

The Assessment Relationship: Interactions Between Social Workers and Parents in Child Protection Assessments

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Summary

This paper is concerned with a relatively unresearched area of child protection practice: the comprehensive assessment. The study comprises qualitative research of social workers conducting these assessments. Sixteen assessments are analysed in detail. It is noted that these assessments, like many other in-depth social work assessments, are mainly based on verbal interactions. Some of the core evidence cited by social workers as forming the basis of their assessment decisions is based on verbal interaction between social workers and parents. Such verbal interactions are viewed as being inextricably intertwined with the social worker-client relationship. A particular aspect of the relationship, the ability to agree a plausible explanation for the family situation, is highlighted as particularly important in determining the outcome of the assessment. The possible implications of these findings for assessment practices are outlined

In recent years in Britain our knowledge of the workings of current child and family social work has been increased by a large number of empirical studies. Insights have been gained into the processes of referral and early assessments in child protection cases, case conferences, the workings of the child protection register and interdisciplinary working (Birchall and Hallett, 1995; Farmer and Owen, 1995; Gibbons *et al.*, 1995; Thoburn *et al.*, 1995; Parton *et al.*, 1997). One area of the child protection process that has received relatively little attention, however, is that of the comprehensive assessment (Gough, 1993). This assessment is usually carried out after initial child protection proceedings, such as investigation and registration, have been completed and is particularly associated with care proceedings. It often forms the basis of a significant decision: whether a child should be removed from home or, if

a child is in care, whether that child should be returned home or placed permanently elsewhere (Department of Health, 1988). This paper reports empirical research into the process of comprehensive assessment.

The comprehensive assessments in the research were all conducted with the use of Department of Health (1988) guidelines as a basis. This set of guidelines, popularly known as the 'Orange Book' has received mixed reviews over the last decade. It has been criticized for its technical rationality, low-level theoretical base, use of 'pop-psychology', manipulation of power relations, moral biases and individualistic approach (McBeath and Webb, 1990-91; Howe, 1992; Cooper, 1993; O'Hagan and Dillenberger, 1995; Otway, 1996). It has been suggested that the Orange Book epitomizes the role of 'social worker as technician' (Otway, 1996, p. 167). However, little is known about how Orange Book assessments are carried out in practice and how the resulting recommendations, with their important implications for children and their families, are reached.

It might be argued that the comprehensive assessment, in common with many other social work assessments, has verbal interaction as its basis. Whilst the Orange Book encourages observations, both of children and of parent and child interactions, and visits to the home, at its core are 166 questions plus sub-questions. Most of these are designed to be asked of parents and parent figures (all parent figures are described as 'parents' for the remainder of this paper). The cases reviewed in this study certainly all relied heavily (although never solely) on verbal interactions in order to conduct the assessment and to reach recommendations.

The link between the verbal nature of much social work and the relationship between social worker and service user has been noted by Howe (1993, 1998). Interest in this relationship was a core subject of the social work literature until the 1970s (Petr, 1988; Coady, 1993) but, when Perlman published a classic textbook on relationships in 1979, she lamented its decline from centre stage. Research in this area has mainly progressed in the field of psychotherapy, with a research rating scale on the 'therapeutic alliance' having been developed in the United States (Gaston, 1990; Horvath and Symonds, 1991). There have, however, been a few papers published on both sides of the Atlantic in recent years discussing the relationship between service user and social worker (for example, Coady, 1993; Petr, 1988; Howe, 1998). In this paper it is proposed that the verbal basis of the comprehensive assessment means that the relationship between assessor and assessed plays an important role in both the process and outcome of the assessment.

Research Methods

The research was undertaken by means of a qualitative case study (Yin, 1984) based on two sites. The first, referred to here as 'Hillside Family Centre', is a specialist family centre which conducts comprehensive assessments with families referred by one urban local authority. Although it is owned and managed by a large voluntary organization, it works only with families referred by the social services department. The second site was a neighbouring social services department (City SSD) where most comprehensive assessments are carried out 'in-house' by social workers who

also carry a large and varied child and family caseload. The sites were chosen as examples of two of the main ways in which assessments are carried out in the UK, that is, by the statutory and voluntary sectors.

