Social Work Assessment and Intervention

By

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Introduction

The key purpose of social work has been defined as:

A profession which promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.


This powerful statement from a representative body of social workers from around the globe states quite clearly the twin elements that enshrine modern social work practice – the relationship between the external social world and the inner psychological experience of the individual that cause some citizens pain and suffering. In order to better understand how to help in these situations social workers need to develop the capacity to undertake assessments and interventions in a wide variety of settings with individuals, families, and groups. Such activity needs to be understood in the context of statutory duties, agency requirements, the needs and wishes of service users, and firmly underpinned by anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practice. Modern social work also needs to position itself within an increasingly globalised world where supra-national agencies and institutions are impacting on previously unilateral policies and practices. The borders between countries are being eroded as a result of regional economic and geo-political pressures, migration for economic reasons, or to escape from war and ethnic conflict is on the increase. Cultural competence in social work is therefore a necessity and now an expectation of all public services that must reflect the increasingly rich, multi-cultural, religious and ethnically diverse society, country or region we inhabit.

Social work assessment and intervention are core skills for qualified social workers and fundamental learning requirements for trainee/student social workers. These skills have relevance to the Human Rights Act and featured in recent guidance on practice competencies and the latest occupational standards guidance for the Training Organisation for Personal Social Services. This book combines the two practice elements of Assessment and Intervention in an integrated way that is consistent with contemporary practice and the foundational values and skills of classic psycho-social practice. It will be an invaluable guide to practitioners seeking to address the new occupational standards guidance and respond to the new regulatory and graduate training environment in modern social work. Assessment is usually separated from intervention in the literature and practice guidance. This book aims to provide social workers with the combined intellectual and practical resources to help improve practice in these crucial areas.
Practitioners know that the two processes cannot be separated from each other. Government guidance and the professional literature have begun to accept that assessment and intervention should be seamless parts of a continuous process. It also expects there to be a therapeutic dimension to this area of social work practice:

*The provision of appropriate services should not await the end of the assessment but be offered when they are required by the child and family. The process of engaging in an assessment should be therapeutic and perceived of as part of the range of services offered.*


However, employers tend to emphasise assessment skills to the detriment of good, integrated, holistic practice. The trend towards retrenchment in social services and reduction of social work to bureaucratic care management is not meeting the needs of vulnerable service users who want more than administrative processing. Social workers who cherish their core helping skills will find this book supports and extends their practice. This book challenges the orthodoxy for compartmentalising practice processes that lead to narrow, resource-driven assessment procedures and eligibility criteria in statutory social services contexts. It also reminds staff that difficult decisions regarding rationing of human and physical resources are part and parcel of contemporary practice. We aim to offer social workers in a variety of qualified and unqualified roles and agencies a rich source of up to the minute resources to draw upon and enhance a psycho-social perspective to deliver empowering, ethical, service user-focused practice.

Recent SSI inspections have illustrated the need for social workers to rediscover their core skills of assessment and intervention, so that decision-making and care planning are based on sound analysis and understanding of the client’s unique personality, history and circumstances. Social workers’ own skills need to be seen as a resource to be used and offered in the subsequent intervention which should be based on client need rather than agency resource limitations and where services should fit around the service user rather than the reverse (DOH/SSI, 2000). This book provides social work staff with an accessible, practice-oriented guide to their work in the developing modernising context of multi-disciplinary team working, joint budget arrangements, inter-agency collaboration and care management. The new graduate training environment, occupational standards, General Social Care Council, SCIE, TOPSS, and post-qualifying training requirements, all demand improvements in practice standards. This book responds to that demand and the needs of social workers to deliver high quality services in the contemporary context of practice.

**National occupational standards**

Six key roles for social work practitioners have been identified in the latest occupational standards guidance that together with the units and elements of practice provide detailed requirements expected of qualified professionals:

- **Key role 1.** Prepare for and work with individuals, families, carers, groups and communities to assess their needs and circumstances.
- **Key role 2.** Plan, carry out, review and evaluate social work practice, with individuals, families, carers, groups, communities and other professionals.
- **Key role 3.** Support individuals to represent their needs, views and circumstances.
- **Key role 4.** Manage risk to individuals, families, carers, groups, communities, self and colleagues.
- **Key role 5.** Manage and be accountable, with supervision and support, for your own social work practice within your organisation.
- **Key role 6.** Demonstrate professional competence in social work practice.

**Evaluation, delivery and dilemmas**

Within this broad occupational guidance framework some of the important tasks include the practical activities we aim to cover in this book. At the very beginning of the engagement process in social work you will be expected to
review case notes and other relevant literature and liaise with others to access additional information that can inform initial contact and involvement. Evaluating all the necessary information in order to identify the best form of initial involvement is crucial. The advantage being that it can quickly bring you up to date on what might be happening in the life of a service user. The disadvantage is that the case file may be inaccurate, or other workers’ perceptions are based on prejudice or misinformation.

