

Psychosocial Assessment in Social Work

Origins of assessment

Here's a quote from Iversen et al (2005: 690) on the origins of assessment in social work:

“Beginning with the settlement movements in the United States and England, the social work profession was a child of cultural modernism (Addams, 1910/1960). As Jane Addams declared, based on her study of English settlements, ‘The early American Settlement . . . insisted that each new undertaking should be preceded by carefully ascertained facts’ (1910/1960, p. 101). Subsequently, social work assumptions and practices became increasingly allied with rationalist principles and practices of science (Addams, 1910/1960; Parton and O’Byrne, 2000; Walker, 2001). From the scientific standpoint, objects of study were ‘there in the world’, and the task of science was to describe and explain these objects as accurately as possible, without personal, ideological or other bias. These suppositions were most clearly represented in the social work diagnostic perspective (Woods and Hollis, 1990). This perspective, informed initially by medical science, posited the clinician as an expert investigator who ferrets out essential, individualized patterns of dysfunction in order to generate a blueprint for ‘corrective’ treatment.”

Definitions of assessment

More recent definitions of the assessment process often go something like this:

“We see assessment as a journey for which social workers need to select the most appropriate map if they are to get to their destinations quickly and efficiently. We do not believe that assessment can be easily separated from intervention – change happens at all stages of the social work process – but we do think it dangerous to read a road map while driving. So we recommend that social workers familiarise themselves with a range of maps before planning the assessment journey. Should they get lost on the way or should the service user not meet them at the destination, they will then need to consult the maps again” (Milner and O’Byrne, 2002: 4).

“Assessment is an ongoing process, in which the client participates, the purpose of which is to understand people in relation to their environment; it is a basis for planning what needs to be done to maintain, improve or bring about change in the person, the environment or both” (Coulshed and Orme, 1998: 21).

“Workers have to develop an understanding of the nature of the particular social problem being tackled, and the feasibility of different kinds of solution and their possible consequences. Realistic assessment has

- to address the whole of the task
- to engage in ongoing negotiations with the full range of people

involved in specific problems and their possible solutions

- to address both the change, care and social control tasks
- to go beyond the individualisation of social problems as the focus for assessment and intervention” (Smale et al, 2000: 132).

We also need to acknowledge that the assessment made may primarily represent the perspective of the professional worker making it. Assessment making, in this sense, is no more or less than the professional worker constructing his or her own narrative of the problem situation (Fook, 2002: 118).

Overall, most definitions relate to one or more of the five stages of the framework for assessment proposed by Milner and O’Byrne (2002: 6)

1. Preparation. Deciding who to see, what data will be relevant, what the purpose is and the limits of the task are.
2. Data collection. People are met and engaged with, difference gaps are addressed, and empowerment and choice are safeguarded as we come to the task with respectful uncertainty and a research mentality.
3. Weighing the data. Current social and psychological theory and research findings that are part of every social worker’s learning are drawn on to answer the questions ‘Is there a problem?’ and ‘How serious is it?’
4. Analysing the data. One or more of the analytic maps are then used to interpret the data and to seek to gain an understanding of them in order to develop their ideas for intervention.
5. Utilising the analysis. This is the stage in which judgments are finalized.

Examples of assessment aids

Figure 1 The 'Framework' (Department of Health et al, 2000)

