TOWARDS AN ANTI-OPPRESSIVE SOCIAL WORK ASSESSMENT METHOD

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This paper discusses how social workers might put into practice anti-oppressive values in the particular area of understanding and assessing the users of their services. It begins with a critical examination of a published piece of assessment that is a good example of the type of work currently being done in social work agencies, arguing that the failure to look sufficiently at the anti-oppressive issues is a failure of the method used. It continues with a constructive series of suggestions towards an anti-oppressive method of assessment - a modification of social work practice theory that is currently being researched by the author, and derives from both theoretical considerations and practical experience.

INTRODUCTION

Although the anti-racist and anti-sexist social work practice literature deals in a general way with the dangers of stereotyped assessments, there is little detailed guidance on how to go about making anti-oppressive individual and family assessments. It is said that family forms differ, and that white workers should not impose their own evaluative assumptions in their assessment of black families (e.g. Brummer, 1988). However, we know that the black communities vary enormously in their social and cultural traditions - there is no single style of black family functioning. We also know that the same applies to white families, and we especially should beware of imposing middle-class, sexist, heterosexist, disablist, ageist or other stereotypical norms upon our assessments. So the real issue is how to make assessments which take into account the full range of social divisions. (I am taking 'anti-oppressive' values to imply opposition to discriminatory social divisions based on 'race', class, gender, disability, sexuality and age, not ignoring other social and cultural differences).

There are many psychological and social methods of assessment of children, adults and families, but all should be subject to criticism if they do not meet up to the methodological requirements of an anti-oppressive approach to social work practice. The next section is a critique of one published example of the practical assessment of a black child and his family, followed by an anti-oppressive model for assessment, based on the writings of black feminists.

CRITIQUE OF 'ASSESSING CHILDREN'S NEEDS'

This assessment of a black child, (Adcock, et al., 1988) uses up-to-date social work techniques and criteria, including assessments of the child's social and emotional functioning, but without any serious consideration of either 'race', gender, class, or any other major social division, in my view. I want to emphasise that these social divisions issues are not vague background factors that we need only pay lip-service to in the assessment of children, they are the crucial issues of both the foreground and the background - the immediate personal relationships as well as the structural sociological and cultural background, and of course these personal and political matters have to be understood in their interconnection.

In the assessment concerned, the social worker, Roger undoubtedly working within a well-established 'paradigm'. This collection of
papers is connected with very well-known workers in this field, such as Nessie Bailey, and others related to the British Association for Adoption and Fostering. The latter organisation has had such an enormous influence on child care social work that their general approach has been used as the official method of assessment for social workers, recommended by the Government, (Dept of Health, 1988). It is ironic that within the Aldgate and Simmonds collection there is also a paper on the assessment of black children that makes some excellent points, (see Brummer, 1988). However, it is precisely because the official guidelines for assessment do not attempt to seriously consider an anti-oppressive methodology that in practice it results in a concentration on the social psychology of individual children and their families in relative isolation from the social divisions factors that would not only inform the background to the assessment but re-organise and re-evaluate the foreground. The following criticisms are therefore not intended personally, but as a constructive criticism of a framework of assessment that is currently popular but, in my view, flawed. The example just happens to be conveniently published, and has been done well - but within the limits that will be indicated.

If Roger Lake and his colleagues were to take 'race' seriously there are many sorts of questions that need to be answered. However, after initially describing the child concerned in this example 'Clifford as of Black Afro-Caribbean origin' (p.25), he totally fails to refer to 'race again except on p. 31 where the cultural and racial experiences' of children get due lip-service paid to them without any attempt to consider how this applies to Clifford. We are not told for example whether both his parents have the same ethnic origin; we are not told whether his sister, (by a different father), his mother's boyfriends, his foster-parents, his teachers or his school friends have similar ethnic origins, so the questions do not arise as to whether some of his behaviour might be related to 'race' and racism. We do not know whether the mother or father were born in Britain, or whether they have suffered traumas of settlement and separation: the role of the d. There extended family and friends in the community is thus Ignore is no awareness of the impact on communication between social worker and client that arises from the ethnicity, gender and authority status of the worker, (presumably, but not necessarily, white - we are not told), and the black clients. The whole assessment is geared to the evaluation of attachment between mother and child, regardless of 'race', or other social divisions.

