



6th Edition

Social Work Practice

Assessment, Planning, Intervention & Review

Jonathan Parker

LM Learning
Matters



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Understanding assessment in social work practice: theoretical concerns

Introduction

Assessment is a term often used in social work with little regard to its definition and the meanings created by and made of it. It is recognised as a key task in social work practice (Bartlett, 1970; Parker, 2013; Parker, 2020). Government policy acknowledges this and has, in the UK, developed frameworks for assessment that emphasise its centrality for effective planning, intervention and positive outcomes while local authorities have adopted models that reflect a commitment to participation, finding out what matters to people and acknowledgement of the strengths and resources of people using social work services (Partners4Change, n.d., SCIE, 2017a; Social Care Wales, 2019; Scottish Government, 2020). You will be asked to complete, contribute to and present assessments during your practice learning for the degree and once qualified. The centrality of good social work assessment was emphasised by the inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié (Laming, 2003), is further reinforced in Lord Laming's updated report (Laming, 2009), and forms an important plank within Eileen Munro's report (Munro, 2011) in calling for higher quality assessment to improve the child protection process throughout its duration. This emphasis on

assessment can lead to misunderstandings that it is simply a normative process, one which is self-evident and needs little or no explanation. This is not the case. It is important that you have a thorough knowledge of what makes a good assessment, how they are conducted and some of the difficulties that might arise when making an assessment. However, it is also crucial to adopt a critical approach to the often unquestioned acceptance of assessment as a 'cornerstone' of good practice (McDonald, 2006). If we do not ask questions, the taken-for-granted assumptions may form social or disciplinary discourses of 'what is or should be' in social work. So, when reading how the inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié, in the early 2000s, influenced assessment practices in social work to adopt a questioning focus (Laming, 2003), ask yourself why this should be and whether it should always be so or needs to be flexible enough to adapt to individual circumstances. Ask yourself what the assessment is saying about your role and practice as a social worker and about the people with whom you are working.

Although written at the beginning of the century, the Climbié inquiry is an important point in the history of assessment in social work. It clearly identifies some of the actions and responsibilities that social workers need to take into account when making an assessment that still hold true for social workers today. For instance, when referrals are made concerning children, those children must be seen in a timely manner (in the original report within 24 hours or the reasons why this cannot be achieved must be clearly recorded; recommendation 35). Where there are allegations of deliberate harm, the social worker must:

- speak alone to the child;
- see and speak with carers;
- visit the child's accommodation;
- seek and consider the views of other professionals;
- agree a plan to provide for the child's welfare.

(recommendation 40)

In making these assessments, social workers should have the confidence to question other agencies and their involvement or conclusions (recommendation 37). This is not always easy and developing confidence demands that we as social workers know what it is we do and why we are doing it. This, again, is something that the Climbié inquiry focused on. For instance, recommendation 34 states that social workers should not undertake home visits without being clear about the purpose of the visit, what information is being sought and what will happen if there is no one at home. It is also important that social workers check any prior information they have, if at all possible, and pay strict attention to recording visits and information gained in a case file. It is recognised that these responsibilities are demanding and the Climbié inquiry, again, states that social workers should receive regular supervision that considers case recording (recommendation 45). It is in supervision that questions should be raised about how the assessment is proceeding and not solely focus on whether the recommendations above have been followed to the letter. Of course, inquiry recommendations do not guarantee that tragedies can always be prevented, any more than social workers can be blamed for the deaths of children or adult service users. This is evidenced by events such as the deaths children, for example Peter Connelly (Baby Peter), Daniel Pelka, Dylan Tiffin-Brown or

Evelyn-Rose Muggleton as well as adults (see Policy Partners Project, n.d.). However, learning from, reflecting on and asking questions about prior events and inquiries, research and, crucially, your own practice will hone your understanding and skills. What is clear is that having an assessment function gives social workers a tremendous amount of authority that differs from the conventions of everyday life, such as speaking to children without their parents being present, looking at the adequacy of accommodation, their interactions and so on. It is important to keep this in mind if one is to remain respectful as a social worker.

Social workers, albeit not exclusively as a profession, undertake a wide range of assessments that are not solely confined to children in need and child protection, including the following:

- care assessments and specific assessment for carers (Care Act 2014);
- mental health assessments for admission to hospital, treatment or guardianship (Mental Health Act 1983, ss.2, 3, 4, 7);
- 'best interests' assessment and Liberty Protection Standards (Mental Capacity Act 2005, s.4, Mental Capacity (Amendment) Act 2019).

The same approach to learning as mentioned above in respect of children and young people will help you develop your practice – reflect, question and learn from external events and your own practice. This questioning approach and ability to negotiate a difficult terrain that includes a range of competing explanations or demands is something the previous professional body in England highlighted (HCPC, 2016), and remains part of the professional standards for current UK professional bodies.

Activity 1.1

Pick any two overviews of serious case review reports and read them through. (You can find these reports by typing in 'serious case review overview report'.) Look at the similarities and differences and consider what these might mean for your practice and development as a social worker undertaking assessments.

Comment

You will no doubt be struck by common emphases on the necessity of sharing information with other professionals, producing clear, informative records and being able to justify your assessments. It is the emphasis on assessment that we most want to reflect on and engage with in this chapter. If you have considered a child safeguarding report you may find it useful to read Chapter 5 of the *Working Together to Safeguard Children* guidance (HM Government, 2018) which outlines the importance of learning gained from serious incidents and sharing that locally to improve practice. If you are reading a mental health inquiry you should consult the *Mental Health Act Code of Practice* (Department of Health, 2015b), and consider this alongside the Care Quality Council evaluation that the guidance is not always being used (Care Quality Council, 2018). We will explore this further in Chapter 2.

In this chapter, you will be introduced to some definitions of assessment, types of assessment and key influences affecting social work assessments such as ethics, power, professionalism and anti-oppressive practice. You will be invited to consider how an assessment is made with service user groups common to social work – in child and family work, and work with adults. As mentioned in the Introduction, we will not cover all groups of people who use social services, but just a selection to illustrate key points. To illustrate some of the processes involved we will introduce case studies later in the chapter. The importance of a multidisciplinary focus in assessments will be emphasised in terms of sharing information with other professionals, and from the perspective of people who use social work services who are unlikely to want to be assessed again and again for the same service by a number of agencies and professions (see Quinney and Hafford-Letchfield, 2013; Smith, 2018). However, you will also be asked to question the purpose and use of assessments, and how they can be person-focused, relationship-based and proactive in achieving agreed aims. This will provide you with knowledge that you can use when considering the five key tools for use in assessment that will be introduced in Chapter 3.

The centrality of assessment work is recognised also in social work education. Indeed, being skilled in conducting assessments is a key requirement for social workers and is recognised in the government's drive to improve social work education (Department of Health, 2002a). Learning about assessment during university-based and practice-based education was recognised as important by newly qualified social workers in a study on newly qualified social workers by Bates et al. (2010), something which continues to be important (Keen et al., 2016). This importance has also been confirmed by the previous professional body's Standards of Proficiency (SoPS) (HCPC, 2017), the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) (BASW, 2018) in England and the professional standards of the current professional bodies, Social Work England (2019), Social Care Wales (2017), Scottish Social Services Council (2016), Northern Ireland Social Care Council (2019). It is included in the Knowledge and Skills Statements (KSS) for child and family social workers and adult social workers in England (Department for Education, 2014; Department of Health, 2015a). Before developing and learning assessment skills it is important to have some idea of what an assessment is and how one might be defined.

