

12 MODELS OF ASSESSMENT

Janine Bolger and Patrick Walker

Key Themes

- Assessment is a core activity of social work practices, which should be a process capable of responding to dynamic factors in the lives of service users.
- Assessment is underpinned by a series of principles that serve to guide and direct practice.
- The legal and policy context of assessment is essential to understand as this sets a mandate for appropriate social work practice.
- Models and frameworks for assessment provide guides for practitioners and are underpinned by the skills and knowledge to inform the 'what', 'how' and 'why' of assessment.
- Assessment is founded on partnership with service users, but may be undertaken in both voluntary and involuntary contexts.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of assessment is generally associated with notions of appraisal, making judgements, forming opinions or calculating the value of something. Whilst these provide a helpful starting point, they require much further examination when applied to a social work context, where assessment is a discrete, core activity and a key skill. This chapter will introduce you to elements of social work assessment, incorporating principles, context, models, frameworks, skills and practice issues. It will draw reference from across the range of service user groups and invites you to reflect on and critically explore the material.

To begin to understand the meaning of assessment in social work, consider your understanding of assessment in your day-to-day life. Everyone makes numerous assessments every day in order to navigate their way through the daily interactions and situations that they face. In making these day-to-day assessments you will use a wide variety of perspectives that give meaning to the information that is presented, or help sift the information that is presented or found. Perhaps personal experience

helps you, or perhaps your own cultural beliefs offer a way of interpreting situations or environments. Some of these factors will have relevance to assessment in social work and highlight the importance of being self-aware.

DEFINING ASSESSMENT IN SOCIAL WORK

Despite the large body of literature regarding assessment in social work, it remains a much debated area, not least because of the variety of approaches, perspectives and frameworks that are available. There is certainly agreement that assessment is a core activity but less consensus on what actually constitutes a good assessment and whether assessment is separate or integral to intervention. Coulshed and Orme (2012) describe assessment as an ongoing process, which is participatory, seeks to understand the service user and his/her situation and sets a basis for planning how change or improvement can be achieved.

In a similar vein, Payne (2008) identifies assessment as something that is continuous and ought to be part of a cycle. In this respect assessment is seen as a *process* rather than an *event*; although Payne highlights that practice reality often does not reflect this. Emphasising the process aspects, Milner and O'Byrne (2009) put forward a framework for assessment with five key stages:

- 1 Preparing for the task.
- 2 Collecting data from all involved.
- 3 Applying professional knowledge to analyse, understand and interpret the information gathered.
- 4 Making judgements.
- 5 Deciding and/or recommending.

For our purposes we would propose to define assessment in social work as a structured activity with the characteristics shown in Figure 12.1.

PRINCIPLES OF ASSESSMENT

The purpose of this section is to offer some principles, or core common features, of assessment. The discussion here cannot be prescriptive, but rather is indicative, for reasons that will become apparent. Assessments are frequently *context-specific* and consequently are shaped by the inclusion of particular elements and influenced by the manner in which the assessment is undertaken.

Case Study

Consider the following three different types of assessment that may take place under the auspices of services for children and young people:

- 1 An assessment in a family centre may focus on elements of parenting capacity, or parent-child interaction.
- 2 A comprehensive assessment for a Children’s Hearing (in Scotland) may require capturing a much wider picture of the child in the context of his/her family, school/community and social setting.
- 3 An assessment in a Youth Justice team may employ a standardised, structured assessment focusing on specialised areas related to offending.

As a consequence, we need to be very clear about our role, remit and the context of any assessment.

Guiding principles help clarify and direct practice in all areas of assessment. They may be drawn from ethical frameworks, theoretical perspectives, legal obligations and practice guidance and are important because, although various frameworks can be

