

# **Social Work Assessment and Intervention**

**Second Edition**

**Steven Walker and Chris Beckett**



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# Introduction

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The key purpose of social work has been defined as:

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

International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Workers 2001, in: BASW, 2002

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

*The Human Rights Act* (UN, 1998) symbolises the convergence in socio-political practice emanating from closer dialogue between nation states that slowly developed in the past century. It came into force in 2000 and incorporates into

English law most of the provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights. The Act applies to all authorities undertaking functions of a public nature, including all care providers in the public sector. *The Human Rights Act* supports the protection and improvement of the health and welfare of children and families throughout the United Kingdom. The implications for contemporary social work practice have yet to be fully tested but practitioners need to become more familiar with the potential conflicts and dilemmas that may arise as the Act is used to challenge current practices. For example, Article 3 concerns freedom from torture and inhuman or degrading treatment. Children and young people who have been subjected to restraint, seclusion, or detention as a result of alarming behaviour could use this part of the Act to raise complaints against your practice in residential or mental health contexts.

Article 5 concerns the right to liberty, and together with Article 6 concerning the right to a fair hearing, are important to adults as well as some children and young people detained under a section of the *Mental Health Act*, the *Children Act*, or within the youth justice system. Social workers involved in such work must ensure that detention is based on sound opinion, in accordance with clearly laid out legal procedure accessible to the individual, and only lasts for as long as the mental health problem persists. In the context of youth justice work, particular attention needs to be paid to the quality and tone of pre-sentence reports that can be stigmatising. The formulaic structure of pre-sentence reports might not enable an assessing social worker working under deadline pressure, to provide an accurate picture of a young person.

Article 8 guarantees the right to privacy and family life. Refugees and asylum seeking families can become entangled in complex legal procedures relating to citizenship and entitlement. This provision can be invoked when UK authorities are considering whether a person should be deported or remain in this country. Compassionate grounds can be used for children affected by the proposed deportation of a parent

in cases where a parent is not admitted. Social workers attuned to the attachment relationships of small children can use this knowledge to support Article 8 proceedings. In such circumstances the maintenance of the family unit is paramount.

Social workers involved in care proceedings or adoption work will have to consider very carefully whether such plans are in the best interests of the child but also are consistent with the child's rights under the Convention. For example, the Convention emphasises that care orders should be a temporary measure and that children should be reunited with their family as soon as possible, where appropriate. In the case of a parent with a mental health problem detained in a psychiatric hospital, the Convention could be employed by their children to facilitate regular visits if these have been denied.

Article 10 concerns basic rights to freedom of expression and in the context of adult services, is a crucial safeguard to ensuring that practitioners work actively to enable vulnerable adults to express their opinions about service provision. Social workers have an opportunity within this specific provision to articulate and put into practice their value principles of partnership and service user empowerment.

Article 14 states that all children have an equal claim to the rights set out in the Convention 'irrespective of the child's or their parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.' This provision could be used to argue for equality of service provision and non-prejudicial assessment and intervention. Social workers need to ensure they are employing anti-racist and non-discriminatory practice and to be able to practically evidence how they are doing it.

Social work assessment and intervention are core skills for qualified social workers and fundamental learning requirements for trainee/student social workers. They have relevance to the *Human Rights Act* and featured in recent guidance on practice competencies and the latest occupational standards guidance for the Training Organisation for Personal Social Services. This book combines the two practice elements of Assessment and Intervention in an integrated way that is consistent with contemporary practice and the foundational values and skills of classic psycho-social practice.

Assessment is usually separated from intervention in the literature and practice guidance. This book aims to provide social workers with the combined intellectual and practical resources to help improve practice in these crucial areas.