What is assessment? Definitional perspectives

This section introduces ways in which assessment might be understood. It is important to have an awareness of different understandings of assessment because the ways in which it is understood can affect what is done, how the assessment takes place, how information is used and interpreted, and what plans are made as a result. This will affect not only the ways in which you work, but also how service users, carers and other professionals involved in the assessment perceive the process and work with you. Indeed, adopting a critical, reflective and questioning approach to assessment is important in avoiding a 'taken-for-grantedness' by which the notion that current assessment practices in social work are normative and the implications they have for

the profession, yourself as a social worker and your service users are also not to be questioned.

It is often useful to start with a dictionary definition. The *Oxford English Dictionary* sees assessment in terms of judging or valuing the worth of something. This is an indication of a skilled activity by someone who is competent to judge between things of different value. It implies the use of standards against which something can be appraised. This certainly appears to be the case in many social work assessments in which judgements are made. Sometimes social work students can feel uncomfortable with this and it is important to disentangle the making of judgements and applying a value-perspective or being judgemental, the latter being something to avoid. However, the dictionary definition leaves out the interactive and human contexts which also feature in social work assessments. The definition suggests that there are right and wrong situations or good and bad values – a suggestion that, in social work, demands critical appraisal. The dictionary definition offers an economic understanding that underpins much of contemporary social welfare practice. However, it is important for social workers that it is not the worth of the person that is being assessed or judged but the potential for growth and change, and growth and change are individually perceived and constructed. The other danger that social workers should be aware of is the application of ‘judgements’ that derive from our organisations or from society as a whole. These may counteract our professional values. Where they do not, they may act in opposition to the values, wants and wishes of the individuals being assessed, and it is important here to balance and weigh options, and the meanings these may have for those involved, before proceeding.

Assessment: art or science?

The perceived conflict between social work as ‘art’ or as ‘science’ is central to the debate about definitions. The debate is well rehearsed in the literature (see Richmond, 1917; England, 1986; Reamer, 1993; Munro, 1998; Bent-Goodley, 2015) and links to contemporary discussions concerning evidence-based practice (Webb, 2001, 2006; Sheldon and Macdonald, 2009). If assessment is an art it cannot be limited by definitions, structured questionnaires or checklists, or even be fully described; rather, it would rely on the creativity, wisdom and skill of the assessor as refined through experience. This may be thought to leave people open to the whims of individual social workers and their particular views and beliefs, although it would lend itself to relational aspects of social work (see Chapter 5). It would not necessarily provide a systematic approach or one that service users could expect to receive regardless of practitioner, team or region. But we have to question if this is necessarily a ‘bad’ thing. If, on the other hand, assessment is a science, then it should be open to precise measurement and be practised effectively by following steps outlined in a ‘technical manual’ of social work. This could be seen as reducing human relations and situations to a common set of standards and criteria, and would not allow for diversity in setting, culture and interpretation of situations. Consider the following example.

Case study

John has contacted the local community mental health team. For some time he has felt depressed, lethargic and unable to cope with his job. The team leader has asked that an assessment be undertaken.

- a) Tim, a social worker using an arts-based approach, talks with John about his situation in a free-flowing and broad way. He decides on the basis of his assessment and his prior experience that John is particularly vulnerable and would benefit from intensive support from the team.
- b) Janice takes a systematic and 'scientific' approach to assessment. Her assessment of John takes into account a range of risk and vulnerability indices that are validated by their use on groups of similar people. Her assessment scores John below the threshold of risk that would guarantee him eligibility to a service from the team.

A balanced approach would reject the notion that art and science are mutually exclusive. They are of course interdependent and we would suggest that social work assessment is both an art and a science since it involves wisdom, skills, appreciation of diversity and systematically applied knowledge in practice (Parker, 2007a, 2008, 2015, 2020).

Perhaps a helpful way of ensuring that social work assessment is approached as both an art and a science is to follow an 'ethnographic approach', which we explore more fully in Chapter 5. Ethnography will be best known to you as a research method. However, many of its characteristics are akin to those involved in social work practice. Traditionally, ethnography involves deep immersion into the worlds of those at the focus of the research, drawing on participant observation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Atkinson, 2015). This involves negotiating an entrance into those worlds, seeking to understand them by walking alongside the people, exploring alternative perspectives and challenging one's own normative views (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2016b). More recently, time constraints in research have meant that shorter, intensive bursts of time are spent in the research environment and ensuring the depth of appreciation of the world of the people involved has become the focus of debate (Wolcott, 2008; Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2016b). These technical, scientific considerations alongside the art of negotiation, engagement and immersion are mimicked within social work assessment practice. Entrance to the worlds of others is negotiated and mandated, and seeking an in-depth understanding of how those others perceive, experience and understand their worlds forms a central plank in undertaking an assessment that values the individuals with whom the person is working (Parker and Ashencaen Crabtree, 2016; Parker, 2016).

Let us return to the case of John.

Case study

A third social worker, Jeannette, would use her prior experience of social work with people in John's position, weighing that knowledge against the eligibility criteria of

the agency and the structured assessment tools that are designed to assist decision-making. The difference between Jeannette and Janice is that Jeannette would see the assessment instruments as 'tools' for a job and not prescriptions. They are also important in engaging the person, encouraging them to participate and to lead the work.

The approach taken by Jeannette is echoed by Milner et al. (2020) who describe assessment in terms of its practical application, and also as an art form. For them, assessment is identified as follows:

***analysis** is about making sense of events and statements, arriving at an overall picture and an understanding of what is happening and perhaps giving some thought as to how the situation has come about ... **Judgement** is about what is good enough and what is not, what is dangerous and what is reasonably safe, what is of reasonable standard and what is not. **Decision-making** is about future action or inaction and aspects of that action, with a plan for carrying it out and reviewing it.*

(Milner et al., 2020, p3, emphasis added)

Values, diversity and service user involvement

Social work assessments are firmly rooted in the context of social work values (Middleton, 1997). The emphasis on values is important because assessments are about making judgements but not about being judgemental, as we noted earlier. Milner et al. (2020) identify several potential pitfalls in making judgements that we need to avoid. These include paying attention selectively, stereotyping and labelling people (attributing certain characteristics to people because we think that is how they are likely to behave) and sensory distortions (what we see and what we hear). Groups, agencies and teams, as well as individuals, can also be affected by developing collective assumptions and perspectives on situations which become entrenched and unspoken 'discourses' that affect the ways in which team members practise (see Foucault, 1979; see also the following case study).

Case study

Chris is well known in the social work office. Since having his first child removed from his care and subsequently adopted, he has been to the office on several occasions, becoming angry, and shouting and swearing at the social work staff. Once he threatened violence to the social worker involved in the initial assessment.

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Three years after this incident he has again come into contact with the social work team as he has become involved in a relationship with a woman who has two young children. Jeremy, a social worker new to the team, has been asked to assess the new situation. His colleagues have warned him about Chris's 'dangerousness'. Chris is a big man, sporting several tattoos on each arm and a 'skinhead' haircut. On first meeting Chris, Jeremy was quite nervous and a little on edge when Chris became loud. Jeremy realised that Chris was wearing a hearing aid, and was being open and detailed about the past and present situation. He appeared to want to engage with him.

Comment

You may have experienced something like this yourself, or perhaps you have been on the receiving end of such misunderstandings.

Starting from strengths, respect for service users and keeping clear records can assist in offsetting some of these difficulties. This is something we will discuss further in this chapter. Milner et al. (2020) present a model of assessment which acknowledges that knowledge is developed through interactions with other people and does not necessarily proceed in a straight line between point A and point B. This is important if we are going to avoid labelling people like Chris in the case study above, and if we are to undertake comprehensive and valid assessments.