Data were collected in three ways: by in-depth interview, through case records, and by observation of informal interactions of social workers in their staff room. In addition, in five of the assessments studied, permission was given by agencies and parents to view assessment sessions that were routinely recorded on videotape. The data centre around sixteen comprehensive assessments that were studied in detail. Interviews and observations took place during the assessments, and commenced, where possible, before it had begun.

The cases mainly involved families whose children had been removed into care and where care proceedings had recently begun. In one case a new-born child was at home but an assessment was required as to whether she should remain there. In another case, the assessment concerned whether a stepfather should return home following his release from serving a prison sentence for an assault on a child. The cases included physical abuse, sexual abuse and neglect and most involved fairly serious allegations. Assessments involved couples, single mothers, single fathers and children. They were usually concentrated on the parents, with children assessed through observation of contact sessions. The majority of the children involved were under four years old. In three cases, older children's opinions were asked and recorded as part of the assessment. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were carried out with the assessing social workers. Where permission was granted, these were taped and fully transcribed. In addition, data were collected from informal interactions between social worker and researcher and between social workers, with the full consent of participants. This latter, observational, data might be expected to provide information on aspects of decision making more informal than those reported in interviews (McKeganey *et al.*, 1988). Case records provided a range of insights due to the varied nature of their contents, written for a number of audiences. Files contained formal court reports, case recording, notes, and contributions from parents. A grounded theory method of analysis was used, structured by the case study design:

[Researchers] enter the field with minds as open as possible, attempting to be aware of their own biases and preconceptions. As the research proceeds, they begin to define concepts, see relationships among concepts, and discover patterns. They continually pit their emerging empirical findings against new data. Data collection and analysis involve . . . continual comparisons within and across cases (Gilgun, 1994, p. 116).

Analysis was aided by the use of computer software designed for qualitative analysis, NUD*IST 4 (Qualitative Solutions and Research Pty Ltd., 1997).

Findings

Core Evidence for Decision Making

An analysis was conducted of the methods of decision making in the comprehensive assessments and of the core evidence cited by social workers in explaining the

decisions they reached (Holland 1999a). Assessments carried out in the two different sectors differed from each other in some methodological aspects. The length of time and depth of questioning was on the whole greater in Hillside Family Centre than in City SSD. Hillside Family Centre staff were also more likely to stress the potential therapeutic elements of an in-depth assessment than were the statutory social workers. However, the key decision-making factors cited by social workers were largely consistent across both City SSD and Hillside Family Centre. In addition, the core evidence for decision-making did not differ according to severity of abuse or different types of abuse. This core evidence may be grouped into three main areas: *parent-related factors (including parenting skills and the relationship between parents)*, the ability of parents to change their behaviour and lifestyle within an acceptable time-scale, and the verbal interactions between the assessing social worker and the parent being assessed. It is the last area which is under consideration in this article. Whilst all the areas were regularly cited as core evidence, it was often the case that the area relating to verbal interactions appeared to be given the highest status. I will argue that this area is inextricably concerned with the assessment relationship; that is, the relationship that develops between social worker and parent during the course of the assessment.

Verbal interactions as evidence

Major areas of evidence in the comprehensive assessments centred around the perceived personalities of the parents and their attitudes to the assessment. These were mainly assessed through verbal interactions within the assessment and were seen to influence the ability of the parent to enter into a constructive working relationship with the assessing social worker. Equally, the ability to form relationships was seen to be an indication of the personality of the parent and ultimately perhaps their ability to care for their children. Parents who could work well within a relationship were seen to share many of the following attributes: they were articulate, plausible, co-operative and motivated. On the other hand, parents who were seen to provide a negative contribution to the assessment relationship were viewed as inarticulate, inconsistent and passive.

In the extract below, a social worker summarizes some of the core evidence to be sought during a comprehensive assessment:

I am looking for commitment and motivation. For her to be able to demonstrate that things are different, that she has some awareness of the issues. That she can step back and say 'Yes', you know. The minimum has to be that she can step back and say, 'Yes, in itself that would be concerning', you know. (Interview with social worker, Hood family assessment)

This worker suggests that, as a minimum requirement, the parent should be able to 'step back' and admit that her type of actions give rise to concern. The attributes of motivation, commitment and awareness of concerns could be seen as existing also outside of the assessment relationship, i.e. as attributes of the parent independent of the relationship with the social worker. However, I would argue that they are also

integral parts of the relationship with the social worker and his or her social work agency. For example, commitment and motivation appear to be judged by the parent's willingness to co-operate with the social work agency, willingness to accept concerns about themselves as laid out by the agency, and willingness to accept the assessment methods. Parents must provide explanations for their behaviour and situation that are plausible and insightful *to the social worker*. Such explanations may be linked with the parent's ability to be articulate. A parent who is articulate, plausible and co-operative possesses the attributes that lead to a successful and positive assessment relationship.