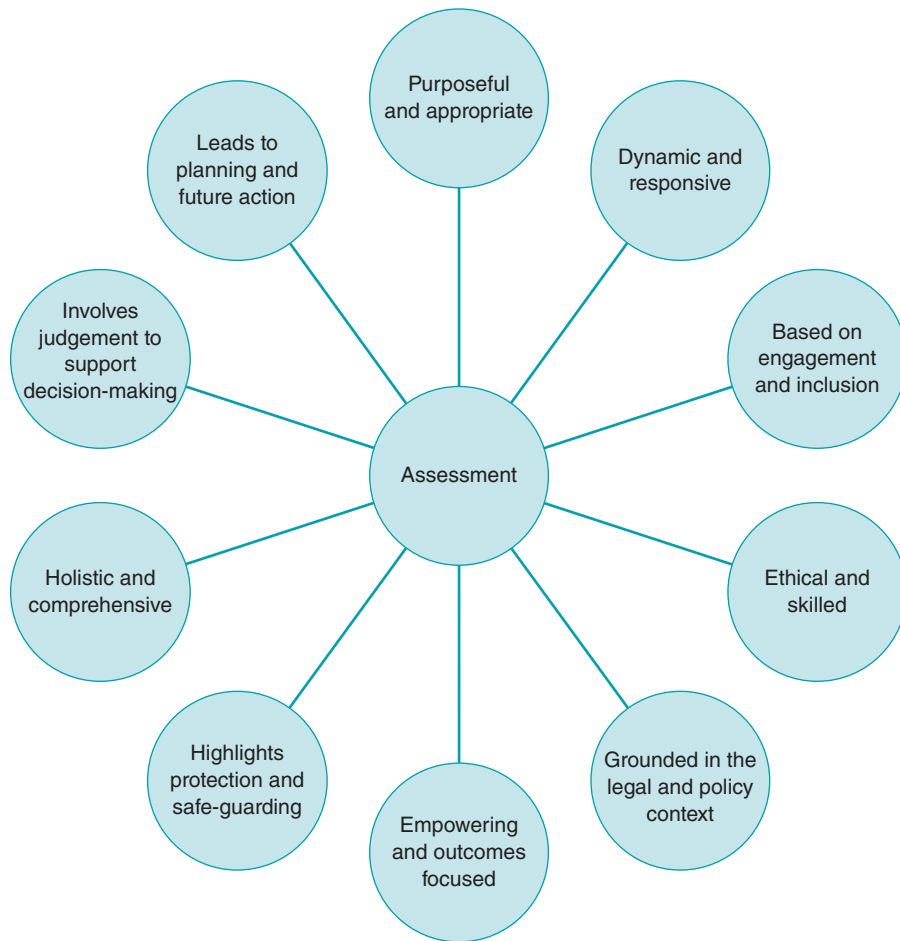


Figure 12.1 Structure of assessment in social work

used in assessment, it should be remembered that, as Statham and Kearney point out, 'social work can never be a *purely* technical activity based simply on assessment formats, models or methods' (2007: 102, emphasis added). This suggests that some underpinning and orientating principles are required when beginning and undertaking the assessment process. Five key principles are presented here.

Principle 1: Understanding Need

Daniel (2007: 116) states clearly that **need** 'can offer a guiding principle for the social worker'; it orientates the practitioner towards exploring and understanding the service user's situation. In some cases, need will be immediate, for example in situations of child or adult protection. In other cases, need may emerge over a longer period and relate to support and quality of life, for example befriending to address social isolation.

Horder (2002: 117) notes that 'good assessment in social work has always been needs-led', although he alerts the reader to the fact that need can be understood differently by people and can become a 'contested' concept. Horder goes on to suggest that need is 'in most cases defined by others rather than as perceived by the person being assessed'. This is the practitioner's dilemma: how to understand, take into account and respond to the service user's view of their needs, whilst also acting within employers' requirements, using professional theories and with **normative** concepts of need in mind.

Spicker (2012) offers the following:

The idea of need refers to:

- the kinds of problem which people experience;
- requirements for some particular kind of response; and
- a relationship between problems and the responses available. A need is a claim for service ...

and points the reader towards Bradshaw's (1972) taxonomy of need, summarized as:

- Normative need, which is identified according to a norm (or set standard); such norms are generally set by experts. Benefit levels, for example, or standards of unfitness in houses, have to be determined according to some criterion.
- Comparative need concerns problems that emerge by comparison with others who are not in need. One of the most common uses of this approach has been the comparison of social problems in different areas in order to determine which areas are most deprived.
- Felt need, which is based on the perspective of the people who have it.
- Expressed need, which is need people say they have. People can feel need that they do not express and they can express needs they do not feel.

