Analysis and Critical Thinking in Assessment

2nd Edition

Literature Review

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Introduction

Child protection work makes heavy demands on reasoning skills. With an issue as important as children's welfare, it is vital to have the best standard of thinking that is humanly possible. Mistakes are costly to the child and the family.
(Munro, 2008)

Social work with vulnerable children and families is challenging and difficult work, practically and emotionally. Positive outcomes are not guaranteed and the consequences of error, as the opening quote puts it with considerable understatement, can be 'costly'. Inquiries into child deaths and serious case reviews over the years have typically highlighted shortcomings in frontline practice, with assessment being a recurrent concern. Good quality assessment is critical for proper case management, whatever the case: it is important whether you are at the early stages of considering whether a child or young person has additional needs or proceeding with a complex child protection inquiry. Where the welfare of a vulnerable child is at stake, if that assessment is either not done or not done well, the consequences can be catastrophic.

This literature review examines analytical, critical and reflective thinking and writing in assessment, which is vital not only in social work but across a range of disciplines that work together to achieve the best possible outcomes for children, young people and their families.

What is the problem?

Assessment practice in children and families social work

Assessment involves gathering and evaluating information about a situation (Adcock, 2001; Crisp et al, 2003; Horwath, 2009; Turney et al, 2011) and underpins the formulation of any plan to safeguard and promote the welfare of a child or young person. Without good assessment, practice is likely to be unfocused and directionless; at worst, it is potentially dangerous and may leave a vulnerable child at serious risk of harm. The problems in assessment seem to lie in the move from the collection of data or information to its use in practice as the basis for judgement and decision-making.

A number of commentators (eg Cleaver and Walker, 2004; Holland, 2010; Munro, 1998) have observed that social workers are generally good communicators and skilled at gathering information about families and their circumstances, but they then have difficulty in processing the material they have collected (Helm, 2010). The difficulties seem to lie in synthesising and analysing the data, evaluating it and drawing conclusions (Cleaver, 2005). The failure or inability to analyse, in particular, has been noted time and again in inquiry reports, inspection reports and serious case reviews (Laming, 2003; Cantrill, 2005; Brandon et al, 2008; Ofsted, 2008). Yet despite the repeated identification of this difficulty

and various new procedural requirements, the problem remains.

Before trying to make sense of some of the difficulties with assessment, it is important to understand the context for practice, the cultures and organisations within which social work gets done. Modern practice is more complex, service delivery (multidisciplinary, multi-agency and service-user participative) more diverse, and the supporting infrastructure (organisational structures, recording systems, etc) more rapidly changing than ever before. Add to this the challenges of performance indicators and targets to be met by local authorities, staff and resource shortages, a range of government-led policy initiatives and locally managed responses, and the resulting picture is of a profession in almost constant movement and change. While change is certainly not inherently problematic, it is perhaps fair to point out that the level and speed of change has been unprecedented and that this kind of environment can make it hard to hold on to some of the basics of good practice – namely that it takes time and effort to provide the quality of thinking that is required for accurate assessment and well-planned interventions. We will return to this point.

This review draws together ideas from current literature and research about assessment and the kind of thinking that is needed to support this key dimension of practice. It highlights the role of analysis, but also looks more broadly at the nature of thinking in social work and the different elements that combine to produce the skilled reasoning that the complex world of work with children, young people and families requires.

Defining terms

In this section we look at some of the key concepts in relation to thinking in social work and assessment.

Analysis

To analyse something or some system is to break it down into its components and, by identifying the constituent parts and exploring the relationship between them, find out what it is made of or how it is constructed. Analysis is presented as a largely objective process (Munro, 2008) undertaken in order to gain a better understanding or to draw conclusions about the thing or issue under review. The strength of analytical thinking is that, used properly, it is rigorous, systematic and methodical. In the social work literature, it is generally discussed in the context of analysing information or situations and involves working carefully and logically through a mass of often complex, confusing or incomplete information, such as might be gathered in the course of an assessment.