Co-operation and commitment

Parents who are viewed positively are willing to co-operate with what is acknowledged as being a difficult process for them. In the assessment of the Baker family, for example, the willingness of the family to accept all of the demands of the local authority, such as supervised contact sessions and the father living away from the home, was seen as important evidence that the family might be reunited:

The plan is for rehabilitation. He's now in a hostel. They're working hard, sticking by everything, sticking by the contract. They've worked with us, right the way through. I was really sceptical in the beginning—looking at the injury, but they've been really committed, abiding by the rules. (Interview with social worker, Baker family assessment)

By way of contrast, other parents were seen to be uncooperative with the assessment process. Some families withdrew from the assessment completely and others *co-operated only partially*; for example, by attending most contact sessions with their children, but missing assessment interviews. These families were seen as lacking the ability to prioritize the assessment.

She can't stay after contact tomorrow because she's looking after her sister's kids. (laughs) That's more of a priority! I feel like I'm running around after her all the time and I don't think that's how it should be. She doesn't seem to see how important this could be for her. It's as if she'll fit it in if there's nothing more important to do. (Comment from social worker, Cooke family assessment, Field notes, 28/7/97)

They've been attending the sessions with the children only. She said there wasn't much point in coming if the children weren't there, which says something about her attitude to the assessment. (Interview with social worker, Lewis family assessment)

Handelman (1983) suggests that a co-operative service user signals that the bureaucracy's reasoning is valid and that the social worker is confirmed in her viewpoint that she is helping the client. Another explanation is provided by one social worker, who equates commitment to the assessment with commitment to the child:

They've shown commitment to this process and therefore commitment to their child and commitment to the process of challenge and working through things that go on in a comprehensive assessment because certainly the way I work

with my families can be very challenging. And I think if families can stick through that confrontation they'll see the other side of that and show that commitment to want to work, then that would indicate a commitment that they're showing to their child and ultimately to the next piece of work. Because it's quite likely that a lot of the children that would come through a comprehensive assessment would remain on the register or on care orders, so if there remains an entrenched anti-agency stance then how real is what we're doing? (General interview with social worker regarding comprehensive assessments)

This social worker suggests that co-operation with the assessment provides a likely indicator that the family will continue to work with the authorities in the future.

A further element of co-operation is the willingness to accept the concerns expressed by the social services department (the Hillside Family Centre workers almost always concurred with the local social service department's concerns). Parents are expected to accept responsibility for the risk they pose to their child and to accept social work explanations of that risk. A parent who accepts responsibility in this way is often attributed with having insight. By way of contrast, the mother under discussion below was seen to be lacking in insight due to her lack of acceptance of the concerns presented by the local authority.

There was just sort of no real insight or acceptance of the concerns that were presented. Her replies were often characterised by sort of deflection, objection, denial. And now that is fine to a point if you can move people on and say well let's not look at your situation, let's look at another situation but she couldn't even make that leap really, so she had little insight into the concerns, she didn't accept them. (Interview with social worker, Myers family assessment)

This social worker is here describing how he had tried to approach the discussion in another way by asking the woman if she would be concerned about another person who was acting in the way she had done. But, according to him, she was unable to make any connection with her own situation.

Explanation and plausibility

A further element is important here. The parent is required, not simply to co-operate and accept concerns, but to provide an adequate explanation to the social worker of how those concerns arose and to show contrition for past acts. Such interactions can take on a nature that is almost confessional, with the worker rewarded for their sensitive questioning through disclosures made by the parent of feelings of shame or with the parent changing their story to acceptance and explanation of their wrongdoing.

