Social Work in a Digital Society

Includes the Professional Capabilities Framework for Social Work

SUE WATLING
AND JIM ROGERS

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Series Editors: Jonathan Parker and Greta Bradley

FSC

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About the authors

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Series editors' preface

The Western world, including the UK, faces numerous challenges over forthcoming years, many of which are brought to the fore by ever-developing technologies that become out-dated as quickly as they become part of everyday realities. Challenges also include dealing with the impact of an increasingly ageing population, with its attendant social care needs, and working with the financial implications that such a changing demography brings, and learning new social performances to effect care or to stay in contact with others. At the other end of the lifespan the need for high-quality childcare, welfare and safeguarding services have been highlighted as society develops and responds to a changing complex-ion. National and global perturbations have continued to be influenced by social media and technologies. The contemporary world demands engagement with such and social work needs also to respond.

Migration has increased as a global phenomenon and we now live and work with the implications of global issues in our everyday and local lives. Often these issues influence how we construct our social services and determine what services we need to offer, includ-ing the ways in which we offer these services. It is likely that as a social worker you will work with a diverse range of people throughout your career, many of whom have expe-rienced significant, and traumatic, events that require a professional and caring response grounded, of course, in the laws and social policies that have developed as a result. As well as working with individuals, however, you may be required to respond to the needs of a particular community disadvantaged by world events or excluded within local com-munities because of assumptions made about them, and you may be embroiled in some of the tensions that arise from implementing policy-based approaches that may conflict with professional values. What is clear within these contexts is that you may be working with a range of people who are often at the margins of society, socially excluded or in need of protection and safeguarding. Technologies may be useful in dealing with some of these issues but may also be implicated in the further marginalisation of those people with whom social workers practise. This book provides important knowledge and informa-tion to help you become aware of these issues, and to respond appropriately when faced with new technologies, older technologies and challenging situations.

The importance of social work education came to the fore again following the inquiry into the death of baby Peter and the subsequent report from the Social Work Task Force set up in its aftermath. It is timely, also, to reconsider elements of social work education as it is being taken forward by the Reform Board process in England and its implementation – indeed, we should view this as a continual striving for excellence! Reflection, revision and reform allow us to focus clearly on what knowledge is useful to engage with in learning to

be a social worker, and using information technologies are part of this: social workers are part of digital society. The focus on 'statutory' social work, and by dint of that involuntary clients, brings to the fore the need for social workers to be well versed in the mechanisms and nuances of legislation that can be interpreted and applied to empower, protect and assist, but also to understand the social policy arena in which practice is forged. This important book provides readers with a beginning sense of the complexities and anomalies of digital society and its connections with contemporary social work.

The books in this series respond to the agendas driven by changes brought about by professional body, Government and disciplinary review. They aim to build on and offer introductory texts based on up-to-date knowledge and social policy development and to help communicate this in an accessible way, preparing the ground for future study as you develop your social work career. The books are written by practitioners and academics who are passionate about social work and social services and aim to instil that passion in others. The knowledge introduced in this book is important for all social workers in all fields of practice as they seek to reaffirm social work's commitment to those it serves.

Professor Jonathan Parker, Bournemouth University

Greta Bradley, University of York

Introduction

This book is written for a range of social work and social care students who are in education or placement and developing the necessary knowledge and understanding of the many different guises of social exclusion. It will also be of interest to all social workers and anyone else working in the field of social care. It is designed to introduce a potential new category of twenty-first-century disadvantage and exclusion; one brought about through the impact of a digital society, in particular the influence of the internet.

