research in practice

PILOT RESOURCES

Analysis and Critical Thinking in Assessment

Liz Brown, Sarah Moore and Danielle Turney

Dartington working together with The University Of Sheffield.

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research in practice is a department of The Dartington Hall Trust, run in collaboration with the University of Sheffield. The Dartington Hall Trust is a pioneering charity - a place of experiment, enterprise, and education where the arts, social justice and sustainability come together.

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About this Change Project

What is a Change Project?

The collaborative Change Projects run by **research in practice** bring together researchers and practitioners from local authorities and national organisations across England to discuss key issues affecting staff in children's services. The collective aim of the Change Projects is to develop innovative, evidence-informed resources around a particular topic that are accessible, relevant and useful to those working in the field.

A typical Change Project runs for three years, and involves two groups of agencies. The first group, known as the Development Group, participate in a series of intensive discussions to tackle the practice issues and key research messages that are central to the topic in question. The learning from the meetings is then written up into a series of resources, which consists of practical ideas, exercises and innovative audio-visual materials. These materials are then piloted with a second group of agencies who test out the exercises and guidance within their own organisations, before being revised, published and disseminated among all agencies in the **research in practice** network.

In this Change Project, the Development Group adopted a slightly different approach in that each member also set up an individual project within their own team or agency. These local projects then provided additional material to draw on in the group meetings and, indeed, to feed in to the pilot materials.

The Development Group

The Development Group for this Change Project on *Analysis and Critical Thinking in Assessment* consisted of staff from eight Partner agencies and met five times between January and July 2010.

Facilitators

Liz Brown worked for many years as a child-care social worker and child protection co-ordinator. She is a founder member with Mary Ryan and Jo Tunnard of **rtb**, an independent organisation specialising in service development for children and families. Since 2000 her work has focused on assisting children's services agencies to develop services that are needs-led and outcome-driven, rather than service-led and process-driven. Liz has been involved in the development of assessment practice and service commissioning in a range of agencies and has worked with practitioners from a wide range of professional backgrounds.

Sarah Moore joined **research in practice** in July 2007 and is the Acting Team Leader in the Sheffield office. She is responsible for the *Performance Pointers* series of briefings and has written a chapter on the mental health of young people for an edited book on transitions. Sarah has been involved in the development of an evaluation strategy for **research in practice**, and has also run events and workshops in agencies across Yorkshire and the Midlands promoting the use of evidence-informed practice.

Danielle Turney is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work and Director of the Post Qualifying Specialist Award in Social Work with Children and Young People at the University of Bristol. She is a qualified social worker and has worked in local authority children and families social work. Danielle has been involved in social work education and training since 1994, and worked at Goldsmiths College, University of London and the Open University before moving to her present post at Bristol in 2007. She has taught on qualifying and post-qualifying level social work programmes, focusing on work with children and families and on child observation, and within the broader field of health and social care. Her research interests include child welfare and protection (with particular reference to child neglect), relationship-based practice in social work, and assessment of children and families.

Participants

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About these pilot resources

What do these pilot resources include?

The pilot materials developed by the Change Project Development Group comprise seven elements:

- This **core publication**, which contains key research and practice messages around analysis and critical thinking in assessment that forms the basis of the resource.
- A **literature review** (Turney, 2009) that draws together ideas from current literature and research about assessment and the kind of thinking that is needed to support this dimension of practice. It was completed at the beginning of the Project, in part as a way of defining and drawing some boundaries around the work. As you read through the core publication, you will see that we draw on the literature review at a number of points. For ease of reference, these quotations are cited as 'literature review' throughout.
- A short briefing for **practitioners** containing a summary of the key messages and practice recommendations about improving analysis within the assessment process.
- A short briefing for **supervisors** containing a summary of the key messages and practice recommendations about how to provide effective, reflective supervision to improve critical thinking within your team and service.
- A short briefing for **strategic leads** containing a summary of the key messages and practice recommendations about improving analytical systems and processes at a strategic level.
- A web-based package for **trainers** that contains resources for delivering a workshop on this topic (including exercises, presentations and notes for facilitators).
- A series of **exercises**, available online, for both individuals and teams that are designed to support and improve critical thinking and the quality of the assessments they produce.

Why analysis and critical thinking in assessment?

The issue of analysis and critical thinking in assessment has been a recurrent concern in inquiries into child deaths and serious case reviews. Good quality assessment is a critical element in planning for children, whether you are at the early stages of considering if a child has additional needs or are proceeding with a complex child protection inquiry. What is clear from the literature review conducted at the start of this project is that a major challenge for practitioners is the synthesis and analysis of often complex data, and the time and effort involved in providing the quality of thinking required for sound assessment and the effective formation of plans.

The Change Project – and the pilot materials – therefore focus on the issue of 'thinking in practice', with particular attention to supporting practitioners to be more analytical in their assessments. The pilot resources emphasise that assessment is a process, and highlight the importance of critically evaluating the situation as the case progresses. They deliberately do not focus on one type of assessment (eg initial assessment, core assessment, or specialist assessment). Rather, through training, supervision and strategic support these materials aim to develop effective generic skills of analysis that can help to improve the quality of all types of assessments across an organisation.

Aims of the pilot resources

> The problems in assessment seem to lie in the move from the collection of data or information to its use in practice to support judgement or decision-making. A number of commentators have observed that social workers are generally good communicators and skilled at gathering information about families and their circumstances, but that they then have difficulty in processing the material they have collected. The difficulties seem to lie in synthesising and analysing the data, evaluating it and drawing conclusions.
> Literature review - Turney, 2009

Good assessment is key to effective intervention and improved outcomes for children. Without it, practice is likely to be unfocused and to lack a clear sense of purpose; at worst, poor assessment may result in a vulnerable child's needs being overlooked or misunderstood, with possibly dangerous consequences for their well-being. However, having made clear the importance of good assessment, it was not our intention in this project simply to re-state the reasons why it is so difficult to achieve in practice. Rather, our aim was to move beyond this to explore how some of the barriers that have been identified might be overcome and to develop a practical, easy-to-use resource that can support analysis and critical thinking in simple and straightforward ways, so making a real difference in the context of day-to-day practice.

So with this in mind, we set out to develop some practical evidence-informed tools and approaches that will:

- help ensure that analysis and critical thinking are central to assessment practice
- improve understanding from research and practice of what might constitute a 'good' assessment
- support the use of analysis and critical thinking within the supervision process
- increase understanding of how organisational systems, structures and cultures can support analysis and critical thinking
- increase knowledge of the evidence-informed processes supporting analytical thinking in the context of social work assessment.

These pilot resources therefore encourage a shift away from a 'checklist' approach to assessment by focusing on skills associated with analysis and critical thinking rather than the more bureaucratic and procedural aspects of assessment.

Who are these pilot resources for?

We recognised very early on in the project that there are many different staff within an agency who can help to support the improvement of assessment practice. These include:

- strategic managers with a responsibility for the quality of assessments
- team managers who supervise practitioners doing assessments
- practitioners (whether newly qualified or more established) who conduct assessments, often within very tight timescales.

Part of social work training involves encouraging students to critically analyse complex situations and to learn to exercise professional judgement. Indeed, this is fundamental in everyday practice. However, as practice has become increasingly procedure-led, an over-reliance on checklists can undermine practitioners' confidence in their own thinking skills and ability to use professional judgement effectively. These resources therefore aim to provide tools for **practitioners**, at different stages of professional development, to increase their confidence and develop their critical thinking skills throughout the whole assessment process.

Team managers exercise a key influence on the development of analysis in assessment, particularly through the provision of reflective supervision and the development of a team culture that encourages creative and evidence-informed approaches to assessment, and which supports critical thinking and sharing knowledge. **Strategic leads** can also promote analytical approaches to assessment by encouraging a culture of reflection, hypothesising and learning from mistakes. This is key to ensuring that analysis and critical thinking are embedded in the practice of all staff in an organisation, rather than confined to individual practitioners or innovative teams.

Any resource that aims to develop an analytical approach to assessment will therefore need to target all these professionals if it is to make a significant impact on practice. In addition, these pilot materials will also be useful for other staff, including those in **multiagency teams**, and **staff in Learning and Development** responsible for training different groups of professionals in conducting good assessments.

Outside frontline agencies, **social work educators** have a role to play as well, and support for the development of analysis and critical thinking needs to be an integral part of the education and training of social workers at all stages of professional development.

How to use these resources

This core publication introduces the key research messages around analysis and critical thinking in assessment, and examines how these messages can help to improve the quality of assessment at individual practitioner, supervisor and wider organisational levels. Examples based on a case study, and details of some of the individual projects carried out by the Development Group, accompany the key principles in the core publication to show how they can work in practice. The literature review that was completed at the start of this project provides a good overview of the research around this topic, and the gaps that this Change Project aimed to address.

We have developed three briefings that summarise the key information for three different audiences: practitioners, supervisors and strategic leads. These are specifically designed to promote the key messages in an accessible format. Practitioners, for example, can take the briefing with them when on a visit, while supervisors could use the briefing when developing supervision agendas. The briefing for strategic leads takes some of the messages in this core publication and applies them to commissioning practice, showing how this model can be used to improve analysis and critical thinking at all levels of an organisation. Each briefing also contains pointers to the key exercises and chapters of the core publication for its particular audience. A second case study referenced in the briefings can be found at **www.rip.org.uk/analysis**. Staff can also refer back to the core publication for further detail, examples and references.

A number of exercises and key resources are available to download at **www.rip.org.uk/analysis** to support staff in putting the messages from this core publication into practice. Further to the exercises around analysis and critical thinking for practitioners and supervisors, the web-based resources also include charts showing the thinking behind an assessment of each of the two case studies, and a suite of training resources that can be used to disseminate the learning from this Change Project.

Please send us your comments and feedback before the end of **July 2011**. Results will inform production of published materials later in the year.

Website log in is required to access the materials. Partners can use their usual username and password. For assistance logging in or to request temporary access to the website for this pilot, please email **ask@rip.org.uk** quoting Analysis pilot.

Thank you for your help to make this material as useful as possible in practice.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Development Group for all the hard work, ideas and creativity that have helped to shape this resource. Our thanks also go out to those who kindly acted as peer reviewers for this resource: Chris Ballinger, Karen Hewer, Julie Hodgson, Carol Holt, Jane Lewis, Sal Lodge, Janice Morgans, Catherine O'Rourke, Gillian Ruch and Cathy Shea. Many thanks also to rtb for allowing their work to contribute to these pilot resources.

Throughout these pilot resources you will see the following symbols

Quotes

The quotes have been taken from both the experiences of Development Group members and wider research around analysis and critical thinking in assessment.

Exercises

A series of online exercises and resources designed for practitioners, supervisors and teams to support you in putting the learning from these pilot resources into practice.

Tips

This core publication also includes findings and tips from the individual projects carried out by Development Group members as part of this Change Project.

Examples

The examples all relate to the case study of Danny, which can be found on page 17 of this core publication.

Links

This symbol indicates where you can find more information about a topic. It will point you to related websites, useful publications and helpful organisations.

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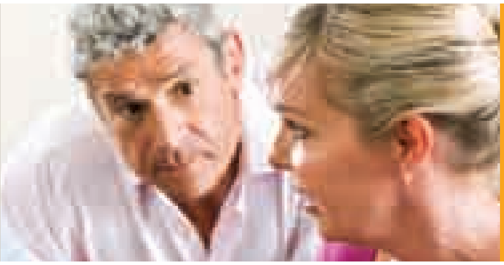
1.

Contextualising analysis and critical thinking in assessment

Originally, this project was conceived to provide support for practitioners in using analysis in the assessments they undertake. However, as the project developed, it quickly became clear that this issue must be understood in the context of a much broader picture of challenges and changes within the social work profession.