Practitioners know that the two processes cannot be separated from each other. Government guidance and the professional literature have begun to accept that assessment and intervention should be seamless parts of a continuous process. It also expects there to be a therapeutic dimension to this area of social work practice:

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

DoH, 2000

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

Recent SSI inspections have illustrated the need for social workers to rediscover their core skills of assessment and intervention, so that decision making and care planning are based on sound analysis and understanding of the client's unique personality, history and circumstances. Social workers own skills need to be seen as a resource to be used and offered in the subsequent intervention which should be based on client need rather than agency resource limitations and where services should fit around the service user



rather than the reverse (DoH/SSI 2000). This book provides social work staff with an accessible, practice-oriented guide to their work in the developing modernising context of multi-disciplinary team working, joint budget arrangements, inter-agency collaboration and care management. The new graduate training environment, occupational standards, General Social Care Council, SCIE, TOPPS, and post-qualifying training requirements, all demand improvements in practice standards. This book responds to that demand and the needs of social workers to deliver high quality services in the contemporary context of practice.

## National occupational standards

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

### ***Key role 1. Prepare for and work with individuals, families, carers, groups and communities to assess their needs and circumstances:***

- Prepare for social work contact and involvement.
- Work with individuals, families, carers, groups, and communities to help them make informed decisions.
- Assess needs and options to recommend a course of action.

### ***Key role 2. Plan, carry out, review and evaluate social work practice, with individuals, families, carers, groups, communities and other professionals:***

- Respond to crisis situations.
- Interact with individuals, families, carers, groups and communities to achieve change and development and to improve life opportunities.
- Prepare, produce, implement and evaluate plans with individuals, families, carers, groups, communities and professional colleagues.
- Support the development of networks to meet assessed needs and planned outcomes.
- Work with groups to promote individual growth, development and independence.

- Address behaviour which presents a risk to individuals, families, carers, groups and communities.

### ***Key role 3. Support individuals to represent their needs, views and circumstances:***

- To advocate with, and on behalf of, individuals, families, carers, groups and communities.
- To prepare for, and participate in decision making forums.

### ***Key role 4. Manage risk to individuals, families, carers, groups, communities, self and colleagues:***

- Manage risk to individuals, families, carers, groups, communities, self and colleagues.
- Address behaviour which presents a risk to individuals, families, carers, groups, communities, self and others.
- Identify and assess the nature of the risk.
- Balance the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families, carers, groups and communities with associated risk.
- Regularly monitor, re-assess, and manage risk to individuals, families, carers, groups and communities.
- Take immediate action to deal with the behaviour that presents a risk.
- Work with individuals, families, carers, groups, communities and others to identify and evaluate situations and circumstances that may trigger the behaviour.
- Work with individuals, families, carers, groups and communities on strategies and support that could positively change the behaviour.

### ***Key role 5. Manage and be accountable, with supervision and support, for your own social work practice within your organisation:***

- Manage and be accountable for your own work.
- Contribute to the management of resources and services.
- Manage, present and share records and reports.
- Work within multi-disciplinary and multi-organisational teams, networks and systems.

**Key role 6. Demonstrate professional competence in social work practice:**

- Research, analyse, evaluate, and use current knowledge of best social work practice.
- Work within agreed standards of social work practice and ensure your own professional development.
- Manage complex ethical issues, dilemmas and conflicts.
- Contribute to the promotion of best social work practice.

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

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

This all sounds straightforward enough until you start to consider the complexities presented by social work clients and the multitude of personal, environmental, and relationship problems they bring to your notice. You might also wonder whether you have the time and other resources to work in the way prescribed above.

Social workers are always having to defend their organisation's lack of ability to provide what service users define as their needs. It is not uncommon to then face the fury of people who have gone through with what feels like an inquisitorial assessment process that ends up with very little in return for them. The likelihood of these tensions arising was acknowledged over 20 years ago in the first major inquiry into the role and tasks of social workers (NISW, 1982). The report described social work as comprising two strands of activity – counselling and social care planning.