[I was] very much checking how much reflection they could [show] ... how much denial there was and how much acceptance. I asked them to explain it to me, and both of them were very upset, in fact both of them were tearful. I said pick your baby up and pass the baby to Emma in the same way that you did [with your older child]. And he pulled back and said 'I couldn't do that'. It was quite powerful, his reaction, and it showed that there was no way that he could handle this baby in the same way. And I

said 'why couldn't you do it? You did it before' He answered appropriately about, you know this could happen, that could happen, the awareness of risk and danger and his attachment to his child (Interview with social worker, Thompson family assessment)

In this case, the statements of sorrow and explanation as described above were recounted in case recording, case conference reports, the assessment report and in verbal accounts of the decision making. The explanation was seen as plausible because of the couple's youth at the time of the injuries to the first child, and because the injured child's severe disabilities were seen to have made him a more difficult baby to care for. On the other hand, explanations were inadequate if they were made implausible due to inconsistencies and denials.

Ms James has been very vague when discussing her son's injuries. She claimed she first saw his leg injury on the morning of 23rd of June 1997, when she went to get Patrick [baby] up. Ms James claims Mr Collins had gone out that morning and this is how she came to get Patrick up. This, she indicated, was usually Mr Collins' role. Ms James said that she believed his leg injury was serious because it looked very swollen, yet, despite this, there appears to be a significant time lapse between Ms James' first sighting of the leg injury and the time which Patrick was presented at the Accident & Emergency Department. Ms James' account is that she was waiting for Mr Collins to return home. (Extract from Assessment Report, James family assessment)

This account was considered implausible due to its vagueness and the unreasonable explanation for not responding to a serious injury.

The ability or otherwise of the parent to provide a plausible explanation of their behaviour or family situation appears to play a central role in the process and outcome of the assessment. As will be discussed below, a merging of the social worker's own explanation and that of the parent appears to be a necessary precursor for the reunification of families.

To summarize, a parent who is co-operative with the assessment methods and accepts agency concerns possesses the attributes that contribute positively to the assessment relationship. He or she is also someone who provides a plausible explanation for the concerns and who is able to demonstrate contrition where appropriate. A further element which may be seen to follow on from the above is that of parental articulacy.

Articulacy

It's still looking fairly optimistic. He is able to describe the boys and I can see them there, he describes them well. He's quite articulate. (Interview with social worker, Cross family assessment)

He demonstrates insight into the child's needs. He can put himself into the child's position. I think that's a prerequisite, to be able to empathise. For many of the parents we work with that's a problem. His values and attitudes I identify with, they seem appropriate. He doesn't say unrealistic or dubious things about his parenting. (Interview with social worker, Moore family assessment)

Whilst there is no suggestion that the decisions to return the children to Mr Cross and Mr Moore in these cases were related to their articulacy alone, there is the possibility that a parent who is articulate will be better able to perform well in an assessment that is strongly based on verbal statements. This is perhaps seen even more clearly with parents who are less articulate. Many of the other relationship attributes listed above, such as co-operation, motivation and the ability to explain in a plausible manner, might be more easily discerned in an articulate parent. It is possible to distinguish a few assessments (in this study, about a quarter) where the parents' lack of ability to express themselves well became a key theme in the assessment process. An over-riding theme to emerge in these cases was one of passivity.

The passive parent

The passive parent in these assessments was always a woman. It is possible that men who were not able to respond articulately to the assessment process responded in a different way, for example by not attending sessions or by being aggressive. The passive parent was seen as co-operative, but only superficially so and gave short answers to questions, such as, 'Yes', 'No', 'I don't know'. As discussed above, the assessment is both verbal and intensive and one of the social worker's key aims is to elicit detailed, 'confessional'-style statements from the parent. If the parent does not provide verbal responses, then the social worker is disarmed and frustrated. A parent who is passive and inarticulate is seen as lacking insight. Also, she is not providing the expected emotional response to the removal of her child from her care. The social worker cannot identify with her or find any point of connection. Unlike with some of the parents discussed above, the social worker cannot perceive any shared values on which to base their discussions. Ms James was one of the 'passive' parents:

Ms James presents as a passive young woman, expressing little change in her emotions. Engaging with her has been difficult, not only due to her missed appointments, but her personality is such that she does not initiate and maintain conversation. However, once given the attention, she can appear co-operative, she holds no strong views or opinions on matters relating to her life circumstances. Factors of her background, her motivations, the concerns she has, or her plans for the future are not known. (Extract from assessment report, James family assessment)

The two social workers assessing Ms James expressed their frustration at their inability to elicit any information which might be seen to form a plausible explanation for why Ms James had silently witnessed her partner severely injuring her baby over a period of time. In the case of Ms Cooke, a mother of four and accused of neglect, again she was unable to provide a plausible explanation for her situation. Her social worker expressed his frustration at being unable to induce an 'appropriate' emotional response from her.