In June 2010, at the request of the government, Professor Eileen Munro embarked on a review of child protection, with a brief to include issues such as early intervention, frontline practice and managing uncertainty. In line with her initial report (October 2010), we start from the position that social workers work within complex systems and the impact of these must be acknowledged, as any work to support improvement in assessment needs to operate within this context.

Challenges facing social work

The Social Work Task Force, set up in 2008 to 'undertake a comprehensive review of frontline social work practice and make recommendations for improvement and reform of the whole profession', emphasised in its final report the constructive role that social workers play in the lives of vulnerable people:

> When social workers have confidence in their own skills, purpose and identity, and in the system in place to back them up, they have a huge amount to offer. They collaborate effectively with other professionals and adapt to new roles and expectations. Most importantly, they forge constructive partnerships with people who find themselves vulnerable or at risk and make a sustained difference in their lives.
> (Social Work Task Force, 2009)

While the positive tone of this message is encouraging, it is also clear that the challenges facing social workers – which often make it harder for them to have the necessary confidence both in themselves and the systems that should support them – have increased substantially. In other words, social workers today are facing more pressures that can have a significant effect on their practice. The Social Work Task Force identified a number of these pressures including: high vacancy rates and problems with recruitment and retention of staff; tight constraints on, or reductions in, frontline resources; fewer opportunities to access appropriate training; some particular failures of leadership and management; and the continued poor public perception and understanding of the social work profession. To this list, we can also add the impact of significant and repeated organisational restructuring within public services, along with the marked rise in work coming in to children's social care services in the wake of the publicity surrounding the death of Peter Connelly ('Baby P').

At the same time, there has been an increase in the bureaucracy surrounding social work, particularly in terms of the volume of checklists, tools, monitoring and performance management procedures. Much of this has emerged in response to public inquiries into child deaths, including those of Victoria Climbié and Peter Connelly. However, these measures do not seem to have had the beneficial consequences for practice that were envisaged. The initial report from the Munro Review strongly suggests that increased bureaucracy has in fact undermined, rather than supported, professionals working in the field and reduced their capacity to act effectively.

> A dominant theme in the criticisms of current practice is the skew in priorities that has developed between the demands of the management and inspection processes and professionals' ability to exercise their professional judgment and act in the best interests of the child. This has led to an over-standardised system that cannot respond adequately to the varied range of children's needs.
> (Munro, 2010)

At the time of writing, this review of child protection was ongoing, with an interim report due in January 2011 and a final report in April 2011.

Despite the undoubted challenges facing social workers, the initial response of the Munro Review, along with the continuing work of the Social Work Reform Board in implementing the Task Force's recommendations, suggests that the future of social work is being given serious consideration – and is perhaps looking more promising. Although we are currently experiencing a period of significant change within the social work profession, this may also include the potential for some positive change as practitioners and policy-makers search for effective, less bureaucratic ways of improving social work practice. It is within this context that this resource is located.

2.
Organising themes

In the early stages of developing the Change Project, four key themes emerged from our discussions and these became the organising framework for the work undertaken by the Development Group.

The themes were:

> Identifying ‘good’ assessment

What does a good analytical assessment look like?

> The analytical process

What thinking skills support good analysis and how can we better understand the process of analysis?

> Supervision

How can supervision be used to develop and support effective critical and analytical thinking skills?

> Organisational culture

How does organisational context and culture affect the quality of thinking that takes place? And within organisations, how do different systems and structures impact on practitioners’ ability to think analytically?

The following chapters of this core publication address each of these themes in turn. As this project is focused on the very practical task of *thinking in practice*, we have tried to ensure that what might sometimes appear to be more abstract points are related to specific practice examples. Some of these examples draw on the work of the Development Group but we have also used the story of Danny as a case study to help illustrate some of the key principles of effective analysis and critical thinking in assessment.

It must be noted that the nature of a case study means that much of the information that practitioners will usually have to find has already been collected here. Nonetheless, there are gaps and questions that still need to be asked of Danny’s story.

Case study:

Danny
14 years, white Irish - lives with:

Parents
mother (34) and father (36)

Sister
Mary (10)

Brother
Patrick (8)

Danny was born in Ireland. Before his birth his father had left the country, to work in England. When Danny was 18 months old his mother joined her husband here, leaving Danny with his grandmother and step-grandfather. Danny kept in touch with his parents, spending time with them during school holidays. When Danny was nine years old, his grandmother died suddenly of a heart attack and he moved to England to live with his parents and younger siblings on a permanent basis.

Danny found it very hard to settle into primary school and his behaviour was extremely difficult both at home and at school. His parents think he may have been mistreated by his step-grandfather, who is now dead. He was temporarily excluded from primary school on several occasions because of his behaviour.

When he was in Year 6 he said his parents had beaten him with a belt, and this was confirmed. For a year he was the subject of a Child Protection Plan.

When Danny started at secondary school his behaviour problems continued. His attendance is poor, he doesn’t obey school rules and he can’t concentrate in class. Danny is aggressive, has been temporarily excluded several times and is now at risk of permanent exclusion. He has been isolated from his peers but recently got into an offending peer group of older boys and has started offending – robbery, mainly money and phones.

Danny’s parents find it very difficult to understand his behaviour. They feel guilty about having left him in Ireland and ashamed that their son has been involved in criminal behaviour. Relationships in the house became so difficult that a week ago Danny’s father requested that Danny be accommodated, because he feared he would assault his son again. Danny is now living with carers some distance away from his home. His parents are missing him but find it hard to visit him because they feel so ashamed that ‘strangers’ are caring for their child. They speak to him on his mobile and text him on a daily basis. The foster carers report that, so far, Danny has fitted in well. He hasn’t wanted to go out and spends lots of time in his room. The foster carers find it hard to feel positive about Danny’s parents because they have not taken up the offer of visiting Danny at their home. He is not in school.

3.

What does a good assessment look like?

The starting point for this project, as indicated in the literature review (Turney, 2009), was the problem of analysis in assessment – that is to say, the frequently identified difficulty that practitioners appear to experience in formulating sound analytical assessments that are able to deliver focused and effective plans. While all members of the Development Group shared the same concern about the nature of the problem (ie absence of, or insufficient, analysis in assessment), and were all persuaded of the benefits of analytical thinking for good assessment, we realised that in order to develop an effective response we first needed to identify what we meant by the notion of a 'good assessment'.

A number of questions presented themselves for discussion, including:

What factors/features are we looking for in a good assessment? Do we look for the same things?

Do we all mean the same thing when we talk about ‘analytical and critical thinking’?

Do we know what ‘analysis’ looks like? How do we identify it? Is there a common yardstick that can be used to measure it?

This chapter:

> sets out the characteristics of a good assessment

> describes the Anchor principles – a ‘framework for thinking’ that emerged as a result of our discussions, and then goes on to illustrate how the framework might be used in practice by applying it to the case study

> includes tried and tested tips from the Development Group about ways of supporting practitioners in improving analysis.

What are the characteristics of a good assessment?

Initially, we considered the possibility of finding, or producing, a model or prototype analytical assessment. However, it quickly became apparent that this was probably impossible, as well as undesirable. Effective assessment is based on analysis of the unique circumstances of the child in question and so a universal template is likely to be of limited value. Also, there is a risk of producing one-size-fits-all assessments and one-size-fits-all plans that are unlikely to be particularly helpful.

In addition, assessment is an ongoing process that rarely reaches a natural or obvious conclusion. So in each case, there will be a need to: manage and respond to new information – for example, how to use it to test ideas or understandings that have already formed; review and respond to positive change, or perhaps to understand the absence of change; and to judge the significance of new events that occur. As children’s lives move on, new circumstances unfold which give rise to new dilemmas and questions. If we were to think of a child’s life as a movie, then assessment might be likened to a snapshot that captures the picture at the time – in the knowledge that the picture may change as the child’s situation changes.

Despite the fluidity and complexity of the assessment process, however, pragmatism dictates that circumstances are analysed, conclusions reached and decisions made in a timely fashion. A point must be reached, and often rather quickly, where enough is known – and understood – to enable a move towards addressing the problem at hand. So the challenge is to develop a response to the question ‘What is a good assessment?’ that takes account of both the real life complexities of children’s lives and the often urgent need to respond clearly and effectively.

In view of these issues, it may be more helpful to frame the question in the following terms:

> How would a practitioner or manager be able to recognise a good (analytical) assessment?

> How can an assessment be constructed in a way that ensures analysis is central?

The search for satisfactory answers began by working with the Development Group to compile a list of the characteristics they would expect to find in a ‘good’ or sound analytical assessment.

The following list shows, in no particular order, the characteristics that emerged from these discussions:

A good analytical assessment should:

- show an understanding of family history and context (the issue of context is key)
- provide a good picture of the *child*, the parent, and their story
- be specific about the individual child's needs, rather than following a generic assessment template
- be logical, both in terms of 'showing your working' (ie making sure your thinking process is clear to the reader, showing how you have got from point to point, how you have used the information available to reach certain conclusions, etc) and in terms of structure, so that recommendations can be seen to follow from the information obtained
- provide an understanding of why the assessment is being done and what you are expecting to get out of it
- make explicit the underpinning knowledge (for example, child development theory, knowledge about the effects of bereavement and loss) and evidence (observation material, research findings, etc) that have informed your argument
- be clear about your concerns, and the reasons behind these concerns
- include evidence for the judgements made, whether this is research messages, or your own observations
- include the family's views, and an analysis of these views
- contain information that is directly relevant to the purpose of the assessment
- contain hypotheses, ie your preliminary – and probably still tentative – explanations for the situation or behaviours at issue
- be succinct, concise, relevant and specific at each stage
- be jargon-free, both in terms of words that will mean little to the family, and of words that might have different meanings for different professionals
- show confidence in your analysis – 'I think … because …' – and include clear statements with evidence to back them up rather than hide behind flowery language (there is often a reluctance to do this, as closed statements are less open to challenge than those that specify the reasons behind decisions)
- clearly state what is going to happen as a direct result of the assessment – the 'so what?' question
- link the action plan back to specific parts of the assessment (the plan must clearly emerge from the analysis and an outsider should be able to work out the general story of the case from the plan)
- include an analysis of what we don't know yet (analysis is an ongoing process, and it is OK to say that we need more information about a particular issue)
- show an understanding of the emotional implications for the family of what has been observed
- adopt an open-minded and questioning approach – eg is this the only way of understanding this? (uncertainty is OK as assessment is part of an ongoing conversation, so a good assessment will probably always contain some uncertainty).

For further exploration of what makes a good assessment, see Exercise 1 at www.rip.org.uk/analysis

The Anchor principles: A five-question framework for analytical thinking

The characteristics listed above were used to formulate five questions that were arranged to follow the process of assessment: gathering relevant information, analysing and evaluating that information, drawing conclusions, making plans and reviewing progress.

These five questions are:

What is the assessment for?

What is the story?

What does the story mean?

What needs to happen?

How will we know we are making progress?

When addressed in sequence these five questions provide a 'framework for thinking'. The framework has been tested by practitioners in the Development Group and found to be a useful basis for producing sound, analytical assessments and as a formula to test whether an assessment is good or not. Within the Development Group, the framework came to be called the 'Anchor' because of its ability to anchor assessment firmly within the context of analysis.

It can:

- enable an analysis of individual child and family circumstances
- support the development and testing of hypotheses
- lead to recommendations for actions and review
- be applied in all child-care situations
- be used by any child-care professional regardless of their training or agency background
- be used in conjunction with all recording templates currently in use.

Each component of the framework is explained here and examples from the case study are used to illustrate how the principles link together to produce a summary analysis that can then form the basis of a clear plan.

What is the assessment for?

> 'If it's not clear why we're doing an assessment, how can children and families know what it's for? If it's not clear what it's for, how can we tell if we're making a difference?' (Development Group member)

Clarity about the reason an assessment is being undertaken is vital in directing the course of the assessment in general, and deciding the relevant issues to focus on in particular. The information in the case study relates directly to the reason the assessment is being undertaken. That reason might be described as follows:

Danny spent his early years in Ireland in the care of his grandmother, joining his family in England aged nine. Family relationships have been tense since Danny moved and a crisis was reached a week ago when Danny was accommodated at his parents' request; his father fearing he would again resort to hitting Danny. Plans need to be made to address the difficulties Danny and his family are facing and to decide if and when he can return home.