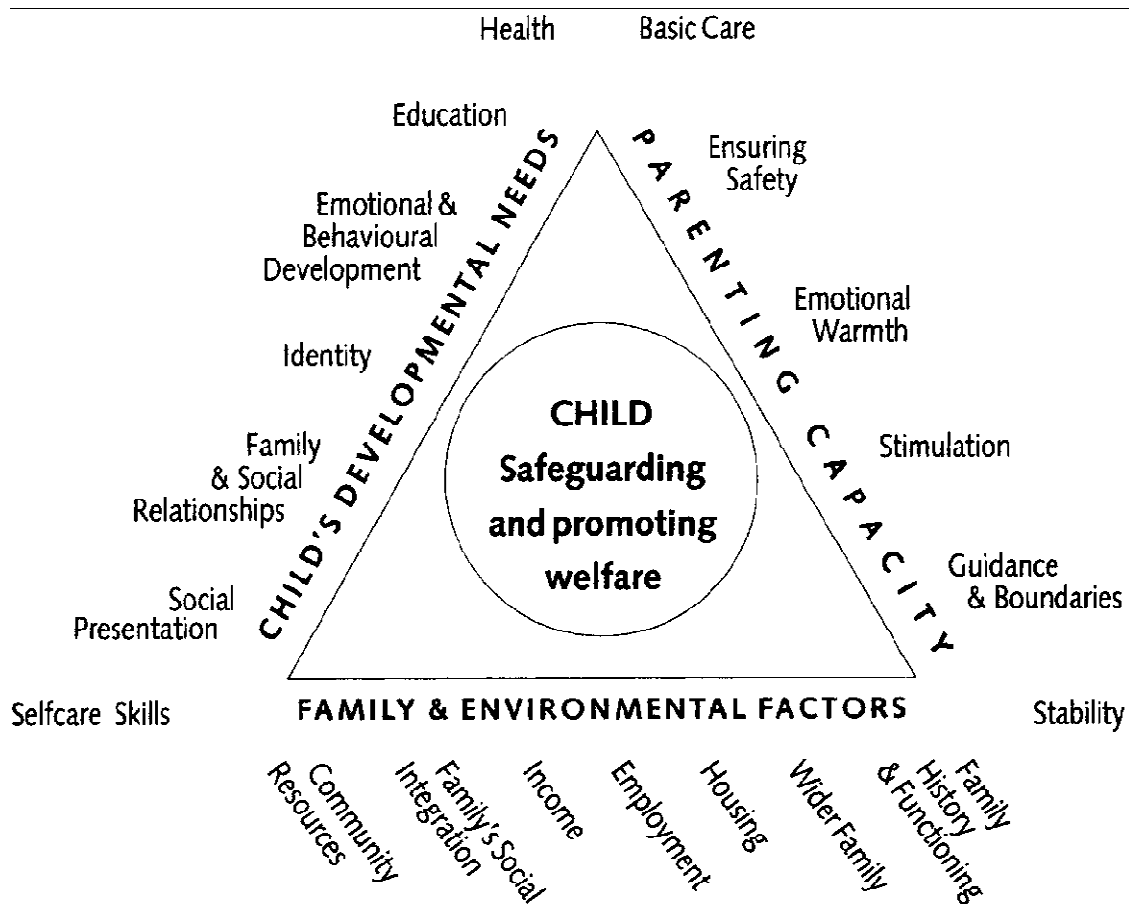


Figure 2 The Genogram (From Iversen et al 2005)