Need, as a principle, can determine what the social worker may require to explore in assessment. If children need, for example, a secure relationship with their parent or caregiver, to grow and develop, then the absence of it becomes a risk to them. Similarly,

if an adult with mental health problems needs support and counselling to manage auditory hallucinations, then an absence of such support may significantly impact on the person's health and well-being. By understanding need and drawing on broader knowledge and theory, the practitioner is able to consider the person's situation and to explore approaches to relieving the unmet need.

Exercise

The word 'need' is used commonly by everyone, so the expression 'needs-led' should be fairly straightforward. However, think about when you and others use the word and substitute the word 'want' in place of 'need'. How often is 'want' a more appropriate term, and how often is 'need' the correct description of the situation?

Principle 2: Working with Systems and Ecology

Like most people, users of social work services very rarely live in a vacuum. Most of us are part of systems, networks and connected relationships that serve to shape and influence our lives in complex and multifaceted ways.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (cited in Daniel, 2007: 116) suggests that individuals are situated 'within layers of systems from immediate family up to wider society' and any assessment is required to take account of these layers of connections and influences. Although this theory was developed in the context of child development, the levels and systems identified are just as applicable in work with other service user groups. The central aspect to draw on here is an understanding of how different factors influence and are influenced by the individual. The ripple model proposes four interconnected levels surrounding the individual:

- Micro-system: the family, school, workplace etc.
- Meso-system: the interaction of two different micro-systems
- Exo-system: the community/external environment
- Macro-system: the sociocultural context.

Bronfenbrenner later added a fifth level, the chrono-system, this being the dimension of time relating to an individual's life events and environment – for example the influence of time in relation to reactions to the death of a parent, relocation, a relationship breakdown and so on.

See the article by Hill (2002) on the Companion Website (www.sagepub.co.uk/SocialWork) which reviews the social network approach to social work assessment.



Principle 3: Building on Strengths

If social workers are to work collaboratively with individuals and families the assessment process must take account of capacities, strengths and protective factors. In doing so social workers will take an assets-based approach which seeks to recognise **resilience**

and capacity for change (Daniel et al., 2010). An assessment that explores strengths can reveal an individual's or family's ability to resolve their difficulties using their own skills and expertise without becoming disempowered through service involvement. The very process of assessment can help individuals or families to identify and utilise latent strengths and thus reduce dependency on professionals.

This principle is relevant when working with all service users and in all domains of social work, whether the practice base is termed 'Children and Families', 'Learning Disability Services', 'Social Work with Older People' and so on. Assessments that purely focus on deficits are not only likely to be demoralising and incomplete, but also run the risk of being oppressive, result in inappropriate labelling and potentially limit an individual's (and their network's) abilities to resolve their difficulties themselves. Compensatory strengths need to be explored, identified and added in to the equation whenever they are present.

Principle 4: Being Person-centred

We have outlined above the principle of systems and ecology and believe that such a perspective is important. Whilst there is a requirement to keep this ecological perspective, it must be emphasised that no assessment should lose sight of the fundamental needs of the child or adult at the centre. Taking a person-centred or child-centred approach sharpens the focus of social work practitioners to their primary concern. It can be, in practice, all too easy to become side-tracked into the needs of others. It is a reality that social workers are often engaged in working in complex situations where the voices of these 'others' are stronger and more articulate. A person-centred approach to assessment should involve direct interaction with the adult or child and be informed by the theoretical and knowledge base underpinning practice.

Exercise

Consider your own situation now. What are the positives and negatives in your own situation? How do you interact with your family and how does your family interact with neighbours, friends, work and the wider community? How much of this is relevant to your current situation?

Principle 5: Taking an Interprofessional Approach

An interprofessional approach to assessment highlights the importance of recognising that different professionals have particular areas of expertise. No one professional can have the whole picture that makes up the lived existence of an individual. Given that each profession will have unique insights and understandings, it is important to pull these together and to make sense of them. The value of interprofessional practice is brought into sharp relief through the following quotation from Bronstein (2004, cited in McLean, 2007: 339). In it she describes interdisciplinary collaboration as:

an effective interpersonal process that facilitates the achievement of goals that cannot be reached when independent professions act on their own ...

Interprofessional assessment therefore brings together professional perspectives, and, when these are collated and acted on, offers potential for a more comprehensive, coherent and relevant approach to assessed need across multiple, but connected, areas of people's lives.

Of course, when we speak about taking an interprofessional approach (see Chapter 14) there is a tendency to focus on the contribution of professionals, but this is not the whole story. By no means should service users and their families be excluded from such an approach – they are experts on themselves.