It is important for you to be aware of your own prejudices and values when engaging with clients and to guard against making decisions based on preconceived assumptions about individuals and groups. Trying to evaluate what may be contradictory information or falsehood as a basis for deciding your next steps following a referral may not be as simple as it first appears. You are expected to inform clients about your own and your organisation’s duties and responsibilities. Identifying, gathering, analysing and understanding information is a key skill. In addition you are expected to enable service users to analyse, identify, clarify and express their strengths, expectations and limitations. And you should be working with clients to assess and make informed decisions about their needs, circumstances, risks, preferred options and resources.

This all sounds straightforward enough until you start to consider the complexities presented by social work clients and the multitude of personal, environmental, and relationship problems they bring to your notice. You might also wonder whether you have the time and other resources to work in the way prescribed above. Social workers always have to defend their organisation’s lack of ability to provide what service users define as their needs. It is not uncommon to then face the fury of people who have gone through with what feels like an inquisitorial assessment process to end up with very little in return for themselves. The likelihood of these tensions arising was acknowledged over 20 years ago in the first major inquiry into the role and tasks of social workers (NISW, 1982). The report described social work as comprising two strands of activity – counselling and social care planning.

The latter related to solving or ameliorating an existing social problem which an individual, family, or group experienced. All the subsequent evidence demonstrates service users’ value the key counselling/therapeutic skills employed in assessment and intervention activity. Social care planning relates to preventive informal or formal work to develop and strengthen communities. The problem is that social care planning can be undertaken both by practitioners and managers, resulting in tension between staff trying to juggle finite resources. The dilemmas this situation produces are considered in this book in the context of rationing and eligibility restraints that operate more strictly in statutory agencies. We examine contemporary evidence for the delivery of competent assessment, intervention and risk assessment practice. The various elements that comprise a comprehensive model of assessment and intervention practice are drawn together to articulate a synthesis of practice based on empowerment and socially inclusive practice, integrated working, and evaluating effectiveness to contribute to the building of a coherent evidence base in social work.

The occupational standards suggest that you assess and review the preferred options of service users and assess their needs, risks and options taking into account legal and other requirements. Then you are expected to assess and recommend an appropriate course of action for your clients. The first part of this hints at the potential for disagreement between you and the service user. They may have a preferred option that conflicts with your legal duties to remove their child or to detain them against their will in a psychiatric unit. Your recommendation may not feel right for them, either because it is too much or too little of what they anticipated being offered. You will often be in a position of enforcing a course of action rather than recommending that it takes place. Assessment has been defined as:

*an ongoing process, in which the client participates, the purpose of which is to understand people in relation to their environment. It is the basis for planning what needs to be done to maintain, improve or bring about change in the client, the environment or both.*

(Coulshed and Orme, 1998)
It therefore cannot be separated from intervention because of the reflexive interactive nature of the client/worker encounter.

Looking through these prescribed occupational standards is an enlightening experience in as much as they tell you very little of how to achieve them. What you are expected to achieve is deceptively simple. There are different ways in which these aims can be achieved each of which is as valid as the next. The problem you face is that there is no way of confidently predicting which way is the best, easiest, or most cost-effective. And that is because every service user is a unique individual. You are expected in other occupational standards to tailor your practice to the needs of that individual thereby avoiding stereotyped, institutionalised practice.

You will also bring your own individual unique self to the task of social work practice – perhaps a history of personal problems that give you some degree of insight into particular difficulties faced by some clients. Or your motivation may spring from deeply held religious or political imperatives that impel you to devote yourself to helping other citizens in trouble. Whatever the motivating factor, your interpretation of these occupational standards and the practice guidance that follows may be different to other social workers in small, subtle or large ways. You will also find differences in service standards between organisations. Each local authority, health trust, or voluntary agency has discretion and flexibility in terms of how it prioritises its responsibilities under various legislative and statutory duties. All of what follows therefore needs to be placed in the context of your own local professional environment.

This is linked to central government decisions about how to apportion the local government and health budget and the variety of formulae used to rationalise political decisions. Therefore, it is very difficult in practice to undertake the task of assessment and intervention without encountering a degree of confusion, uncertainty and some dilemmas. Our aim is to bring clarity where we can, to explain where some confusion can be enlightening, but more than anything we hope this book will be a genuine resource for you to use in the complex, challenging and ultimately rewarding world of social work.

Assessment is now recognised as more than an administrative task, or as a form of gate keeping for resources, or even as a means of determining risk. It is an intervention and thereby like many of the orthodox methods and models of intervention can be applied in a variety of ways. The distinction between assessment and intervention is unhelpful and has always restricted the vision and creativity of social work staff. We combine both aspects of social work practice in this volume in order to permit an integrated, holistic, modern psychosocial practice rooted in the principles of social justice and informed by the highest level of ethical and evidence-based knowledge.