Analysis is often contrasted with intuition and the two presented as opposite 'poles' or ways of thinking. Typically, analytical thinking is portrayed as precise, objective and rational while intuition is woolly, imprecise and prone to bias and individual idiosyncrasy. These pictures of the different modes of thinking may well contain some truth but are oversimplified. So, while the strengths of analytical thinking should be acknowledged, it is worth noting that

it has some limitations (Munro 2008) and that intuitive thinking may also have something to offer on its own terms (Hammond, 1996; Helm, 2011; Munro, 2008; Platt, 2005; Platt and Turney, 2013). There are arguments to support the considered use of intuition in social work – for example, that it is a basic mode of thinking and one that we all draw on, so it does not have to be taught (which is not to say its use cannot be developed and improved). It is also quick, it can be used in establishing rapport and to demonstrate empathy, and it draws on the practitioner's life experience and (sometimes tacit) practice knowledge, as well as formal research knowledge. So rather than seeing analysis and intuition as either/or modes of thought, it may be more constructive to consider how skilled social workers make use of both, and to understand the trade-offs or strengths and limitations of each way of thinking.

Different approaches to assessment are found in the social work literature (for example, Calder, 2008; Calder and Hackett, 2013; Holland, 2010; Milner and O'Byrne, 2009; O'Connor et al, 2006; Parker and Bradley, 2010), with the role of analysis featuring explicitly in some but not all of the models described. Some authors offer systematic frameworks for analysing information (Holland, 2010; O'Connor et al, 2006), which can support the assessment process in practice.

The importance of formal analysis should not be overlooked but it is not the only way of thinking about thinking in social work. Other elements have been identified – for example, analytical thinking is often discussed alongside another concept: *critical* thinking.

Critical thinking

First of all, it is perhaps worth saying what critical thinking is not. In everyday usage, the word 'critical' often carries negative connotations and 'being critical' is seen as (largely unhelpful) fault finding. But critical thinking is not inherently about undermining or negating other people's ideas or work – or rather, it is not about doing that just to be contrary or as an end in itself. While there is no single agreed definition, there are some features that distinguish 'critical' from other sorts of thinking (Gambrill, 2012; Moon, 2005; Moseley et al, 2005; Paul and Elder, 2009). Critical thinking is purposeful (Gambrill, 2012). It takes a questioning (and self-questioning) attitude towards the issue or problem at hand and examines the information, ideas, assumptions and concepts, etc, associated with it and considers how they act to support a particular view or interpretation of the situation.

Critical thinking involves maintaining an open-minded attitude and being able to think about different ways of understanding the information before you. Critical thinking also includes a process of evaluating claims and arguments in order to come to logical and consistent conclusions, assessing these conclusions against clear and relevant criteria or standards, and being able to spell out the reasons for the judgements you have reached.

Critical thinking is associated with reasoning ... [which] includes:

> *having reasons for what we believe and do, and being aware of what they are*

> *critically evaluating our own beliefs and actions*

> *being able to present to others the reasons for our beliefs and actions*

(Cottrell, 2011)

Critical thinking is discussed within education literature in the context of teaching/learning processes (eg Brookfield, 1987; Moon, 1999, 2005 and 2007; Moseley et al, 2005) and in relation to general study skills development (Cottrell, 2013). It is also found in literature aimed at a broader health and social care workforce (Brechin et al, 2000; Fraser and Matthews, 2007; Jones-Devitt and Smith, 2007). Within social work more specifically, there is material aimed at supporting social work students through qualifying and post-qualifying level courses (Mumm and Kersting, 1997; Rutter and Brown, 2011) where critical thinking is discussed in terms of its contribution to the professional or academic writing process (eg Aveyard et al, 2011; Rutter and Brown, 2011; Cottrell, 2011; Gambrill, 2012), or framed as a key element in a developing 'critical practice' (Adams et al, 2009; Fook, 2012; Fook and Gardner, 2007).

Reflection and reflexivity

Critical thinking incorporates an attitude of 'mindfulness' – ie an awareness of one's own thoughts, feelings, motivations and actions – which links very readily to the practice of *reflection* (Fook, 2012; O'Connor et al, 2006; Taylor and White, 2000; White et al, 2006).

Different usages of the term 'reflection' are found in the literature. For example, it can carry the sense of 'mirroring'; in this usage, it refers to the way a practitioner picks up and then mirrors the emotions expressed consciously or unconsciously by the

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person they are working with (Froggett, 2002). This understanding of reflection draws attention to the emotional meaning of situations and how practitioners can learn to use this information about the emotional 'climate' to contribute to their thinking about what might be going on (Cooper, 2005).

