

# CHAPTER 7

## Making Assessments in Partnership

### ABOUT ACTIVITY 7: HOLD THE FRONT PAGE

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*Hold the Front Page* aims to help students consider making assessments from the point of view of the service user and provider. This may seem an obvious aim, but the proliferation of assessment frameworks can take the focus away from the person and on to the assessment process itself. *Hold the Front Page* should enable students to keep people's needs, wants, and problems at the forefront of their assessments.

### NOTES FOR INSTRUCTORS<sup>1</sup>

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#### PURPOSE

Finding out about a person's situation is not unlike investigating a story as a journalist. There may be a number of different, interrelated stories, each with its own headline and more detailed storyline. When listening to people's stories, it is important to listen for quotes from what they have to say; these quotes summarize the story and help to keep it authentic by using the person's own voice. This activity and the chapter that follows emphasize the skills of active listening as core to making assessments in partnership with people.

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<sup>1</sup>See the Introduction to the book for suggestions about how instructors and students can, separately and together, use the activities in this book.

### METHOD

The student should have a copy of *Hold the Front Page* well in advance of the supervision session or fieldwork seminar. Ask the student(s) to construct a draft “Front Page” that would consist of a main headline and four or five other headline stories, with a possible quote for each topic and some text by way of a storyline.

Discuss with the student(s) why the headline story and the other topics were chosen. Of course, it is crucial to emphasize that this is speculation for the purpose of the learning and that work with actual people will not be speculative.

## NOTES FOR STUDENTS AND INSTRUCTORS

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### VARIATIONS

It is interesting to repeat *Hold the Front Page* later in the practice learning, in order to reflect work with an actual person. This is a technique that can also be used in direct work with people, as has been done very successfully by a number of students and practitioners. The *Hold the Front Page* technique is especially effective when used with flipchart paper and can unlock creativity in people’s responses to assessment.

### USE BY OTHER PROFESSIONS

This method of making assessments in partnership is relevant to all professionals who need to find out people’s stories. Students from different professions could use the technique together, either speculatively or in practice. It would be interesting to see what differences there might be in the kinds of story they are likely to focus on.

### EDUCATIONAL POLICY ACCREDITATION STANDARDS

The topics in this chapter relate to the following *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) 2008 Core Competencies* (Council on Work Education, 2008):

1. Apply critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgments.

2. Engage, assesses, intervene, and evaluate with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities.

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## FOR STUDENTS AND INSTRUCTORS

### ACTIVITY 7: HOLD THE FRONT PAGE

In *Permission to Learn* (Chapter 1, Activity 1, p. 29), we met Zoë Benner and her family:

At Number 1 is Zoë Benner, a single parent who was in foster care for much of her childhood but is now reconciled with her mother, who lives on another street in Green Hill apartments. Zoë has a 14-year-old son (Jackson), a 12-year-old daughter (Kylie), and a baby daughter (Kara) age 11 months. Jackson was cautioned for shoplifting earlier in the year and has just been arrested on a charge of criminal damage. Kylie has not been to school for several weeks. She has few friends and is reluctant to leave the family's apartment. Kylie has been referred for help with her bedwetting problem. Kara is Zoë's daughter by another man, who is attempting to gain custody of her. Kara has asthma and seems to suffer from unspecified allergies. Zoë has another child, Tilly, who is a 7-year-old girl currently with foster parents on the other side of the city.

If there was a newspaper just about Zoë and her family, what might the front page look like? (You will need to elaborate on Zoë and her family's situation.)

Construct a front page for Zoë Benner (see Figure 7.1). What might the main headline be? Fill in the storyline and a likely quote from Zoë to illustrate the story. As well as the problems and difficulties, what might she say that she *wants*? What other headlines and stories might there be? Construct the rest of the front page by adding four or five other headlines. Add the more detailed stories, and likely quotes, to summarize them in a nutshell. Include what Zoë or other family members might want to happen in relation to each particular storyline. Add your own "editorial" about how you see her situation.