Being clear about the purpose of the assessment at this early stage enables practitioners to begin the process of analysis by formulating initial ideas about what the key issues might be, reflecting on what more information might be needed and considering how conversations with Danny and his family might be directed. Practitioners may also begin to consider what existing knowledge they have that might be useful in relation to their initial ideas – for example, knowledge about attachment and separation, identity, connections between offending behaviour and educational underachievement, and so on.

Knowledge about these issues may come from research or previous study, but might also come from learning from a similar case. Identifying your knowledge base linked to the general purpose of the assessment, and keeping an open mind about how this knowledge base can support your thinking, even at this early stage, is absolutely key to analytical decision-making. One of the dangers of using research in assessment is the temptation to select arguments that simply support your interpretation without looking at other possibilities, but keeping an open, critical mind about the knowledge base from the start of the assessment will help to prevent this.

What is the story?

> 'Telling the story is not at all the same as filling in the dimensions on a template.'
>
> 'My goal is that any young person of average intelligence should be able to read their assessment and understand everything in it.' (Development Group members)

Compiling the story is a fundamental social work task requiring the whole range of thinking skills. Traditionally, stories have been understood in terms of social histories or chronologies and there has often been confusion about the nature and purpose of each. Our approach places more emphasis on the notion of 'telling a story' or constructing a narrative.

Stories are told in context. For social work practitioners, the story has to reflect the unique circumstances of each child and their family in the context of the difficulties they are facing. Those difficulties will be reflected in the reason for the assessment. If the reason for the assessment is described in process terms – for example, 'A core assessment to inform planning meeting' – then the nature of the child's difficulties will be lost, making it less likely that the difficulties will be directly addressed. Similarly, if information is collected as a questionnaire and not constructed as a story, it is unlikely to reflect the particular circumstances of the child's life or a clear description of the difficulties they face. Again, this will make it much harder to produce focused and effective responses.

Telling a story involves deciding, in a logical way, which information is relevant and then connecting the relevant circumstances, facts and events to create a coherent narrative. Simple descriptions of events, or lists of apparently unconnected or irrelevant facts, do not constitute a story and cannot create a clear or reliable account of the child and family's circumstances. Neither can they provide a sound basis on which to base a plan.

Tips from the Development Group: Using genograms to construct the story

One team manager in Cumbria was concerned about the quality of information gathered:

> 'It was as if workers felt that their job of assessment was to follow a standard routine. They would undertake a home visit, hold a multiagency meeting and then another home visit. This was, for a time, supposed to provide sufficient information. Clearly it didn't!'

To address this concern, she established that every assessment would include a genogram that the worker had compiled with the family. Genograms are a diagrammatic format for representing information about a family across (usually at least three) generations and mapping out the relationships within the family. Completing the genograms involved workers actually getting on the floor with pen and paper to draw the diagram with the families, which helped to build relationships between the social worker and the family.

From this project, she found that:

- workers were able to build a clear picture – with families – of how they got to where they are now
- workers felt more able to challenge reported histories (from old records or other professionals) that were often incorrect or had been inaccurately reported
- using genograms enabled workers to see that one of the most important aspects in any assessment is their relationship with the family and that to build on this relationship they needed to have an understanding of the family's position and their story.

Parents are generally the experts on their children and their knowledge will usually exceed that of the practitioner: their version of their child's story is vital. The child's version of the story may differ in part from their parents' version or versions; this is very likely in Danny's case for example. The different accounts are therefore essential to an overall understanding of the story – and it may be quite a challenge to see how (or whether) they fit together.

For further details about using genograms with families, see Exercise 2 at www.rip.org.uk/analysis

For more details about how you can examine the involvement of children and families in your assessments, see Exercise 3 at www.rip.org.uk/analysis

Using a case study involves a pre-fabricated story where decisions have already been made about what information to include and what to omit. Chunks of the story are missing and it does not illustrate how information about Danny and his life were sifted and woven into a story that was relevant to the reason for the assessment. However, it does include enough information to allow us to start identifying some potentially significant issues. On the basis of the facts presented, aspects of particular relevance in Danny's story might include:

- lack of knowledge about the father, and therefore Danny's attachment to him
- Danny's separation from his mother at 18 months
- possible abuse – might there have been abuse by the step-grandfather?
- the death of Danny's grandmother
- being uprooted from familiar home and surroundings in Ireland
- the loss of Danny's grandmother and poor attachments to his parents leading to poor behaviour
- the father's inability to understand and manage Danny's behaviour
- escalating behaviour, leading to exclusions and involvement in crime
- the parents' reaction to accommodation
- the foster carers' attitude to Danny's parents.

Some of these issues are stated in the story and others have been deduced or posed as questions on the basis of the information stated and the practitioner's own professional knowledge and experience. The process of understanding begins with the practitioner picking out the key features of the story, posing questions about the circumstances and behaviours presented and formulating possible explanations (we focus more on this under the following question 'What does the story mean?'). However, starting to think critically about these issues at this stage will help to make the analysis much easier and quicker later on in the assessment process. These questions can then be tested, first in conversations with Danny and his parents, and subsequently with other professionals. Differing descriptions of circumstances, and differing perceptions of those circumstances, all need to be noted as they all form part of the story.

The quality of the information gathered and the relevance of the story created will depend, in large measure, on the quality of the relationship established between the worker and the family. It involves helping children and families to think about the key events in their lives and to understand how these have shaped their relationships, emotional well-being and the issues that have led to the difficulties they are facing. This is a very different activity from filling in a questionnaire and requires that a degree of trust and respect exists between worker and client. In effect, the worker is supporting children and families to be the authors of their own stories. In this context, formal recordings of the child's story should never contain surprises for families and should always be written in language they understand.

Tips from the Development Group: Ensuring assessments are easily understandable to children and families

The aim of Dudley's project was to enable children and families to participate in assessments as fully as possible. The project had three distinct elements:

1) to ensure that the language used in assessment was as clear and simple as possible

2) to simplify electronic recording formats

3) to get feedback from children and families about how easy they had found it to understand assessments that had been undertaken in relation to them.

Two newly qualified social workers were linked with two senior social workers to present their analysis of two cases at a team away-day. Social workers in the team were also asked to identify cases that could be used as a basis for obtaining feedback from children and families about the accessibility of assessments. Although this is still a work in progress, findings from the away-day and the feedback suggest it is important to:

- make sure the assessment documents the child's story, and in clear language
- include a clear list of tasks, with timescales, when constructing plans
- share outcomes with children and families face to face and in a timely way (it may also be worth considering the involvement of an advocate).

It is also important to acknowledge that the assessor will have their own story and they need to be able to reflect on how their own story might be affecting the way they tell the child's story. This issue is discussed further in the next chapter around analytical processes.

If, as we suggested earlier, stories are movies rather than snapshots and children's stories are on-going then the story for each individual case will need to be kept under review and updated as necessary. It is important that any new information is integrated fully into the story, rather than being treated discretely. Reder and Duncan (1999) have observed that:

> ...putting newly acquired information into the context of that which is already known can allow a comparatively small change in total information to precipitate a major transformation in thought and action.

The implication here is that stories need to be concise, constantly updated and refined working documents.

What does the story mean?

> ‘Sometimes I get to the end of reading an assessment and think – so what? Although I have a read a wealth of obviously carefully compiled facts about a child I am unclear about what the implications of those facts might be.’
> (Development Group member)

Meanings will already be emerging as the story is constructed, but those meanings have to be pulled together so that clear conclusions can be drawn. Addressing the question ‘What does the story mean?’ – thinking about what the story means to the child and family, and how the situation impacts on the child – is the point at which the real task of ‘synthesising and analysing the data, evaluating it and drawing conclusions’ (literature review – Turney, 2009) happens.

Assessments are undertaken in different contexts, for different reasons and use different formats. Some may need lengthy explanations and include discussion of different perspectives. They may require different, possibly competing explanations of the story and reasons why one explanation might be more convincing than another. Others may be relatively short.

However, regardless of the length or brevity of the story and discussions around the meaning of the story, the threads of the analysis have to be drawn together in a manageable summary form so that clear conclusions can be reached about the story’s meaning. A mathematical analogy may be useful here. In working out a mathematical problem it is important to ‘show your workings’. The same is true for assessment. The process of deduction – or the analysis – that led to the conclusion should be clear and easy to follow.

‘Need, Outcome, Plan’

Social workers do not have a precise or objective formula to assist their analyses. The nearest approximation may be the formulation of **need, outcome, plan** that is reflected in most assessment templates, so we will now look at how this can help to support assessment.

We start by focusing on the concept of **need**, explaining how it can be used in a precise and focused way to give meaning to the story and produce a summary needs analysis. The case study is used to illustrate this. (The linked concepts of **outcome** and **plan** are described in a similar way when we discuss the next question in the Anchor principles: What needs to happen?)

Need

It is easy when working with children and families to think:

Here’s the problem – what’s the solution?

The difficulty is that this approach misses out the crucial stage of fully understanding and analysing the problem. It tends to lead to responses that are service-led rather than needs-led and so don’t produce such good outcomes for children. It is therefore better to think:

This is the story or situation – what does that tell us about the need?

The more **specific** the descriptions of need are, the better the chances of fully understanding the precise needs of the individual child and, ultimately, responding effectively. It should be remembered, too, that often the best way of meeting a child’s needs is by meeting the needs of their parents – and using the same very specific approach to describe their needs. To have the best chance of understanding a particular child’s story, analysing their individual needs and finding a service that meets those needs, it is necessary to **avoid** describing their needs in the following terms:

> In **universal** terms, for example: ‘The child needs to have their emotional needs met.’

This is too general – all children need to have their emotional needs met. The nature of a particular child’s emotional needs or the causes of unaddressed emotional needs is lost, making it much more difficult to ensure that an effective service is found.

> In **service** terms, for example: ‘The child needs to be referred to CAMHS.’

In this example it will not be clear to the child and family or to CAMHS what the service is for, and what needs should be addressed. Without such clarity it is likely that the child will be assessed again or ‘slotted into’ the service that already exists, rather than receiving a service that is based on already identified need. Again, the service is unlikely to be effective.

> In terms of an **assessment**, for example: ‘The child needs to have their special needs assessed.’

An assessment of special needs may well be an important aspect of an effective service response but difficulties have clearly already emerged that have led to the current assessment being conducted. This links back to the initial question about why the assessment is being done. For example, a parent may be struggling to manage a child’s behaviour, or be concerned that their child is different from other children of a similar age. They may be worried about the strain their child’s difficulties are having on adult relationships. If these difficulties are not made explicit they are likely to be overlooked completely or not addressed in a timely fashion.

Using this specific way of describing needs, Danny’s needs might be formulated as follows:

Danny needs to:

> understand what happened to him before he came to England

> understand why he was left in Ireland

> come to terms with his grandmother’s death

> have a better relationship with his parents

> understand why he behaves as he does

> change his behaviour

> stop offending

> go to school regularly.

His parents need to:

- understand why he behaves as he does.

His father needs to:

- find ways of helping him manage and change his behaviour that don't involve hitting him.

His carers need to:

- understand why his parents find contacting Danny so difficult
- facilitate his parents visiting.

An exploration of assessing need within a limited timescale is seen in Exercise 4 at www.rip.org.uk/analysis

Such an analysis is by no means fixed or certain and will need to be checked with the family and tested out on an ongoing basis. It is a summary analysis written in simple, jargon-free language and in bullet-point format. It could of course be written in a lengthier and more discursive prose style, but the point here is that a summary analysis clarifies the meaning being given to the story. Children, families and professionals can then be clear about the key issues and pressing needs as currently identified, enabling them to agree, disagree, add or amend.

