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# Lost identities and the need for a Framework for Intervention

A paper by:

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the UK the public discourse on separated families is rich with the stereotypes of 'deadbeat dads' and 'obstructive mums'. It is the author's view that these stereotypes are also common in public service social work with families, in part encouraged by uncritical approaches to assessment perpetuated by mandated tools such as the *Framework for Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (DH, 2000), the *Common Assessment Framework* (2005) and the *Integrated Children's System* (2005). There are continuing concerns about the quality of assessments and that good practice in this regard is inhibited by managerialist and bureaucratic approaches.

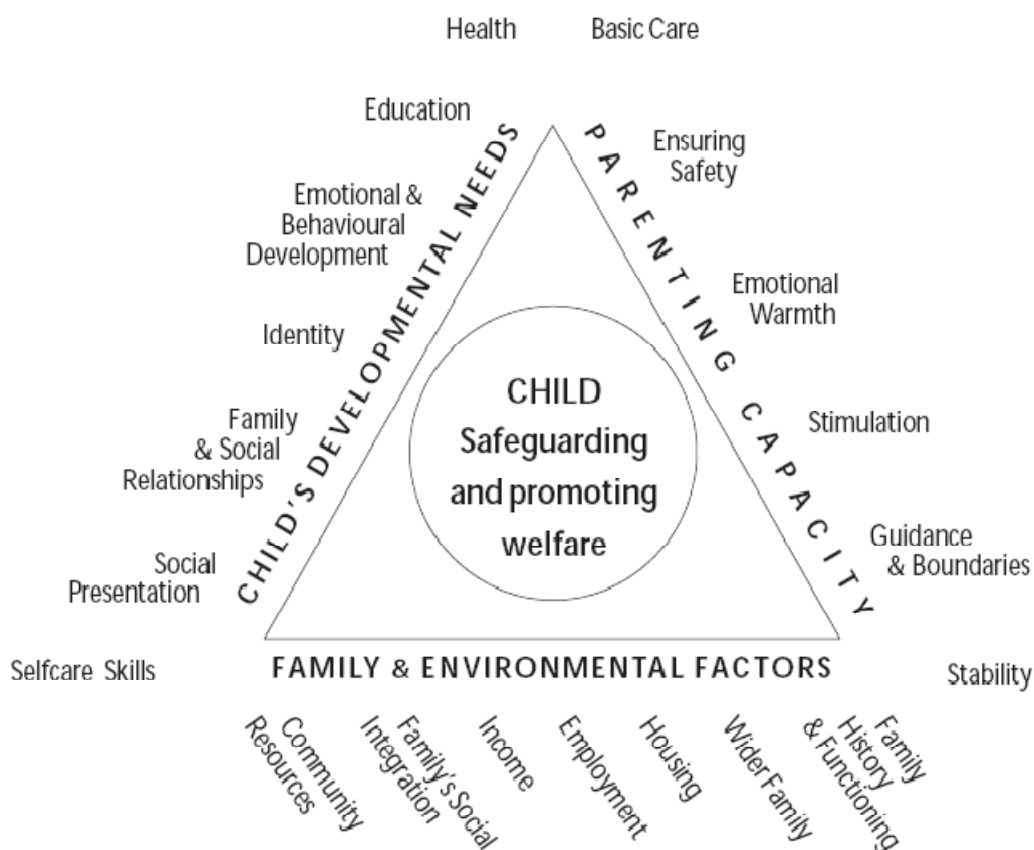
One negative outcome of this, particularly for children in contested contact proceedings, is denied familial and cultural experiences and lost identity. The myth of the 'deadbeat' and 'obstructive' parent means that many non-resident parents are anonymous in practitioner's minds and records, not helped as many children's stories are reduced to a 'cut and paste' approach to assessment. Such anonymity means that possibilities offered by the non-resident parent's family, culture and community are denied and unavailable to the child.

The authors believe that a *Framework for Intervention* is necessary of which assessment would be one part. This paper critiques contemporary public social work practice with children and their families in the UK and explores the possibilities of better outcomes for children offered by Framework for Intervention.

## Glossary

### Framework for Assessment of Children in Need their Families

Also known as the 'Assessment Framework' or the 'Framework' (both used throughout this paper) this ecological model of assessment is mandated and is therefore the foundation for most statutory social work practice in England. Based on a triangle the framework is implemented through a series of tools designed to take the practitioner through each of the identified areas before making a judgement about a child's needs. The framework is child centred and interdisciplinary in approach.



(DH, 2000: 17)

### Common Assessment Framework (CAF)

CAF reinforces the inter-disciplinary nature of assessment in child welfare work and was introduced in the wake of concerns following the death of Victoria Climbié. It is a shared assessment and planning framework for use across all children's services,

not just social work, and is focused on children with additional needs with the aim of early identification of needs. As such it may be used with children who might not otherwise be involved with social work and therefore subject to an assessment using the Assessment Framework (children with complex needs). It is used to ensure effective inter agency working and communication in assessment and involves the use of a lead professional who may not be a social worker. Like the Assessment Framework CAF utilises standardised recording tools.

### **Integrated Children's system (ICS)**

ICS is based upon the dimensions of the Assessment Framework and as such is seen as 'an applied conceptual framework' for the assessment of children. In effect it is an electronic tool for recording and managing information from an assessment using the framework.

## Introduction

The General Household Survey for 2007 undertaken by the UK Office for National Statistics shows that twenty-three percent of families with dependent children in the UK were lone parent families, of these twenty percent were lone mothers (ten percent categorised as single, six percent divorced and four percent separated) and three percent lone fathers. This constitutes six percent of the twenty four million, seven hundred thousand households in the UK or approximately one and a half million lone parent families with dependent children. In addition there are approximately seven hundred and fifty thousand step families with dependent children, eighty six percent or six hundred and forty five thousand of which have a child (ren) from the woman's previous relationship(s) (ONS, 2009).

