

## 2.1: Social Work Assessment

Approximate completion time: **2:30 hours**

"It has long been acknowledged that assessment is a key task in social work practice."

Parker and Bradley, 2014: 1

To commence this topic we consider a key element of social work practice – that of assessment. As an experienced practitioner, it is assumed that you are well versed in assessing children, young people and families. This topic will touch upon some contemporary principles of assessment and aims to facilitate your reflection on assessment processes and your skills. Some attention will be paid to the future direction of assessment, particularly with the imminent implementation of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014; and, of course, in the spirit of using and developing evidence enriched practice, some key sources are used or signposted for further reading.

### **What Does the Social Work Literature Say about Assessment?**

The importance of assessment in social work has been underlined by a series of high-profile serious case reviews and enquiries, most prominently those into the deaths of Victoria Climbié, Peter Connelly and Daniel Pelka (Laming, 2003, 2009; Lock 2013 respectively). These reports and enquiries put assessment centre-stage and demand skilled competence from practitioners. The literature on assessment identifies a conflict between the perception of assessment as an 'art' or as a 'science' (Parker and Bradley, 2014: 4). This aside, there is a consensus that assessment skills are an essential core component of social work practice (Hennessey, 2011; Parker and Bradley, 2014).

Whittington (2007) categorised the many definitions of assessment into four 'ideal types'. These are:

> process-focused

- > contingent
- > contestation-focused
- > critical social constructionist.

Reflecting on these definitions in relation to your own experience of engaging in assessments refer to Whittington's report, [Assessment in Social Work. A Guide for Learning and Teaching](#).

Specifically read about the four types above (pages 18–21, Section 9: Definitions of Assessments).

## Task

After reading the above source, and using this example to assist you to reflect on the current context in which you undertake assessments, consider the following and make some notes.

What kind of assessments do you undertake as part of your role? Choosing just one assessment that you undertake, how might you describe this assessment's purpose from:

1. A legislative/ policy perspective
2. An organisational/ social work perspective
3. A service user/ carer perspective

Considering Whittington's 4 ideal types, could you discern which type it is most closely related to?

Why? What factors influenced your choice of 'type'?

## Empowerment and Assessment

Parker and Bradley (2014) emphasise the importance of values in assessment and state that respect for the individual is essential for empowerment:

“The emphasis on values is important because assessments are about making judgements but not about being judgemental”  
(Parker and Bradley, 2014: 6)

The critical social constructionist definition of assessment, as noted earlier, leans towards the concept of assessment as an “exchange model, where all people are seen as an expert in their own problems, and the emphasis is upon the exchange of information” as described by Baldwin and Walker (2005: 46). Moving beyond the focus on problems and taking an ecological framework, such as that which underpins the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (NAW & Home Office 2001), this provides for a balanced assessment of need, risk and strengths in children’s lives. This aligns with contemporary concerns of co-production (which we will touch upon later in the module), and with strengths approaches, positive risk taking, change and solution focussed models of assessment and practice.

## Practice Snippet

### *Signs of Safety*

One example is the Signs of Safety Approach (SofS). This originated from Western Australia and is an approach that, according to Bunn (2013), has been embraced by 33 local authorities in England. In Wales, the City and County of Swansea is the only authority to have significantly implemented the SofS approach to date, though a few others are beginning to embark on their ‘implementation journey’. SofS is commonly used in child protection, in assessment and case work with families, and increasingly

in other social work fields such as with looked after children. It is a strengths based, solution focussed approach that advocates positive risk taking (whilst not losing sight of risks to the child), essentially integrating a strengths and safety focus.

The following quote describes the ethos of the approach:

“The heart of the Signs of Safety process is a risk assessment and case planning format that is meaningful for professionals as well as the parents and children. One of the greatest problems to bedevil child protection practice is that assessment and planning processes privilege the professional voice and erase the perspectives of children, parents and other family members. The Signs of Safety risk assessment process integrates professional knowledge with local family and cultural knowledge, and balances a rigorous exploration of danger/harm alongside indicators of strengths and safety.”

Source: [Signs of Safety Net](#) (2014: online).

You may also find this short video explanation by Andrew Turnell of interest. [What is Signs of Safety](#) (2min 58secs)

Explore the Western Australian Government's Department for Child Protection guidance on Signs of Safety. In particular look at pages 12–22 which relate more specifically to risk assessment and engaging children in the assessment and planning process.