A different set of ideas about reflection is contained in the notion of the 'reflective practitioner' (Schön, 1983 and 1987) and while those ideas have not been without criticism (Ixer, 1999; Moon, 1999), 'reflection' has been widely discussed in health, education and social care.

At the most straightforward level, reflection means nothing more than 'thinking things through' (Payne, 2009). It involves looking back on what you have done and thinking about what you did, how it went and what could have been done differently – a process described as *reflection-on-action* (Schön, 1983 and 1987). In addition, there is another type of reflection, *reflection-in-action*, which describes the way that a competent practitioner is able to 'think on their feet'. Observation of experienced practitioners has shown that they can use learning from previous experiences and apply it to new situations. Through this process of reflection-in-action, being able to think about what is happening in the moment, practitioners are able to make meaningful links between theory and practice (Yelloly and Henkel, 1995).

The knowledge they draw on is not spelt out – and it would not always be easy to spell it out. It has been internalised by the practitioner and become part of their tacit knowledge or 'practice wisdom'. But as with

intuitive thinking, the ways in which practitioners exercise this professional judgement can be examined, described and perhaps even codified – it can itself become the object of reflection.

The kind of reflection just described typically operates at an intensely personal level and involves the individual looking 'inwards' at their own assumptions, beliefs, experiences, social identities and values, and how these impact on practice. While it is potentially a powerful source of learning and self-development, this approach to thinking about the 'self in practice' has also been challenged. For example, it has been pointed out that continual self-criticism can lead to a degree of self-doubt which then undermines the practitioner's sense of well-being (Eby, 2000). Indeed, the focus on personal monitoring can even become quite oppressive (Taylor, 2003).

In addition, a more individualised approach tends to leave responsibility for change or improvement with the particular practitioner and downplay the importance of the broader environment of practice, with its resource limitations, staff shortages, frequent re-organisations and so on. Workers do not operate in a vacuum and failing to acknowledge the impact of these external factors risks locking the worker into self-blame.

Critique of the more individualised forms of reflection has also encouraged a move from 'reflection' to 'reflexivity'. Reflexivity takes on board the need for personal reflection, but moves beyond the individual to address the broader historical, socio-cultural and political context – the 'situated' nature of practice – and how the individual practitioner operates within it. For

Fook (2012), reflexivity 'refers more to a *stance* of being able to locate oneself in the picture ... [and] understanding the myriad ways in which one's own presence and perspective influence the knowledge and actions which are created'; it suggests that what we know is 'contextually based' (2012). So reflexivity points to a more fundamental examination of the bases of practice in which the kinds of knowledge and assumptions practitioners work with are scrutinised and questioned. Specifically, it invites the practitioner to analyse what they know and how they know it (Taylor and White, 2000) and becomes an important element in the critical thinking process.

As an aside, it is worth noting that the move from reflection to reflexivity is also accompanied by some confusion in the terminology. A range of terms are used – for example, 'reflexivity', 'critical reflectivity' and 'critical reflection' – each with slightly different meanings and agendas (see D'Cruz et al, 2007). However, for the purpose of this review – acknowledging the shared commitment to critical and transformative practice associated with all these different concepts – I will draw them into an approach that can be called 'critical reflection' (Adams, 2009; Fook and Gardner, 2007; Thompson and Thompson, 2008; White et al, 2006).

The three elements of analysis, critical thinking and critical reflection take on particular relevance in the light of recurrent negative reports on social work – and other professions' – practice (eg Bradford SCB, 2013; Coventry SCB, 2013; Laming, 2003; Ofsted, 2008) which highlighted sometimes acute failure by

practitioners and managers to reflect on and critically examine the assumptions and actions of either key family members, other professionals or themselves. The fact that failures of thinking were a factor in such extreme cases – Hamzah Khan, Daniel Pelka, Victoria Climbié and Peter Connelly ('Baby P') – graphically reinforces the need for sound critical, analytical and reflective thinking to underpin everyday practice. Consideration of these different modes of thinking suggests that each has a crucial role to play in supporting assessment and a broader critical practice with children, young people and families.