In the case of Danny, we have already started to identify the important themes. Possible themes identified earlier in this chapter could include:

- rejection/lack of attachment (parents leaving him with his grandmother and step-grandfather to live in England, and more recently being accommodated on the request of his father)
- loss (death of his grandmother)
- poor behaviour and attendance at school (leading to temporary exclusions)
- offending (stealing, being part of a peer group who offend).

This is not to say that all of these are issues that have an impact on Danny. However, by setting out some of the key issues that could be affecting Danny, practitioners can start to look at what they already know – for example, about attachment or loss – and where the gaps in their knowledge are. For example, a practitioner may have studied some research about attachment as part of a recent course, or they may have had several recent cases concerning the effects of loss. This is something that can absolutely be quoted as part of the assessment, as long as you clearly state where it has come from, and how it applies directly to the individual case.

At this stage, this use of research could be around causes and outcomes of some of these issues. For example:

We know from Kelly and Hodson (2008) that placement stability is directly linked to better attachment and improved educational achievement. In Danny's case, it is therefore possible that his move from Ireland and subsequent move into care has had a detrimental effect on his behaviour in school. It is therefore important that I make sure his current placement offers him stability and we support his carers to encourage him back into education.

An alternative way of using research could be:

Harsh and erratic discipline has been linked with youth offending (Leech, 2008). In Danny's case, he has experienced physical punishment from his father and potentially, his step-grandfather. I could clarify this by talking to Danny and his parents. Danny needs to understand how his experiences in Ireland might be affecting his current behaviour. At the same time, his father needs to understand how his treatment of Danny could be having an impact.

What needs to happen?

'I want to be able to read a plan and be able to work out from the plan what the needs are and what the story is. This isn't possible if the plan is just a list of agencies the family will be referred to.'

'As practitioners we can talk to the end of the earth about what's wrong. We talk much less about what we're going to do about it – and even less about what the family would like us to do'.
(Development Group members)

The whole purpose of undertaking an assessment is to decide what needs to happen. The links being made between the story, the meaning given to the story and what needs to happen, or the plan, must be clear and logical otherwise interventions are likely to be unfocused and ineffective.

It can be helpful in shaping a plan to ask: 'Of all the needs identified what is this child's most pressing need?' This approach provides a helpful prompt about where to start. One approach for example would be to identify Danny's most pressing need as the need to come to terms with loss and resolve issues around his life in Ireland. Without such resolution it might be predicted that Danny's alienation from his family will increase and his behaviour will escalate. In addition, we can highlight that continued exclusion from school will increase the likelihood of offending behaviour and, given his underlying emotional issues, he could well end up in secure accommodation.

We can also use research here:

The likelihood of offending increases year on year in adolescence, and young people are most likely to offend between the ages of 15 and 19 (Leech, 2008). As Danny has already shown some signs of offending, it is therefore important that we deal with his offending now to prevent further episodes as he gets older.

Setting outcomes

Outcomes are stages on the way to addressing need, so it is important that they link together effectively. Deciding what needs to happen has to be tempered by realism. Of course, the best possible scenario would be for Danny and his parents to work together to resolve Danny's issues of loss and to be reunited. However, Danny's needs are extensive and have been developing over a long period of time, so we can predict that this is unlikely to happen – at least not quickly. So the next stage is about setting realistic outcomes that we can use to effectively measure progress for the individual child and family.

Outcomes for Danny might be formulated as follows:

- Danny has talked to his parents about what happened to him in Ireland.
- Danny and his parents can explain how their relationship became so fraught.
- Danny's parents can describe how feelings of rejection can lead young people to behave in angry and aggressive ways.
- Danny and his family have agreed ground rules for a return home.
- A school place has been found for Danny.
- Danny and school have a strict agreement in place about acceptable behaviour.
- Danny can name an adult in school he could talk to if he was feeling stressed.

Outcomes have to be negotiated with families so that their views about what they want to achieve and what success might look like can be included in what is essentially a contract. Again, the success of such negotiations will depend on the quality of the relationship the worker has established with the family; the better the relationship with the worker the more able the family will be to engage in the process and the more likely it is that outcomes will be achieved.

It is useful to apply the **SMART** standard to outcomes, ensuring that each outcome is:

Specific – rather than too general, vague or woolly

Measurable – either formally, through the use of scales and questionnaires, or using softer measures that indicate things are moving towards the desired outcome

Agreed – with families and professionals to enable partnership working

Realistic – rather than over optimistic and risking failure

Timed – to prevent drift and dictate the order in which outcomes will be addressed.

Plan

The task then is to decide which interventions will achieve the outcomes specified. These will be decided on the basis of research knowledge about what works, as well as skills and experience available within the local professional network.

Some interventions are likely to be straightforward. For example, in relation to:

'Danny and school have a strict agreement in place about acceptable behaviour'

the intervention may simply be that a meeting is set up between Danny, school and parents to agree on acceptable behaviour in school and how Danny will be supported by parents and school staff to achieve the agreed standard of behaviour.

To achieve the outcome:

'Danny has talked to his parents about what happened to him in Ireland'

the intervention is likely to be more complex. One approach would be to draw on research knowledge about 'what works' for traumatised children. Although this may not detail a specific intervention for this individual situation, it could certainly help to inform the approaches and techniques that a practitioner could adopt to work effectively with Danny and his parents and carers.

Professionals will need to decide with the child and family which outcomes should be focused on first, which professionals will work with the family to achieve which outcomes, if multiple plans could be delivered in parallel, where it might be possible to go for 'quick wins' to give families a sense that progress is being made and when outcomes should be reviewed.

Exercise 5 focuses on how to effectively move from outcomes to plans and can be found at www.rip.org.uk/analysis

How will we know we are making progress?

> ‘Too often at review meetings we focus on whether parents have attended appointments. We aren’t clear about what the purpose of the appointment is and so we really can’t tell if it’s making a difference or not.’
> (Development Group member)

The purpose of assessment is to decide the best way of addressing the needs that have been identified and so it is obviously essential to measure progress. If interventions are not making a difference, we need to know why and to try something we think is more likely to be effective. So knowing that we are making progress in addressing needs is an essential part of the assessment process. Clear outcomes are crucial if progress is to be measured accurately: they are the criteria against which progress can be measured. Without clear, measurable and specific outcomes that link directly to identified needs, it is difficult to know what has been achieved, check out hypotheses or adjust plans.

The process of reviewing progress is twofold. First, we need to enquire whether an outcome has been achieved. If so, it is possible to check and update needs and move on to setting the next outcome. Where outcomes have not been achieved, more questions have to be asked, for example:

> Was the meaning given to the story/ the analysis flawed?

> Has our hypothesis been disproved?

> Is there an alternative hypothesis from which a new need might emerge?

> Did we start with the wrong need?

> Were we attempting to achieve too many outcomes at once?

> Has new information emerged?

> Was there a gap between the need and the service?

> Was the service delivered in the wrong way?

> How can the analysis be refined, hypotheses amended, outcomes revised and responses adjusted?

Second, people’s circumstances can change for a variety of reasons, and new information can come to light at any point. This might be new details that make old information appear in a different light, or new information that arises simply as a result of time moving on. Either of these circumstances may lead to you revising your understanding of the case and reframing needs, or identifying new ones. These in turn will require new outcomes to be specified and new interventions decided. In this way the Anchor framework can be applied in a circular fashion:

First cycle

> What’s the assessment for?

> What is the story?

> What does the story mean?

> What needs to happen?

> How will we know we are making progress?

Second cycle

> What’s the assessment for – now?

> What is the updated story?

> What does the updated story mean?

> What needs to happen in relation to the updated story?

> How will we know we are making progress?... and so on.

Applying the Anchor framework requires the use of a whole range of thinking skills on the part of the practitioner. These thinking skills are discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

A worked example of an assessment for Danny can be found at www.rip.org.uk/analysis

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Tips from the Development Group: Looking at what makes a good assessment

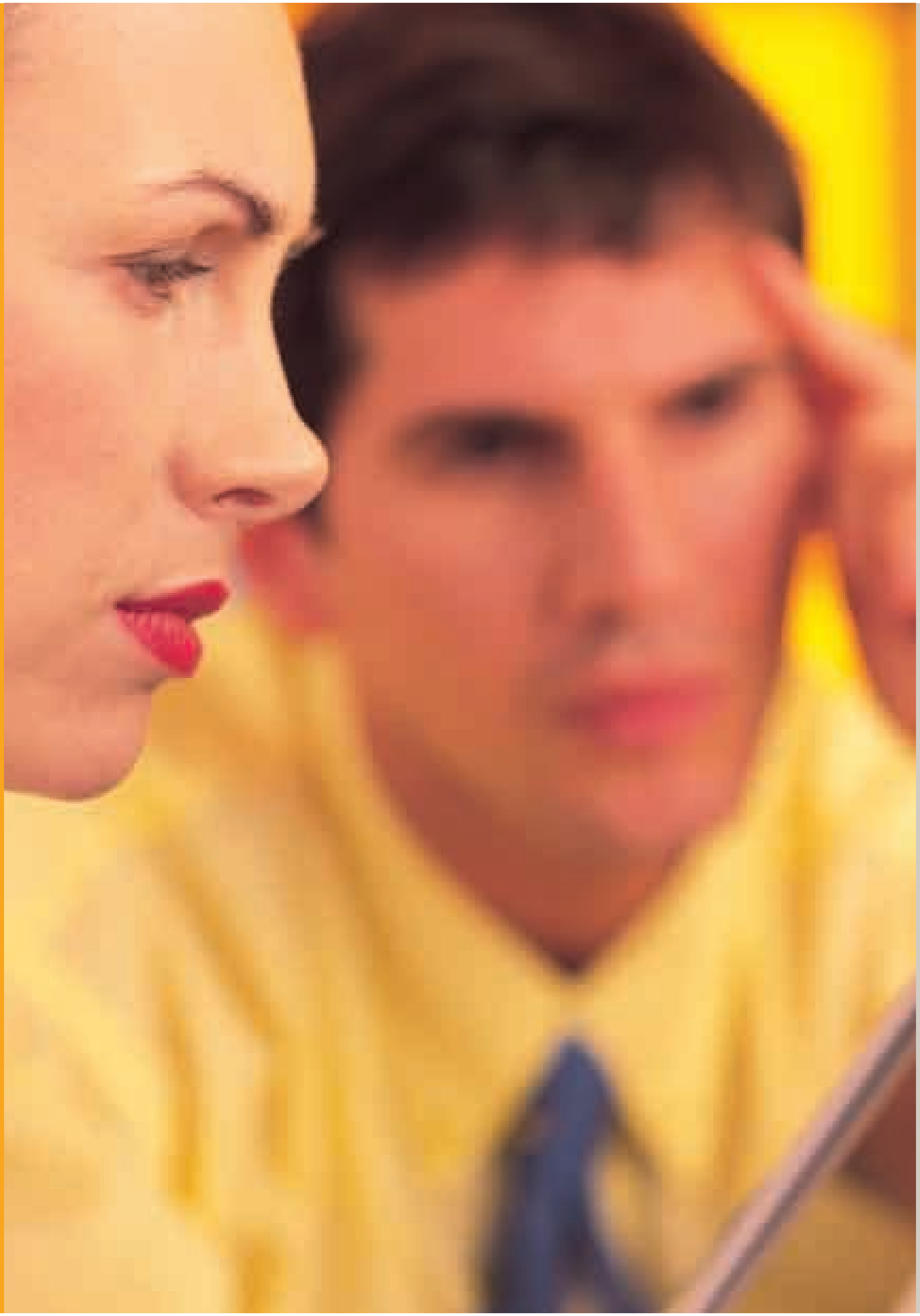
The aim of Wigan’s small-scale research project was to identify elements of good practice in critical thinking and reflection, and to build on these. Practitioners were asked to pick examples from their own assessment work that they thought were ‘good’. The different elements of good practice were identified and mapped onto a spreadsheet. Practitioners were then interviewed and asked about why they had chosen that particular assessment, and what they felt had contributed to their ability to produce good-quality examples. Both sets of data were used to identify areas for further development for individual practitioners, and all were introduced to the Anchor principles. The project also had a positive effect on team culture, as the team agreed to work as a group to develop (initially two) components of analysis.