The reduction of individual situations to a set of problems and causes may suggest that there are clear 'right and wrong' actions and situations that can be observed and assessed. The constraint of resources, tightened under austerity, and the implementation of eligibility criteria to restrict access to services compound this view, according to Milner et al. (2020). Assessments are rarely, if ever, 'value-free' and the particular perspectives of social workers influence the way they are conducted and their analysis (Ney et al., 2013; Parker, 2015). It is imperative, therefore, that workers should be aware of and check their individual bias and how this may well affect the assessment undertaken (Clifford, 1998). It is useful to keep in mind some of the thinking of the French sociologist Bourdieu about daily practices (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu described how unspoken, tacit assumptions are formed by our behaviours and actions in everyday life. External aspects of everyday life do not only structure these habitus, but also exert an impact on it. So, while our perspectives about social work assessment are structured by policies, organisational practices and, indeed, academic writing, they influence how these are perceived and experienced by others. It is important, if we are to be critical and reflective, to bring to the surface these unspoken, taken-for-granted understandings of assessment.

Milner et al. (2020) suggest that social workers should acknowledge the power they have in making assessments and that multiple interpretations of situations are considered. This demands acknowledging, questioning and, where appropriate, challenging some of the 'discourses of power' that have been created within social work as a discipline, including within your social work education, and in respect of you as a social worker, how you present to others in manner, dress, speech and so forth (Foucault, 1979). Negotiation between service users and social workers and the construction of a

joint narrative form the basis of their assessment approach. Assessment concerns the development of a social narrative that takes into account diversity and what each of the parties bring. If you can acknowledge your position within the contexts in which you work, you can more easily adopt a co-creational approach to the assessment. This will in turn be likely to better reflect the needs of those with whom you are working (see Fook, 2016), and is aided by following an ethnographic approach, as suggested earlier. Writing from a childcare perspective, Cooper (2000) argues that when social workers are reflexive – identifying, questioning their own biases and ensuring assessments are interactive and collaborative – it is possible to create effective interpersonal relationships and offset potential bias. The importance of reflection and reflexivity in assessment has been shown by the analysis of critical incident accounts (see Parker, 2010; Ashencaen Crabtree et al. 2012, 2014; Parker et al., 2012, 2014), many of which mirror the situations described by people who use social work services. Social workers need, in their assessments, to listen to people, validate their experiences and work collaboratively to promote service users' strengths. This is something with which Fook (2016) also agrees. She considers that the traditional and accepted approach to assessment involves sorting into categories and creating eligible and ineligible types, the common element being to frame situations in terms of 'problems' which fit those holding the power and resources. These approaches also lend themselves to a linear model of social work which is belied by experience. The alternative approach allows for multiple and diverse understandings developed in the particular context of the individuals involved. The models developed by Milner et al. (2020) and Fook (2016) use a narrative approach that is constructed with the service user and is open to change and development. Assessment becomes a process of dialogue rather than fact-finding. It is also important not to be bound by restrictive assessment proformas but to question what information is needed, why it is needed and to what uses it might be put, something that Munro (2011) emphasised in raising the quality of practice. Let us return briefly to the case study of Chris.

Case study

In developing a working relationship with Chris, Jeremy was able to allow him time to rehearse his past experiences with social workers, the hurt he had felt and the anger that it had aroused in him. Jeremy was also able to put forward the reasons why the actions had been taken and the responsibilities that social workers have. While this was painful for Chris, it allowed him to work with Jeremy in a more open and collaborative way. They were able to discuss together ways in which progress might be made.

Theory and assessment

One problem in defining and understanding assessment that has been recognised for some time is that there have been very few attempts to construct a systematic theory of assessment in social work (Lloyd and Taylor, 1995). Coulshed and Orme (2006) describe

how assessment may be understood by its core processes, its purposes or its theoretical base, but this fluidity lends itself to a functional typology rather than systematic theory. What is clear is that the theoretical approach taken by social workers and the agencies in which they work influences the assessment process in a similar way to personal values and belief systems, suggesting that power is a central concept in theorising social work assessment. Social workers need to acknowledge not only their personal beliefs, values and biases, but also the impact their approaches might have on the way an assessment proceeds. Social workers should be open, honest and explicit with service users if power relations are to be acknowledged (Coulshed and Orme, 2006; Duschinsky et al., 2016). For instance, Howe (1992) identifies a range of broad theoretical categories that can be adopted in social work that take one of the following approaches:

- a problem-solving perspective, starting from the position that there is something wrong that needs to be fixed, whether in the present (cognitive behavioural) or in the past (psychoanalytic);
- a perspective that is concerned with the construction of subjective experiences or how people understand their experiences within society, how labels are applied to people on the basis of their actions;
- a political model that considers social problems in relation to social inequalities and the dominant political system.

Each of these approaches to social work affects the way an assessment proceeds. Consider the following case study and the different responses that might be made depending on the perspective or approach of the social worker.

Case study

Jane, mother of Tony, separated from Eddie, Tony's father, after two years of domestic violence. Tony received an injury to his arm during one of these incidents. Eddie is now requesting greater contact with Tony.

A social worker taking a problem-solving approach would look to examine the risks that Eddie might pose to Tony, seek and test alternatives or ways of reducing any risks and look at potential strengths in Jane, Tony and their wider living system as well as any that Eddie might bring. This social worker might assess the capacities for change, development and protection of those involved.

A social worker from the second school of thought might assess the impact the situation might have on Tony, whether or not he wished for contact and the meanings that a lack of contact might have for both Tony and Eddie, and indeed Jane. This social worker might also explore how being seen as violent might impact on Eddie's capacity for change.

A social worker taking a more overt political approach may look to the problems that male domination has led to in creating a context in which violence towards women is seen as acceptable and where women are seen as victims. This social worker may also make a class-based analysis looking at education, employment and environmental factors that may have contributed to the previous situation.

Comment

Social work assessments, therefore, combine the judgement or weighing up of something with the explicit acknowledgement of the importance of values, diversity and the views of others. One further way of looking at assessment in social work is to separate the 'types' of assessment used.

Assessment types in social work

In this section, we will examine the different types of assessment in terms of their focus and duration. Before we look at different types of assessment it is important to take a little time to consider the question, 'Why is assessment so important?' We have seen the emphasis put on assessment in the Climbé inquiry (Laming, 2003) and by social work professional bodies. We have set it in the context of power and immersion in the lives of others. It is, however, not a discrete entity that can be undertaken in isolation from other aspects of social work and social care practice, and neither can ways of understanding it be disaggregated from the rest of practice in anything but a heuristic way. Assessment is an integral part of the social work process and, certainly in practice, assessment and intervention cannot be clearly separated. Assessment is part of a continuous process which links with planning, intervening and reviewing social work with service users. This is exemplified well in the ASPIRE model which we adopt here:

AS – Assessment

P – Planning

I – Intervention

RE – Review and Evaluation

(Sutton, 1999)

If assessment is effective, then it makes it more likely that an intervention will succeed (Milner et al., 2020). Assessment is the key to effective social work practice in whichever area you are working and also a central task in contemporary social work (McDonald, 2006). The word 'effectiveness' requires a little comment here, although it is taken up further in Chapter 6. While often politicised by those who see outcome measures as most important to monitoring social work or other human service activity, the term is contested. In actuality, effectiveness relates to the extent to which something produces desired results or achieves agreed goals. Used in this sense we can understand that it is central to good social work practice that desirable consequences result from those relationships – something on which, perhaps, all sides of the debate can agree.