Implications for practice

Analytical, critical and reflective thinking is an intensely practical activity, grounded in a secure knowledge base and drawing on a range of skills and attributes. It is not an end in itself but underpins both the assessment process and the clear and authoritative communication of its results.

The knowledge base

> Social workers clearly need to be able to draw on different areas of knowledge when undertaking assessments of children and young people (Trevithick, 2008). For example, the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (DH et al, 2000) used in England assumes that assessment will be underpinned by a thorough understanding of child development and informed by relevant theory, such as attachment theory. There is also a need for knowledge about particular social problems such as mental ill health, substance misuse and domestic violence (Crisp et al, 2003) and how they impact on parenting capacity and children's health and well-being. A broadly ecological approach will also support an understanding of factors such as poverty and racism and how they impact on the experiences of individuals and families. Assessment

will also need to be informed by an awareness of risk and different approaches towards risk management.

> Critical thinking is identified as an integral part of evidence-based practice (Gambrill, 2012). However, as suggested in our earlier discussion of reflexivity, it may also be required for dealing with some issues about the nature of knowledge in social work (see Parton, 2000; Pawson et al, 2003; Sheppard, 1998; Taylor and White, 2001; White, 1997) and the nature of evidence, and the possibility of different approaches to evidence. In addition, it is clear that knowledge on its own is not enough – the social worker also has to decide what is relevant and be able to apply it to the particular situation at hand. This is one aspect of the use of professional judgement and again brings in the importance of context.

> Knowledge from social science research and an understanding of research methods and approaches have also been identified as pertinent for practice (Crisp et al, 2003; Holland, 2010; White and Riemann, 2010). In particular, it has been suggested that social research methods offer a sound foundation for analysing information and that the process of hypothesis-building (ie developing preliminary explanations for the situation or behaviours at issue) and testing can usefully be incorporated into social work practice.

> As the earlier discussion of reflection also indicated, an element of self-knowledge is important in critical and analytical thinking.

Skills and attributes

The literature points to a number of characteristics and skills that are necessary to support critical, analytical and reflective thinking (for example, see Balen and White, 2007; Gambrill, 2012; Holland, 2010; Lymbery, 2003). At the risk of reducing these to a 'shopping list', the following skills and attributes can be identified:

> curiosity

> open-mindedness

> the ability to manage uncertainty and not knowing

> being able to question one's own assumptions as well as those of others

> the ability to hypothesise

> self-awareness

> observation skills

> problem-solving skills

> the ability to synthesise and evaluate information from a range of sources

> creativity

> sense making

> the ability to present one's thoughts clearly, both verbally and in writing.

What these different skills and attributes suggest is that thinking effectively involves a willingness not to jump to conclusions in order to try and 'make sense' of sometimes disparate and misleading material. Hypothesising, trying out different interpretations of the data, allows the practitioner to think about a range of possible meanings or ways of explaining what might be going on (Dalzell and Sawyer, 2011; Holland, 2010; Platt, 2011). This requires an awareness of the tendency noted by psychologists towards 'verificationism' (Holland, 2010) or 'confirmation bias'. By this, they mean that people are more likely to look for, or be drawn to, information that will confirm rather than challenge the ideas they already have (about a situation, person, etc) (Munro, 1999). This has proved to be a potentially dangerous pattern of thought. If you have already made your mind up, this may shut down other avenues of thought and reduce the likelihood that different interpretations for the presenting event will be sought. So, for example, sympathy for a needy and/or likeable (or plausible) family member and a belief in their willingness or ability to change may encourage the practitioner to attach more weight to small changes than they really warrant (the 'rule of optimism') and discourage a more negative interpretation.

More challenging – but potentially more important – is the ability to work against this tendency and to search for information that might overturn one's initial assumptions. As Munro (2008) notes: 'the single most important factor in minimising errors is to admit you may be wrong'. A repeat cycle of hypothesising, comparing with the data, and revising the hypothesis may lead you to question what appeared to be the obvious answer. But this is a demanding and potentially uncomfortable activity – and means that you must be able to allow yourself to be wrong. It also requires an agency culture that will accept 'not knowing' (Taylor and White, 2006) and encourage an attitude of 'respectful uncertainty' (Laming, 2003).