These are some of the key learning points to arise from the project:

> Identifying strengths as a team is a powerful way of affecting change.

> Practitioners were able to build on their strengths – after taking part in the project, practitioners felt more able to introduce analysis into their assessments.

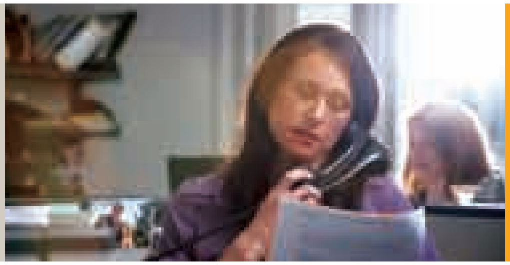
> Practitioners also became more confident in expressing their judgement and the reasons for the judgements they had made.



4.

Analytical process

The three elements of analysis, critical thinking and critical reflection take on a particular relevance in the light of the recent negative reports on social work – and other professions' – practice that highlight acute failure by practitioners and managers to reflect on and critically examine the assumptions and actions of either key family members, other professionals or themselves. The fact that failures of thinking were a factor in such extreme cases – Victoria Climbié and Baby P – graphically reinforces the need for sound critical, analytical and reflective thinking to underpin everyday practice.
(Literature review – Turney, 2009)



In this chapter, we focus on the thinking skills needed to produce a 'good' assessment and, just as importantly, to put into practice the plans arising from such assessments. While social workers also need a range of technical skills – such as observation, interviewing techniques, knowledge and application of statutory and agency procedures – it is thinking skills that underpin the application of those more technical skills. Moreover, it is the quality of thinking that dictates the quality of practice and, ultimately, the quality and effectiveness of any support provided to children and their families.

We will outline and discuss the key concepts in relation to thinking in social work in general, and assessment more specifically:

- analysis
- intuition
- critical thinking
- hypothesising
- reflection
- evidence-informed practice.

Practitioners use these modes of thinking on a daily basis, although they may not be conscious of using them or necessarily describe them in the way the literature review does. We will look at how a framework of hypothesising, testing and reflecting can have a significant impact on the quality of critical thinking within assessment practice. The purpose of this section is not only to highlight the crucial importance of thinking skills, but also to demystify them – so practitioners and their managers can be clear not only that they already use these ways of thinking, but can also feel confident they should be using them because they underpin good practice.

Although each mode of thinking is described separately, practitioners will not necessarily employ them separately. Different modes of thought are not like the gears in a car where it is not possible to be in more than one gear at a time. Indeed, in practice, there will be times when a practitioner will find it hard to identify which mode of thinking, or combination of modes, they are using, not least because some concepts overlap. Although precision in describing ways of thinking is hard to achieve, we hope that a little more awareness of the different ways practitioners think and make judgements will assist in opening out what Eileen Munro (2010) has referred to as 'an explicit space for critical reflection'.

Analysis

To analyse is to break something down into its component parts and to explore the relationship between those parts. The strength of analytical thinking is that, used properly, it is rigorous, systematic and methodical. In the context of social work assessment, analysis involves working carefully and logically through a mass of often complex, confusing or incomplete information and trying to make sense of it. We use analysis to work out what the story means.

Eg An example of analytical thinking

Practitioner:
Key issues I have picked up about Danny's relationship with his father include:

- *Danny's father was not around when Danny was a baby, so would probably not have formed a close attachment to him.*
- *Danny's father has hit him in the past.*
- *He thinks he might hit him again.*
- *He feels ashamed that he has not been able to manage Danny's behaviour.*
- *He seems to want things to be better.*

What do these different, and seemingly contradictory, aspects of Danny's story tell me about the quality of the relationship between Danny and his father? How can I integrate them into a coherent picture? How can I work out what they mean? Might it be that he is struggling to form a positive relationship with his son because of the early separation; that he feels guilty about the separation; and that these feelings of guilt and his difficulties in managing his son have led him to hit Danny, but that he is very motivated to work to improve the relationship? What does research tell me about how his father's actions might have impacted on Danny? This seems to be the best meaning I can give to the story at this point.

Intuition

Although intuition is often seen as unreliable, subjective and impossible to measure, there are, in fact, sound arguments to support a cautious and considered use of intuition in social work. It is a way of thinking that is essential to the complex nature of social work practice: it is quick, can be used in establishing rapport and to demonstrate empathy, and it draws on the practitioner's life experience and practice knowledge, as well as their knowledge of theory and formal research. It is a key component of social work decision-making, but must be analysed thoroughly if it is to be an effective part of assessment practice. So rather than conceptualise analysis and intuition as either/or ways of thinking, it may be more helpful to consider the use of both – and to understand the strengths and limitations of each way of thinking.

Eg An example of intuition

The duty social worker who visited Danny and his family prior to his accommodation with foster carers had read all the background paperwork and was very clear that it was Danny's father who had previously hit Danny, and that he was now saying he was concerned he might do so again. Danny's parents confirmed this when she visited. However, during the course of the conversation the worker had a sudden and unexpected hunch that, in fact, it was Danny's mother who had been violent previously and that the couple feared she might be so again.

After the visit the worker tried to understand why this thought had suddenly popped up and wondered if she was being fanciful and should ignore it, especially as it contradicted all the other facts. She reflected that while the potential violence was being discussed Danny's mother had looked at the floor, as had Danny. This was in contrast to their previous demeanours. Danny's father seemed at great pains to explain why he had been violent before and his reasons for fearing his own violence now, which, on reflection, didn't ring true. While this was happening, the already tense relationship between Danny's parents became even more tense and stilted.

In addition, the worker recalled a previous situation she had been involved in where a father had lied to protect a mother. She also recalled an article she had read describing how much less acceptable it is in our society for mothers to harm children than fathers.

Intuitive thinking operates at the level of the unconscious and is most commonly used when time is pressing. This can make it hard to evaluate intuitive judgement fully. What is important here is not the 'truth' of the intuition but rather that the worker should ask, 'What makes me think that?' and then pursue their hunch further, testing it so a decision can be made about its validity or otherwise. Testing might involve further conversations with families, either being explicit about your hunch or asking relevant questions – for example, asking Danny's mother: 'How does Danny's behaviour make you feel?', 'How do you deal with such feelings?' and 'Has his behaviour ever brought you near to hitting him?' Such questions are unlikely to produce an immediate or clear-cut answer, but as the case moves on they may well produce responses that change the meaning given to the story.

Critical thinking

💬 Critical thinking is purposeful... It involves maintaining an open-minded attitude and being able to think about different ways of understanding the information before you. And critical thinking also includes a process of evaluating claims and arguments in order to come to logical and consistent conclusions, assessing these conclusions against clear and relevant criteria or standards, and being able to spell out the reasons for the judgements you have made.

(Literature review – Turney, 2009)

Critical thinking is about weighing up the different options and possible interpretations in an open-minded way, being clear and explicit about why one interpretation might be chosen over another and explaining why this interpretation has been chosen rather than any others. As we have noted, practitioners need to be able to make decisions – often with imperfect information – so it is particularly important that these decisions can be expressed clearly and in straightforward language, and in such a way that the thinking behind them is transparent and therefore open to challenge and/or revision. This might also include bringing in practitioners' own knowledge of the research around a particular issue, and how this affects the way they look at a situation.

Hypothesising

Hypothesising – in other words, trying out different interpretations or giving different meaning to data and to the story – allows the practitioner to think about a range of possible meanings or ways of explaining what might be going on. Testing a range of hypotheses increases the possibilities of finding the best interpretation and the best response. Such hypothesising also reduces the tendency towards 'verificationism'. Verificationism describes what appears to be a common human pattern of thinking where we tend to be drawn towards information that confirms a view we have already formed and discount information that might contradict this view. This poses a particular challenge within social work, where it has proved to be a potentially dangerous pattern of thought. If you have already made your mind up about a situation, this may shut down other avenues of thought and reduce the likelihood that different interpretations for the presenting event will be sought.

As part of hypothesising, it is also important to look at what we don't yet know. As mentioned earlier, a good assessment is part of an ongoing conversation, so it is natural that there will be some uncertainty. The key is to understand the level of uncertainty, whether it is general uncertainty:

I feel I've done the best I can in making an assessment of the circumstances as they present, but I can never be 100 per cent sure

or more specific uncertainty:

I don't feel I can really make an assessment until I'm clearer about the relationship between Danny and his mother.

By identifying the gaps in knowledge, practitioners can then start to think about how they might find out additional relevant information. This could be through observation, talking to the family, or using research evidence.

Testing hypotheses crucially involves the practitioner pursuing competing theories with children and with their families: being explicit about their thinking and having conversations with the child and family about which interpretations of their story make most sense to them. It also involves the practitioner drawing up plans that best fit joint decisions about the most likely explanation. Where it is not possible to reach agreement, then it is important to be explicit about this too.

Hypothesising and testing are iterative processes: if new information comes in or plans are not achieving the desired outcomes, then hypotheses need to be reformulated and plans revised, retested, re-reviewed, reformulated, and so on.

The process of thinking, hypothesising and testing is not easy work. There is no such thing in social work with children and families as 'the right answer'. We are dealing with complex, sometimes dangerous, situations in which there can never be certainty. We have to live with that uncertainty but also to get as near as possible to understanding the causes of children's vulnerability in order to provide the best solutions possible. Thinking is central to such understanding and to be effective has to be valued, structured, transparent and explicit.

Eg An example of hypothesising

On the one hand:

Danny's father has been violent before and he says he fears he may be violent again.

The best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour.

Danny's father never had a strong bond with him.

Research shows that the combination of a poor relationship, violence and testing adolescent behaviour is potentially very harmful to Danny.

Danny is doing well in the foster home.

The obvious course of action is to make an application for a Care Order and so protect Danny from harm and secure the placement with the foster carers where he is doing well.

I can feel confident in the arguments I will present to the court.

However, thinking critically:

The first incident of violence was quite a while ago, and Danny has told me that since then he and his father have got on much better.

Danny's teacher has said how good Danny's father has been at negotiating with Danny and defusing situations that have arisen in school.

Danny's father has taken a deliberate interest in the music Danny likes.

Both parents seem genuinely upset that things have gone wrong when so much progress seems to have been made.

I am not sure I quite understand Danny's mother's role in the family difficulties. Is Danny's father protecting her by taking responsibility for the need for Danny to be accommodated? Do I need to know more about her relationship with Danny?

If I spend more time trying to find out about her experiences, is that just going to delay things?

I know from research that teenagers who are accommodated tend to return home when they leave school.

Danny already has identity problems. He may have more chance of resolving these if he lives with his family.

To pursue this course of action will mean a real battle with my supervisor – who will disagree with me and say we can't afford to take a risk.

I know from research that loss and bereavement have had a significant impact on Danny's behaviour. I think the greatest risk is in separating Danny from his parents and subjecting him to yet another loss.

I feel exhausted – there's so much to think about in such a short time.

Each hypothesis could then be tested by asking –

Is there another explanation that would make sense here?

As part of the process of hypothesis testing, it will be important to make sure that any new information is assessed for its 'fit' with the current understandings of the situation. Possibly contradictory evidence needs to be explored, as it could shed new light on the issues involved.

How do I make sense of Danny's father's interest in Danny's musical tastes?

How do reports from school fit into this interpretation of events?

Danny's parents don't visit him but what about the clear wish of both parents for things to improve?

Possible conclusion

It's my job to make recommendations about what I think is in Danny's best interests – and to give my reasons.

Having thought about all these aspects of the case, I need to talk to Danny's parents about how they might find different strategies to manage his behaviour.