Unfortunately, the converse can also be true. When assessments are undertaken without suitable preparation and without a clear sense of purpose and direction, and without adequate attention to forging positive relationships, they are unlikely to produce good quality data or personal narratives that will help in planning to improve the lot of service users. They could even be dangerous if failing adequately to identify risks (Munro, 2011). Unsuitable assessments include those agency proforma assessments conducted without

question or applied without thought for the context in which they are undertaken. The following case study illustrates some reasons for paying attention to planning for assessment and specifying purpose.

Case study

As a student on her first practice learning placement, Margaret was allocated a case concerning a mother, Carol, and her two young children. The referral from the health visitor had requested help with parenting and behaviour management.

Margaret was eager to begin practice. She telephoned Carol and organised a convenient time and date to visit. The day of the visit arrived. Margaret made her way to the house, rang the bell and introduced herself when Carol answered. It was at this point that she realised she had no plan, did not know what information to collect, how to collect it and to what ends she was making an assessment. Carol asked Margaret what she was going to do to help her with her children. Margaret did not know how to answer. The visit became tense and after 15 minutes ended with no further plans. Carol telephoned her health visitor the following day to say the social worker was 'useless'.

So the questions 'what is the assessment for?' and 'what is the focus?' are important. This requires that you are able to understand the extent and parameters of your assessment – what the mandate for conducting the assessment was and where the authority to undertake it came from; what your agency provides in the way of services; and what your professional social work values are. This means it is important that you are working with a clear sense of those values and understanding of your power as a social worker, ensuring the best possible outcomes from the relationship for those involved.

Fortunately, you are not likely to be placed in such a position because you will have a practice educator who will help you to plan and prepare for visits. However, this case study illustrates some of the difficulties that can arise when planning is inadequate or when the social worker has not clarified their role and the reasons for and expected outcomes of the assessment visit. Because assessment has been acknowledged as central to good social work practice, and with a growing recognition of the importance of relationships, a range of person-centred assessments have been developed that emphasise assets and strengths. We will consider some of these when we look at strengths perspectives in social work assessment.

In social work, assessments can be separated into two basic types – ongoing and fluid, or time limited and issues specific. Superficially, these two types may be seen as corresponding to the debate about social work as an art or as a science. In practice, they are more complex and often assessments comprise elements of both. Elsewhere, I describe that assessment does not simply represent a singular event, but continues after the production of a specific piece of work or report (Parker, 2007a, 2015, 2020). This is important politically as many media pronouncements and political understandings of social work suggest that if the right formula is applied, the right result will ensue – suggesting a linear-rational view of social work somewhat akin to that enshrined within some effectiveness debates. The model can be applied to the social work process as a

whole and not just assessment (Parker, 2020). It is our responsibility as social workers to ensure that we continue to question our work reflexively.

Assessment as an ongoing, fluid and dynamic process

Assessment is increasingly acknowledged to be a continuous process (Hepworth et al., 2009; Coulshed and Orme, 2006; Department of Health, Department for Education and Employment, Home Office, 2000). This is emphasised in the latest *Working Together to Safeguard Children* guidance (HM Government, 2018). This develops the *what* and *how* that need to be done but acknowledges that changes and developments occur in a person's life that may have a significant impact on how a situation is seen or responded to. It is something that continues over time. The benefits of this approach lie in seeing social work as a process in which assessment and intervention are interconnected and that social work is a dynamic activity that changes throughout its course (see Chapter 4). It also clearly associates assessment and evaluation in the social work process. As early as 1973 Pincus and Minahan developed this 'process' model of assessment in their systemic approach to social work practice which retains its relevance today.

The process of assessment ... continues throughout the planned change process. While the initial assessment serves as a blueprint, it will be modified as ideas are tested out and new data and information are gathered. The worker continually reassesses the nature of the problem, the need for supporting data and the effectiveness of the approaches chosen to cope with it.

(p116)

The debate is extended by the increasing recognition that spirituality forms an important part of comprehensive assessments that focus on potential service-user strengths (Hodge, 2001; Gotterer, 2001). However, concern with spirituality is more widespread in healthcare practice than social work (Puchalski, 2006). Social workers need to acknowledge their own belief systems while respecting those of others but not shy away from spirituality or religious faith when making assessments (Furness and Gilligan, 2010; Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2016a; Parker et al., 2017). Often spirituality, which concerns matters of existential importance to individuals that may not include religious belief, can be confused with religion and, again, social workers need to take care not to make assumptions that can skew assessments. Equally important when working with people who have a strong religious faith is not to 'essentialise' that faith by imposing a prescriptive and rigid interpretation on it. Using good assessment skills will assist social workers in learning of the centrality or otherwise of belief systems from those people with whom they work.

Single event/time-specific formulations

In practice, however, social workers sometimes do not continue the assessment throughout a planned piece of work (Sheldon and Macdonald, 2009). In fact, some contemporary

policies and practice may preclude such a continuous process because of the artificial separation of assessment from the social work process as a discrete activity (McDonald, 2006) and the development of a split between assessing and commissioning or purchasing functions and the provision of services.

A second way of categorising assessment in social work is as a *time-specific formulation* (Hepworth et al., 2009). This means the production of a report after a time-limited period of assessment has taken place. For instance, a report for a youth offender panel, a report for a mental health assessment or a Care Act 2014 assessment report may represent such time-specific snapshot reports.

It is this kind of assessment that may suggest there are clear norms and standards. The assessment judges aspects of the service user's life against expected or accepted ways of seeing similar situations. It offers a way of examining a situation, event or individual within a specific timescale or period in a person's life. This focused approach lends itself to making predictions or identifying needs, goals and ways of achieving these. It also offers, at times, a baseline from which change can be continually monitored. It does not, however, necessarily tell you anything about the individuals or events except at this particular point in time. It may not present a full or accurate picture that holds over time or in different circumstances and it may reflect the values of those making the assessment rather than those being assessed. This is where the development of practice wisdom becomes important. Sheldon and Macdonald (2009) offer a valuable way forward in understanding the distinction between assessment types, suggesting that an assessment can be seen as finite, but that continued monitoring and final evaluation add to the initial formulation arrived at through the assessment.

Activity 1.2

Write down as many reasons as you can think of for social workers undertaking an assessment. Place these in three lists:

- those that focus on producing reports or specific 'products';
- those that see assessment as a continuous process;
- those that fall into both categories.

Comment

The activity above may not have been as easy as it may have seemed at first sight. Indeed, you may have hesitated when placing each assessment in one of the three columns. Don't worry if this was the case. Assessments are, as we are beginning to see, complex and do not fit neatly into categories. Even an assessment that resulted in a court report, or case conference report, might be seen as a stepping stone to further assessment work, and an open assessment may have produced a summary and 'measuring point' from which progress or changes can be determined.

Remember also when undertaking this activity to consider the implications of each, what mandate you may have for conducting the assessment and what implications there might be for people who use social work services. These assessment types can be considered without reference to the person 'being assessed'. It is important, after considering the assessment of risk, that we introduce the central notions of participation and strengths.

Risk assessment

The concept of risk has assumed increasing importance within our daily lives and activities (Webb, 2006). Sociologist Ulrich Beck brought the concept to greater attention in his exploration of 'risk society' (Beck, 1992). In this book he examined the changes in society from struggling for survival to a fearful society in which risks are to be managed. This is also the case in respect of social work practice and assessment, although the concept of risk goes back further (Brearley, 1982). Brearley conceptualised two types of hazard occurring in social work: predictive hazards (those in the background environment and history), and situational hazards (current hazards). So, if a person with long-term mental ill-health has a history of becoming violent towards other people if they stop taking their medication this may be considered predictive, whereas if that person were to be goaded and harassed when not taking medication this may represent a situational hazard. A risk assessment would seek to determine whether these hazards made it likely that negative outcomes would occur and how serious these might be. Risk can be understood in actuarial terms as the likelihood of certain outcomes, whether positive or negative, occurring under certain circumstances or dependent on decisions made. Whether or not it is believed that such calculations can be made accurately in social work – and this is contested – the regulation of risk has become central to contemporary practice.