**Figure 7.1** *Hold the Front Page*

<h1>The FRONT</h1>		
<i>Headline:</i>		
<i>The story:</i>	<i>The story continued:</i>	
<i>Another headline and story:</i>	<i>Also:</i>	<i>More news:</i>
<i>And finally:</i>		

NOTES FOR INSTRUCTORS

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## TEACHING ABOUT MAKING ASSESSMENTS IN PARTNERSHIP

**Opportunities for Making Assessments in Partnership**

According to Siporin (1975), assessment is the “differential, individualized, and accurate identification and evaluation of problems, people, and situations and of their interrelations, to serve as a sound basis for differential helping intervention” (p. 224). Meyer (1995) defines assessment simply as “knowing, understanding, evaluating, individualizing, or figuring out.” Sheafor and Horejsi (2008) assert that “assessment is the thinking part of the process by which the worker reasons from the information gathered to arrive at tentative conclusions” (p. 239). All social work practice begins with some form of assessment. The social worker gathers data from the client and from the systems that affect the client (Hepworth et al., 2006). For our purposes, assessment is the investigation and determination of variables affecting an identified problem or issue. It refers to gathering relevant information about a problem so that decisions can be made about potential solutions.

When preparing opportunities for the student to learn about the assessment of people, it will be necessary to decide how much autonomy the student should have in this process. This, in turn, will depend on the risk factors associated with the assessments and the circumstances of the particular student; for example, does the current period of practice learning come early or late in his or her program of study? A helpful model is for the student to shadow others making assessments before taking supervised responsibility himself or herself.

**Your Role in Teaching About Assessment**

In the introduction to Part I, we touched on the difference between good practice and good practice teaching. The distinction is especially strong in this area of “assessment.” The student is indeed *a student* and not a trainee, and it is important that the learning goes above and beyond the specific assessment frameworks used in your own particular agency or area of practice. Students are not learning to “do assessments” as a worker in your agency; they are learning “about assessment.” However, doing assessments will be a tool for them to learn about assessment. So, they will learn how to do an assessment within a particular framework (depending on the opportunity in any particular setting) but also learn to generalize from this particular experience to learn about the notion of assessment.

During a period of practice learning, students should be enabled to understand the following:

- Philosophical principles that underpin the idea of assessment
- Practice skills that are needed to make a good assessment when working with service users, providers, and other colleagues in an interprofessional context
- Emphasize the importance of identifying and using a client's strengths in addition to focusing on problems

As part of understanding the idea of assessment, students should be encouraged to recognize what is *general* to all assessments, what is *specific* to an assessment protocol, and what is *particular* to the context in which the assessment is made (the agency context). Perhaps students should be encouraged to keep a journal of their practice, for example, by keeping a list of the numbers of assessments they have made using a particular assessment protocol, rather in the way that the medical profession keeps a record of the number of assessments made using a particular protocol (see below for a discussion of protocols).

The vagueness of the term *assessment* presents one of the greatest challenges to your practice teaching, not least the potential confusion because the same term describes the process to which students are submitted in relation to their practice abilities. Experience in doing assessments does not necessarily mean that you will feel confident in teaching about assessment, and you might want to familiarize yourself with Milner and O'Byrne (2002) and Parker and Bradley (2003), the suggested texts in the Further Reading section toward the end of the chapter. We discuss some of the issues around assessment in more detail later.

### Assessment and Intervention

There has been a tendency for assessment to be seen as a separate activity from intervention. However, the student is learning both about social work practice and agency practice; social work practice emphasizes the close connection between assessment and intervention. Indeed, assessment in the sense of "finding out and making judgments together" continues throughout the intervention period.

By asking the student to include statements about what Zoë Benner and her family might *want*, you have also been encouraging the student to consider what kinds of intervention the assessment might lead to. This is crucial to social work practice since we doubt whether an assessment without an intervention is, in fact,

social work. The assessment should be theoretically grounded and based on available evidence (see Part IV: Social Worker as Researcher: Evaluating Practice).

## NOTES FOR STUDENTS

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### LEARNING ABOUT MAKING ASSESSMENTS IN PARTNERSHIP

#### Assessment: A Note of Caution

The term *assessment* is deeply embedded in the social work vocabulary at professional and organizational levels. We need to be honest about the reservations we have about the term. There are two good reasons to sound a note of caution.

First, it is a confusing term. Is it a process, a skill, an outcome, or all three? In addition to its principal use in this chapter in connection with judgments made with respect to service users and providers, you will find it used to describe the process and outcome of your own competence to practice social work.