I find it very difficult that she's not angry. When people are angry I find it easier, well not easier, but there's something to hold on to. I find her very passive, that's difficult. (Interview with social worker, Cooke family assessment)

The Impact of the Social Worker

The argument above is mainly concerned with social workers' understandings of parents' contributions to the assessment relationship. An analysis was also carried out of social workers' understandings of their own contribution to that relationship. There was an awareness of the difficulties involved, including issues of power differential on grounds of class, 'race', gender and statutory powers. However, whilst social workers were able to *theorize* that they themselves could have an impact on the quality of the relationship with parents, most identified compensatory tactics they used to minimize the impact of *self in practice*. The two examples below are drawn from social workers' discussion of these issues.

I am very much aware that I am a mixed race man. She is a white woman. I think we have some common ground in the fact that we both have small children and I can disclose things about my children and so on... I think in a sense the issues of class relate to the fact that I am employed, in full-time employment and she isn't, so I mean there is an imbalance there. I mean, I was brought up on a council estate and she is from a council estate and I am familiar with the situation that exists with single parents who have large families... I like to think that I have used different approaches with her that she still feels able to talk to me. (Interview with social worker, Cooke family assessment)

Here, the social worker acknowledges that there are potential differences in cultural understanding between himself and the parent concerned, but he suggests that he has compensated for these differences through disclosing personal information and a variety of other tactics. In the next extract, another social worker suggests that there could potentially have been problems with the assessment due to her uncomfortable feelings in relation to the male service user. Like the social worker above, she consciously adopted a compensatory tactic.

Social worker: I'm uncomfortable with Mr Marsh, professionally and personally.

Interviewer: Did that affect the nature of the comprehensive assessment?

Social worker: No. I don't think so, except that because I'm so conscious of the difficulties with these parents I may have made more effort to communicate with these parents. (Interview with social worker, Marsh family assessment)

Discussion

In the findings presented above it can be seen how the social workers carrying out comprehensive assessments construct attributes of the parents concerned that are related to verbal interactions and the assessment relationship. Those parents who are seen as easy to work with, and good contributors to the assessment relationship, are those who are co-operative, motivated and articulate. Parents who are seen in a negative light, on the other hand, are those who are regarded as unco-operative, unmotivated and inarticulate. Several empirical studies have highlighted users' attitudes towards the assessment process, or to the assessing professionals, as playing

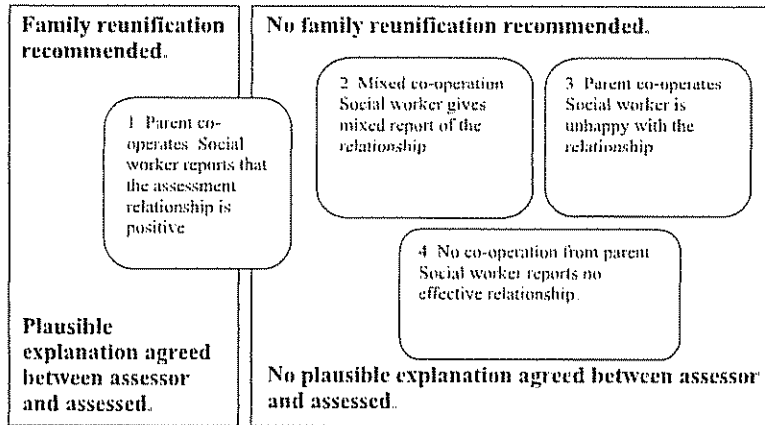


Figure 1 The assessment relationship, co-operation and plausible explanation

an important role in social work decision making (Handelman, 1983; Waterhouse and Carnie, 1992; Fernandez, 1996)

Additionally, two quantitative studies in North America found significant relationships between maternal non-compliance in the assessment process and decisions not to return children home (Jellinek *et al*, 1992; Atkinson and Butler, 1996). However, both studies demonstrate that some 'complying' clients do not have their children rehabilitated and *vice versa*. In reviewing the individual cases in the present study, a similar pattern can be discerned. Parental co-operation, the key aspect of relationship as found in the studies above, was used to divide the assessments into categories. An additional aspect, the social worker's opinion of the overall assessment relationship, was included as a further indicator. This led to the assessments being broadly grouped into four categories (Figure 1). In the first category, the parent co-operates and the social worker speaks about the assessment relationship in broadly positive terms. In the second category, the co-operation is variable and the social worker makes mixed comments about the assessment relationship. The third category relates to those where the parent co-operates, at least superficially, but where the social worker is unhappy with the overall quality of the relationship. These are the 'passive' parents as described above. Lastly there is a small group where there is no co-operation and no effective working relationship. These last cases are marked by aggression and sometimes violence on the part of the parent.