THE LEGAL AND POLICY CONTEXT OF ASSESSMENT

Across the four jurisdictions of the United Kingdom there is a raft of legislation and policy concerned with social work and social care. Much of this legislation and policy impacts directly on the assessment process, and consequently it is essential to acquire this knowledge and learn to use it effectively. We shall address some of the broader points that you need to be aware of, but for more detail you should also refer to Chapters 2 and 3.

One of the characteristics of assessment we identified earlier was that it should be grounded in the legal and policy context. It is vital when undertaking assessment that you are aware of what you can do, what you must do and what you may not be allowed to do. In a legal context 'powers' are what you *can* do in specific circumstances; 'duties' are what you *must* do in specific circumstances; and 'restrictions' refer to any limitations placed on the worker (Thompson, 2009). Whatever your field of practice, you need to establish the legislative and policy framework within which your work takes place.

Given that the law generally regulates the activities of social work practitioners and the organisations those practitioners work for, it is essential to recognise that the law also holds those practitioners and organisations to account for the work undertaken. This may seem on the one hand intimidating, but it is the natural companion of having legislation and policy that gives you a mandate for practice, particularly in the context of social work in statutory settings.

The third general point is that legislation and policy can act as a powerful tool in empowering service users and promoting their rights. Often you will work with service users who have a limited understanding of their rights and are not fully aware of the options that are available to them. By understanding the law and what can and should be done, you can assist service users to improve the quality of their lives, achieve their outcomes and protect their interests (Johns, 2011).

Lastly, it is important to be aware that whilst the law may appear prescriptive it is applied in the context of individual lives, with all the complexity that brings. In this sense, social workers still need to be able to make judgements and 'negotiate tensions between legal principles and processes and the values and approaches that underpin social work practice ...' (Gordon and Davis, 2011: 1).

MODELS AND FRAMEWORKS OF ASSESSMENT

The increased emphasis on assessment in social work, particularly of risk, has created more theories about the purpose, process and practice of assessment. Increased focus on recording has resulted in the production of a number of proformas, many of which are used by a range of professionals, including those in health, social work and education. These standardised formats are supported with social work values and theories and so can be viewed as value-based. The information gathered is from the worker's perspective and, therefore, the outcome of the assessment can be influenced by the attitudes and values of the assessor. The social worker has a responsibility to the service user to be both reflective (consciously looking backwards) and reflexive (using innate skills in the moment) on their practice.

Agreement is required between 'what to do', 'how' it can be done and 'why' it needs to be done. Above all the purpose of assessment must be clear (Doel and Shardlow, 2005). Assessment frameworks do not ensure effective practice in their own right as they only provide us with a framework to assist what is a complex activity. The process of assessment must be underpinned by knowledge around 'current policy trends, professional codes of practice, the attitudes of the workers, their managers, the organisations involved ... and should be supported by good assessment skills' (Statham and Kearney, 2007: 102).

The purpose of carrying out an assessment is usually to identify levels of need or risk or to form an understanding when making first contact with the service user. Depending on the kind of information we need to gather, Smale et al. (1993) offer us three models – the Procedural, the Questioning and the Exchange – to guide us in carrying out assessments.

- The *Procedural* model, often associated with guidance related to legislation, involves using systems that are devised to ensure consistency and thoroughness in data collection. Consequently, eligibility for and allocation of services is often decided upon as a result of the collection of such data. This can provide only a snapshot assessment, directing the assessment away from examining the individual's strengths and abilities, and can divert from individual rights or concerns over quality of life (Milner and O'Byrne, 2009). The concern is that such systems can replace rather than support or inform judgements made by professionals (Barry, 2007 cited in Milner and O'Byrne, 2009), and may be viewed as rigid, time-consuming (lots of forms) and one-way, in that it meets the needs of the worker and agency rather than that of the service-user. The difficulty arises when information is collected on an individual by different professionals with a different focus (i.e., health, housing etc.) but stored separately. This results in an inadequate understanding of the total experience of any individual by any one professional. Workers can become caught up in the process of gathering information rather than in trying to understand what the service user needs. On a more positive note, this systematic manner of collecting large amounts of data has also contributed to the evidence base for social work practice.
- The *Questioning* model of assessment focuses on the nature of the questions and how the information is used. Using this approach problems and solutions reside with the

individual and the social worker's task is to identify the problem and highlight the most appropriate approach to resolve the issue. A criticism of this model is that it can be seen as oppressive given that the social worker takes on the role of expert and makes the final decision. However, if questions are asked in order to try to understand what is impacting on the current situation, and if a range of perspectives are sought, then this does not have to be the case.