Second, and more seriously, the term *assessment* has connotations that are contrary to the spirit of partnership. The preposition that most commonly follows *assessment* is *on* rather than *with* (e.g., “Have you completed your assessment *on* Mrs. Smith?” rather than “Have you completed your assessment *with* Mrs. Smith?”). This is not a semantic point, and it is one that lies at the heart of a fundamental dilemma: Assessments usually comprise professional judgments about people, their state of mind, their risks, their eligibility for resources.

Clearly, there are times when it is necessary to use professional judgment about a situation, in which case it would be more honest to use the term *judgment*. *Judgment* is more candid than *assessment* because the former recognizes the element of discretion (and room for mistake), whereas assessment makes a claim to objectivity that is not necessarily justified. Assessment is about making judgments based on information (Middleton, 1997). A professional judgment should, of course, be made that takes full account of the views of a range of stakeholders about needs and wants.

#### Feedback From *Hold the Front Page*

If we think of assessments as an “exploratory study” (Coulshed & Orme, 2006), it is possible to see links with a journalist’s skill. The aim is to find out what is happening, who it involves, what people think about what is going on, what they have tried to do about it, and what their aspirations are. The journalist does this to sell newspapers, and the social worker does it to see what

kind of help might be appropriate. Journalists often have their own agenda of what spin can be put on the story to sensationalize it (to sell *more* papers); social workers too often have their own agenda, too—what parts of the person’s story fit into the proforma, the assessment criteria. Unfortunately, this can lead to one ear being closed to the person’s story, as it is processed by the social worker for a “fit.”

Of course, resources are limited and must be fairly allocated, so at some point, there has to be a process of assessing a person’s *need* and not just his or her *wants*. However, in closing off discussion so that it only fits the agency’s agenda, we are acting contrary to the spirit of partnership and, indeed, to the principles of good social work practice. The *Hold the Front Page* activity lays the foundations for “open book” listening, unguided by assessment structures, so that you know what an open assessment can, at least, look like.

### Wide Range of Assessments

Social workers are involved in a very wide range of assessments, which include the following:

- Assessment of children in need and their families
- Assessment in child care, with three domains: the child’s developmental needs, parenting capacity, and family and environmental factors
- Community care assessments
- Mental health assessments for admission to hospital or guardianship
- Assessment of appropriate discharge plans for hospital patients
- Diversity considerations when conducting assessments (e.g., age, class, color, culture, disability, ethnicity, family structure, gender, marital status, national origin, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation). For each case, social workers should ask themselves whether any aspects of diversity may be significant.

### Assessment and Government Guidance

Many assessments carry the authority of the courts, so they are exceptionally powerful, as is the whole notion of assessment. Although the format may be prescribed and limiting, McDonald (1999) acknowledges that assessments do carry statutory authority and legitimation. In particular, this impact has been to increase the “emphasis on ensuring that assessments are evidence-based, consider risk more comprehensively in all its contexts, and accountability” (Milner & O’Byrne, 2002, p. 1).



We noted earlier that social workers are involved in a very wide range of assessments, which can be thought of as a series of separate *protocols* governing how an assessment might be undertaken in a particular context. Some of these are mandatory, some advisory: You need to be very clear which is which!

Although you will learn about a wide range of assessments, it will not be possible or necessary to practice all of them to understand what assessment is about. As we have already emphasized, it is important that you learn how to help somebody to tell his or her story before you then learn how to squeeze it into an assessment framework.

### Working in Partnership With People

An assessment can be transformed from a formalized checklist to a genuine partnership of enquiry by good communication skills, especially listening and interviewing skills (Trevithick, 2005, p. 53). This ability is especially important since, in reviewing the literature, Milner and O’Byrne (2002) were struck that there was “little evidence of the existence of well-developed skills in involving service users in the assessment process” (p. 3). The following quote from a social worker’s portfolio reflects some of the confusion over the nature of assessment:

Following a visit, my initial assessment was that she had let the tasks of the household get on top of her and she also appeared to be isolated.

This statement indicates that the everyday interpretation of the term *assessment* is that it is a judgment made by a relative expert about another’s situation. Was the service user’s assessment that she had let the tasks get on top of her and that she was isolated? We think not. Service users do not “make assessments.”