I need to do this before considering proceedings to see how able they might be to understand and implement new strategies.

It's not my role to change my professional judgement about this case because of other considerations – like my caseload and private life.

I need to be clear about my reasons for this before my next supervision session.

I need to be clear to my supervisor that I understand the arguments on both sides and ask her to help me devise a contingency plan if Danny does go home.

I need to think about different strategies to find out the information that I don't know yet.

So the important thing about critical thinking is to avoid getting stuck in one way of understanding a situation and to try instead to be open to considering a range of possibilities. By formulating these possibilities as clear hypotheses, they can then be tested out so that plans can be developed.

Reflection

The term reflection is used in different ways and, in this section, we will use the case study to demonstrate how different forms of reflection can be used in practice.

Reflection can refer to the way a practitioner can pick up on and mirror the emotions expressed by the person they are working with. This can then enable the practitioner to use this information about the emotional 'climate' to contribute to their thinking about what might be going on.

Eg

An example of reflection

'I felt really uncomfortable and tense when Danny's father was talking about his violence. I think he was feeling really tense. I wonder why that was? Might there be another version of events that he feels unable to talk about?'

Donald Schön (1987) has identified two forms of reflection that help to expand this concept further: 'reflection on action', and 'reflection in action'.

'Reflection on action'

The reflective practitioner is able to look back on what they did, think about how it went and consider how it might have been done differently. This process is described as 'reflection-on-action'. So while thinking is undoubtedly enhanced by experience, experience is only really useful if it involves practitioners reflecting on their experience – and learning lessons about what worked well and why, and equally what did not work so well and how they might adjust their thinking in future.

Eg

An example of 'reflection on action'

'I'm really worried about the foster carer's attitude to Danny's parents. It's so important that he sees his family and her attitude is making that difficult. When she talked to me about how negative she felt about them I was worried that if I challenged her view it would jeopardise my relationship with her – which is a good relationship. It would have been much better if I'd explained why I thought Danny's parents might not be phoning him and then asked her to put herself in their shoes. I might have asked her what she had done in previous cases that had worked in helping parents to feel comfortable about visiting. This reminds me of a similar situation where I felt concerned about the attitude of a foster carer. I did manage to help her change her attitude by confirming what a good relationship she had established with the child and then helping her to put herself in the shoes of the child and the child's parents. She was able to see how hard it was for the parents and to understand the child's ambivalence.'

'Reflection in action'

Reflection in action describes the way a competent practitioner is able to think on their feet, using learning from previous situations and applying it to the current situation. As with intuition, the practitioner may not be aware of what is happening in the moment. They are drawing on knowledge from previous experiences that has been internalised and become part of their tacit knowledge or practice wisdom.

An example of 'reflection in action'

Danny's parents were talking about how worried they were that Danny was in trouble with the police and that nothing like this had happened in their family before. I became very aware that they were very emotional and that some of their feelings stemmed from their guilt about his early years. Danny was in the room with his younger siblings and I felt it was extremely unhelpful for him to be singled out in this way. I found myself drawing the conversation to a close and asking all three children if they would like to show me their new fish tank. I made an appointment to return later to discuss the situation with the parents on their own.

Evidence-informed practice

At various points in this resource, we have referred to 'evidence' – evidence to support your hypotheses about a case, evidence that informs your judgements and plans, and so on. So what is meant by the notion of evidence and what does it mean to talk about 'evidence-informed' practice? We have suggested that good assessment depends on good thinking skills, and these, in turn, need to be supported by a sound knowledge base. The kind of analytical, critical and reflective approach we have proposed here invites practitioners to consider what they know and how they know it.

Practitioners draw on knowledge from a variety of sources. In addition to relevant law and policy, these are likely to include:

- practice knowledge and experience (drawing on the individual's 'practice wisdom', professional values, learning from previous similar cases – either their own or another professional's – and knowledge from and about the community
- the views and experiences of service users and carers
- evidence from research.

Evidence-informed practice is embedded in all of the thinking processes that have been mentioned in this chapter. It is a way of working that acknowledges the contribution of these different forms of knowledge and has been defined as:

Evidence informed practice = Practice knowledge and experience + service user views + research evidence
(Barratt and Hodson, 2006)

Research can be a key source of insight and information, and is clearly one important element of the professional knowledge base. However, as we highlighted in the introduction, social work is a complex profession that involves working with people who can often behave in contradictory and unpredictable ways. It is therefore crucial also to use practitioner experience and the views of the child and family themselves to ensure that any research is applied effectively to the individual case. As a result, it is better to talk about 'evidence-informed' rather than 'evidence-based' practice as this more accurately reflects the position of research in social work decision-making. The combination of these three factors at any one time will depend on the decision being made, and the individual practitioner's strengths and areas of knowledge.

Research knowledge can be used in an assessment to help explore what the story means and to support planning and decision-making. But it is important to use it effectively. Research can be very context-specific and will rarely provide definite answers to a particular case, although looking at the wider research evidence around the kind of difficulties facing the individual family may help to give you a broader understanding of their situation and/or some ideas about alternative ways to approach your work together.

So when reviewing research evidence, it is always worth asking:

Does this [research finding] help me understand what is going on here? How does it apply in this particular situation? Indeed, does it apply here?

Furthermore, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

How does this fit with, or challenge, what I already know?

This might flag up further questions that you had not thought of. It may also enable you to challenge your initial assumptions and increase your background understanding of the key issues affecting the family and possible approaches to working with them.

The nature of social work and the acquired skills of social work professionals also mean that practitioners are constantly using their own 'tacit' knowledge when working with children and families, often without realising. This can be a good starting point for an assessment, as it prompts the practitioner to question their reactions and assumptions. However, it is just as important to understand what has informed practitioner experience and tacit knowledge as it is to appraise any research you use.

A list of key resources and useful journals can be found at www.rip.org.uk/analysis

For further support in using research in assessments specifically for the family court, see the research in practice Handbook *Evidence Matters: Social work expertise in the family court* (Eccles and Erlen, 2008).

5.
Supervision

Talking to team managers in the Development Group underlined that effective supervision is absolutely key to enabling social workers to produce high-quality assessments. A lack of effective supervision has been linked to stress, absence and high caseloads, which can undermine professional confidence and competence (Gibbs, 2001, cited in Children's Workforce Development Council, 2009). The quality of the relationship between supervisors and supervisees is central to the development of social workers who feel skilled and supported in carrying out their professional role.

The issue of analysis and critical thinking in assessment is therefore not one that can be confined solely to individual frontline practitioners; some of the responsibility must lie with their managers and supervisors. Indeed, the potential of supervision as a positive way of supporting reflective social work practice has been frequently stated in international research:

> Supervision is one of the hallmarks of professional social work providing as it does an opportunity for reflective practice and a format for the containment of the anxieties of everyday work, in the pursuit of better practice.
> (Karvinen-Niinikoski, cited in Bradley and Höjer, 2009)

In this chapter, therefore, we will look at the role of supervision in the assessment process in terms of:

> what supervision is for

> what supervision can bring to the assessment process

> some evidence-informed strategies for reflective supervision.

What is supervision for?

In recent years, much social work supervision has been primarily focused on procedure, with increased pressures within local authorities exacerbated by staff shortages and wider public scrutiny of social work. This has led to more focus on case allocation and performance management within supervision. However, there has been a shift towards a greater emphasis on more reflective approaches to supervision, highlighted in Lord Laming's recent report after the death of Peter Connelly:

> Regular, high-quality, organised supervision is critical, as are routine opportunities for peer-learning and discussion … Supervision should be open and supportive, focusing on the quality of decisions, good risk analysis and improving outcomes for children rather than meeting targets.
> (Laming, 2009)

As part of the exploration around supervision, the Development Group participants considered the definition put forward in the Children's Workforce Development Council's (CWDC) guidance for supervisors as part of their Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSW) pilot programme. This draws on the work of Tony Morrison, who conducted a substantial amount of research around effective supervision practice. Although the NQSW programme is aimed at practitioners who are just starting out as qualified social workers, the guidance was felt to have more general application and to offer a useful way to conceptualise supervision. Indeed, the CWDC formulation has also been adopted by Cafcass as their definition for supervision. The guidance states that supervision is:

> A process by which one worker is given responsibility by the organisation to work with another worker. The objective is to meet certain organisational, professional and personal objectives in order to promote positive outcomes for service users.
> (CWDC, 2009)

The Group also identified a range of different functions of supervision. Supervision should:

> offer guidance and support

> challenge

> motivate

> identify gaps in learning

> provide space for case discussion

> encourage reflection

> facilitate performance management

> cover administrative functions (eg booking leave).

However, most of the group reported that supervision tended to focus on the final two bullet points: performance management and administrative functions. This observation, which is supported by research into supervision practice in local authorities, has been

attributed to the increased bureaucracy that followed the serious case reviews, public child protection inquiries into the deaths of Victoria Climbié and more recently Peter Connelly. Eileen Munro (2010) provides a useful comment on the way in which changes in organisational culture have affected the management of social work practice:

> It seems plausible at this stage of the review to conclude that the anxiety about managing uncertainty has supported the creation of a performance management culture and regulatory regime which searches for compliance with process, finds the scrutiny of practice difficult, and is ultimately distanced from learning and reflective practice.

As the above quote indicates, there can be a tension between the performance management and the learning and development functions of supervision, and Munro is suggesting that the balance between the two functions has become unhelpfully skewed in favour of the former.

Effective working relationships, developed through reflective supervision, should be positive and open as they involve getting to know the supervisee and tailoring the supervision towards them as an individual. Much recent literature has focused on the importance of a user-centred approach to social work practice; similarly, supervision should focus on the needs of the individual practitioner. This will involve looking at their learning and development needs, reflecting on lessons that might be gleaned from past practice, and identifying their individual knowledge and skills base. Research has shown that a supervisor's approach is very much influenced by their own experiences of supervision, so it is important that they reflect on how their supervision history affects their current practice and adapt it accordingly.

What can supervision bring to the assessment process?

There are clear links between supervision and the assessment process. The Development Group identified four key ways in which supervision can help to encourage analysis and critical thinking among workers as they are conducting assessments and to keep the focus on the child and their needs. Supervision can:

- provide an opportunity for reflection
- provide an opportunity to be challenged
- provide an opportunity to test out ideas
- empower the supervisee.

Each of these approaches to supervision will now be examined in more detail to demonstrate how supervision is an intrinsic part of the assessment process.

Opportunity for reflection

We have already drawn attention to the role of reflection as part of the analytical process and supervision provides a key site for the development and support of reflective practice. Supervision is about standing back and taking a fresh look. Bringing a case into supervision means that the worker can set aside the time and space to explore the issues linked to that individual situation outside the pressures of a busy, and often overwhelming, work environment.

Supervisors do not necessarily have to have all the answers. Indeed, the supervisor's role is not to do the analysis for the worker; instead, the supervisor can use their 'outside' perspective to help and work with the supervisee to think critically about the case. So, for example, rather than asking questions that begin 'Have you done...?' or 'When are you going to do...?', which focus more on procedure, it may be more useful to explore how best to analyse complex cases through questions such as 'How do you feel about...?', 'What do you think ... means?' or 'What surprised you about...?'. Crucially, the supervisor also brings their own experience and knowledge into the analysis. By sharing these with the supervisee, supervision can become a collaborative process that allows practitioner and supervisor to analyse together.