- When adopting the Exchange model the service user becomes the expert with regard to their own needs and through their involvement in their own assessment becomes empowered. It acknowledges that the worker's expertise lies in their problem-solving abilities. The aim, through development of trust, is to seek a compromise between choices and needs through involvement of all parties. The worker takes on responsibility for managing the process of assessment. The focus is on a holistic assessment of the context in relation to the individual over time (Coulshed and Orme, 2012).

Specific frameworks have been outlined in the Case Study to demonstrate how models of assessment can support particular frameworks or approaches to information gathering.

Case Study

1. The *Common Assessment Framework (CAF)* in England and Wales, the *UNOCINI Assessment Framework* in Northern Ireland and the *GIRFEC (Getting it Right for Every Child)* approach in Scotland focus on how practitioners across all services for children and adults can work together to ensure that children and young people have their needs met with reference to a range of outcomes and indicators that can be applied in any setting and circumstance. The approach is underpinned by a set of common values and principles. The success of such approaches depends on a standardised assessment and the application of shared tools and models. All approaches require a lead professional.

The five outcomes of CAF concern being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic well-being (Children's Workforce Development Council, 2009). It consists of a pre-assessment checklist to decide who would benefit from an assessment (focusing on the development of the child/young person, parents and carers, and family and environment); a standard recording format; and a process to enable practitioners in the children and young people's workforce to undertake a common assessment and to move forward on the result through the development of an action plan.

In sharing information with other professionals, recording information on a single system, identifying needs and services, establishing a plan and reviewing both the plan and provision, it would appear that a *Procedural* model is being employed.

2. The *Single Shared Assessment (SSA)* in Scotland, the *Single Assessment Process (SAP)* for older people in England, the *Unified Assessment* in Wales and the *Northern Ireland Single Assessment Tool (NISAT)* combine elements of both Procedural and Questioning models. SSA is the 'streamlining of the assessment process to enable the needs and outcomes for the individual to be identified and subsequent interventions and services put in place' (Scottish Government, 2009b: 1).

(Continued)

(Continued)

The sharing of information across agencies is crucial and so the process encourages joint working.

In a SSA a 'lead professional' coordinates the gathering of information for the assessment and ensures that a plan is made and reviewed and that the identified services are delivered. *Care Management* is the name for this process, and it is focused on the needs of individuals with complex or changing needs. Three different types of assessment (Simple, Comprehensive or Specialist) can be carried out, depending on the needs of the service user, and assessment is undertaken by different professionals depending on their levels of training and expertise. The legal context for Care Management is provided through the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990 and in Scotland is augmented by the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001 and the Community Care and Health (Scotland) Act 2002. The process of a SSA involves service users and carers and is intended to be person-centred. However, for older people information is also gathered through an Indicator of Relative Need questionnaire which consists of 12 multiple choice questions under section headings: activities of daily living; personal care; food/drink preparation; mental well-being and behaviour; and bowel management. The answers to each question are scored and the totals for each section are calculated. The scores are intended for planning purposes and not to determine eligibility for services.

3. Motivational interviewing (see Chapter 23), used in substance misuse counselling, is both client-centred and semi-directive. The approach attempts to increase the service user's awareness of the consequences of their behaviour and to encourage reflection on the benefits that might be achieved through change. The approach is non-judgemental, non-adversarial and non-confrontational. The eight key interviewing techniques: asking leading questions; reflecting resistance; acknowledging the advantages of behaviours; raising awareness of discrepancy between the present and the desired situation; elaborating on self-motivational statements; offering non-dogmatic information; voicing the service user's doubts and summarising selectively (Miller and Rollnick, 1991) fit well with the Exchange model of assessment.

Having chosen a specific model and framework for assessment the social worker must also consider the knowledge that underpins assessment. The range of knowledge used to support the assessment should include an awareness of developmental theories, social systems theories, policies, organisational knowledge and knowledge of research. The point is to bring together information and resources in order to personalise the provision (Statham and Kearney, 2007).

