

12 MODELS OF ASSESSMENT

Activity

Practice scenario

Mark has been working in a social work team for older adults for the past three months. In general he is enjoying his work, but he finds it difficult to accept that some of the relatives he works with offer limited support to the older members of their family. The assessment process with Mrs Macintyre has been particularly contentious for Mark because her daughter, Susie, has said she will not provide any support, even though Mrs Macintyre would prefer this. Although Mark can understand that Susie has her own life, other responsibilities and commitments, he can see that Susie's stance is having a detrimental effect on Mrs Macintyre.

Consider:

- Why Mark may be finding it difficult to work with Susie.
- What 'personal baggage' Mark might bring to this exchange.
- What impact Mark's views may be having on the process of assessment.
- The support Mark may require dealing with the impact of this work on him.

Commentary

The scenario would suggest that Mark is frustrated by the differing needs and perspectives of Mrs Macintyre and Susie. Mark recognises that each should be afforded the right to state their views and preferences, but where these do not marry up then a source of tension is created. Strengths based assessments encourage service users to consider their personal assets but it is important that service users do not confuse what might be assets with expectations of particular people. The fact that Mrs Macintyre has a daughter could be considered a personal asset, but it is clearly not an asset if Susie does not want to provide support. Expecting someone to provide support and having them refuse to do that generates a need to explore family relationships and for people to be honest about what they can and cannot do.

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The scenario does not tell us anything really about why Susie will not provide support. You would need to question whether Mark has explored this in any depth. In a sense the scenario information is implying that Mark has an expectation Susie should provide support for her mother. Why would Mark have this expectation? Does it say more about his personal values, his own family experience, his views of what mothers should be able to expect of their daughters or his views about working in contexts where resources are limited and where everyone should be doing their bit to contribute to meeting the needs of those requiring support?

Susie may have very clear and valid reasons for being unwilling to provide support. She may have other caring responsibilities, she may frequently work away from home, she may have relationship problems, she may be experiencing physical or mental health problems that would be exacerbated by a caring role, she may have had a very difficult relationship with her mother in the past and not want to care, she may dislike her mother or alternatively she may want to provide support but believes she lacks the skills to do so. There are numerous possible explanations and it is important for the social worker in this situation to explore these; ensuring that their exploration is undertaken in a non-judgemental way.

Without a full understanding of the family situation, the personal histories and current life circumstances of those involved, then the process of assessment will be incomplete and subsequent interventions potentially inappropriate. Social workers need to gather full information, avoid making assumptions and be ever conscious of the risk of imposing their personal values on those they work with. If we have expectations of other people the first thing we should do is engage in some self questioning – are these expectations valid and why do we think that is the case? This is about the social workers awareness of self in the assessment.

Being self-aware is about understanding what you bring to your practice and includes the 'baggage' that you might bring – that is our own beliefs, values, attitudes and experiences which have shaped who we are today. In turn we need to be alert to how this 'baggage' impacts on the way we work, how we might impact on other people and how they impact on us. Such awareness is a cornerstone of ethical and reflective practice and can be supported through effective use of supervision and support. At times the work social workers undertake has a significant personal impact and professional support is a key element of assisting practitioners to cope with these situations.