It is reported (p.33) by the school that Clifford is 'a rather isolated and independent little boy who had difficulty in making friends, often having fights'. It should surely be asked whether this is the result of racism in the playground and the school. Equally, the fact that he tells his white male social worker that he has 'lots of friends at school' could also be surely considered as a defensive manoeuvre by a black child trying to impress a white authority figure. I am not suggesting that this is the only possible interpretation, but I am saying that in order to assess this child properly the social divisions issues have to be systematically considered, otherwise the value of the whole assessment is undermined. In order to consider the emotional and social functioning of this child the social divisions issues also have to be given prominence if a balanced assessment of the factors involved is to be possible.
To pursue this example one stage further, it is necessary to look at
the other social divisions, and the way in which these interconnect
in the life of Clifford X, a matter that does not seriously arise for
Roger Lake and colleagues. It could be argued from a feminist
viewpoint, with some justification that this assessment is another
exercise in mother blaming, and from an anti-oppressive/black
feminist viewpoint that it is racist mother-blaming in its failure to
contextualise the issues of 'race' class and gender in its
understanding of this situation. The inevitable conclusion of the
assessment is that the mother 'did not have the parenting skills'-
little else is offered. Yet the parenting and relationship skills (or
lack of them) in the father is surely not just an academic
consideration, as the father's abuse of his partner, the family
breakdown, and the child's loss of his father is a major contributory
factor. The various events in this woman's life, as far as we are
told, make it clear that much offer behaviour can be attributed to
sexist behaviour by her partner, and by the sexist and racist social
structures within which she has to survive. There are also
indications that she has strengths which enable her to fight back:
her decision to go to a women's refuge, to get herself re-housed, and
to refer herself to a psychologist are testimony to her courage, and
also to the wider women's movement which had by this particular point
in historical time had established refuges in most British cities. If
these are the major factors in this child's life then one could
predict that, given a decent house, school, and absence of harassment
by male partners, the mother's ability to cope was likely to improve,
and the child's improving experiences would be likely stabilise his
behaviour regardless of the therapeutic intervention of a social
worker. As it happens the final piece of information we are given is
precisely about renewed male violence.

We also need to consider other equal opportunity issues such as
social class, which is not directly mentioned. This intersects with
'race' and gender -in this example in a number of ways. We know that
the general level of unemployment tripled during the period under
consideration, and that for black working class people the situation
is worsened by racism. This makes any kind of coping by either parent
doubly difficult, affecting housing and the provision of care for
children, increasing the likelihood of a criminal career, and also
the likelihood of state intervention in family life. We need to
assess how the experiences of deprivation and criminalisation relate
to this particular group of people, and what are their coping
strengths.

One of the features of the assessment is that, as with 'race', many
social divisions matters are simply not mentioned, and we cannot
assume that they are not relevant. There is no reference to
disability, but there are many forms of disability, and we do not
know from this account whether the matter has been fully investigated
or not. We are not told about the father's or the mother's education
and job experience, and nothing about their parents, so many
important social divisions indicators are not available. It is
essential that our assessments raise these issues systematically, and
the next section suggests a practical way towards doing this.

Finally, there is the issue of age, and the treatment of children in
particular, which would appear to be high profile in this child
protection/permanency-planning type of assessment. However, there is
no clear indication of how this child compares with the cohort of
children of his generation, 'race', class and gender. We know that
provision for children was not improving during this period - levels of finance and welfare were being cut, affecting black children differentially. We also get the impression that protection of the child from his mother rejection is the main concern, whereas the harassment and violence of the father seems to be taken for granted. Thus again, I would argue that a systematic consideration of social divisions issues illuminates both the background and the foreground of assessment, providing the crucial perspective which anchors it in reality, as well as helping to unravel the ways in which the oppression of children in our society is related to the other social oppressions.