Briggs (2013) is clear, however, that social work approaches to risk assessment and risk management must be clearly grounded in professional values and our approach as social workers requires continual reflection. Offering an important counter to actuarial approaches to risk, Webb sees the assessment of risk as a potential problem in social work, suggesting that:

Its methods are based on strong notions of predictability and calculation that a future event is likely to occur ... These partly rely on existing scientific knowledge, which is often provided by experts. In social work the assessment of risk often lacks scientific rigour and may not be modelled in a satisfactory way ... Risk assessment is pervaded by value-laden assumptions and is often used as a rationing device that excludes some from service provision.

(2006, p19)

However, despite the caution raised, it is important to mention risk assessment here as you will be required to complete such assessments in your work, and understanding some of the complicating factors, as pointed out above, can be helpful. Such instruments are also promoted often by hard-stretched organisations who want to make efficiencies, and as a social worker you will need to have the knowledge and capability to make arguments for and against their use. The assessment of risk is uncertain and accurate predictions are not always possible, but it can provide a framework for honest discussions, which allows those using services to make informed choices (Watson and West, 2006). Coulshed and Orme (2006) promote Corby's earlier work on risk assessment in child protection identifying three elements of risk assessment, and suggest this can be adapted for different settings. The three elements are associated with the stage in the process at which they are undertaken (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Types of risk assessment (after Coulshed and Orme, 2006)

	Preventive risk assessment	Investigative risk assessment	Continuation risk assessment
Process stage	Prior to intervention	Initial contact and assessment stage	Continuing involvement
Key questions	Should anything be done?	What is happening here?	Has the risk reduced?
Comment	Relies on research evidence which is often equivocal	Procedures, guidelines and checklists may be interpreted too prescriptively	Balances risks of intervening against not intervening

Kemshall et al. (2013) examine the skills needed to undertake risk assessments and focus on the importance of including people’s strengths and capacity for resilience. Risk assessment concerns the measurement of the likelihood of something occurring, its significance to those involved and the extent of the potential harm. There are four things to consider:

- What are the risks and to whom are they risks?
- What is the likelihood and imminence of the risks occurring?
- If they happen what are the likely consequences?
- What, in the specific situation, will increase or decrease the likelihood of harm?

A good risk assessment, according to Kemshall et al. (2013), should be participative and any intervention planned as a result of the assessment should be proportionate. So, social workers need frequent and good supervision to enable them to reflect on and communicate their concerns.

All these forms of risk assessment have their own inherent ‘risks’ and it is important to remember that an individualised, reflective approach needs to be maintained when conducting such assessments. We also need to be mindful of our own approaches to risk in everyday life. How many times, for instance, have you or others railed against aspects of ‘health and safety’ legislation or work policies? These derive from the ‘risk society’ we have constructed as much as do policies that seek to ensure the safeguarding of a child at risk of harm. So, we will all have views about risk but social work is an occupation that seeks to balance risk by protecting people in danger from harm and danger while allowing and even facilitating the legitimate taking of risks by others as they seek to take control of their lives. A clear co-constructed assessment of what is permissible and what is desired is central to good practice in this context.

The STEPSWISE approach to risk assessment has developed in child care and safeguarding but is a useful model that offers much, especially in respect of the principles on which it is built, to all areas of social work practice (ISCP, 2020). It is a structured assessment of needs and risks developed, used and refined in the US to manage risks in a positive and appropriate way (Yuille et al., 1993). The approach works as a partnership between professionals and family members, using the principles of child-centredness, participation and strengths. Social workers require robust supervision to help them evaluate their thinking and to make plans, echoing Kemshall et al. (2013)

above. The model has seven key steps which build to an overall assessment. The steps include:

- Making hypotheses about the situation, risks, dangers, strengths and assets, and immediacy
- Planning
- Gathering information
- Testing and evaluating
- Analysing the data
- Deciding the plan
- Reviewing the work

These steps are much akin to the social work process as a whole and to the ASPIRE model we introduced earlier, whilst the assessment itself considers vulnerabilities mitigated by sources of resilience or strength. Risk assessment has become normalised not only in society but also in social work. It is, therefore, important that you question yourself closely when asked to undertake a risk assessment, to reflect critically and to consider the needs of the people you are working with as central as well as your organisation's expectations. Keeping in mind a person-centred and strengths-based focus will help you here.

Contemporary models

There are a number of models currently employed in social work practice which share many important features whichever country you are practising in. Here we will briefly consider the '3 Conversations' and the 'Signs of Safety®' approaches. The '3 Conversations' approach to assessment and care planning focuses on two central elements of people's ecological systems, the individual's strengths and assets within their community (SCIE, 2017). '3 Conversations' was developed by Partners4Change, a group working with health and social services to develop an alternative to traditional resource-focused assessment. As its name suggests, the approach involves three conversations. The first explores the individual's needs and from this seeks to identify his or her personal strengths and connect them with family members and community resources that can help meet those needs. The second conversation is led by the individual and focuses on the identification of risk and impending crises with the aim of identifying ways of managing these. The third conversation focuses on planning for long-term outcomes considered by the service user to be important to their perception of a good life. The professional aids the individual by identifying with them social services and social security resources that can help alongside emphasising the community and personal assets that are available.

The approach is value-based, privileging those people using social work as experts and emphasising the need to listen and to connect people with support whether that is intrapersonal, interpersonal or organisational. Research by Partners4Change (n.d.) evaluating the use of the '3 Conversations' approach demonstrates cost savings for local authorities but also high satisfaction for people using social work. The fresh approach demands new ways of thinking and responding, seeing the person and not the label and ensuring the lead is taken by the person not the professional.

Activity 1.3

How do you think this approach differs from social work models of assessment that you have come into contact with or that you know from your course, reading or placement?

The Signs of Safety® approach to child protection has a long practice history and research base in Australia and has been used in the UK (see Signs of Safety® website <https://www.signsofsafety.net/>). It addresses the complex and difficult questions that arise when trying to form genuine and appropriate partnerships with children and families where abuse is suspected. Crucially, however, it builds on the strengths perspective in social work and so moves away from a singular risk focus to the development of strengths that can be built on within those environments. In terms of its use as an assessment aid, this is the only place in which there is a formal protocol that links to a more in-depth comprehensive assessment model. Its research base is extensive and in the UK Bunn's (2013) work for the NSPCC provides a useful insight into both its usefulness and its focus on strengths. The model is less reliant on the bureaucratic management of cases and more on dialogue and participation. The assessment and planning form seeks to use the observations and descriptions of danger, safety and context to evaluate risks and then to ask what the agency requires to close the case, what the family wants and what indicators could be used to measure progress. It is transparent and open.

In Wales, social policy is being driven by the Future Generations legislation. The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 is a piece of long-term legislation which calls on public bodies to consider the implications of their actions, to be inclusive and to work to resolve 'wicked' problems such as the climate crisis, poverty and health inequalities. For social work, there is an emphasis on genuine participation as a cornerstone (see Future Generations, 2020). Thus having 'What Matters' conversations to find out what people really want, what services they want and how they want to see them respond to them are central to social work assessment and planning processes. These involve feedback at all times, accessibility and clarity, and actively seeking the involvement of citizens at the earliest opportunities and throughout any relationship with them.

