A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF ASSESSMENT OF THE CHILD AT RISK

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to reflect on some basic principles that are of critical importance to ensure effective assessment of children at risk. The authors identified these principles during an empirical study that formed part of the testing of newly developed assessment tools for the South African context as well as feedback from social workers that were trained to implement these tools in practice. It became evident that some basic principles form a critical part of a safety and risk assessment protocol, implying that the use of a set of assessment tools alone will not guarantee a competent assessment. They advance that, principles such as to follow a holistic approach, to gather collateral information in an ethical manner, to form a partnership with the family system, to follow a strength perspective approach, to be child-centred focused and to adhere to evidence-based practices, will enhance the quality and effectiveness of the assessment process of children at risk.

Keywords: Principles, safety and risk assessment, child protection, child and families at risk.

1. Background

The high prevalence of child maltreatment is a global concern for social workers and other professionals working in the field of child protection. International statistics on the prevalence of child maltreatment attest to the widespread occurrence of this social issue (Pecora, Chahine & Graham, 2013; Pretorius & Pistorius, 2012).

A comprehensive global study by the United Nations from 2002 to 2006 revealed the gravity of child maltreatment and the urgency of addressing this phenomenon effectively (UNICEF in Pretorius & Pistorius, 2012). Statistical data from the United States indicate that about 1500 children in the US die each year from child abuse and neglect, of which 70% are under three years of age while in more than 80% of the cases the children were abused by the parents (Pretorius et al., 2012). Pecora et al. (2013) confirmed in a more recent study conducted in 2011 in the United States that approximately 9.1 per 1000 children were exposed to child maltreatment, while an estimated 1570 children from a substantiated number of 576 569 victims, died from a form of maltreatment.

Although overall statistics on child maltreatment for Africa and specifically South Africa are difficult to obtain due to different challenges, the available data suggests that South African children are at risk (Pretorius & Pistorius, 2012). A national report on violence against children in South Africa confirms that violence against children is a hidden and underreported crime. Nevertheless, the most recent statistics from the South Africa Police Service indicate that over 50 000 crimes against children were recorded during 2010/2011, of which 52% were sexual in nature (Department of Social Development/Department of Women, Children and People with Disabilities/UNICEF, 2012).

Against this background, the protection and welfare of children are a moral and legal responsibility of society (Pretorius & Pistorius, 2012). In the South African context the Children's Act 38 of 2005, Section 151, stipulates that a child who is suspected to be a victim of maltreatment should be referred to a designated social worker for an investigation. In order to serve the best interests of the child involved in the matter, the social worker needs to make a verified decision based on a thorough assessment (Spies, Delport & Le Roux, 2015). It is noted that DePanfilis and Salus (2003) distinguish between the concepts 'investigation' and 'assessment.' These authors highlighted the fact that an investigation focuses on whether maltreatment occurred, while assessment is intended to evaluate a child's safety and risk and to determine what services are needed to prevent further maltreatment.

According to Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, Strom-Gottfried and Larsen (2006:179) "Assessment involves gathering information and formulating it into a coherent picture of the client and his or her circumstances. …[it] is a fluid and dynamic process that involves receiving, analysing, and synthesizing new information as it emerges during the entire course of a given case." Assessment, specifically in the field of child protection, is thus a complex process which requires critical thinking and decision making skills as a basis for sound professional judgement (Pecora et al., 2013).

Due to the complexity of assessment of child maltreatment, the high prevalence of child maltreatment in South Africa and the lack of uniform assessment practices in the country, the National Department of Social Development initiated a process to develop safety and risk assessment tools and training materials for the South African context. The authors were engaged in a

process that involved the development and testing of such tools and materials (Spies et al., 2015) and the subsequent training of designated social workers on a national level. During an empirical study that formed part of the testing of the newly developed tools, as well as feedback from social workers who were trained, it became evident that different challenges threatened the upholding of basic principles underlying assessment. These challenges included high caseloads and a shortage of social workers. The authors are of the opinion that some basic principles form a critical part of a safety and risk assessment protocol, implying that the use of a set of assessment tools alone will not guarantee a competent assessment. This statement is in line with the views of Pecora et al. (2013:154) who state the following: "Competent assessment and decision making in child protection depend on sound professional judgement and a comprehensive systematic approach that transcends the use of specific tools." In this regard Smith and Bace (2003) confirm that the success of assessment is enhanced by having a strict protocol for assessment.