The first decade of the twenty-first century has witnessed a massive shift to digital ways of working. These have infiltrated individual lifestyles as well as almost every aspect of education and professional practice. We have all been influenced by the development of digital technologies and the move to online communication and provision of information. However, as is often the case in times of great change, the demands of day-to-day living mean we can be so busy adapting and coping with new ways of working, we are often unaware of the broader social significance of these changes. The book examines how social work practice is being challenged by such changes, in particular the ethical issues of unequal access to resources and how digital divides are exacerbating existing categories of social exclusion, creating the potential for further marginalisation and disempowerment as public services move to online design and delivery. It critically examines the impact of a digital society on its citizens, in particular the government's ongoing shift to digital-by-default policy, and the potential implications of digital exclusion for service users. The essential requirements of digital literacies for students, educators and practitioners runs throughout any conversation regarding social work in a digital society and they are included here in this book. Of particular importance is the need for confidence and competence with digital environments, accurate evaluation of online content, awareness of the difference between private and public online identities, and offering appropriate support for the service user who is increasingly being presented with digital technologies to support independent living.

While the book is primarily aimed at social work students in their first year or level of study, it will also be useful for students in subsequent years, depending on how programmes have been designed and the order in which they are approached. It will be particularly useful for students preparing for practice learning as this is where the need for caution with personal digital behaviours is essential and the reality of exclusion from digital information and public services may first be encountered. The book will appeal to people considering a career in social work or social care but not yet studying for a social work degree, as well as assisting students undertaking a range of social and health care courses in further education. Nurses, occupational therapists and other health and social care professionals will be able to gain an insight into the new requirements demanded of social workers with regard to the social impact of digital technologies and their

parameters of access. Experienced and qualified social workers, especially those contributing to practice learning, will also be able to use this book for consultation, teaching, revision and to gain an insight into the expectations of digital confidence and competence raised by the qualifying degree in social work. Unless stated otherwise, the examples used throughout the book apply to the UK.

Requirements for social work education

Social work education has undergone a major transformation to ensure that qualified social workers are educated to honours degree level and develop knowledge, skills and values which are common and shared. A vision for social work operating in complex human situations has been adopted. This is reflected in the following definition from the International Association of Schools of Social Work and International Federation of Social Workers:

> *The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.*

(IFSW, 2001)

While there is a great deal packed into this definition it encapsulates the notion that social work concerns individual people and wider society. Social workers practise with people who are vulnerable, who are struggling in some way to participate fully in society and have equal access to necessary resources. Social workers walk that tightrope between the marginalised individual and the social and political environment which may have contributed to their marginalisation. With regard to digital divides, the social worker will frequently find themselves in the unique position of seeing both sides of the inclusion and exclusion paradox which is inherent in the development of new technologies. They will also find they occupy a space of privilege whereby they are generators of digital content so need to ensure exclusion is neither replicated nor reinforced by their own digital practices.

As a social worker, you will need to be highly skilled and knowledgeable to work effectively within a digital society. Previous and present governments have been keen for social work education and practice to improve and keep up to date with contemporary practices. In order to improve the quality of professional social work, it is crucial that student social workers develop a rigorous grounding in and understanding of relevant theories and models. Such knowledge helps social workers know what to do, when to do it and how to do it, while recognising that social work is a complex activity with no absolute 'rights' and 'wrongs' of practice for each situation. This book subscribes to a social barriers model, often specifically linked with a disabling environment, and views digital divides as having social and cultural foundations rather than technological ones. The need for developing an understanding of the social shaping of digital technologies is of particular relevance to the social work profession with its focus on individual empowerment. The book has been written against the background of work carried out by the Social Work Reform Board

implementing the recommendations made by the Social Work Task Force to improve the quality of social work, which has included revising and renewing the quality and consistency of the social work degree with an aim to improve the expertise of social work graduates and ensure you are all best prepared for the demands of a changing society. Recognising how digital ways of working are becoming integral to social work education and professional practice, the book supports those recommendations which help *improve the learning experiences of students and result in graduates who are suitable and better prepared to undertake the demanding and complex challenges of social work today* (Department for Education, 2010, p4).

The book will help social work students meet the information, communication, technology and numeracy subject skills identified in the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) academic benchmark criteria for social work (QAA, 2008). Benchmark 5.9 states, *The student is able to use ICT knowledge and skills effectively in a professional practice context* and specific criteria include demonstrating the ability to:

- use ICT effectively for professional communication, data storage and retrieval and information searching;

- use ICT in working with people who use services;

- demonstrate sufficient familiarity with statistical techniques to enable effective use of research in practice;

- integrate appropriate use of ICT to enhance skills in problem-solving;

- apply numerical skills to financial and budgetary responsibilities;

- have a critical understanding of the social impact of ICT, including an awareness of the impact of the 'digital divide'.