[Child Protection Practice Framework](#)

Following this, take a few minutes to reflect on your current use of critical thinking and questioning during assessments with families and / or children and young people. Consider:

- > Are there any parallels between the solution focussed approach of SofS and your own practice?
- > Could you envision any benefits or potential pitfalls to using SofS in your assessments with children and families that you engage with?
- > If you use SofS already, how has it impacted on your critical thinking and questioning during assessments? AND what are your views on the benefits and potential pitfalls of using this approach?

You may find it useful to record some notes in your Personal Learning Journal, though this is not a required Activity.

## Assessment and the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act (2014)

The final element of this subtopic focuses on the assessment duties and powers contained within this Act. Assessment duties and powers are most prominently contained within Part 3, though reference to strategic and broader population assessments are addressed elsewhere in the Act.

As noted previously, the transference from policy intention to implementation is yet to be solidified by statutory guidance and a code of practice, nevertheless, it is possible to gain a flavour of the way in which assessment is at the heart of the Act and to reflect on your readiness for these measures.

Below are some resources on assessment and the Act. Choose at least one to read /watch:

> [Social Services and Well-being \(Wales\) Act \(2014\)](#)

Part 3 deals with assessment. Bear in mind that the implementation of the Act is currently being consulted upon, so you may like to refer to other sources below for an insight into some of these developments (as of summer 2015).

The following short film is introduced by the Welsh Minister for Health and Social Services, and sets out to explain how “the proposed new system for eligibility and assessment – a fundamental part of the Act – could work in practice. It was produced as part of the consultation on the Act” (*you may wish to watch the first 1minute 45 second introduction and fast forward to 4minutes 55seconds for a young carer scenario*).

[You Tube video: Assessment and Eligibility in the SS&WW Act 2014](#)



The following Welsh Government Consultation Summary Report, produced after consultation in Spring 2015, provides an overview of the consultation process undertaken in relation to Parts 3 and 4 of the Act. It also includes the Welsh Government response and analysis of the consultation. Welsh Government analysis from page 19 details proposals for assessment of children, young people and families. Click on the link below:

> <http://gov.wales/docs/phhs/consultation/150508responsesummaryen.pdf>

### Pause for thought

Reflecting on the assessment requirements of the 2014 Act in relation to your own practice take ten minutes to consider:

- > How, if at all, your engagement with service users and assessments may alter going forward with the Act?
- > What are the potential opportunities and pitfalls of these measures for the local authority or your organisation (if non statutory), for you as a worker engaging in these processes and for children and families?
- > Are there any steps you and/ or your local authorities are taking / or can take to prepare for these changes?
- > Do you know how service users will be informed?

## Conclusion

In this subtopic we have had an opportunity to look at assessment as it is defined in the social work literature, and as it relates to your area of practice. We've considered service user engagement in assessments and, in particular, the notions of an exchange model and holistic assessment of strengths and risks, whilst exploring a practice model for risk assessment and planning in child protection work. The readings on the Signs of Safety were intended to provide insight into practice innovation and for you to consider any parallels with your own practice, or the potential and pitfalls for this model in your own organisational context. Finally, some brief attention to assessment duties and powers in the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act (2014) has provided a starting point for looking towards and planning the future.

## References

Baldwin, N. and Walker, L. (2005). Assessment. In Adams, R., Dominelli, L., and Payne, M. (eds). *Social work futures: Crossing boundaries, transforming practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bunn, A. (2013). [\*Signs of Safety in England. An NSPCC commissioned Report on the Signs of Safety Model in Child Protection.\*](#)

Department for Child Protection (DCP), (2011). [\*The Signs of Safety Child Protection Practice Framework\*](#) (2nd edn): DCP Perth:

Hennessey, R. (2011) *Relationship Skills in Social Work*. London: Sage.

Lock, R. (2013). [\*Serious Case Review: Daniel Pelka\*](#). Coventry LSCB:

Lord Laming (2003) *The Victoria Climbié Inquiry: Report of an Inquiry by Lord Laming*. London: The Stationery Office.

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Parker, J. and Bradley, G. (2014) *Social Work Practice* (4th edn) London: Learning Matters

Signs of Safety (2014). [\*The Signs of Safety Approach to Child Protection Case Work\*](#). Signs of Safety.Net.

Welsh Government. (2015) *Consultation Summary. Regulations and codes of practice in relation to Part 3 of the Act, on Assessment, and Part 4 of the Act, on Meeting Needs, including care and support planning and direct payments.*

[Welsh Government](#) Online pdf.

Whittington, D. (2007) [\*Assessment in social work: a guide for learning and teaching\*](#). SCIE Guide 18. SCIE.

**Note:** Some of the documents on this page are in PDF format. In order to view a PDF you will need [Adobe Reader](#).

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