Based on the above mentioned empirical study and feedback from the social work trainees, the authors wish to sensitise social workers to the importance of the implementation of a number of basic principles to enhance effective and accountable assessment practices in child protection. The goal of this article is thus to reflect on some basic principles that are generally associated with successful assessment of children at risk.

2. Principles related to assessment of the child at risk

As far back as 1988, Loewenberg and Dolgoff (1988, as cited in Potgieter, 1998) stated that professional values guide social workers in practice and form the basis for ethical principles. A principle "is a general truth, grounded in values, and stated as a rule that should be followed" (Potgieter, 1998:38). As ethical principles guide social work practitioners through complex situations (Parrott, 2003), it is regarded as of paramount importance that social workers working in the field of child protection should uphold principles associated with the assessment of children at risk.

As with all social work practice, the assessment of children at risk is also underpinned by specific principles (DePanfilis & Salus. 2003; Department of Health, 2000). In this regard the authors wish to reflect on the following principles that they deem to be of critical importance to ensure effective assessment of children at risk:

2.1 Holistic approach

A holistic approach to assessment refers to consideration of the interrelatedness of a complex set of factors within the child, the family, and the social environment (DePanfilis & Salus, 2003). A holistic approach implies that the child is viewed within the environment (Maguire, 2002), especially as child maltreatment is seen as a result of the interaction of risk and protective factors in the child, family and the wider social context (DePanfilis & Salus, 2003). These authors indicated that a holistic assessment process urges the social worker not to focus only on the child, but also to conduct a thorough family assessment to ensure the immediate and future safety of the child. A holistic assessment, as reflected in the ecological model, is a central feature of the assessment of children and families at risk (Trevithick, 2012).

By overlooking a holistic approach as a basic principle of assessment, the social worker may run the risk of not being able to comprehensively contextualise the situation and fail to consider all the factors that may contribute to the alleged maltreatment. Further, the social environment often contains supportive capacities (Wilson, Ruch, Lymberry, & Cooper, 2008). These capacities might be overlooked by the social worker who works only from a problem-orientated perspective and as a result sabotage the belief that people have inherent strengths. This statement is endorsed by Trevithick (2012) who states that social support networks may indicate protective factors in the environment of the child and family. Gathering collateral information is essential for a holistic approach to assessment.

2.2 Collateral information

The wider environment in which families and children function may provide the social worker with crucial information in support of a holistic assessment of families at risk. The social worker therefore needs to obtain collateral information from significant others in the environment of a specific case in order to acquire comprehensive information that will lead to a better understanding of the child and family system. Collateral contacts can include relatives, friends, teachers, neighbours, physicians and other persons who have insight into the lives of the client system (Hepworth et al., 2006).

The social worker should however keep in mind the nature of the relationship between the client system and the source of collateral information. The perspectives of collateral sources could influence the information they provide and thus also the assessment (Hepworth et al., 2006). Furthermore, it is essential to take into account ethical considerations whenever collateral sources are approached to gain more insight and understanding of the family system. In this regard, confidentiality and transparency are seen as crucial ethical considerations. To protect the family's confidentiality and to maintain transparency, the initiation of contact with collateral sources should be handled with caution (DePanfilis & Salus, 2003). Failure to consider ethical principles when making contact with collateral sources may result in distrust and in the development of distance between the client and the social worker. This situation could culminate in damaging the partnership between the social worker and the client system, which is an important factor in open communication during the assessment process.

2.3 Partnership with the family system

The outcome of assessment is directly dependent on the social worker's efforts to develop a collaborative relationship with the child and the family members (DePanfilis & Salus, 2003). The formation of an open and honest relationship is based on the social workers' demonstration of the three core conditions essential to the helping relationship, namely empathy, respect and genuineness (Grobler & Schenck, 2009). Partnerships involve open dialogue so that clients experience that their voices are heard, their views and decisions respected, that they are informed, and that their inherent worth and dignity are recognized (Midgley,

2010). Partnerships and collaboration between the social worker and clients are regarded as a key predictor of the successful outcome of interventions with families (Pretis, 2011).