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The following quotation comes from an evaluation by Ofsted of a number of serious case reviews (SCRs) and occurs in the context of a discussion of the knowledge, skills and attributes needed by authors of SCR reports. However, it seems equally applicable to mainstream social work practice with children, young people and families, and offers a useful summary of the different elements that contribute to skilled assessment:

> *the ability to bring an open-minded, independent approach to the evidence*

> *the ability to stand back and critically analyse all the information*

> *the ability to collate and coordinate a large amount of information from which to distil the key findings*

> *writing skills*

> *crucially, knowledge and expertise in child protection.*

(Ofsted, 2008)

Teaching and learning

Substantial literature exists on the teaching of particular frameworks or tools for assessment within social work. These include a variety of risk assessment tools (eg BridgeALERT – see Dent, 1998; Corby, 2003), questionnaires and scales (eg Cox and Bentovim, 2000). Many of these approaches and 'packages' can offer useful support for practice[1], but they should perhaps be viewed with some caution. Some authors have questioned whether the teaching of frameworks and tools is helpful or whether, certainly at qualifying-level

training, it may constrain thinking and the exercise of professional judgement (Calder, 2004; Horwath, 2007).

Good tools cannot substitute for good practice, but good practice and good tools together can achieve excellence.
(Department of Health, 2000)

Also, it has been suggested that focusing on particular tools and models may inhibit the development of transferable assessment skills (Crisp et al, 2003). At the same time, however, Barlow et al (2012) have argued for an approach they describe as '*structured* professional judgement', which draws on the balanced and purposive use of *both* standardised tools *and* professional judgement.

Moving away from what might be seen as more of a 'checklist' approach to assessment, a number of approaches have been developed within social work that seem to focus more on the thinking processes involved in managing and evaluating information during assessment (Dalzell and Sawyer, 2011; Gibbons, 2002; Platt, 2011; Turnell, 2012; Turnell and Edwards, 1999; Wilkins and Boahen, 2013). Outside social work, a range of tools and models exist that are designed to support decision-making by providing ordered and methodical ways to manage and make sense of different sorts of information – for example, the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP), Decision Support Systems, Root Cause Analysis, Decision Trees.

Elsewhere, curricula across a range of disciplines aim to support teaching and learning about the processes of

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[1] See Barlow et al, 2012, for a critical appraisal of a range of tools for assessing and analysing data about the likelihood of significant harm to children.

thinking. A number of writers have addressed the issue of teaching and learning critical thinking in education (Brookfield, 1987; Moon, 1999, 2005 and 2007), nursing (Kuiper and Pesut, 2004) and social work (Ford et al, 2004 and 2005; Heron, 2006). One framework within education (Moon, 2005) sets out the stages a student might go through in developing critical thinking and being able to represent it in writing, and proposes that during an undergraduate degree, students would move along a continuum from what is called 'absolutist thinking' towards, but not necessarily as far as, 'contextual thinking'. This model does not assume that students will all move along at the same rate or that their development will be linear or even. The author acknowledges that the capacity for critical thinking, and being able to represent that thinking in writing, is influenced by the complexity of the material that students are dealing with (Moon, 2005) – a point that may be of particular significance in relation to teaching and learning in social work.

Moving on to reflection and reflexivity: as noted previously, these have been extensively discussed in social work literature in particular, with considerable attention paid to issues raised in relation to teaching and learning (Balen and Masson, 2008; Balen and White, 2007; Fook, 2012; Fook and Askeland, 2007; Fook and Gardner, 2007; Gould and Taylor, 1996; Kroll, 2004; Martyn, 2000; Ruch, 2002, 2005 and 2007). A number of authors have proposed that the process of writing – about events and experiences – supports and develops reflective ability (Knott and Scragg, 2007; Rutter and Brown, 2011; Thompson and

Thompson, 2008) and suggest different questions, strategies and formats to help students and practitioners move from simple or descriptive reflection into ways of writing that evidence more critical and evaluative thinking and learning. Practical writing skills are also addressed through a range of materials (for example, the *Write Enough* pack produced by Walker, Shemmings and Cleaver: www.writeenough.org.uk; see also www.thinkingwriting.qmul.ac.uk).

Thinking skills in context: what facilitates and what hinders their use in practice?