The social worker did not recommend the rehabilitation of the children home to their parents in any of the last three categories. In most of the cases in the first category, the recommendation was for a reunification between parents and children (or in two of the cases that the child should continue to be cared for at home). In this small study, then, co-operating and possessing other positive relationship attributes appear to have had rewarding outcomes for the parents under assessment. However, this explanation is not complete as it does not explain the few cases where the

parent co-operated and the social worker rated the relationship positively but the recommendation, none the less, was that the child or children should not be cared for by that parent. These latter cases had a specific element of verbal interaction in common with those from the other three categories. This was that the parents were either unable to offer any explanation for the concerns about them or that the explanation they gave appeared implausible. As was mentioned above, the ability to provide a plausible explanation emerged as one of the most important factors in the analysis of positive parent attributes. In those cases where the parent co-operated and where most of the other relationship attributes were positive, one element was *still missing*: that was, the lack of an explanation agreed between social worker and parent to satisfactorily cover the concerns about the family situation.

Bull and Shaw (1992) write about the causal explanations social workers might use in re-telling their work in a variety of settings, calling these 'causal accounts'. Taking the standpoint that it is through language that much of social reality is constructed, they suggest that recounting an event serves to provide it with a conclusion through the selection of incidents in the re-telling. Whilst Bull and Shaw in this instance only refer to social workers providing such causal accounts in the context of interactions with other professionals, it is possible to suggest, on the basis of the present study, that social workers are engaged in a similar process with the parents they are assessing. They are developing a causal account of how and why each family situation arose.

The social workers will have derived some causal explanation before the start of the assessment from a variety of sources: personal experience, practice experience, the information contained in referrals and theory. Parents, too, will probably begin the assessment with their own causal explanation of their situation. A parent who is able to provide a plausible, alternative causal account might be able to persuade the social worker to adapt or broaden their own account.

Handelman (1983) in his analysis of child protection work in Newfoundland, links service user co-operation with causal accounts. He suggests that, if there is user opposition to social work intervention, then workers will respond by imposing their understanding of the case with coercion, but that where a user is co-operative, the social worker will comply with his or her viewpoint. Whilst, in this research, to suggest that workers *complied* with parents would be to overstate the case, it seems that social workers were more willing to adapt their causal explanations if parents were co-operative. Whether the parent simply accedes to the social workers' causal explanation or is able to provide a persuasive alternative, one element appears clear. In order for an assessment relationship to be judged successful and for a recommendation to be made for family reunification, social worker and parent must share a common understanding or causal account of the family situation.

In the following extract from the transcription of an assessment session, the social worker and parent have been discussing the parent's understanding of the social services intervention. The social worker has commented on how the parent has moved his opinion from one in which he bore none of the blame for the children's neglect, to one where he agreed that he should share the blame with his ex-partner. He was able to provide an explanation, that the social worker found plausible, for

how he had failed to understand the harm being done to the children at the time, whilst expressing contrition for that failure

Social worker: Yeah, but it sounds to me like you have clearly thought a lot about the events leading up to the removal of the children and, like you said last week, it's a really sad time but, also like you said last week, you can understand it, it's a time to make a new start ...

Parent: Since they've been removed, like, things have been put into perspective, haven't they? Things have been grouped out or whatever, haven't they? For want of a better word, like. So we've been made aware of difficult areas, like, you know. Because, before, it was all like one big problem, like (draws in air), but now it's been broken down like (draws on table). So we've been able to tackle or to look at the difficult areas, sort of separately like, you know, which has been useful like and we've sort of worked on those areas

Social worker: Good

Parent: Because I mean the situation now, is far better than it was, obviously we don't have the babies, or

Social worker: Sure, sure

Parent: They're where they are, but the overall situation is far better apart from the fact that they're not home, like, and (pause), yeah, we're working on some areas. (Assessment interview, Cross family assessment)

The parent shows that he accepts the agency's explanation that removal of the children was a necessary precursor to any improvement in the situation. Interestingly, he is seen here to have adopted phrases usually associated with social workers, such as 'working on' and 'look at the difficult areas'. He and the social worker have reached a stage of the assessment in which they share a causal account for the family situation. The social worker subsequently recommended a return of the children to their father.