Collaboration can be defined as "a style for direct interaction between at least two coequal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work toward a common goal" (Henderson & Thompson, 2011:541). This definition accentuates that collaboration is not only voluntarily, but that it also requires parity amongst participants. That means that each participant has an equal voice in the assessment process and all contributions are valued equitably. Meaningful participation of the family in decision making creates transparency and promotes mutual accountability between the social worker and client system (Pecora et al., 2013), in which they share responsibility for the process as well as the outcome of the assessment. In short, the collaborative process, more specifically as part of the assessment process, involves shared goals and two-way communication in a joint activity.

Developing a helping relationship with children and families involved in the assessment of alleged maltreatment, is critical to address and limit further risks for maltreatment (DePanfilis & Salus, 2003). However, forming a partnership and helping relationship with the family may be one of the most challenging tasks for the social worker working in the context of child maltreatment as the families may not have had positive relationships with formal systems such as social services, and usually involve involuntary clients. Long and Frederico (2014) mention that clients from families at risk may be extremely cautious of social work involvement, often due to a generalized perception that social workers tend to focus on problems, rather than on strengths and support for the family.

The social worker needs to take responsibility for the success of the collaboration with the client system. Knopf and Swick (2008) suggest a number of strategies to strengthen collaboration during service delivery. These strategies include discovering the strengths and capacity of families, understanding the needs of families, and involving parents in decision making processes throughout the process of service delivery. A social worker who approaches the client system with genuine care, respect, acceptance and understanding are better able to lower clients' resistance and help clients to build their inherent capacities (Corey, 2013). This approach supports collaboration between the social worker and the client system as opposed to a scenario where the social worker provides all the answers and therefore denies the existing strengths and capacities of families.

2.4 *Strengths-based perspective*

A strengths-based perspective refers to the belief of the social worker that every person, family or community possesses certain strengths, knowledge, skills and resources that need to be considered during the assessment (Zastrow, 2003). A focus on strengths implies that the social worker does not only focus on presenting problems or risks, but rather utilise existing strengths to address problems and empower people (Hepworth et al., 2006). Assessment should thus not have a narrow focus by concentrating exclusively on risks as the main aspect, but should adopt a comprehensive consideration of the risks, needs, strengths and resources of a particular family (Wilson et al., 2008). Trevithic (2012) emphasises that a strengths perspective will assist the social worker to look for both strengths and weaknesses that will facilitate a process through which individuals and families are enabled to rediscover their resilient characteristics.

The inherent strengths of people are not always apparent. The social worker needs to empathetically search for hidden strengths and capacities by collaborating extensively with the child and all significant others in the child's context (Midgley, 2010). Rogers (1987 as cited in Grobler & Schenck, 2009) reminds us that the social worker can never be the all-knowing authority in the lives of others. By not acting as the all-knowing authority in other people's life worlds means that the social worker rightfully allows the child or others involved to give a "glimpse of what is going on inside his or her private world" (Grobler & Schenck, 2009:18). Although it is important to listen to the views of all involved, the social worker should ensure that the well-being of the child is always at the centre of the assessment process.

2.5 *A child-centred focus*

The primary focus of assessment should always be the safety and well-being of the child. Globally, as well as in the South African context, the child's best interests is always of paramount importance and must be applied in all matters concerning the care, protection and well-being of the child (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996; the Children's Act 38 of 2005; Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, 1989; Secretary General of the African Union, 1990). Within a holistic assessment it may be that the social worker tends to focus mainly on the wider issues and problems and as a result lose the primary focus on the child.

Further, a child-centred focus implies the full participation of the child during the assessment process. The South African Children's Act 38 of 2005 (Section 10) stipulates that "Every child that is of such an age, maturity and stage of development as to be able to participate in any matter concerning that child has the right to participate in an appropriate way and views expressed by the child must be given due consideration." The right of the child to express his or her views is also recognised in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Organisation of the African Union, 1999) as well as in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, thus enabling children to have a voice (Conley, 2010).

