

# HISTORY

OF SOCIAL WORK

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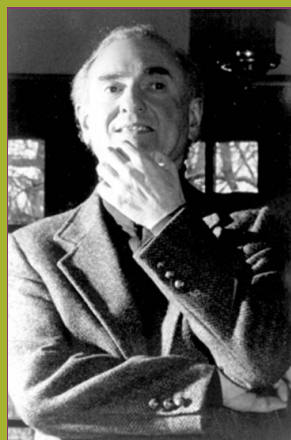
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## 1975 Fundamental Principles of Disability

A paradigm shift towards a social model



For many centuries, citizens with an impairment were hardly granted a place in society. They were left on their own or killed immediately after being born. In ancient Roman society, it was law to eliminate babies with impairments. Aristoteles wrote that deaf people couldn't think, as they had no language. Not much progress was made during medieval times. Early 16th century, Luther referred to people with cognitive impairments as *massa carnis*, a 'heap of meat'. Children with impairments were considered to come from the devil, who had swapped his own deformed children with those from people. It's only in the 18th century that this pessimism about people with impairments begins to change. The French author Denis Diderot (1713-1784) wrote letters about the possibilities of deaf and blind people. And the Abbé Charles-Michel de l'Épée established one of the first schools for deaf children in 1760. With the aid of wooden letters and numbers, Valentin Haüy (1745-1822) demonstrated that blind children could communicate and being blind does not equal being dumb. Other initiatives followed soon. All marked the transition towards a pedagogical optimism about what children with impairments could learn and achieve.


A significant further development in the thinking about disability and impairments occurred in the sixties and seventies of the 20th century, culminating in the publication of the British Fundamental Principles of Disability in 1975. This document explicitly declared that "it is society which disables physically impaired people". It introduced the subtle but crucial distinction between an impairment (a bodily function that doesn't operate at one would expect) and a disability (the difficulties caused by society to a person with an impairment).

It is Michael Oliver who built on these developments and coined the term 'social model', to distinguish it from the medical model. With the latter, help is focused on the individual and his or her impairments. Within the social model, help is focused on society and accessibility. Whether a person has a mobility impairment or not is up to bad luck and health care, but whether the mobility impairment prevents that person from participating (going to school, taking the train, ...) is up to society. This led to a focus on universal access or design for all in building and product design. It was included in e.g. the famous section 508 of the US rehabilitation act which obliged all parts of government to make their electronic and information technology accessible to people with impairments. As a result, software like windows became more accessible. An additional source of inspiration for this development is the principle of normalization and the closely related theory of Social Role Valorisation as it emerged in the same period in Sweden and the US to quickly spread across the world and different areas of human service. Important ambassadors were Bengt Nirje and Wolf Wolfensberger (1934-2011). Key element is to make available to persons with impairments "patterns of life and conditions of everyday living which are as close as possible to the regular circumstances and ways of life or society".

This change of thinking about disability and people with impairments culminated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which was adopted in December 2006.

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### Additional information

- Oliver, M. (1991), *Social work, disabled people and disabling environments*. London: Jessica Kingsley
-  Steyaert, J. (2005), [Web based higher education, the inclusion/exclusion paradox](#). Journal of technology in human services, 23(1/2), 67-78.

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This initiative also exists in Dutch, where it covers the history of social work in the Netherlands, in Flanders, and internationally.

See [www.canonsociaalwerk.eu](http://www.canonsociaalwerk.eu)

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- [The Disability History Museum](#)
- [The European Commission on \*design for all\*, as part of e-inclusion](#)
- [Wikipedia on the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities](#)

#### Study tasks

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