Of course, practitioners and agencies have to make judgments about people’s circumstances, and these will sometimes be quite different from those made by the people themselves. Let us, in that case, be honest and call them judgments, rather than hide behind the white-coat term *assessment*.

We have to exercise caution, too, in our use of the word *partnership*. It is an *apple pie* term and can be “used to describe anything from token consultation to a total devolution of power and control” (Braye & Preston-Shoot, 1995, p. 102). Genuine partnerships are not easily established, and the differences in power within the relationship between social workers and users and providers will always be a limit to the scope of the partnership.

Partnership involves an approach that is centered on the person rather than on the pro forma. For example, Kitwood and Bredin (1992) developed

person-centered approaches in relation to work with people with dementia, looking at the care process and its effect on well-being. It highlights the service user's point of view and reminds us of the importance of considering strengths as well as problems.

### Holistic Assessments

We have mentioned several conceptual and practical problems with “assessments.” A further difficulty with highly structured assessment procedures is their tendency to blinker the person who is assessing, so that they only assess for narrow aspects of a person's life rather than allowing a fuller picture to emerge. The following quote from a social work postqualifying portfolio illustrates this:

One of the difficulties of the assessment that Sure Start<sup>2</sup> completed was that it was about Ms X and the assessment was not a child-centered assessment. The difficulty was that Ms X was very needy herself and it is my belief that the Sure Start staff lost sight that the assessment was meant to be child-centered.

We cannot be confident that the social worker would have approached this from a holistic (all-encompassing) perspective either. Two assessments would emerge, the one parent centered and the other child centered. Which, if either, tells us the full story?

It is important not to confuse a holistic assessment (one that takes account of different dimensions in people's lives, including their strengths not just their problems) with a single assessment, which is one carried out by one professional rather than many. A single assessment is designed to prevent people having to endure multiple assessments from a number of different professionals, but it does not guarantee that the assessment process itself will take account of the service user as a person rather than as a “pain sufferer” or “an applicant for day care services.”

### Assessments and Interventions

Finding out is just one aspect of an assessment. Unlike journalists who do nothing more with their story than print it, social workers must use an assessment as a basis for further action or recommendation. Social work practice goes beyond assessments to interventions; indeed, assessment is one aspect of the social work intervention, although it may mark a definite stage (via a report, for example) before further work is or is not indicated.

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<sup>2</sup>Sure Start is an organization working with families.

What follows an assessment will vary from one agency to another, but in social work practice, there are a number of models to guide the whole of your intervention, the best known of which is probably task-centered practice (P. Marsh & Doel, 2005). In this method of practice, the assessment stage is called “problem exploration.” Task-centered work emphasizes people’s strengths as well as their problems. It models making assessment in partnership, precisely because the social worker’s expertise is not making judgments about the person’s situation but engaging him or her in a new experience of building confidence, solving, or at least lessening problems and achieving goals.

Interventions vary from “short and fat” along a continuum to “long and thin” (Doel & Marsh, 1992, p. 90); in other words, your work may be characterized by relatively frequent contact over a short period of time or extended over a longer period with fewer contacts. It is important that your learning about assessments is linked to your wider learning of planning, completing, and evaluating interventions and that all of these processes are tied to an understanding of what partnership with people means in practice.

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## ASSESSING YOUR LEARNING

It is important not to lose sight of the “in partnership” in the title of this chapter. The temptation is to focus on the skills of making assessments for the agency in which you are placed, rather than focusing on learning about the assessment process as a whole and how it links to other aspects of your intervention with people. By all means use a particular assessment framework as an example, but keep in mind that it is just that, an example. The assessment of your abilities as a student in this area should focus on your capacity to enquire and to plan, complete, and evaluate your work together with all the people who have been involved.

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## FURTHER READING

- Hepworth, D. H., Rooney, R. H., Dewberry Rooney, G., & Larsen, J. (2006). *Direct social work practice, theory and skills*. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole/Thompson.
- Milner, J., & O’Byrne, P. (2002). *Assessment in social work* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Parker, J., & Bradley, J. (2003). *Assessment, planning, intervention and review*. Exeter, UK: Learning Matters Ltd.
- Sheafor, B., & Horejsi, C. (2008). *Techniques and guidelines for social work practice* (8th ed.). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

