

Criteria for Choosing a Needs Assessment

Although helping people to meet their needs is a core function of social work, the concept of need and the measurement of it give rise to many difficult questions for those attempting to assess needs. Labreque (1999) states that the literature on needs assessment reveals that the concept of need is often not defined by those conducting needs assessments. She suggests that researchers should allot more attention to issues surrounding the measurement and scope of the concept of need. Most needs assessments are based on Kauffman's *discrepancy model* (Labreque, 1999). The definition of need used by Kauffman (1972) stipulates that a need exists when there is a gap between the state desired by a person or group, and the actual state. Scriven and Roth (1978) criticized Kauffman's definition for failing to distinguish between needs and wants, and for not differentiating between future needs and basic needs. They expanded upon the discrepancy model by proposing that a need occurs when the state desired by an individual represents a significant benefit for the individual, and when the inability to attain the desired state results in a state of dissatisfaction for that person (Scriven & Roth, 1978). Gabor et al. (1998) defined needs as the basic requirements that are necessary to sustain human life, and posited that needs are a right; they suggested that social needs assessment is comprised of two components- the first being the determination of the nature of a social problem, the second being the identification of possible solutions. McKillip (1987) also sees the defining of a problem and the identifying of solutions as important aspects of needs assessment. He defined needs in this way: "Needs are value judgements that a target group has a problem that can be solved" (McKillip, 1987, p. 7).

The issue of values in needs assessment has been controversial. The notion that needs can be objectively defined using scientific methodology has been at the centre of the controversy. It is now more common to recognize that values play a pivotal role in needs assessment, and that concrete measures must be used in measuring needs and their attainment. Guba and Lincoln (1982) argue that all needs assessment must consider the values of all individuals and groups who are involved in the process. Further discussions about need are based on the centrality of values in the assessment of need, on the importance of the perceptions of clients in defining need, and on the view that needs assessment involves both defining problems and identifying possible solutions.

The previous discussion about need has been included as a preface to explain my thinking about the choice of criteria in selecting a needs assessment for Ontario's child protection system.

Criteria for Selecting a Needs and Strengths Assessment

- 1) Does the assessment effectively address strengths?
- 2) Are the needs measurable? Does it measure needs? Does it capture the full range of needs?
- 3) Does the assessment use an ecological perspective?
- 4) Are both child and parental needs addressed?
- 5) How practical is the assessment in terms of implementation?
- 6) Has the assessment been found to have validity and reliability?
- 7) What will be the utility of the assessment in contributing to better child outcomes?
- 8) Are client perceptions of need considered?
- 9) Does the assessment have conceptual clarity?

Review of Several Needs Assessments

1) New York Assessment of Family Needs, Strengths and Risks

- it does address strengths in a limited fashion
- shows evidence of ecological orientation to assessing needs
- it equates problems with needs- this is questionable- understanding a need should involve the evaluation of both risk and protective factors
- addresses parent and child needs
- appears to be practical
- no evidence of psychometric testing of instrument
- utility is hard to evaluate without knowing more about it's application- how is it used to set objectives?
- are clients involved in defining their needs?
- the problems are measurable as a scale is used
- combining the assessment of needs and risks into one scale is not recommended (Rykus & Hughes, 2003)

2) Child and Adolescent Needs Scale

- addresses strengths adequately
- it equates problems and needs
- the problems are measurable as a scale is used
- weak ecological orientation
- addresses parent and child needs
- seems to be practical
- some psychometric testing has been done
- utility is hard to evaluate without knowing more about it's application
- are clients involved in defining their needs?

3) California Needs Assessment

- addresses strengths adequately
- shows some evidence of ecological orientation
- doesn't address child's needs
- equates problems and needs
- practicality of use seems question- doesn't look user friendly
- no evidence of psychometric testing
- utility is hard to evaluate without knowing more about it's application
- measurement of level of needs is not well done

4) Common Language Tools

The Common Language tools go beyond assessment. They are about assessment, defining achievable outcomes for the child and family, and selecting the services required to achieve the outcomes

- strengths are well addressed for the child and less so for the parents
- needs are measurable but not as structured as CANS and New York models
- it is ecological in orientation
- addresses child and parent needs
- it goes beyond defining a need as a problem and also incorporates protective factors and solutions into the thinking about needs
- has been designed to be user friendly for practitioners as well as research tool
- no psychometric testing has been done on instruments- however, they have been designed by researchers, and there are being evaluated
- show good potential for utility
- they show evidence of conceptual clarity as they have been constructed based on research findings and current theory about needs, risks, resiliency, and child development