For social workers in Wales similar approaches are developing, and a 'What Matters' way of working is enshrined in legislation, the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, that focuses on strengths, resources and working together as genuinely equal partners (Welsh Government, 2015). 'What Matters' conversations represent the process of assessment rather than a model of assessment itself (Social Care Wales, 2019). Using this approach is a skilled way of identifying and co-producing, with another person as an equal partner, an assessment that details what people want, what barriers prevent them achieving this and what strengths or assets may be brought into play to address them. To ensure people can participate demands support, encouragement and even advocacy. It may be novel to many people to be asked for their input. All social workers, in whichever country they practise, can learn from this approach which seeks to remove the time pressures from the process and focus on co-produced outcomes for all.

In Scotland, the process has been driven by the desire to create an integrated approach to assessment which, in respect of children's social work has been brought about through the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, which promotes the Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) approach. This integrates and therefore simplifies assessment and encourages participation and strengths-based social work, although there is still a need to develop validated approaches to assessment (Smith, 2018).

Levels of assessment in social work

As well as looking at assessment by type, we can distinguish between the levels of assessment. By this we mean whether the assessment is broad-based, fluid and holistic (taking into account all aspects of the service user's life and situation), or whether it is focused on a particular issue or serves to inform a particular intervention. These levels do not necessarily preclude one another. It may be appropriate in many circumstances to undertake a broad social assessment prior to focusing on an agreed goal and target for intervention which may demand a much more specific focus and activity. In practice, social work assessments often not only reflect different levels throughout the intervention, but also contain elements of both types identified in the previous section. Doel and Marsh (1992) use a helpful illustration to show the importance of levels in an assessment for task-centred social work. They employ the example of a newspaper which can be scanned by its headlines to give an indication of what topics are covered. If there are articles of particular interest you might read the first paragraph or indeed the whole article depending on your focus at the time. Another way of considering the refinement of an assessment is to think of a funnel tapering towards the bottom. As you 'pour in' your information, it will gradually be refined until the key elements remain. An example of this funnel approach is shown in Figure 1.1.

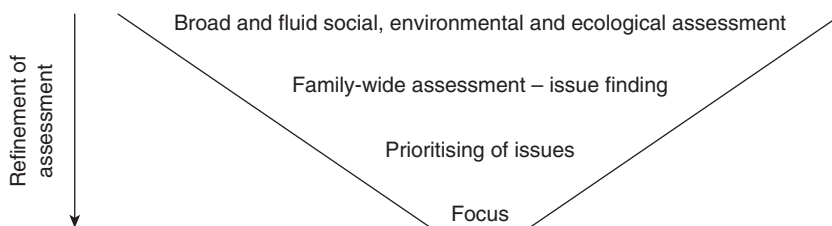


Figure 1.1 A funnel approach to levels of assessment (adapted from Parker and Penhale, 1998)

Being explicit about the type of assessment used and the implications this may have for service users is important. The type and level of assessment used will have implications for the service received and the approach employed. If service users are to be fully involved in the assessment, an understanding of what will take place, how it will proceed and for what reasons the information is being gathered is crucial. The issues or interventions given as examples in Figure 1.2 change and shift between points on the matrix. However, the diagram provides a helpful visual way of identifying some of the key

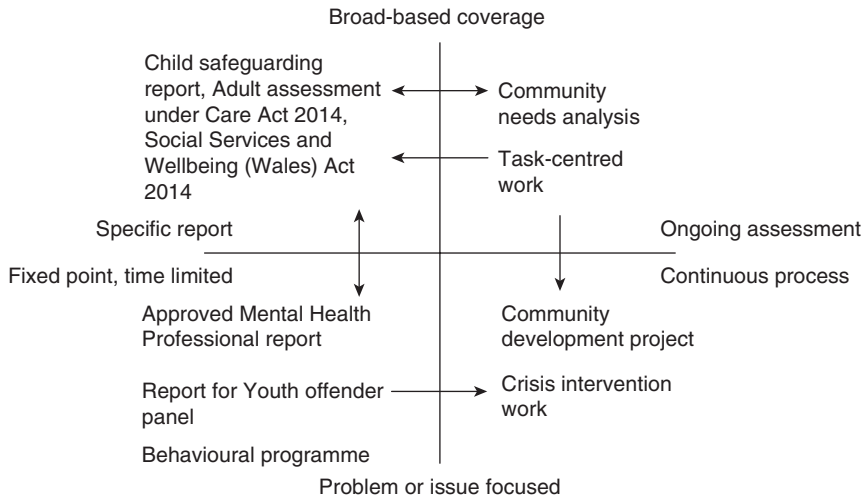


Figure 1.2 Assessment types and levels (with some examples)

features of an assessment and conceptualising social work assessments by type and level. It also indicates the systemic aspects of assessment and, importantly, acknowledges that much social work is either permitted or mandated by legislation.

The purpose of assessment in social work

We have considered some definitions of social work assessments, the types and levels involved and now turn to the purposes for which assessments are used. The purposes of assessment are as many and varied as the methods designed for undertaking them. The assessment itself serves to reach initial conclusions that describe, explain, predict, evaluate and prescribe or suggest interventive methods. Thus, it has a purposive element and to achieve its purpose assessment should be focused, factual and explicit. Assessments have often followed resource-led pathways (those dependent on what services are available at the time) rather than the broader needs-led approach (looking not at what is available but what is needed to make a difference), which has been in vogue for some time although seems to skirt over the perpetual realities of resource limitations. The needs-led approach separates ends and means, and is not dependent upon the resources available. It is hoped that by taking this view, the larger picture will help clarify and identify service gaps and therefore allow for ways of filling these. However, Coulshed and Orme (2006) relate this to the ‘real world’ and state that needs-led principles cannot work unless there are plenty of resources and that in social work there will always be a situation where demand exceeds supply and a judgement must be made between competing needs. This returns us to the definition that takes into account the economic and fiscal realities of human situations. Indeed, it could be argued that it would be unethical to present an assessment that could not result in the services it identifies. Current assessment practice emphasises the centrality of the person and their strengths and assets. It is recognised that genuine participation is not only an ethical imperative but helps the process of the work and achievement of agreed goals.

For writers who consider social work as a purposeful activity, there has long been an association between assessment and a problem-solving approach to working with service users.

The problem solving model ... demands that the client's purposes and expectations in joining the worker in interaction be explored and understood and kept in the centre of concern. It is our firm conviction that lack of initial exploration of expectations and goals and lack of careful selection of the starting place in the contact phase ... account for a large percentage of the failures in the helping process.

(Compton and Galaway, 1975, p285)

Because of the contexts in which social work assessments are undertaken and the many purposes to which they are put, all forms of assessment practice run the risk of inducing normative behaviour: following the rules prescriptively and as though they represent unquestionable givens. Social work assessments therefore need to be 'troubled' or questioned closely. It is important that assessment is not seen simply as an activity, skill or practice that can be undertaken in a linear fashion, moving from 'A' to 'B' without recognition of theoretical and philosophical underpinnings or ideologies, and the importance of working together with people who use social work services (Hepworth et al., 2009). Mainstone (2014) takes this further to introduce the increasingly important area of whole family assessment, seeing the systems in which people live and develop as important and preventing atomisation. One approach that can help you critically to evaluate the ways in which assessment can be understood, to appreciate the meanings constructed in the acts of assessment and to identify possible impacts that assessment can have on individuals, is to group social work assessment around its purposes. The model in Figure 1.3 clusters assessment around the following types: prescribed and political approaches, 'tribal' allegiances fostered by theoretical ideologies, and processes or rituals involved in the 'dance' or inter-relational conduct of assessment (see Parker, 2015).