The child-centred approach to work with children, as proposed by Landreth (in Thompson & Henderson, 2007), can enable social workers to facilitate child participation and to maintain a child-centred focus during the assessment process. This approach proposes the following for the social worker:

- To have a genuine interest in children,
- To base work with the child on a warm caring relationship,

- To accept the child unconditionally,
- To promote a sense of safety and permissiveness in the relationship to allow the child the freedom to explore and express,
- To maintain sensitivity for the feelings of the child,
- To believe in the child's capacity to contribute to the assessment process, and
- To follow the pace of the child.

A child-focused and child-centred approach to assessment is based on knowledge and consideration of the developmental level of the child. This statement is supported by DePaniflis and Salus (2003:11) who indicated that successful assessment of a child refers to the task of the social worker to take "into account which interventions are effective with a specific child or family problem in a specific environmental setting and at a particular developmental stage." The Department of Health, London (2000:11) elaborates on this statement by indicating that "plans and interventions should be based on a clear assessment of the developmental progress and difficulties a child may be experiencing and ensure that planned action is timely and appropriate in terms of the child's developmental needs."

Ultimately, all decisions resulting from the assessment should take into account the principle of the best interests of the child as stipulated in the Children's Act 38 of 2005 (Mbokhazi, De Villiers, Pretorius, & Kotze, 2012). In the context of this article, the principle of the best interests of the child can be summarized as follows: the right of the child to grow up in a stable environment, in which parents have the capacity to provide for the care and protection of the child according to the child's age, maturity and stage of development, as well as ensure the optimal physical, intellectual, emotional, social and cultural development of the child.

2.6 Evidence-based practice

The central aim of evidence-based practice is that professionals should base their practice on skills and techniques that have empirical evidence to support their efficacy. These practices can be empirically analysed as the most effective and can be widely implemented in a specific field. Norcross, Hogan, and Koocher (2008 as cited in Corey, 2013) suggest that evidence-based practice involves three main pillars, namely that it is grounded in research, that it relies on expertise, and that it takes into account the characteristics, culture and preferences of the client. In order to work evidence based, it is thus essential that social work practice should be rigorously evaluated for its effectiveness, rather than relying only on the social worker's professional judgment and expertise (Midgley, 2010). In terms of the assessment of the child at risk, evidence-based practice is critical for social workers to be regarded as accountable in service delivery.

In the context of the assessment of children at risk, the Department of Health, London (2000) advises that evidence-based practice requires the following from social workers:

- Utilising knowledge from research and practice on the needs of children and families in a critical manner,
- Systematic documentation of information that has been gathered on a case during the assessment process, such as important dates, sources of information and critical incidents as identified by the child, family and other resource of information,
- Being open to the views of children and families involved in the assessment,
- Continuously monitoring the effectiveness of interventions and, if necessary, modifying the interventions accordingly, and
- Developing practice wisdom by evaluating the outcomes of the social workers' interventions on a continuous basis.

Professional judgement which requires critical reflection, a solid theoretical knowledge base and professional supervision, together with evidence-practice form the foundation for effective assessment of children at risk (National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators, 2009).

3. Conclusion

There is consensus amongst professionals who work in the field of child protection that the assessment of the child at risk is a complex task that requires specific competencies and accountability. Although the availability of assessment tools can greatly assist the social worker in the task of assessment, it is recognised that the assessment of children at risk goes beyond the mechanical implementation of these tools. This implies that the quality and effectiveness of the assessment process also relies on the manner in which the social worker conducts the assessment. The authors are of the opinion that overlooking relevant ethical principles that underlie the assessment process will sabotage the effectiveness of assessment. Ethical principles can guide social workers through complex situations such as alleged child maltreatment.

This article focused on a number of critical principles that the authors identified to be especially relevant to the assessment of children at risk. It is recommended that social workers working in the field of child protection need to be made aware of the significant role that such principles can play in enhancing the effectiveness of the assessment, while mitigating the potential harmful effects of the assessment process on the child and the family.

The principles related to the assessment of the child at risk are not only relevant to social workers working in the field of child protection, but is also of importance for academic staff who are involved in the training of social workers. They have the responsibility to ensure that the importance of these principles, are highlighted during training by including it in the curriculum that focuses specifically on the field of child protection. Furthermore, a clear protocol for the implementation of safety and risk assessment, including the underlying principles, need to be captured in relevant policy documents. The National Department of Social Development in South Africa has indicated plans to include such a protocol in the regulations pertaining to the Children's Act 38 of 2005.

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