A FRAMEWORK FOR ANTI-OPPRESSIVE ASSESSMENT

Principles

It is a mistake to think of anti-oppressive values as merely a set of ethical injunctions. It is important to realise that these values have methodological implications which need to be fully appreciated - and used. As Curnock and Hardiker have correctly noted in their study of assessment models and practice theories intended to guide social workers' practice 'necessarily oversimplify particular situations' but are nevertheless 'indispensable for handling a mass of data'. (Curnock and Hardiker, 1979, pp. 161-2). In order to be clearer about how social work practice can become less oppressive, it is essential to handle the 'mass of data' in the light of a framework of basic methodological principles drawn an anti-oppressive perspective. I am proposing the following, based on the writings of black feminists, as suggested by Williams and Collins (see, Williams, 1989, p.80; Collins, 1990, pp. 20 1220). Their views are born of an experience of oppression which combines more than one social division, and these authors have attempted to summarise the understanding that black women writers have of their oppression. According to their views, any method of understanding human situations that is consistent with an anti-oppressive perspective should be:

1. Anti-reductionist and historically specific: i.e. not reducing explanations of human behaviour to biology, or psychology, or economics, and placing the explanation within a specific historical context.

2. Materialist: (in the sense of relating to material power structures, and the divisions of material wealth and power in society). This will include the synchronic impact of unequal power relationships, as well as the historical aspect of the accumulation of cultural and economic capital.

3. Combining the personal and political: the 'family' and household, reproduction, and sexuality as related to work, production and the outside world.

4. Thoroughly analysing 'difference'. that is, systematically and simultaneously placing individual people and groups within all the social divisions frameworks.

5. Internationalist: that is: to understand the wider contexts which affect us all indirectly, as beneficiaries of our powerful economic position, and some of us directly - especially black communities.

6. Reflexive and dialogical: Collins and others view observers as
accountable for the methods used and the knowledge claimed - they do not exist at some neutral value-free point outside the framework, but are very much part of the social action and as such, 'values lie at the heart of the validation process such that enquiry always has an ethical aim, (Collins, 1990, p.219). The personal biography and values of the author is thus as important as that of the person observed, and the dialogue which must occur for knowledge to increase is not an interference to social understanding, but an essential part of it. This approach is similar to the idea of 'conscientisation', (Friere, 1972): the observer has to be placed within the framework of analysis, especially with respect to the social divisions and the power relationships that pertain to the situation. What social divisions does the observer belong to, and what institutional and personal power does that confer on him or her with respect to the observed client? The differences in perspective and power have to be taken into account: understanding and action must develop dialogically.

These criteria can be met by using an approach to assessment that utilises a 'critical life histories' methodology, that is: an approach that places all the individuals within specific historical contexts at both personal and social structural levels, by paying attention to their interweaving life courses in the real context of their social history, (see Clifford, forthcoming). This is a re-evaluation of the importance of history in understanding people's lives and behaviour in accordance with anti-oppressive principles. For many widely-used authors the task of social work assessment is firmly focused on the present. For example, a 'basic principle' in one standard text is that: 'the past should always be subordinated and directly related to understanding the present' (Siporin, 1975, p.224). However, a recent text which specifically addresses issues of assessment relating to 'race' and ethnicity emphasises that the present is a part of history, and that: 'Understanding and knowledge of the history, customs and beliefs are required for effective practice both at the individual and the institutional level (Devore and Schlesinger, 1987, p. 150).

Practice

The suggestion made here is that social workers can use a critical life histories framework to help provide the sort of anti-oppressive perspective for assessment that the above principles demand. There is, of course, no end to the amount of information that could conceivably be relevant to the understanding of complex human situations, but it is suggested that this approach is compatible with the above methodological criteria, is also sufficiently flexible to be of practical help to social workers in possession of limited information - and with limited time, and therefore provides the means to select and order the mass of information in an anti-oppressive way.