<i>Normative</i>	
Frameworks and regulatory frameworks – (political assessment) , for example: Early Help Assessment, 'What Matters' conversation (Social Care Wales, 2019)	Procedural assessment – (ritual – liturgical or prescriptive) Understanding and critiquing the assessments employed by agencies and organisations and the ways in which these are conducted (Smale and Tuson, 1993; Preston-Shoot, 2012)
<i>Theoretical</i>	<i>Relational</i>
Theoretically influenced assessment – (tribal assessments) , for example (Payne, 2005; Milner et al., 2020; Teater, 2020): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • evidence-based practice • psychodynamic assessments • cognitive-behavioural assessments • person-centred assessments • community assessments 	Interpersonal assessment – (ritual – relational) Critical reflection on the interpersonal processes involved in assessment (Ruch, 2013) – data choice and gathering; data analysis and interpretation; the impacts of relationship
<i>Adaptive</i>	

Figure 1.3 Purposes of assessment

While social work assessments are, to a greater or lesser extent, politically determined, prescribed and driven, it is possible for individual social workers to engage with individuals, to recognise theoretical and personal biases and to engage with others rather than 'apply' an assessment. Fostering a critically reflective approach to your assessment will help here. It is also important to consider assessment as something that is not 'done' to someone but an activity that is best undertaken as a co-produced piece of work, in a relational way that builds on the strengths and resilience of those you are working with and addresses identified and agreed needs.

In summary, we can state that a social work assessment is a co-produced focused collation, analysis and synthesis of relevant collected data pertaining to an agreed presenting problem and identified needs. Assessments are often confused with evaluation but are, in fact, *more akin to an exploratory study which forms the basis for decision-making and action* (Coulshed and Orme, 2006, p26), which is why they are best undertaken in a participatory way. This problem-solving model may suggest that a focused and scientific approach is being advocated. However, it must be remembered that the model is intended to be collaborative and works effectively if service users work together with the social worker in an active exploration of the issues. Perhaps this purposeful approach would benefit from being balanced with a strengths-based model which takes into account the capacities and resources of the service user.

Strengths and social exclusion

The strengths perspective has a long history in social work but began as a formal development with the work of Saleeby, Weick and others in the 1980s (Weick et al., 1989). Past social work practices focused upon pathology (what is wrong or what needs fixing) and appeared to ignore the strengths an individual, family or group has for change. The strengths perspective challenged this approach and enjoined with movement towards co-creation and collaboration in the social work process. The focus on deficits created dependency and was seen as damaging to a service user's self-esteem. An individual's needs do not occur in isolation, however. Problems are often complex, involve other people and agencies, and occur in a variety of social situations. Therefore, an assessment requires extensive knowledge of the service user's environmental and living system and the wider systems impinging upon it.

Working with service user strengths helps ensure that an anti-oppressive focus is maintained, that the values of social work are promoted and that individual and self-responsibility are emphasised. The strengths perspective focuses on positives with the intention of increasing motivation, capacity and potential for making real and informed life choices, as the seminal work by Saleebey (1996) states.

The strengths perspective honors two things: the power of the self to heal and right itself with the help of the environment, and the need for an alliance with the hope that life might really be otherwise. Helpers must hear the individual, family, or community stories, but people can write the story of their near and far failures only if they know everything they need to know about their condition and circumstances. The job is to help individuals and groups develop the language, summon the resources, devise the plot, and manage the subjectivity of life in their world.

(p303)

Gray (2011) warns us, however, against aspects of the strengths perspective that appear to have synergies with a neoliberal emphasis on individualism and self-reliance. Whilst Kondrat (2020) does agree that the strengths perspective does not seek to challenge the structural roots of problems he does argue that the encouragement and deployment of the individual's resources and strengths in tackling the situation and problems has the potential to transform things at a local level for that individual. Whilst Gray recognises the merits of the approach, she argues for a revisioning of the model that addresses the limitations of an atomised focus on the individual. If we consider that it is not simply the individual biography of the person that is important but the biography in the context of history then we reach a position in which it is the person-in-environment that becomes the focus which acknowledges the importance of both structure and agency and therefore mitigates, theoretically, against such an individualised approach (Germain and Gitterman, 1980). Indeed, the collective potential is summarised in the five principles outlined by Kisthardt (2013):

1. The initial focus is on strengths and capabilities not deficits.
2. Collaboration, partnership and mutuality inform all aspects of the work.
3. All human beings have intrinsic worth and the right to learn, grow and transform, or at least try.
4. The 'natural' everyday setting rather than office (or clinic in the US) is the best place for helping.
5. The whole community is a resource to draw upon and informal, non-professional resources should be used first.

We can see the importance of the strengths perspective at individual and social levels in Pierson's work on social exclusion (Pierson, 2002). He understands the assessment of children in need as being similar to the central concept of social exclusion in social work. Both draw attention to the wider environment and ecological factors (those relating to the individual's living situation) in the lives of children, young people and families, and the structural barriers people face. In this, he promotes the strengths-based approach as opposed to a deficit model. The strengths perspective focuses on resilience, survival in the face of significant hardship or threat to well-being. There is room within the assessment framework to focus on the cognitive skills, coping mechanisms, temperamental and dispositional factors, interpersonal skills and social supports that can be built on as strengths. He uses Saleebey's model to examine barriers and strengths as shown in Figure 1.4. This is similar to Hillen and Levy's (2015) work with black and minority ethnic students, and echoed in the focus Hodge et al. (2018) and Abdullah (2015) consider in respect of potential marginalisation of Muslims in contemporary Western societies.

Taking a strengths-based or solution-focused approach demands a change in emphasis for social workers. No longer can they be seen as expert but as collaborators, facilitating service users to identify their needs and explore alternative ways of acting or conceptualising their experiences. This can be achieved by adopting Smale et al.'s (2000) perspective on assessment in which social workers do not act as 'experts' questioning service users or simply follow agency procedures. Rather, social workers develop an exchange model, similar to Fook's (2016) notion of the joint construction of a narrative. The exchange model acknowledges that service users are the experts on their situations. It sees service users and social workers exchanging ideas, information and ways forward to make a difference and find alternative ways of approaching the situation being considered.



Figure 1.4 Saleebey's strengths and barriers model (see Pierson, 2002)

A strengths-based approach aims to reduce some of the imbalance in power between social workers and service users. It must be acknowledged, however, that the power will never be fully balanced and there are times when social workers are empowered by law to undertake assessments and legitimately to use their authority. It is central in these cases for social workers to be honest and open with service users as indicated by Parker.

While social workers necessarily employ procedures, they can still use an exchange model in their work. Indeed, the spirit underlying many procedures demands that social workers advance collaborative exchanges that put users centre stage.

(2007a, p116)

We must add a further caveat to the strengths perspective. As social workers, we should be sensitive to the feelings and perspectives of those with whom we work and we need to start at the point at which those individuals, families and groups see themselves. So, it is important not to dismiss a person's description of their situation as a problem or to deny their distress under the misapprehension that this is demanded by taking a strengths-based approach. Kondrat (2020) is clear that the model does not dismiss the pain and problems people experience but the focus on strengths adds a new and often cathartic perspective. One way of conceptualising the strengths approach is to see it within a relational social work context in which the whole person is accepted in context and from which the resources, strengths and resilient characteristics of that person can be identified and worked with alongside their more negative appreciation of their current situation at a range of social levels.

Skills in assessment

Watson and West (2006) suggest that effective assessment depends on the deployment of key skills, especially communication, negotiation and decision-making. While these interpersonal skills are certainly important, it must be remembered that administrative skills are also central to accurate and purposeful assessment (see Coulshed and Orme, 2006).

Research summary

Platt (2011) describes a model of analysis in social work assessments, focusing on children and families building on earlier hypothesis-testing work designed to improve and enhance social workers' analysis in assessment. He draws his model from approaches designed to facilitate study skills training in post-qualifying childcare education run at the University of Bristol.