The opening quotation from Eileen Munro (2008) set the terms for this review by highlighting the importance of thinking skills in social work. Implicit in the discussion has been an attempt to address a deceptively simple question: what contributes to thinking that is of the 'best standard ... that is humanly possible'? In some ways, the answers are well known and can be quickly summarised:

The ability to develop care pathways from the foundation of an iterative assessment process requires knowledge, confidence and skill in staff, underpinned by regular training and professional supervision. Resources which help structure practitioners' thinking about the complex lives of families, that assist them to record systematically and consistently, and then assist their analysis and formulation of appropriate plans, can make a significant contribution to effective practice.

(Cantrill, 2005)

Nothing here is news and these points have been repeated, in one way or another, in pretty well every inquiry report in recent years. So, at one level, we 'know' what is needed and can list the requirements for good and thoughtful practice. And yet, despite knowing these things, we still seem to have profound difficulties in putting them into practice. In this last section, therefore, we look at why this may be.

Practical and emotional demands

First of all, critical, analytical and reflective thinking is hard work (Wilkins and Boahen, 2013). It makes severe practical and emotional demands on the thinker and does not always lead to comfortable answers to the difficult questions of practice. A questioning and self-questioning attitude is not easy to maintain and may also put you at odds with colleagues who do not want their view of the world to be challenged. It is not just that people may find it unsettling to have their assumptions and actions given close consideration; in some cases, they may also feel that their personal power or position is threatened. As one writer has commented, it is 'not in the interests of many groups to reveal the lack of evidence for claims made and policies recommended' (Gambrill, 2012); indeed, 'fuzzy thinking is the oppressor's friend'. Adopting a critical stance may therefore require courage and assertiveness and have to be managed carefully. And unless there is clear support for this kind of thinking, it may be a lot less trouble to just 'go with the flow' and not to ask too many awkward questions.

Support and supervision

A further broad area of difficulty may lie in the nature of the decisions that have to be taken in children and families social work and the context of decision-making, which have a bearing on the social worker's capacity for critical thinking and analysis. A range of personal, professional and organisational factors can impact on practitioners' ability to exercise judgement (Kirkman and Melrose, 2014). In situations that are complex,

sometimes frightening or hostile, and frequently emotionally fraught, a practitioner may feel overwhelmed or psychically under attack. Without a safe and reliable space in which to think about and process the feelings evoked, there is a serious risk that practitioners will simply 'switch off' (Cooper, 2005; Ferguson, 2005; Littlechild, 2008; Rustin, 2005). However, where such reflection is supported and adequately contained (Ruch, 2007) – through individual or group supervision, for example – much can be learned and practitioners may be enabled to take effective action.

System issues

Maybe, as Munro (2005) suggests, we are looking in the wrong place for solutions to the problems of practice: individuals will continue to make mistakes and, while we can certainly reduce the likelihood of this happening and perhaps minimise the impact when things do go wrong, we need to know *why* mistakes occur. Inquiries that focus on individual failings or human error will only give partial answers. So a different approach may be needed. The systems approach proposed by Munro draws from procedures adopted in the engineering industry for dealing with disasters or failures. Rather than focusing solely on the failings of one individual or a small group of individuals, it takes such examples of human error as a starting point and one of a number of factors (including availability of resources and the organisational context) whose interaction led to systemic breakdown (Munro, 2005). This is not a strategy for removing individual accountability but does recognise that complex systems operate in complex ways and that increasing formalisation and

procedural management may not promote better practice. Indeed, they actually make it harder for individual practitioners to work safely and to exercise professional judgement (Munro, 2005; 2011).

Organisational and procedural constraints

The final area to consider is the nature and culture of the organisations within which social work takes place. Organisational context can have a significant bearing on the ability of individuals or groups of practitioners to think critically, analytically and reflectively – and to apply the learning that derives from reflection. The idea of the 'learning organisation' emerged in the corporate sector but has been adopted in other settings, including social work (Gould, 2000; Gould and Baldwin, 2004; White and Riemann, 2010). It makes the link between organisational structure and behaviour and can be helpful for thinking about the kinds of environment that facilitate or hinder learning. Organisations may respond in a range of ways when faced with a rapidly changing and perhaps unpredictable external environment (as, for example, is the case within social work at present).