THE ASSESSMENT RELATIONSHIP

The task of assessment should be underpinned by skills that convey 'genuineness, warmth and acceptance, encouragement and approval, empathy, responsiveness and sensitivity' (Lishman, 2009: 76). Cowager (1994) suggests that the strengths that the service user brings are key to developing the helping relationship. Strength-based assessments may

support the service user to draw on their own resources to examine alternative ways to improve their situation and to build their confidence. As previously outlined, assessments focusing on deficits may serve only to disempower the service user and reinforce inequalities between them and the social worker. The social worker's role is to develop the service users' capability to assist themselves. This is known as empowerment.

A good assessment relationship involves the social worker in:

- examining the personal and environmental strengths of the service user and carrying out a multidimensional assessment of such strengths
- utilising meaningful and appropriate language
- negotiating mutual agreement over the assessment
- apportioning no blame. (Cowager, 1994)

In addition, we would add:

- discovering the uniqueness of the service user by understanding an individual's identity and life choices which are formed by their life experiences, culture and ethnicity and the way in which others have responded towards them.

Any attempt to form a genuine partnership will involve good skills of listening and interviewing and will focus on the individual rather than the procedure.

REFLECTION ON SELF IN ASSESSMENT

Social workers must be aware of how their own attitudes, values and power based on their gender, age, ethnicity and life experiences might impact on the process and/or the outcome of the task. Through becoming aware of 'self' (often assisted by education and training), workers can consciously adapt their stance, if necessary, in order to practise in an anti-oppressive manner. It is also important for the worker to gain an understanding of how service users' life experience may inform their perceptions of, and attitude towards, the social worker's involvement.

To develop your thinking about the role of self in assessment visit the Companion Website (www.sagepub.co.uk/SocialWork) and explore the challenges Mark has been facing in his practice.



SERVICE USER INVOLVEMENT

A key social work value concerns the involvement of service users in decisions about their own situation and discussions upon other issues such as service provision and agency policy. O'Sullivan (2011) identifies four levels of client involvement: where the outcome of assessment is the result of decision-making by others; consultation, where the service user's opinions are taken into account; partnership, where joint decisions are made between the service user and the social worker; being in control, where decisions

are made by the service user without the facilitation of a social worker (this is the highest level of involvement). Decisions might be service user life decisions, decisions to protect others, or decisions about resources or service delivery. Unless an individual's capacity is in question or there is a concern that the safety of others might be compromised, service users should have control over decisions about their own lives. The reason to choose a lower rather than a higher level of involvement must be justified and limits should be placed on the type of involvement only if there are grounds to do so (O'Sullivan, 2011).

Exercise

Read Chapter 15 and try to identify situations where service user involvement might be problematic.

WORKING WITH RESISTANCE

Social work practice is often undertaken during challenging and stressful times, so it is hardly surprising that service users are not always welcoming and appreciative of such involvement (Taylor, 2011). The service user may experience difficulties in containing the emotions elicited by their situation and the consequent involvement of social work services. For example, the service user may experience feelings of failure or loss of control over life events, and the individual response will be dependent on the nature of their situation and on their preferred coping strategies (informed by their previous life experiences). Social workers have to manage a range of behaviours, and aggressive and violent reactions cannot be ruled out. Dockar-Drysdale (1968) suggests that violence represents a breakdown in communication and is a symbolic way of finding someone to help contain feelings of fear and anxiety.

In social work the term 'resistance' is used to describe those service users 'who are unwilling, or feel coerced into engaging with you' (Taylor, 2011: 11). Taylor (2011) suggests that individuals might be reluctant to become engaged because of a rigid interpretation of life events that impedes consideration of other ways of thinking or acting. The worker's belief in the capacity of the service user to change, however, is central to the helping process, as service users may display ambivalence (conflicting emotions) or be reluctant to engage. The latter may be a result of a distrust of authority, due to the worker's potential role in relation to prosecution or removal of liberties (as a result of offending behaviour, severe mental health problems or child protection cases). There is a greater risk of experiencing aggressive or violent behaviour where:

- The individual has experience of a subculture where violence is the norm.
- The individual perceives that any unpleasantness generated is a deliberate and personal attack on them.
- The person is disinhibited, e.g. through alcohol or drugs.