Platt's model is based on three key principles:

- conceptual clarity in the assessment process;
- developing and practising analytical and practical skills such as making hypotheses and formulating and expressing written conclusions;
- encouraging reflection and the transfer of learning to different areas of practice.

Platt used a quantitative method to evaluate the model, using a self-efficacy scale to measure how confident social workers were in making such analyses. He also used independent examination of social workers' assessment reports and marking of assignments. The findings suggested a degree of statistical support for the model and made suggestions about the centrality of adequate support and supervision when making detailed analyses of children and families in social work practice.

Assessment demands an ability to *organise, systematise and rationalise* knowledge gathered. Concurrently, the social worker has to be sensitive and demonstrate an ability to be able to value *the uniqueness of each individual* assessed.

As well as administrative, communication and written skills in undertaking assessments, social workers need to develop and use listening and hearing skills when working with children, observing them and especially when engaging with and talking to them. This may involve using a range of activities to facilitate communication. In research that the Department of Health, Department for Education and Employment, and the Home Office (2000) cite, children prefer:

- to be listened to;
- professionals to be available and accessible;
- professionals to be non-judgemental and non-directive;
- professionals to have a sense of humour;
- straight talking;
- to be able to trust professionals and, where appropriate, to have confidentiality respected (see also Forrester et al., 2008).

It is, of course, not always possible for information to be kept confidential. Social workers must inform service users of the times at which information cannot be kept confidential and will need to be shared with others. To ensure that practice is of the highest ethical standards, this should be done at the outset of the assessment process and not left until the matter arises in the course of an assessment.

Activity 1.4

List the administrative and interpersonal skills that you think are needed to conduct an effective assessment. Identify which skills you already have and which you need to develop, and outline ways in which you may increase these skills. Refer back to the standards and benchmarks detailed at the outset of this chapter and match these against your answers.

Comment

You may have included your ability to write clearly, to organise a system, to store and file information using computers (administrative skills). Or perhaps you have considered the importance you attach to matters of confidentiality, ensuring that privacy procedures are carried out to the letter. Some of the interpersonal skills you might have identified concern communication in written reports and letters, face-to-face or on the telephone, and indeed use of information and communication technologies. Try to think of the skills that you have not added to your list and think of how you might develop these in your practice.

Hepworth et al. (2009) emphasise that assessment is critical to social work intervention and its effectiveness. This leads to the identification of goals for change, the means of achieving these and alternatives. Since assessments can be construed as fluid and dynamic, the assessment changes as the change process proceeds. Bartlett (1970) states that it is only after understanding and identifying relevant factors in any situation that plans to act may be formulated (Coulshed and Orme, 2006; Parker, 2008, 2013). Thus, we can say that the purpose of assessment in social work is to acquire and study information about people in their environment to decide upon an identified problem and to plan effective options to resolve that problem. It must also be remembered that assessments are not simply fact-finding exercises but represent a joint construction of a narrative or story between social workers and service users. Remembering this helps to locate the assessment in context and draws attention to issues of power when undertaking assessment work.

Characteristics and features of assessments

Most writers agree on the features comprising an assessment, although models differ slightly, as shown in Table 1.2. Also the ways in which different teams collect and organise their information will differ depending on the purpose of the assessment, the focus of the team and the particular approaches taken. These have become more constrained over recent years as instrumental approaches towards standardisation and commonality have channelled questions and processes into inflexible on-line forms. It is generally helpful, however, to have a framework in mind when gathering information. This can help you to engage with service users who will want to know what information you want to collect and why you might want to do so. Having a clear understanding of what you are doing and why can also help you create an atmosphere that is more participative and negotiated.

Table 1.2 Characteristics of assessments over time

	Cournoyer (1991)	Hepworth et al. (2009)	Middleton (1997)	Milner et al. (2020)
Preparation, planning and engagement		Clarification of ecological factors including a configuration of the systems involved	Establishing a working relationship Timing Ground rules Acknowledging feelings	Preparation Identify key people Create a schedule for data collection Determine the interview schedule Produce a statement of intent and include purpose and systems of accountability Note tentative explanations
Data collection and creating a problem profile	Description A. Client identification information B. Description of person system, family/ household/ primary social system and ecological system C. Presenting problems and goals D. Strengths and resources E. Referral source and process; collateral information F. Social history	Identification of the problem This should be person centred although, of course, this is recognised to be difficult in the case of involuntary users of social work services. (This comes first in Hepworth, Rooney and Larsen's model.)	Data collection Individual wants Barriers, problems, stresses, resources and supports Coping mechanisms Evidence from professional/expert sources	Data collection Create a contents page for the case file Store data Check verbal data by summarising and reporting Check written data and mark opinion clearly Consider other sources of information Note inconsistencies but keep an open mind
Preliminary analysis of data	Tentative assessment A. Person B. Family/ household/ primary social systems C. Ecology/ environment D. Summary assessment	Assessment of developmental wants and needs Stresses associated with life transitions		Weighing the data and applying professional knowledge Consider seriousness of situation or how well service user is functioning Identify persistent themes or patterns and list them Cluster themes and begin to rank in order of importance Identify gaps

(Continued)

Table 1.2 (Continued)

	Cournoyer (1991)	Hepworth et al. (2009)	Middleton (1997)	Milner et al. (2020)
Testing the data, deep analysis		Assessment of developmental wants and needs Stresses associated with life transitions	Analysis Individual wants Changes required Risks Opportunities Roles Costs Alternatives and options	Identify people to help Develop a reflexive approach List people to be consulted Making judgements Identify and use theories to gain a depth of analysis Develop hypotheses around goals Develop tentative explanations Test explanations for theoretical fit Check with key people involved Check data again Consult with reflexive group Develop further explanations and list ways they can be tested
Use of data, creating an action plan	Contract A. Problems B. Final goals C. Plans		Planning Draft proposals Negotiation Recommendations Reviews Quality assurance	Deciding What help is needed and by whom? List outcomes to be achieved and consequences to avoid Explain how outcomes can be measured Prepare intervention plan Develop independent mechanism to monitor outcomes – supervision, service user, multi-agency group Prepare draft report listing sources of information, analysis, initial judgement Obtain feedback on report and revise it accordingly

Summary

In this chapter we have introduced and explored some of the key features concerning social work assessments. We have seen not only how fundamental assessments are to social work practice, but also how complex they are. The importance of a value base which respects people who use social work services and flexibility and reflexivity in social workers are crucial to good practice. Before we explore some of the ways in which an assessment can be assisted and some useful tools, we will turn in Chapter 2 to an examination of the legal and policy contexts in which many assessments are currently undertaken. Chapter 2 focuses on England but there are similarities across the UK and the general elements, if not the legislation and policy, can be transferred to many different settings and contexts.

Further reading

Dyke, C (2019) *Writing Critical Assessments in Social Work* (2nd edition). St Albans: Critical Publishing.

This short text offers a useful and accessible practitioner perspective on the undertaking and construction of good quality assessments in social work.

Mainstone, F (2014) *Mastering Whole Family Assessment in Social Work: Balancing the Needs of Children, Adults and their Families*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

The importance of Mainstone's work is in the whole family approach that she focuses upon. It is important to take into account the other people involved in people's lives, ensuring that social work does not become focused on the individual but remains social. This is important in conducting assessments that set people within their context.

Milner, J, Myers, S and O'Byrne, P (2020) *Assessment in Social Work* (5th edition). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

This book provides an in-depth and critical treatment of assessment, highlighting the central importance of anti-discriminatory practice and values for social workers undertaking assessment.