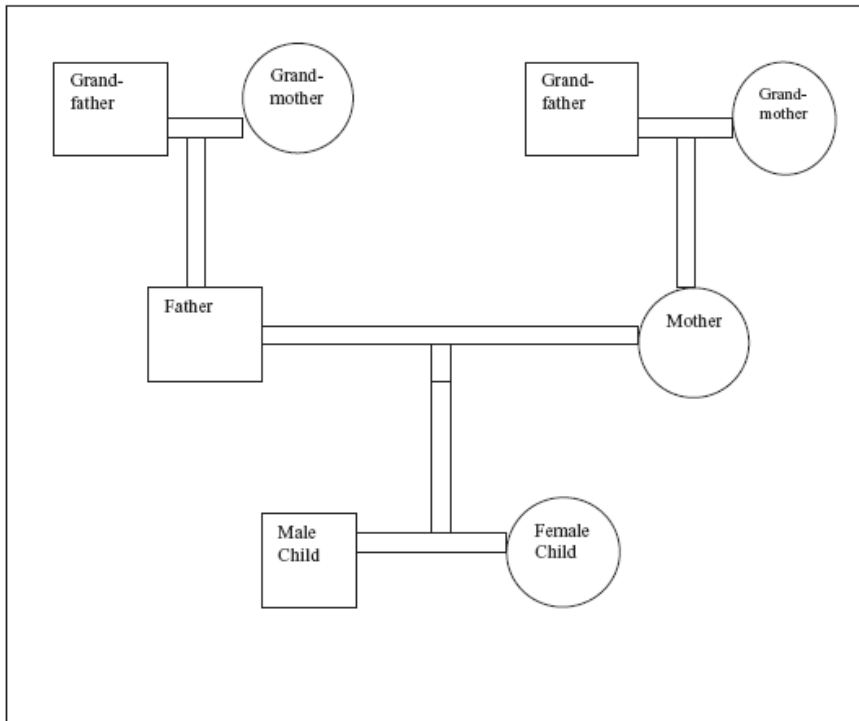
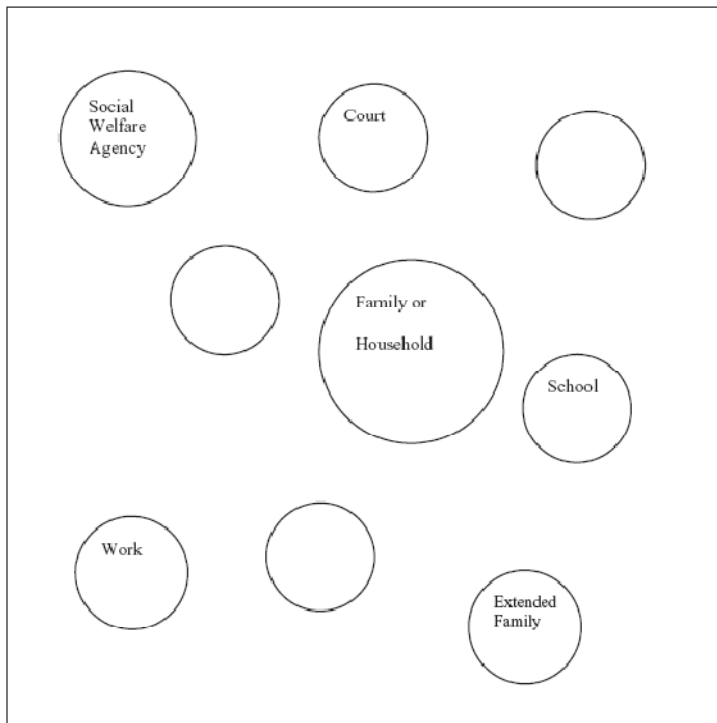


Fig 3 Ecomap (From Hartman, 1978)



In addition to these kinds of diagrams, there are a variety of questionnaires and measures promoted by the UK government itself.

Ideologies and politics embedded in the assessment process?

In the case of assessments of 'parenting' for example, there may be a whole range of normative assumptions backed up by research embedded in the assumptions about what 'normal', 'healthy' 'happy' kids and adults look like. These may inform the way that health and social care professionals see their clients.

It is important to note criticisms concerning the generalizability of such parenting studies, in particular at the use and reproduction of dominant ideologies about motherhood and 'ideal families' (Nicolson, 1993; Phoenix *et al.*, 1991). As Woodcock (2003) reminds us, the studies of 'parenting' are often based upon a limited population of parents, and reflects particularly the values and behaviour of white, middle-class mothers in the US (Phoenix *et al.*, 1991; Phoenix, 1986). Mothers are usually the ones identified as being the parent who was closely involved (and therefore available for study or intervention) with their child during the day. This assumes that mothers, as opposed to fathers (or other relationships) are the most influential factor in the care and development of children (Woollett and Phoenix, 1991). This 'gendering' of the parenting task is evident by the finding that social work with 'parents' usually means work carried out mainly with 'mothers' (O'Hagan and Dillenburger, 1995).

Parton *et al.*'s (1997) work indicated that social workers relied upon 'common-sense' reasoning in situations of uncertainty, for example when making decisions concerning whether a child is at risk of harm. This might involve working from the expected features of parenting in a situation, and based on whether those are present or absent, judging the likelihood of abuse occurring. The social work conceptualization of parenting therefore tends to involve a series of expectations of behaviour, and the processes of practical reasoning adopted what Parton *et al.* (1997) termed a 'surface-static' notion of parenting. This had a number of elements.