In Diagram 1 (see p.236) I set out how the basic principles for critical life history assessment apply. This should be self-explanatory, and should be compared with what has been said already about the methodological principles associated with anti-oppressive values. The important indicators associated with power and oppression vary (and overlap) between the different social divisions, but given some thought it is not difficult to see how most of the important features of oppression which affect people's lives can be accommodated using this model. However, it very much depends on the
agency setting and the actual practical social work situation as to whether such an assessment is recorded either diagrammatically or in report form, and if so, how many of the personal and political social divisions indicators are actually marked down, (as long as they have all been systematically considered). However, the real historical time dimension is crucial for placing individuals within specific personal and public arenas, and for appreciating the timing of personal and 'family'/household careers and transitions.

Diagram 1 A Framework for Anti-oppressive Assessment: Critical Social Life Histories (Diagram 1-3 omitted)

To take Roger Lake's example, (see Diagram 2, p.237) and looking at one aspect of 'race', it would be important to note in the child's life-course and in that of his parents and grandparents, some of the geographical indicators, as 'race' and ethnicity have strong simultaneous connections to place as well as time. This would be important both within Britain, as well as any moves he or close individuals may have made outside Britain. It would therefore be important to mark any actual geographical moves, not only because of the 'separations' that may well be involved for Clifford and those near him which will have affected the course of his life, but also because the (positive) ethnic identity, and the (negative) experience of racism will be crucially mediated by these considerations. This would link the child's individual life to both 'family' and fiends, and community - a matter of some importance where 'race' is concerned. It also places it by implication within a concrete historical local community, national, and international framework. Compare the 'ethnically sensitive' view, (Devore and Schlesinger, 1987), that a vital principle is to understand how individual and collective history bear on the problems of the present.

This model can be used to indicate numerous other matters relevant to social divisions - the history and chronology of education and (un)employment, for instance can be noted, and then their influence can be read across and along the life courses. The various life cycles of individuals and families and the social history of communities and social groups can be accurately interleaved if they are related chronologically within the same framework. This is why it is essential to have actual historical dates recorded. In this child's case we need to know more about the geographical and historical factors of both his own and other people's lives to get an anti-oppressive framework within which to assess the psychological and physiological factors which also affect him. This whole analysis would then provide us with a focus on him as a real social being - 'different' from others, and inhabiting the oppressed world of the child in a specific way, modified by factors of 'race' and gender. Clearly issues of age are easily accommodated within this framework - in a way which makes it possible to link age and personal life history to historical time and social circumstance without stereotyping particular age categories. It is also advantageous to treat disability as a part of an individual's life history, a 'career' which is related to the social situation at a particular point in historical, personal and family time, (Oliver, 1983, pp.56-60). This critical life histories approach thus maximises an anti-oppressive understanding of a person with disability as a member of an oppressed social division, during a specific historical period of time in their life and in the life the community.

An anti-sexist approach to assessment is also facilitated by this
methodology, for a number of reasons, some similar to those connected
to ‘race’. Women’s lives are sometimes subsumed within the family,
in social assessments, but here, the individual life course of the
women involved can be seen both separately, and in relation to other
individuals. This is very important, as the life courses of women are
not the same as men’s and should be considered separately. (Burgoyne,
1987). What kind of education and career(s) (paid and unpaid) are
involved for the woman being considered? How does this life course
interact with the ‘family’ cycle, compared with other women? How does
it interact with the separate individual life courses of related
people? How does it relate to the cohort of women born at the same
time - what structural cultural, economic and legal changes have
affected different groups of women during this period? All these
matters are of importance from a gender perspective, and can be
addressed within this framework. There is no predisposition with this
framework to limit the life courses considered to those of the
conventional family - what matters are the physical proximity of
individuals (any kind of co-habitation), and their emotional
proximity, sexual or not. This facilitates and reminds the assessor
to consider non-nuclear or non-conventional ‘family’ relationships,
including gay and lesbian relationships and extended families and
(especially) friendship networks, which are so important for
understanding women’s lives.