Opportunity to be challenged

When we talk about supervision providing an opportunity for the worker to be challenged, we are not necessarily saying their original decisions or judgements were wrong. But as a practitioner, having someone else review a situation with you – and perhaps pose alternative ways of understanding it – invites you to consider different ways of approaching the case and/or alternative interventions for the child and family. This collaborative way of working with your supervisor in itself contributes to

the testing of hypotheses, and examining what knowledge or experience they draw on. The process of responding to constructive challenge may encourage you to rethink a decision in light of other alternatives, or it might reinforce your original thinking about the case. This is not about the supervisor cross-examining you. Rather, it is about having the opportunity to question assumptions and examine evidence, suggest alternative sources of information or research findings, and so on, so that together you can review, and then decide to accept or reject, different hypotheses. The process of thinking together about other possibilities, and examining (and being able to explain) why you have reached a particular understanding or chosen a particular approach, should give you more confidence in your decision, and ensure that you can clearly articulate your reasons for taking the course of action you have chosen. Being challenged in supervision will also enable you to look more closely at where your own knowledge, views and beliefs come from, thus adopting a more evidence-informed approach to your practice.

Opportunity to test out ideas

It is important that social workers are not afraid of putting forward creative ideas and solutions to the problems faced in a particular case. Reflective supervision can allow social workers to be more experimental with their potential analyses and to test out, in a safe and non-judgemental environment, more innovative ideas about how the case could progress. The danger of testing out possible ideas and potential conclusions for the first time in the family court was emphasised in the **research in practice** Handbook *Evidence Matters: Social work expertise in the family court* (Eccles and Erlen, 2008), but this is not only an issue in relation to court work.

Empowering the supervisee

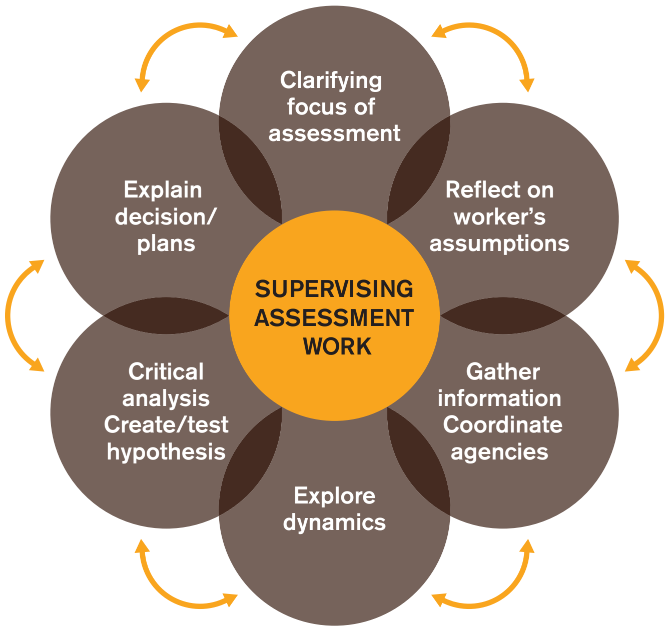
The style of reflective supervision introduced in this chapter is key to developing professional confidence and competence. Even if these conversations only happen every few weeks, they provide an important opportunity for practitioners and managers – in individual or group supervision sessions – to think together, share ideas and experiences, and encourage the capacity for analysis. Asking open questions of the supervisee about an individual case and encouraging them to ask these questions of themselves (and each other) in their day-to-day practice will help them to develop their own analytical and critical thinking skills.

A 'do's and don'ts' list for supervision can be found in Exercise 6 at www.rip.org.uk/analysis

Strategies for reflective supervision

> In situations that are complex, sometimes frightening or hostile, and frequently emotionally fraught, a practitioner may feel overwhelmed or psychologically under attack. Without a safe and reliable space in which to think about and process the feelings evoked, there is a serious risk that practitioners will simply 'switch off'.
> (Literature review – Turney, 2009)

This section looks at effective frameworks for supervision that can help to support practitioners to use analysis and critical thinking skills in their assessments. The Development Group found the following diagram from Tony Morrison's work a useful way for team managers to conceptualise supervision of assessments. Although the model was included as part of the CWDC guidance for supporting NQSWs, the group felt it had more general application and could inform the use of the Anchor principles within supervision.


SUPERVISING ASSESSMENT WORK
Clarifying focus of assessment
Reflect on worker's assumptions
Gather information Coordinate agencies
Explore dynamics
Critical analysis Create/test hypothesis
Explain decision/ plans

(Children's Workforce Development Council, 2009)

However, as part of this project, we also looked at whether we could develop the Anchor principles in a similar way to support the supervision of assessments:

What is the assessment for?

- Encourage the supervisee to look at why the assessment is being done.
- Bring together initial ideas about what the practitioner hopes to achieve with the assessment.
- Identify any support the practitioner might need, from you or any other agencies.

What is the story?

- Discuss the information the practitioner may need to collect to meet the purpose of the assessment.
- Talk through the influence that their beliefs and values might have on the way they approach the case.
- Identify other possible sources of information (including from other agencies).
- Ensure that the views of the child and family are being collected.

What does the story mean?

- How does the practitioner think the story will impact on the individual child and family?
- Work with the supervisee to identify possible hypotheses about what might be going on.
- Encourage them to think about what they don't know yet, and how they might go about finding this out.
- Identify any background knowledge, including previous experience or research evidence, which might provide a basis for this case.

What needs to happen?

- Support the supervisee to link their plan back to the original assessment.
- Explore how the practitioner can use the hypotheses they have developed to make an evidence-informed decision about how to proceed.
- Examine any new information that may have emerged, and how this might impact on the needs of the child and family.

How will we know we are making progress?

- Encourage the supervisee to develop a range of potential outcomes for the individual child and family.
- Ensure that these outcomes are SMART and are developed in collaboration with the family. (The SMART standard is discussed in chapter 5 – 'What does a good assessment look like?')
- Support the practitioner in ongoing measurement of progress against these outcomes. (Adapted from Children's Workforce Development Council, 2009)

Social workers are not going to get formal supervision on every case at every meeting, so it is important that the supervision helps them develop the habit of thinking critically and analytically. Using the Anchor principles in supervision will help social workers to be more familiar with them as a framework, and use them in their everyday practice. At the same time, supervisors should also be able to encourage practitioners to think about more creative solutions, rather than simply focusing on what the agency usually offers. One approach could be for managers to use the speed analysis task (see **Exercise 4**) to prioritise which cases are most important to discuss in supervision. Another approach would be to ask the social worker about which cases they are worried about and which ones they are not worried about, *and the reasons why they are worried or unconcerned.* Often the reasons behind them not being concerned about a particular case are as important as their key concerns in supporting their practice effectively.

Some supervisors adopt an 'open door' policy, which can lead to more informal and ad hoc, but nonetheless supportive, forms of supervision. The danger of informal supervision, however, is that it becomes the *only* form of supervision and, as such, could mean that support is infrequent, brief and available only to those who ask for it. This could result in social workers being unsure of when supervision and consultation is immediately necessary, and when a situation can be safely 'held' until the next formal meeting. On the other hand, it can mean social workers are able to access direct support around a particular case or issue, and the potential for learning from these informal meetings should not be ignored. These conversations also allow for the sharing of practice wisdom and previous experiences between staff. So although it should always be supported by more formal supervision sessions to ensure that all staff are supported equally, an informal approach can still provide key opportunities for discussion and learning about assessment and, as such, should be valued.

Similarly, supervision does not necessarily have to always consist of a one-to-one meeting between the supervisor and supervisee. Peer supervision, or group sessions, can also be used to share learning and develop effective assessment practice, particularly in terms of encouraging each other to use the Anchor principles in their day-to-day work. Again, these do not replace more formal supervision

structures, but can be used to disseminate learning within a team. This approach to learning is discussed in more detail in the final chapter around organisational culture.

A list of 'reflective questions' for supervision can be found in Exercise 7 at www.rip.org.uk/analysis

Tips from the Development Group: Supervision – how small changes can make a big difference

The aim of Reading's project was to see if change is possible in a team where people are so busy there is little time for thinking and reflections. Examples of assessment that workers were pleased with were gathered, and the team manager increased the focus on analysis by asking questions such as:

- Why do you think this is a good assessment?
- What helped in this supervision session?
- What tools do you find useful?

The team manager also held discussions with other supervisors about what materials and approaches they had found useful and organised a team workshop focusing on how to conduct a core assessment. The project emphasised the importance of not being overwhelmed by the enormity of the task of improving assessments, and that small, achievable steps can make a significant difference. The team as a whole also gained a better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses in assessment, while the team manager developed greater knowledge about how to effectively convey the components of a good assessment to different practitioners.

6.

Organisational culture

Organisational context can have a significant bearing on the ability of individuals or groups of practitioners to think critically, analytically and reflectively – and to apply the learning that derives from reflection. (Literature review – Turney, 2009)

In this chapter, we move away from the details of practice and supervision to consider the wider context within which both take place. This Change Project started from the position that practice is always embedded in a broader system – a team perhaps, in the first place, and beyond that an agency or larger organisation. As we have seen, that organisation will have internal policies, procedures and systems that govern the way practitioners and others work. And the organisation will itself be part of a wider network of agencies and institutions, policies, frameworks, law and guidance that operate at a local and national level and which inform and structure practice. So, while we can think about how to improve critical and analytical thinking at an individual level, we are also very aware that this 'bigger picture' needs to be kept in view. Put at its simplest, however good an individual practitioner is, they are always part of (and accountable to) a larger organisation – and the nature and quality of that organisation matters.

We will consider in turn:

> the organisational landscape

> how systems and structures impact on practice

> how practitioners and teams can help create a learning organisation

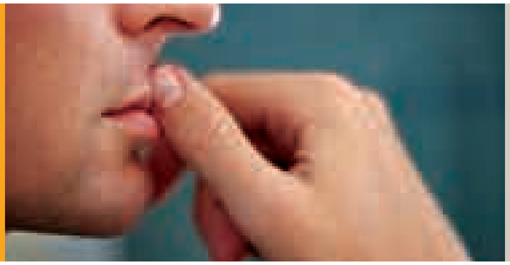
> how organisations can promote learning among their staff.

The organisational landscape

We have noted that organisations do not exist in a vacuum, and the literature review draws attention to the complexity of the current context for practice. This is not the place to catalogue all the policy initiatives and changes to the ways in which services are organised and delivered that have emerged in recent years. However, it is worth noting that the level and speed of change has been unprecedented and that this impacts on organisations at every level. Add in continuing financial pressures and uncertainties, and the impending but as yet unknown impact on social work education, training and practice of the current major reviews (in particular the continuing work of the Social Work Reform Board and the Munro Review mentioned earlier) and you are left with a picture of a profession in flux. All in all, these conditions may not be conducive to the kind of calm, measured and reflective thinking we have been discussing in this resource.

Another feature of the organisational landscape that affects agency policy and practice is the rise of what has been called 'audit culture' and an approach to management that is based on the achievement of a variety of performance indicators. These indicators or targets, often externally set, can lead to an emphasis on procedure rather than outcome. For example, clear and quite inflexible timeframes are set for the completion of initial and core assessments, so, in order to meet the targets around timing, it may become an organisational priority to ensure that the relevant forms are completed.

The pressure to meet – and be seen to meet – these deadlines will be reflected all the way through the system. Social workers are aware of the expectations and may feel they need to cut corners to achieve them; managers need to show that their staff are working to the expected targets, so may on occasion push them to conclude an assessment prematurely in order to meet the required timeframe; and senior managers need to be able to demonstrate their agency's compliance with the targets so need to ensure that mangers are getting the required 'through-put' to achieve this. Overall then, an organisational culture may develop where pressure to meet targets drives practice and it does not feel possible to preserve the time and 'thinking space' needed for complex assessment. And openness to innovative ideas and creative approaches may be lost in an environment where 'getting the job done' takes precedence over the capacity to think and learn.



Systems and structures

> …complex systems operate in complex ways and … increasing formalisation and procedural management may not promote better practice. Indeed, they may actually make it harder for individual practitioners to work safely and to exercise professional judgement.
> (Literature review – Turney, 2009)

In the previous chapter, we looked at the role supervision could play in developing and supporting effective thinking in assessment. Now, we are going on to consider how systems and structures impact on practice. All organisations have systems and procedures for getting things done. Some of these will be explicit, formal and codified, while others may be tacit and/or informal, such as, 'We just do things this way'. Either way, it is clear that complex organisations are going to need a range of ways of managing the complex activities they undertake.