- * Practitioners' 'surface' response meant that they did not deal with psychological factors underlying the parenting problems (even where they had identified such factors).

- * They tended also to rely on exhorting the client to change, rather than using responses informed by psychological observations.

- * Thirdly, when change did occur, practitioners often perceived that this had occurred in the face of some 'resistance' by the client.

Iversen *et al.* (2005: 694) say:

Foucault (1977), in particular, asserted that knowledge claims function as tools of power. As disciplines of knowledge disseminate their truths and become embraced by the populace, so is the populace 'disciplined'. As the reality and values of the truth-making group subtly erode the existing traditions, voices are

silenced and we creep toward conditions of domination. In this sense, assessment of psychopathology or functioning, often aided and abetted by devices such as the genogram or ecomap, creates cultural conditions for deeming certain people as normal and others as diseased or dysfunctional. Re-theorizing assessment in this light introduces new consciousness about the practice by dislodging long-held assumptions about its benevolence.

Garrett (2003: 445):

“Thus, in one of the new *Core Assessment Records*, we find that social workers are expected to ascertain if young people respect ‘the concept of ownership’ (and to blandly answer ‘Yes/No’) (Question B13). In the context of an assessment of ‘parental capacity’, social workers are also expected to assess if the ‘parent teaches respect for the law’ (Question B32). Similarly, workers are directed to find out if parents provide guidance on ‘good manners’ (Question B28). Elsewhere, and somewhat cryptically, in the same document, it is asked if the parents’ relationship with ‘those in authority’ is generally ‘harmonious’? (Question B29).”

References

- Addams, J. (1960) *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, New York, MacMillan (original work published 1910).
- Coulshed, V. and Orme, J. (1998) *Social work practice: An introduction* (3rd edn), Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Department of Health, Department for Education and Employment, Home Office (2000) *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families*, London, The Stationery Office.
- Fook, J. (2002) *Social work: Critical theory and practice*, London: Sage Publications.
- Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York: Vintage Books.
- Hartman, A. (1978) ‘Diagrammatic assessment of family relationships’, *Social Casework*, 57: 465–476.
- Milner, J. & O’Byrne, P. (2002) *Assessment in social work*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Nicholson, P. (1993) ‘The social construction of motherhood’, in Richardson, D. and Robinson, V. (eds.), *Introducing Women’s Studies, Feminist Theory and Culture*, London: Macmillan.
- O’Hagan, K. and Dillenburger, K. (1995) *The Abuse of Women Within Childcare Work*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Parton, N. and O’Byrne, P. (2000) *Constructive Social Work: Towards a New Practice*, London: Macmillan.
- Parton, N., Thorpe, D. and Wattam, C. (1997) *Child Protection: Risk and the Moral Order*, London: Macmillan Press Limited.

- Pheonix, A. (1986) 'Theories of gender and black families', in Arnot, M. and Weiner, G. (eds.), *Gender Under Scrutiny*, London: Hutchinson. Reprinted (1990) in Lovell, T. (ed.), *British Feminist Thought*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell.
- Phoenix, A., Woollett, A. and Lloyd, E. (1991) *Motherhood: Meanings, Practices and Ideologies*, London: Sage.
- Smale, G., Tuson, G. and Statham, D. (2000) *Social work and social problems: Working towards social inclusion and social change*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Walker, S. (2001) Tracing the contours of postmodern social work, *British Journal of Social Work*, 31, pp. 29–39.
- Woodcock, J. (2003) The Social Work Assessment of Parenting: An Exploration, *British Journal of Social Work*, 33, 87–106.
- Woods, M. E. and Hollis, F. (1990) *Casework: A Psychosocial Therapy*, 4th edn, New York, McGraw-Hill.
- Woollett, A. and Phoenix, A. (1991) 'Psychological views of mothering', in Phoenix, A., Woollett, A. and Lloyd, E. (eds.), *Motherhood: Meanings, Practices and Ideologies*, London, Sage.