The book has an action-oriented approach which will help facilitate evaluation and review of your development as a digitally literate social work student both during your studies and while on practice placement. Research summaries will introduce you to key thinking behind both the development of the internet and the impact of a digital society on lifestyles, education and professional practice. Case studies, which focus predominantly on the experience of service users, will be used throughout to enhance these processes and to illustrate key points.

Structure of the book

This book is designed to help you gain knowledge about the impact of a digital society on individual lifestyles and ways of working. In particular it is concerned with the differential access parameters which create digital exclusion and the potential implications of these for social work education and practice. The book is concerned with you achieving the confidence and competence to operate effectively within digital environments, to recognise the benefits technology has to offer while also being aware of the potential disadvantages in terms of barriers to access. As society moves towards increasingly digital ways of working, so the social work profession will inevitably become involved with issues of digital inclusion, in particular where service users are being denied equitable access to online sources of information and the digital management of welfare services.

The book contains six chapters covering the social impact of the internet, contemporary digital policy and practice, digital equalities and digital divides, social work education, social work placement and practice and digital literacies.

In the first chapter, the social impact of the internet, you will be introduced to some of the ways in which digital technologies have influenced access to information and communication, and how the open nature of the internet poses challenges to traditional conceptions of public and private domains. As social workers you will find it useful to be aware of the risks as well as the benefits of being online and how best to stay safe both for yourselves and for service users. We will examine the permanence of digital footprints, introduce the concept of the 'social shaping' of technology and include some of the psychosocial consequences which result when virtual worlds mirror and amplify behaviours found in real ones. The chapter shows how social work students and practitioners may find themselves in a unique position to experience both sides of the digital divide. You will be adopting increasingly digital ways of working and managing access to digital resources, while those experiencing marginalisation and social disadvantage are most likely to become digitally excluded as well.

Chapter 2 looks at contemporary digital policy and practice and introduces government directives for digital-by-default access to public services. Driven by incentives to cut costs and increase efficiency, services such as housing, health care and the payment of welfare benefits are increasingly moving towards digital delivery of resources. The chapter will look at government incentives set up to encourage people to shift to digital lifestyles and practices. It will focus on the reality of this shift for those without the prerequisite skills or means of access and show how existing laws and policies can help social workers to advocate and empower service users towards equitable digital inclusion.

In Chapter 3 we address digital equalities and digital divides through the lens of the social barriers model which was introduced by the disability rights movement in the 1990s. A barriers model views the external environment as disabling, in particular where access parameters do not take into account wide enough diversity or difference. This chapter introduces some of the assistive technology used to enable independence and examines some of the ethical issues this raises. It looks at how assistive technologies can support individual interaction with computers and the internet, examining in particular the paradox between technology which supports and enables digital access and the environmental barriers which prevent that access from taking place.

Chapter 4 examines social work education and tools for virtual learning in a digital age, in particular the relationship between digital technologies and the social work curriculum. You will have many opportunities to ensure you are equipped with the confidence and competence to operate effectively within a digital society. The chapter looks at the impact of virtual learning environments, of electronic portfolios and a range of Web 2.0 style tools for teaching, learning and research. All these can be used to enhance your learning and the adoption of the processes of critical reflective practice which are integral to both higher education and social work. The chapter also introduces the latest research which suggests digital ways of working are changing the ways in which the brain processes and analyses information, and shows how your own critical engagement with digital ways of working can help develop awareness of the social impact of digital exclusion, especially for the service users you may soon be working with on placement and in practice.

In Chapter 5 we move on to social work placements and practice and the digital ways of working you might encounter there. The chapter addresses the use of online social media such as Facebook and the need for strict boundaries between personal and professional communication. It looks at the impact of digital practices on a range of services and how social workers need to enable the advantages of technology while being aware of the parameters of digital exclusion where access is problematic or denied.

