Introduction

Good assessment is the cornerstone of good social work (McDonald, 2006). Risk has always been part of social work assessment as it has been part of the social work process itself (Bates and Lymbery, 2011); whether assessing the risk of the ‘undeserving’ gaining charitable alms (Payne, 2005), the risk of significant harm occurring to a child (Stanley and Manthorpe, 2004; Ferguson, 2011), or the risk individuals with mental health problems present of injuring themselves or others (Bowen, 2007). Risk is not a concrete entity and in most social work situations it is not subject to accurate calculation and, thereby, mitigation. It is something with which social workers must grapple, whilst understanding it is subject to change over time according to the social mores of the day. Social workers must also recognise some of the tensions arising from a risk-focus that may work against the wishes of service users and, where possible, promote positive risk-taking (Innes et al, 2006).

Terminology

Assessment and risk represent deceptively simple concepts that are in danger of meaning whatever one wants them to mean. They are political concepts, in the sense they stem from particular ideological perspectives, and can be used to regulate and prescribe as well as to understand, support and construct shared solutions. Specific timescales are often attached to assessment frameworks, which influence the ways in which assessments are conducted, what is collected and how it is used. Assessments can have significant impacts on the lives of children, young people, families and communities using social work services. There are numerous theoretical approaches to assessment and risk (see below), which, like intervention, derive predominantly from the social and behavioural sciences. These too are political.

Where in the curriculum this topic this might feature

Assessment and risk represent key elements of the curriculum, underpinning the nine domains of the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF), at all stages and levels of practice. They are applied activities dependent on sound and wide-ranging theoretical and knowledge-bases e.g. sociology, psychology, law. The need for a holistic approach that starts from a clear value-base, works with diversity, is critically reflective, analytic and focused on rights and wellbeing through planning and intervention is paramount, and includes individual and team approaches to risk and assessment and encourages service user self-assessment. It is likely that assessment and risk will be found distinctly in parts of the curriculum dealing with the social work process (Parker, 2013); and also those areas of learning in which theories, models and methods for practice are introduced, including practice learning. Student skills in writing assessments should also be built. Universities should liaise with practice educators in relation to how the areas of learning can best connect.

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Key curriculum issues

Assessment is central to social work as part of planning, working with or alongside people and ‘intervening’ in people’s lives, as well as in reviewing what has been done or changed. It is recognised, at times, as an intervention in its own right, producing and documenting change concurrently (McGoldrick et al, 1999 viii). Assessment can be found throughout the curriculum, within practice learning, and with all people who may use social work services. Risk assessment and management permeate social work learning for practice.

Key content areas

1. Understanding assessment

Assessment can be both a product and a process. However, it is important that it is not seen simply as a theory-less activity, skill or practice that can be undertaken in a linear fashion. A critical analysis of the uses, abuses and meanings of practice for all parties is important in the curriculum. Grouping the ways in which assessment can be understood can help students to developing a questioning, critically-reflective appreciation of the meanings and possible impacts assessment can have on individuals, families and communities. The following model groups assessment around prescribed frameworks, theoretical ideologies, and processes involved in assessment.

   a. Frameworks and regulatory frameworks
   b. Theoretically-influenced assessment
      For example, evidence based practice (EBP); understanding evidence in its multiple forms; understanding the historical roots of EBP from medicine and its contested nature; psychodynamic assessments; cognitive-behavioural assessments; person-centred assessments; community assessments; strengths-based assessments.
   c. Procedural assessment
      Understanding and critiquing the assessments employed by agencies and organisations and the ways in which these are conducted.
   d. Interpersonal assessment
      Critical reflection on the interpersonal processes involved in assessment (often the first point of contact between social worker and service user); data choice and gathering; data analysis and interpretation; consent, and the impact of relationship with voluntary and involuntary service users.

2. Understanding risk

The multiple forms, meanings and the uses to which ‘risk’ may be put (Smith, 2010 ix), such as risk assessment tools and theories; qualitative and quantitative approaches to risk assessment; risk management in social work; limits of risk and the need for agency; ethics, values and risk (Hothersall and Maas-Lowit, 2010 see key resource 3 below; Webb, 2006, see key resource 9 below); risk aversion to risk enablement (Carr, 2011 x); an emphasis on promoting positive risk taking.

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ix Smith, R (2010) Social work, risk and power, Sociological Research Online, 15(1)4
  http://www.socresonline.org.uk/15/1/4.html

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3. Different methods for undertaking assessment

- Assessment tools – genograms/‘family’ trees; ecomaps/network diagrams, lifemaps/road-maps/flowcharts; culturagrams (Parker and Bradley, 2010, see key resource 6 below) – (NB. health warnings may sometimes be important when practising these tools with students).
- Assessment schedules– such as the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need\(^{ix}\), ASSET, etc.

4. Assessment skills

Administrative, time-keeping, report-writing (fact and opinion-based interpretations); IT skills; links with research skills; critical reflective analysis, including recognising the potential to induce normative behaviour; generating hypotheses; interpersonal skills (Platt, 2011\(^{xii}\)).

**Links to other curriculum areas, including curriculum guides (⊗):**

- Aspects of the curriculum in which ‘intervention’ or methods and approaches to practice are studied, including practice learning (Intervention \(^{⊗}\)).
- The understanding and use of the law \(^{⊗}\).
- Good, clear interpersonal and communication skills (Communication skills \(^{⊗}\)) are necessary to engaging with those individuals with whom social workers are practising, include a sound understanding of and ability to use IT.
- Working with organisations and other professionals (Interprofessional and inter-agency collaboration \(^{⊗}\)).
- Relationship-based social work (⊗) and grappling with the values that inform social work assessment.
- Issues of diversity and oppression (⊗) given the uses and potential abuses of assessment and working with service users and carers.
- Social work research and research skills (⊗) – for instance, questioning, observing, interpreting and creating understandings together.

**Key resources**


\(^{ix}\) http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/strategy/integratedworking/caf

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