One benefit of a system may be that it is clear what should be done, when and by whom; on the downside, though, the tendency towards increasing systematisation – for example, through the introduction of electronic templates for recording – may also remove some room for manoeuvre for practitioners and their managers. The use of structured formats can clarify the kinds of information that needs to be recorded but may also promote what could be called 'byte-sized' approaches to information management. This results in compartmentalised information gathering that is unlikely to support the idea of a coherent 'story'.

While systems can help with the more routine elements of a particular task, they are less able to support the more complex tasks of analysing and synthesising information that are so key to social work practice – indeed, they can sometimes be counter-productive. Social work assessment is a complex process and needs to be guided by a sense of purpose rather than a tick-list, however comprehensive that tick-list may be. However good the system or checklist, it needs to be there to *support* rather than bypass thinking. Further, the effects of big complex systems are not always predictable. Problems may therefore be as much about what happens when systems fail as an individual's failures in practice.

Although practitioners may feel their professionalism is compromised by some overly rigid organisational structures and templates, there are strategies that can be put in place to counteract this, while still working within an electronic or computerised system. The more creative approach to thinking that has been promoted through this resource is one way to do this. It is important to *think* before starting to write, and the Anchor principles go a long way to promoting this. It should also be remembered that templates in systems are only templates, and so should not dictate what you write. Similarly, checklists should be used to ensure you haven't missed anything once you've done the thinking, rather than as a starting point for thinking. Supervision should be absolutely key in promoting this.

Tips from the Development Group: Adapting electronic recording templates to support analysis

Cumbria developed a project to explore how their electronic templates for recording might be adapted to support analytical assessments. The starting point was that the templates were being used mechanistically as a tick box exercise and so were not producing useful analytical assessments. Work was undertaken to encourage workers to think first and then to use the template to record their analysis. There were two aspects to the project:

- compiling of examples of analytical assessments, recorded on standard templates, into a handbook for use by practitioners
- making recommendations to IT providers about changes needed to existing electronic templates to increase their potential as an analytical tool.

Key learning points arising from the project included:

- producing a model of 'good' assessments is difficult and the process of producing 'good' assessments is ongoing
- developing ideas about 'good' assessment needs ongoing checking with practitioners at all levels, and – very importantly – with families.

Creating learning organisations – how practitioners and teams can make a difference

Analytical and critical thinking makes practical and emotional demands on practitioners and also on managers/supervisors. We have considered the effect that time constraints, driven by externally set performance indicators or management systems, can have on organisational culture. And while the emphasis of this Change Project is on the critical importance of effective thinking, we also note that it can be difficult for individuals (practitioners or managers) to be 'going against the organisational flow' or to be out of step with team culture, if these are not supportive of this kind of critical and analytical approach. On a more positive note, however, any change to the team or organisational culture that promotes analysis and critical thinking is likely to have a significant impact on a number of professionals.

Using existing structures to foster change: the team meeting

Changing organisational culture is not a trivial task and, for the individual practitioner or manager already working to their limits, it may well feel overwhelming. However, there are ways to start a process of change that are not too daunting. Experience within the Development Group suggests that the introduction of what may feel like quite small changes can impact on practice in beneficial ways. One way of doing this might be to make use of existing structures – for example, team meetings – and adapt them a little at a time.

Using the team meeting example: it would be possible to use Exercises 8 and 9 to support team members to create a safe and non-blaming space within which they can share assessments, explore the process of analysis and develop their critical thinking skills. These exercises can be downloaded at www.rip.org.uk/analysis

Members of the Development Group who piloted approaches of this kind in their own team found them particularly useful in developing professional confidence, challenging assumptions and improving decision-making.

If discussion of this sort becomes an established part of a team culture, then as confidence and trust develop within the team there will be scope to move on to using examples that are 'owned' by individuals within the team. From there, the discussion starts to operate as a resource for practice, so individuals can be encouraged to bring troubling or challenging cases to the group for 'peer consultation' and advice. Of course, group supervision or consultation is not a new idea but it can be used to good effect to develop analytical thinking and practice. Research from Nixon and Murr (2006) has emphasised the importance of this approach, as it helps to create a non-threatening environment for practitioners to share their experiences and learn from each other. As mentioned earlier, practitioners bring their own values and beliefs to their practice, so using peer-learning methods may also help to identify new ways of approaching individual cases. It may also usefully be extended to involve others outside the immediate team, and agencies will find their own ways of developing such forums to meet local needs. This kind of approach can be mirrored and/or reinforced by the use of a questioning, reflective approach to supervision as outlined earlier.

Learning from the Development Group local projects

The individual local projects set up by members of the Development Group, whose learning we have drawn on throughout this resource, provide examples of different strategies that can contribute to organisational change. All began as small local projects designed to tackle one issue that a particular team was facing. It was emphasised in the Development Group that projects should not be too complex, so as not to make them unworkable. Although some members of the Development Group who led these projects were initially unsure of their value (because the projects were not 'academic research'), it soon became clear in practice that those who participated generated a lot of learning about small ways in which they could substantially improve assessment.

Most of the individual projects that our Development Group carried out in their individual agencies were linked, in some way, to issues around organisational culture. Below, we have categorised their findings into five key practical approaches to promoting analysis within an organisation and developing a culture in which learning is taken seriously and actively encouraged.

1 Management 'buy-in'

Secure agreement for your project from a senior manager, such as the Assistant Director.

2 Building on good practice

Assess where practitioners in the team are at now, and how to build on their existing strengths.

Gather examples of assessments that can be used as a basis for discussion about what makes a good assessment.

Identify elements that contribute to the quality of the assessment.

Build library of examples that demonstrate how components of good practice can be included.

Begin collection of assessment tools that team members used and found helpful.

Schedule practice meetings.

Critique cases together through group or peer supervision.

3 Supervision culture

Inform staff that emphasis in supervision will be on it being an interactive process. Focus on analysis in supervision by asking questions that encourage practitioners to think about how they approach an individual case.

Discuss with other supervisors what materials and approaches they have found useful to promote analysis and critical thinking.

4 Skills development

Organise a team workshop around how to conduct a good assessment – a workshop that doesn't assume practitioners necessarily feel competent or confident in relation to analysis, as this may not be the case.

Build a shared understanding of the components of a good assessment and convey this to the team.

Interview social workers to gather their thoughts about what makes a particular assessment a good assessment and what helped them to achieve it.

Identify areas for development (perhaps by comparing issues and seeing if the team manager identifies any as crucial that the social worker has not identified).

Know where your team is at!

Learn from each other.

5 Practical measures

Re-arrange accommodation so staff have a quiet space for reflection.

Analysis is everybody's business – securing senior management support

One thing that became clear within the Development Group was how key it was that projects had the support of senior managers who were prepared not only to offer staff time, support and resources to conduct these small experiments, but also to disseminate the learning. Nutley et al's (2009) organisational excellence model emphasises the importance of having support from higher levels of the organisation to be able to improve. Without encouragement and permission from senior managers to bring in reflective supervision procedures or look at tailoring assessments to the individual child and family rather than simply following a series of tick-boxes, then staff on the front line will face an uphill struggle in trying to improve assessments substantially.

As we have indicated, organisational culture has a significant impact on the way social work is practised and managed and on the capacity of individuals to think and learn. So we will now look at the notion of the learning organisation and consider how this can be used to promote an evidence-informed approach to practice that can support the development of effective analytical assessments.

Creating learning organisations – the role of organisations in enabling and developing learning

Evidence-informed practice depends, among other things, on staff within the organisation having access to (and being able to make use of) good research evidence. The pervasive nature of organisational culture within social work means it has the potential to make a substantial positive effect on nurturing a desire for learning and reflection among staff. Practitioners should not simply be passive recipients of research – they should be encouraged and supported to shape new knowledge and apply it directly to their own individual practice. Although this requires more effort and commitment on the part of the organisation, as it cannot simply rely on the efforts of individual staff to promote learning, evidence around research utilisation suggests this is the most effective way of encouraging staff to adopt an evidence-informed approach to their practice.

Using evidence-informed approaches to improve the quality of assessments as highlighted within this resource will only be successful if they are assimilated into the everyday practice of an organisation – otherwise, analytical assessments will be confined to a small number of practitioners. It is up to the senior managers to promote evidence-informed practice and critical reflection at their level so that this is valued, particularly through their commissioning work, which is described in more detail in the accompanying briefing for strategic leads. Similarly, supervisors need to adopt an evidence-informed approach to ensure they are asking challenging questions that enable their supervisees to reflect on their practice in a constructive way.

Furthermore, Nutley et al (2009) have emphasised the importance of organisations taking forward evidence-informed practice more actively by conducting their own local experimentation and evaluation. The individual projects that the Development Group carried out are an example of this approach:

> Within the organisational excellence model, the key to research-informed practice lies with service delivery organisations: their leadership, management, organisational structure and culture. Organisations are not merely channels for getting externally generated research findings to impact on practice, they are also the locus for local experimentation, evaluation and practice development based on research. This is facilitated through organisations working in partnership with universities or other organisations.

This suggests an ideal where organisations are willing to experiment to find out which services will work best for them locally. These experiments do not need to be substantial, particularly at first. The Development Group found that even small projects conducted within individual teams had a significant effect on that team's culture and appetite for learning. Staff need to be given the opportunity and the space to be able to do this without being swamped by bureaucracy. Managers also need to be able to cultivate a positive culture of learning from experience, and using localised experimentation to investigate how assessments could be improved.

Induction

A key way of developing evidence-informed assessment within organisations is to embed it into existing induction procedures. As part of this we have developed a suite of materials designed to be used in induction around analysis and critical thinking in assessment – these are all available to download from the **research in practice** website **www.rip.org.uk/analysis**. Similarly, there are a number of ways in which organisations can promote evidence-informed practice, such as the provision of a library or journal subscriptions, or developing an away-day around how to integrate evidence-informed approaches into practice. All of this can easily be turned towards the topic of assessment.

Tips from the Development Group: Taking practical steps to support thinking in an organisation

TACT's project aimed to formalise a high quality of assessment into the structures and systems that sit alongside the routine checks. Practical steps taken included:

- circulating a piece of published research directly relevant to the work of the agency with a clear expectation that practitioners would familiarise themselves with it
- regular meetings to discuss practice issues
- group discussion of assessments with clear timetabling for circulation prior to meetings, development within the team of a practice tool in relation to assessment of emotional competence, and a change in emphasis in supervision away from PIs and towards analysis
- reorganisation of office space to provide a dedicated quiet room
- widespread use of the Anchor principles.

As a result, TACT has now developed an effective 'marriage' of timely processes and effective reflection and critical thinking.

PILOT RESOURCES

7.
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PILOT RESOURCES

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This core publication is part of a series of materials that make up the *Analysis and Critical Thinking in Assessment* pilot resources. These resources will all be published at **www.rip.org.uk/analysis** from February 2011 for Partner agencies to download. Also, we will be inviting a second group of agencies to pilot these materials in their own organisations, and use the learning from these pilots to feed into the final resource. Between March and July 2011, we will be running two parallel pilots:

The Pilot Group

The formal pilot group will meet three times between March and July 2011, at venues across the country. Each meeting will examine one of the three key areas of this project:

> What makes a good assessment?

> Supervision

> Organisational systems and structures

Participants will be expected to pilot the materials within their teams in between meetings, and then provide feedback to the rest of the group. The facilitators will provide support and guidance to organisations both as part of the face-to-face meetings, and via telephone in between meetings.

Virtual pilot

The virtual pilot offers a more flexible approach to piloting, but will still require participants to examine the materials in depth and feed back their responses. Those involved in the virtual group may wish to focus on a particular element of the pilot resources (for example supervision).

Where can I find further information?

If you would like to know more about this Change Project before applying contact Sarah Moore for further information:
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