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

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

has been defined as an ongoing process, in which the client participates, the purpose of which is to understand people in relation to their environment. It is the basis for planning what needs to be done to maintain, improve or bring about change in the person, the environment or both (Coulshed and Orme, 1998). It therefore cannot be separated from intervention because of the reflexive interactive nature of the client/worker encounter.

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

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

This is linked to central government decisions about how to apportion the local government and health budget and the variety of formulae used to rationalise political decisions. Therefore, it is very difficult in practice to undertake the task of assessment and intervention without encountering a degree of confusion, uncertainty and some dilemmas. Our aim is to bring clarity where we can, to explain where some confusion can be enlightening, but more than anything we

hope this book will be a genuine resource for you to use in the complex, challenging and ultimately rewarding world of social work.

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

## Introduction to second edition

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of Part Two have been written by Chris Beckett: all the other chapters are by Steven Walker

This second edition has been extensively revised, updated and restructured in the context of changes in social work policy and practice since the introduction to the first edition was written in 2003. This edition takes account of the practice implications embedded within, among others, the *Social Work Taskforce Report* (DCSF, 2009) *Putting People First* (DoH, 2008) *Building Brighter Futures* (CWDC, 2008) and *Raising Standards* (GSCC, 2009). In 1997 hopes were high that a government that put social justice at the centre of its policy would be able to have an impact on inequalities in modern Britain. By 2010 several authoritative reports illustrated the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of life in modern Britain (Babb, 2005; Hills et al., 2007; DoH, 2008). They showed that Britain was an increasingly divided nation where the richest 10 per cent of the population are more than 100 times as wealthy as the poorest 10 per cent of society – one of the highest levels of inequality in any modern industrialised country. They also showed that the poorest people in society die sooner and become ill younger than the richest and that social mobility was stagnant with evidence that family wealth, private education and privileged access to University remained the key determinants of career success and well-paid employment.

The ending of child poverty by 2020 was official government policy until it became

apparent that this was not going to be met, and even modest reductions in child poverty were apparently hard to achieve. Social workers are among those professionals most acutely aware of how social circumstances affect a person's potential and are right to condemn the superficial efforts by all governments to tackle child poverty and other inequalities. They know that much of their work is concerned with the effects of poverty, inequality and social exclusion on individuals and families struggling to cope in a harsh and unforgiving economic system where individual greed, corporate profit, corruption and ruthless individualism are valued above mutuality, community, care for others and equality.

The latest in a long line of government reports into the future of social work produced by the Social Work Taskforce (DCSF, 2009) listed the following recommendations to guide the future development of the profession:

- Better training – with employers, educators and the profession all taking their full share.
- Responsibility for investing in the next generation and in enabling social workers already in practice to develop their skills continuously.
- Improved working conditions – with employers signing up to new standards for the support and supervision of their frontline workforce that make good practice possible.
- Stronger leadership and independence – with the profession taking more control over its own standards, how it is understood and valued by the public, and the contribution it makes to changes in policy and practice.
- A reliable supply of confident, high quality, adaptable professionals into the workforce, where they can build long-term careers on the frontline.
- Greater understanding among the general public, service users, other professionals and the media of the role and purpose of social work, the demands of the job and the contribution social workers make.
- More use of research and continuing professional development to inform frontline practice.

The problem with this list of ideas is that it came without an action plan, timescale of implementation or identified funding linked to demonstrable change. Social workers will rightly feel that this is so much more rhetoric, while they

observe deep cuts in public services and welfare provision which are bound to create more need within neglected and deprived communities. At the time of writing in 2010 a new Government is embarking upon a programme of cuts and a deep-rooted ideological aversion to the public sector and the principles of the welfare state which will devastate communities and tear at the very fabric of society – testing social workers to the very limit of their endurance and resilience.

## England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

Within Britain there is much diversity in the legislative and governmental guidance for social work. This text generally is based on English law for reasons of space and the avoidance of confusion. The Scottish system operates under its own legal system and system of guidance, while in Northern Ireland the Health and Social Services boards make up a very different organisational context. The devolved national assemblies in Scotland and Wales further add to this diversity. However the book contents have been adapted and designed to provide significant learning opportunities for practitioners in all the constituent countries of the United Kingdom who will find much of value here.