A 'learning organisation' is one that responds to change by facilitating the learning of its members and encouraging innovative and creative ways of thinking about both new and old situations. It makes a link between living in a situation of continuing change and a need for continuing learning and 'fits' well with the notion of reflective learning previously discussed. However, not all organisations will want, or be able, to respond in this way; existing structures

may not be conducive to reflection of this kind and/or individuals may not be supported to develop the resources – practical, intellectual and emotional – that they need to deal with new situations. The opportunity to question how practice cultures and organisational structures impact on practice – a key part of what has been called 'organisational learning' (Gould and Baldwin, 2004) – may be restricted and old familiar ways of doing things reinforced. In this kind of environment, it may be hard to keep thinking effectively.

Other factors also impact on the development of what might be called the 'learning and thinking organisation'. Analytical, critical and reflective thinking takes time and in a target-driven culture pressures of work force the pace. 'Busy-ness', or too much 'doing' can get in the way of, or become a substitute for, thinking. When this is allied to supervision that emphasises meeting targets and performance indicators at the expense of exploring the nature and quality of decision-making, it can have disastrous consequences. Procedural or managerial approaches (alluded to already) that 'close down' and compartmentalise thinking make it harder to synthesise information from different sources and to see the big picture.

These difficulties can be compounded by information management systems that organise and routinise the collection and presentation of information in the assessment process. While systematic data collection and recording has a key role to play in managing complex cases, different writers have commented on the negative impact of electronic information management systems such as the Integrated Children's System (ICS) (Bell et al, 2007; Broadhurst et al, 2010; Laming, 2009; White et al, 2009) and their tendency to reduce thinking to 'byte-sized' chunks. In the wake of the death of Peter Connelly ('Baby P'), the value and importance of reflective supervision in keeping thinking alive has been all too clearly demonstrated (Laming, 2009). But this kind of supervision makes demands on the time, as well as the competence and confidence, of managers.

Summary

What then can we conclude about the nature and possibility of critical, analytical and reflective thinking in assessment? The short answer is, perhaps, that it is doable but difficult. In a little more detail, the following points emerge from the literature:

> Good social work assessment is dependent on rigorous and systematic thinking.

> Such thinking requires, at a minimum, the ability to be analytical, critical and reflective/reflexive.

> There is a range of resources and approaches that can help practitioners understand the process of thinking and how to apply this understanding in practice.

> Procedures and toolkits are not a substitute for thinking, however, and do not obviate the need for practitioners to exercise professional judgement.

> A range of individual/personal factors can constrain thinking and impact on decision-making.

> Systemic or structural factors can have a profoundly damaging effect on the ability of the individual practitioner to think clearly and effectively.

> Good supervision within a positive organisational culture can support the development of analytical, critical and reflective thinking in practice.

Key texts

Research and other literature

> Cottrell S (2011) *Critical Thinking Skills: Developing effective analysis and argument 2nd edition.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

> Crisp B, Anderson M, Orme J and Green Lister P (2003) *Knowledge Review 1: Learning and Teaching in Social Work Education – Assessment.* London: SCIE.

> Holland S (2010) *Child and Family Assessment in Social Work Practice 2nd edition.* London: Sage Publications.

> Munro E (2008) *Effective Child Protection.* London: Sage Publications.

> Turney D, Platt D, Selwyn J and Farmer E (2011) *Improving Child and Family Assessments: Turning research into practice.* London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Policy and practice guidance

> Department of Health, Department for Education and Employment and the Home Office (2000) *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families.* London: The Stationery Office.

> Department of Health (2001) *Assessing Children in Need and their Families: Practice guidance.* London: The Stationery Office.

> Department for Education (2013) *Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.* London: The Stationery Office. Available online: **www.gov.uk/government/ publications/working-together-to- safeguard-children**

Useful resources

> Gambrill E (2012) *Social Work Practice: A Critical Thinker's Guide 3rd edition.* New York: Oxford University Press.

> *Write Enough* interactive training pack – designed to support good practice in recording (Department of Health, 2003). Available online: **www.writeenough.org.uk**

> *Thinking Writing,* a guide to writing to aid learning – designed for academic staff in UK universities (Queen Mary, University of London). Available online: **www.thinkingwriting.qmul.ac.uk**

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Danielle Turney (2012)
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