There is every reason to relate the different social divisions at the
personal level to social class. A number of people have recently been
stressing that this factor urgently needs to be weaved in with
‘race’ and gender, (for example, the authors of the Burnage Report,
MacDonald et al., 1989). It is easy to do in this context for many of
the crucial factors overlap, and can be indicated simultaneously. It
is not simply a matter of general background interest, but covers a
range of factors that bring the political and personal together in
the life history of an individual black working class child such as
Clifford. It would include the (un)employment and education of
parents and grandparents, since inherited deprivation and class
position is still the norm despite limited evidence of social
mobility. However, there are also possibilities for individual and
generational change, and this can also be effectively accommodated
within a critical life history framework, (see Goldthorpe, 1980,
chaps.5&8), with the information about these matters being equally
relevant for a number of social divisions simultaneously.
Particularly important is the intersection between class and gender,
and the ways in which paid and unpaid work careers impact on
different members of a household. There are other relevant factors
relating to social class, such as legal and financial changes (for
example to the social security system) which occur at specific points
in time, which have an impact on services and standards of living,
and which clearly also connect with the other social divisions, and
with the lives of individuals. Some of these factors do not need to
be explicitly marked, but can be ‘read’ off from the historical dates
given.

Finally, there are two important factors about the anti-oppressive
potential of this technique which should be noted. They both relate
to the methodological criterion of analysing the worker/client
relationship. Firstly, there is not only the potential to include the
worker and the agency within the critical life history model, it is
essential to. consider the history of the contact of the client with
the agency, and also the critical life histories of the key workers,
especially the present one. In Diagram 3 (see p. 234) there is an
illustration of a range of factors which needs to be related to Diagram 2 - but clearly it would not often be necessary to actually construct such a diagram. However, the factors indicated would change with time, and would also change in significance depending on the social divisions of the client(s), so the factors on Diagram 3 always have to be kept in mind and continually reviewed in the light of their relevance to assessing particular circumstances and people. Secondly, an empowering relationship would involve sharing the production and evaluation of this analysis with the client in a way that makes sense to them, but is not patronising. As most people have an interest in family and personal history, it is not usually difficult to get people's active involvement in the task, which can be therapeutic in itself (as with life story books in direct work with children, or reminiscence work with older people). However, this obviously requires adaption to the circumstances, fine ethical judgement by the worker, including some unavoidable - and highly desirable - clarification of the role of the agency and the worker vis-a-vis the client, with respect to the social divisions and the power issues of the past, present, and future.

CONCLUSION

The detailed developmental information required for an in-depth child assessment is not invalidated or avoided by a critical life histories assessment, but to do a detailed assessment without putting it in the context of a systematic anti-oppressive framework, would from this perspective be unacceptable, and lead to the sorts of omissions that have been noted in the example of child assessment discussed above. This framework provides a firm historical basis for the integration of sociological analysis with psychological assessment, in a black feminist way that 'connects psychological variables ... to specific social, political and economic oppressions' (Squire, 1989, p.117).

I would emphasise that Diagram 1 provides a framework which should underpin assessment, but this does not mean that all these social and historical factors have to be either studied or recorded every time an assessment is made. It must depend on the nature and function of the agency, and the needs of the user(s) and worker(s) as to how much enquiry and dialogue is appropriate. It would usually be silly to construct complex personal and social histories for a referral for a bath aid, or telephone, for example. Assessment varies enormously between social and welfare agencies, but the point here is that however much or little is done, it should he as consistent as possible with the principles of this anti-oppressive framework. Actual practices will inevitably vary with the situation, but approaches to assessment similar to Diagram 2 are useful and have been successfully used in practice.

The approach described is being subjected to continued criticism and development, and is the basis for further research, currently being undertaken, both with respect to the practical application of the method, and to its theoretical justification.

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