- There is an expectation that violence will be rewarded, i.e. by influencing the decision or withdrawal of the worker.
- There is a belief that no other action is possible, e.g. where there is evidence that violence has been used frequently as a coping mechanism. (Breakwell, 1989)

Consideration of theories such as social learning theory, psychodynamic theory or attribution theory can be helpful in assisting workers to understand the probable cause of an individual's behaviour. To maximise the possibility of engaging an individual, sustaining a relationship, or even calming a situation, it is crucial for the worker to demonstrate empathy and to practise good communication skills, particularly active listening. Service users and carers outlined a range of specific skills and values demonstrated by social workers who were felt to be good communicators. These included:

- Being polite and punctual
- Listening to what is being said
- Doing what is stated and agreed
- Explaining what will happen and why without using jargon
- Being honest. (Diggins, 2004)

In conclusion, resistance may be seen as a way in which service users attempt to regain some of their 'perceived' loss of power and control by refusing to recognise risks to self or others, not accepting the need for change, or being unwilling to accept options presented to them. The concept of principled negotiation might assist in finding a way forward. By focusing on the interests rather than the attitudes of those involved, separating the people from the problem and trying to find options for mutual interest before agreeing criteria for evaluating the result of the negotiations, a resolution to any stalemate might be found. However, legal and policy requirements might mean that negotiation is not an option (e.g. because of protection issues) or that due to their personal values and principles an individual might be unwilling to negotiate on certain matters (e.g. around the use of alcohol). In planning a response discussions should take place with colleagues and relevant agencies, involving the service user wherever possible. Any response should recognise that safe practice is beneficial for both the worker and the service user.

Critical Thinking

In assessment work, collaborative approaches building on service users' expertise are vital. The current practice agenda, especially personalisation and self-directed support, emphasises the role of self-assessment. Gardner (2011: 43) notes that there has been much professional resistance to the concept and she highlights that we mistakenly assume that self-assessment involves only the service user. In self-assessment, however, service users are major participants because, quite simply, they know themselves best. The social worker participates too, supporting, offering information and assistance. Gardner's interpretation of self-assessment is interesting and provides a useful point for you to consider.

During, or after your most recent period of practice learning, critically appraise your practice in respect of a collaborative assessment.



To read about the findings of pilot projects focusing on self-assessment in adult social work settings, visit the Companion Website (www.sagepub.co.uk/SocialWork) and see the article by Abendstern et al. (2013).

CONCLUSION

This chapter has offered particular frameworks, methodologies and supporting theoretical concepts which are integral in good social work assessment. The following central themes should be borne in mind when undertaking assessment in work with service users:

- Assessment is a skilled activity that is crucial in setting the context of engagement with service users.
- A central theme is of partnership and empowerment but with a recognition that at times assessments are carried out with service users who are either hesitant or unwilling participants.
- Assessment is underpinned by a broad knowledge and skill base, as well as a series of guiding principles that support practitioners in their role.
- Assessment in current practice contexts frequently involves working alongside other professionals, allowing for the sharing of perspectives and a more comprehensive and holistic approach.
- The tools and frameworks that have been proffered in this chapter should be utilised with both care and professional judgement rather than implemented in a technical and formulaic manner. These tools offer a 'guide' rather than a 'map'.
- Assessment is a dynamic activity that should always be viewed as a process rather than a one-off event.

Reflective Questions

- 1 Considering the concepts of need and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory identify what a person requires from their immediate caregivers or family in order to develop or progress. Go on to consider how a person's development or progress may be influenced by the wider world and what difference being part of a supportive community environment can make.
- 2 What questions might you ask during the assessment process in order to explore 'strengths'? Consider how the questions you ask interface with the model of assessment being used.
- 3 As part of preparing for one of your social work placements or practice opportunities spend time researching the legal and policy context of the field you will be working in. During placement, reflect on how legislation and policy shape the work that your placement agency undertakes. Does working in different settings impact on the extent to which social work practice is statutorily driven?

RECOMMENDED READING

- Milner, J. and O'Byrne, P. (2009) *Assessment in Social Work*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Parker, J. and Bradley, G. (2010) *Social Work Practice: Assessment, Planning, Intervention and Review (Transforming Social Work Practice)*, 3rd edn. Exeter: Learning Matters.
- Walker, S. and Beckett, C. (2010) *Social Work Assessment and Intervention*. Lyme Regis: Russell House Publications.