Chapter 6 addresses the topic of digital literacies which are core to the higher education experience and professional practice. It pays attention to the application of critical thinking and reflection towards digital ways of working. You will be encouraged to ask questions and question the answers in order to authenticate your experiences online and validate the digital content you might find there. A key feature of the internet is how we are no longer passive consumers of information, but have become active generators of digital content via blogs, wikis and other forms of social media. A result is that we need to distinguish between personal and professional online identities and ensure we do not inadvertently compound existing exclusion through the ways in which we operate online. Threshold concepts are introduced in this chapter. They are used to demonstrate awareness of how the differential nature of digital exclusion can be increased and ensure the appropriate graduate attributes for working and living in a digital age.

Throughout the chapters there are links to appropriate websites containing additional information alongside recommendations for further reading. All chapters conclude with bulleted summary points. The final chapter revisits the main themes of the book, with further signposts for using the internet to support your continual development as a social work practitioner in a digital age.

You are encouraged to work through the book as an active participant, taking responsibility for your learning, in order to increase your knowledge, understanding and ability to apply this learning to practice. You will be expected to reflect creatively on your own digital literacies and the importance of inclusive digital practice. Case studies throughout the book introduce you to a variety of different digital technologies including their advantages and disadvantages. We have devised activities that require you to reflect on your own experiences with digital ways of working. This knowledge will help develop your awareness of the impact of a digital society and enhance your understanding of the construction of digital divides. Finally, the book will encourage you to maintain a critical approach to both present and potential digital developments and the role we can all play in ensuring our digital practices neither replicate nor reinforce existing exclusion.

It is worth bearing in mind as you read this book that digital environments change very quickly. The internet and the world wide web are fast-moving places where new developments in software, and in the design and delivery of digital resources, mean there is never a point where anything can be seen as finished or complete. We have tried to make the content as up to date as possible but there will inevitably be instances where information given may have been superseded. The speed at which digital ways of working are taking over from traditional practices provided the impetus for this book. This is also one of the reasons why the book has particular relevance for social work students, educators and professional practitioners who work with service users on a regular basis. It is the service users themselves who have to manage with increasingly digital policies and practices and deal with unequal

parameters of access to online resources. We have done our best to continually revise the text right up to the last moment before printing but it is an almost impossible task. If on reading this it seems that there are examples of outdated information then we do apologise.

This book has been carefully mapped to the new Professional Capabilities Framework for Social Workers in England and will help you to develop the appropriate standards at the right level. These standards are:

- **Professionalism** – Identify and behave as a professional social worker committed to professional development.

- **Values and ethics** – Apply social work ethical principles and values to guide professional practice.

- **Diversity** – Recognise diversity and apply anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive principles in practice.

- **Justice** – Advance human rights and promote social justice and economic wellbeing.

- **Knowledge** – Apply knowledge of social sciences, law and social work practice theory.

- **Judgement** – Use judgement and authority to intervene with individuals, families and communities to promote independence, provide support and prevent harm, neglect and abuse.

- **Critical reflection and analysis** – Apply critical reflection and analysis to inform and provide a rationale for professional decision-making.

- **Contexts and organisations** – Engage with, inform, and adapt to changing contexts that shape practice. Operate effectively within your own organisational frameworks and contribute to the development of services and organisations. Operate effectively within multi-agency and inter-professional settings.

- **Professional leadership** – Take responsibility for the professional learning and development of others through supervision, mentoring, assessing, research, teaching, leadership and management.

References to these standards will be made throughout the text and you will find a diagram of the Professional Capabilities Framework in Appendix 1 at the end of the book.

Chapter 1

The social impact of the internet

We live in a digital society which has significantly changed the information landscape affecting every aspect of our lives. The current wave of technological innovation is part of the context in which social work students, practitioners and service users and carers operate.

(Rafferty and Steyaert, 2007, p165)