## Using this book

The book is designed as a practical manual for use by busy practitioners, students, trainers and professional education providers requiring evidence-based knowledge and guidance to enable staff to engage with people in a supportive context. The **exposition** in the main body of the text will draw on a variety of sources, including government policy and best practice guidance, social, educational and health care theory and research findings. This will provide you with relevant information and knowledge to create the framework within which you can absorb, understand and then practically apply changes in your working context.

The **activities** you will be asked to complete are designed to help individuals, multi-disciplinary groups and teams recognise and understand aspects of practice which you might not previously have known about or considered, and will help to develop self-awareness by inviting

you to relate your experience to the issues being explored. The temptation is to skip the activities – try not to because they can be valuable in ways that you might not anticipated at first sight. They are designed to give you the opportunity to bring your own experiences into the learning process, but also your responses will build up into a resource which can be drawn on in current practice contexts and future personal, professional and team development.

With this in mind, it is useful to keep a separate booklet in which to write your individual responses. Think of this as a form of **learning journal**, and record things such as experiences at work which seem to you to relate to specific activities you have completed from the workbook. This can provide useful practice material for future reference, revision, self-study on your own, in supervision, during consultation or in teambuilding and inter-agency training.

## Terminology

The terminology in this book has been kept accessible as possible within the confines of the editorial guidelines and the intended audience. It is necessary however to explain how certain terms have been used in order to at least offer the reader some context to understand their use. We use the terms child protection and safeguarding children and young people synonymously throughout the text to reflect the current transitional phase of policy guidance and literature on this subject. Culture is used in places where it is specifically defined but elsewhere it is used in the sense of the organisation of experience shared by members of a community including their standards for perceiving, predicting, judging and acting.

Black is used in the contemporary accepted sense of meaning that group of people who by virtue of their non-white skin colour are treated in a discriminatory way and who experience racism at the personal and institutional level every day of their lives. 'Race' as a term is declining in use due to its origins in meaningless anthropological classifications by early imperialists seeking to legitimise their exploitation of indigenous land and wealth. It is a social construction but one which is still found in statutes, policy material and in common parlance.

Ethnicity is subject to much definitional debate in the literature but for clarity and brevity the term is used throughout this text to mean the orientation it provides to individuals by delineating norms, values, interactional modalities, rituals, meanings and collective events. Family is also a term around which there is some debate as it is both a descriptor and a socially prescribed term loaded with symbolism. In this book the term family is used to embrace the widest ethnic and cultural interpretation that includes same sex partnerships, single parent, step family, kinship groups, heterosexual partnerships and marriage, extended family groupings and friendship groups or community living arrangements.

## About the authors

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## Praise for the First Edition

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'A thoughtful and ethically realistic book which addresses the principles and dilemmas of contemporary social work practice . . . it draws on a wide-ranging examples of practice across all the mainstream client groups . . . an engaging and stimulating book . . . reading this book has challenged my assumptions about the nature of assessment and intervention in social work practice; it has encouraged me to think critically, analytically and ethically about them and their intertwined relationships . . . it will be an important resource.' *Health and Social Care in the Community*

'An extremely informative book on which to build and develop high standards of practice and, together with the extensive further reading list, it provides the reader with a useful range of learning material.' *Practice*

'An accessible and thought-provoking guide, with succinct summaries of the main points and clear advice on common-dilemmas faced by social care professionals.' *Adoption and Fostering*

'An in-depth examination of contemporary assessment practice and contemporary models of intervention . . . an impressive resource-cum-guide.' *Care & Health*

'A vast amount of information is covered . . . The authors have also included activities and case scenarios . . . This interactive approach, coupled with a comprehensive list of further reading, makes it particularly useful.' *Community Care*

'I would recommend this book.' *Rostrum*