Conclusion

In reporting the findings of an empirical study into how social workers carry out comprehensive assessments in child protection, a number of issues have been raised. It was noted that the assessments in this study tended to be verbally based and to centre on parents' performance in interview. In the area of analysis under discussion in this article, there were no discernible differences between the two types of agency, nor across different types and severity of abuse. One of the main areas of evidence cited by social workers was the way that parents responded to the social worker-parent relationship. It was argued that co-operation, a positive relationship, articulacy, and an agreed plausible explanation for the family situation were all important factors in determining whether a recommendation for family re-unification was made.

The social workers in this study might be seen to be carrying out a necessary part of a comprehensive assessment when differentiating between parents who are

co-operative, motivated, insightful and able to explain their situation and those who are not. Both practice wisdom and practice guidance (Department of Health, 1988) suggest that the return of children to the former group is likely to be a safer option than to the latter.

However, it seems necessary to sound a few notes of caution. First, as has been noted, much of a comprehensive assessment is based on verbal interactions between the assessor and the assessed. Many of the areas mentioned above, particularly the ability to give a plausible account and to appear insightful, are likely to come more easily to the articulate. As was seen, some of the inarticulate are labelled 'passive'. Some might argue that articulacy itself might be a plausible ground for assessing parenting, particularly if that person's response to an inability to express themselves tends to result in violence. On the other hand, it is possible that an over-emphasis on verbal skills might be a less than fair attempt to assess the parenting skills of those who are not so verbally proficient, particularly those with learning disabilities. It was also found that, in this small sample, all of the parents labelled 'passive' were women. The pressure on women to bear the responsibility for child protection assessments has been noted in the social work literature (Farmer and Owen, 1995; O'Hagan and Dillenberger, 1995; Davies and Krane, 1996). In this setting 'passivity' might be seen as a response to such pressures, a form of resistance or a function of their learning disability. This indicates a need for empirical research on gendered responses to in-depth assessment.

Secondly, the ability of parents to express themselves verbally will also be inextricably linked to the quality of the developing relationship between social worker and parent. It requires a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1991) to analyse and maintain an awareness of the contributions of both the parent and the social worker to the forming of this relationship. Rather than pursue the futile aim of maintaining an objective distance in their assessments (Ryburn, 1991), social workers should aim to be reflexive about the processes and dynamics of assessment (White, 1997; Clifford, 1998 (Holland, 1999b)). Careful attention must be paid to areas such as cultural background, gender, organizational culture and the practitioner's own social skills in order to provide an environment in which a parent may express himself or herself freely in the manner expected.

Thirdly, it is also possible that those parents who succeed in the assessments (that is, they have their children returned to them) are those who have adapted their behaviour to conform to the expectations of the assessing social worker and their agency. It was noted in the last extract from the empirical data above that Mr Cross was using some speech that was similar to that of social workers. Howe (1994) writes that:

Today's emphasis demands that actors change their acts, not by curing faulty minds but by showing obedience . . . The disobedient are required simply to conform. The individual's social performance is all that matters (Howe, 1994, p. 527)

It might be suggested that, in a comprehensive assessment, it is particularly important for parents to conform verbally, due to the verbal emphasis of these assessments

do we see verbal skills as an essential part of parenting?
is this a white dominant cultural value?

It seems likely that a parent who conforms to these expectations will be more likely to form a positive relationship with the social worker. And, as has been suggested above, it is this relationship that appears to be central to the outcome.

It might therefore be suggested that those conducting comprehensive assessments should avoid any tendency to *over-rely* on verbal interactions between adults when making decisions about children's futures. Whilst the verbal presentation of the parent will be important, a balance with other aspects of assessment should be maintained. This should include a systematic, reflexive analysis of both the information gathered and the processes of assessment themselves (Sheppard, 1995; White, 1997), careful observation (Reder and Lucy, 1995), and a greater role for the child's needs and perspective (Butler and Williamson, 1994).

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