Although it isn't possible to extrapolate from the ONS data the numbers of children and families for who contact is an issue some insight into contact arrangements and patterns is provided by a significant survey undertaken by Peacey and Hunt (2009) for Gingerbread, the UK charity for one parent families. Their research found that the majority of children whose parents have separated continue to live with their mother – conforming to the ONS data and previous findings, for example Trinder et al, 2002, 2005; Blackwell and Dawe, 2003 ONS, 2005; Cabinet Office/DCSF, 2008 - and that the majority of parents, seventy-one percent, reported face to face contact with the non resident parent. However a significant minority of parents, twenty-nine per cent, reported no current contact of which sixty-three percent of respondents claimed no contact whatsoever with the non resident parent since separation. A further six per cent said that the father was not aware of the child's existence (Peacey and Hunt, 2009, p.17). There are therefore a considerable number of families for who contact is an issue and it is more usually the non-resident father in these situations who does not have contact.

It is important to note that this does not assume that contact is being prevented by mothers as some fathers may choose not to exercise the contact available (Smart et al, 2005 cited by Peacey and Hunt, 2009, p.7). Nonetheless many fathers continue to complain that their contact with the child and the child's contact with the wider paternal family is obstructed (Bradshaw *et al*, 1999; Wikely, 2001) with the resident parent typically citing conflict with the non resident parent or concern for their own and/or the child's safety or welfare as the reason (Peacey and Hunt, 2009). Either of these contexts can lead to the involvement of social workers

with the family particularly if parental conflict is considered to be affecting the emotional well-being of the child (Frosch et al, 2000; Reynolds, 2001; Cummings et al, 2004) or significant harm is a consideration either through violence, drug or alcohol misuse or child abuse (Thoennes & Tjaden 1990; Penfold, 1995; Brown et al, 2000). Where there are concerns that a 'child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm' (Children Act, 1989) a social work assessment is inevitable.

Despite considerable research indicating the benefits to children of father contact (see for example, Ryan, 2000; Lamb, 2002; Flouri, 2005; Fortin et al, 2006; Dunn, 2008) and significant policy developments urging the involvement of fathers (HM Government, 2004; Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2006, 2007; Department for Children, Schools and families (DCSF), 2007; DCSF/Department of Health (DH) 2008) there are significant levels of non resident father dissatisfaction with social work intervention (Daniel and Taylor, 1999; Featherstone, 2003, Ashley et al, 2006). Details of fathers and the wider paternal family are not always fully recorded by practitioners or information may be minimal or not easily accessible, fathers are not consistently consulted during routine assessments nor invited to meetings although this improves in child protection situations or when there is the possibility of the child being looked after by the local authority (Ashley et al, 2006; Roskill et al, 2008).

Several noteworthy barriers to engagement with fathers were raised by Page et al (2008) in a report to the DCSF, these included;

- worker gender, many men find it difficult to communicate with a predominately female workforce,
- lack of time or resources to identify non-resident parents, if the resident mother refused to discuss the father's identity or whereabouts this would only be pursued by workers in the event of a safeguarding concern or the possibility of the child being looked after by the local authority,
- fear of aggression or violence and a lack of training in dealing with this,
- Stereotypes of fathers and mothers leading to negative views of father's as carers.

For a number of practitioners 'father engagement was unimportant and practice was orientated towards the most accessible parent, the mother' (Page et al, 2008, pp. 88-89). This correlates with Scourfield's (2003) findings of negative practitioner attitudes

about men including men being seen as a threat, of no use, irrelevant, as absent and dead-beat. More recently Ashley (2008) provides numerous examples where fathers have been treated less favourably to mothers, where their involvement has been minimised, where they have been excluded and their rights ignored. Utility is favoured over rights and opportunities are being lost to consider the full range strengths and resources available to the child through the direct involvement of the father and importantly the father's wider family with the potential for loss of identity and cultural mores.

That practice with fathers can have such negative outcomes raises questions about the objectivity afforded by the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (Macdonald, 2001; Horwath, 2002) and the nature of social work intervention, in particular of assessment practice, and ultimately the efficacy of the framework which after all requires practitioners to engage with 'each parent or caregiver' (DH, 2000, para 2.11, page 20) including 'fathers and father figures' (para. 2.12, page 20). Although there is some evidence that the Framework has achieved some of its aims including greater partnership with parents and carers (Clever and Walker, 2004) and when used skilfully it can have (in the broadest sense of the term) a therapeutic impact (Millar and Corby, 2006) questions remain whether the perceived benefits are as a result of routinised, behaviourist practice or through a genuine development in the understanding, values, ethics and professionalism of practitioners in developing inclusive practice? (Reid, 2007). These questions remain because the framework can be used subjectively with some groups of service user with one aspect of the triangular arrangement being weighted either positively or negatively in certain circumstances, potentially for example favouring assessment of the parenting capacity afforded by a resident mother over that of the non resident father particularly if significant harm is a concern.

Assessment is much more than a cerebral process and it can be reactive to external demands (Horwath, 2007; Littlechild and Reid, 2007; Gilligan and Manby, 2008). Practitioner views of the framework of assessment... and the accompanying Integrated Children's System include criticism of the temporal dimension of assessments, repetition and information being gathered because the system requires it, a cut and paste approach to recording that prevents a holistic view of the child and family and a high blame working environment (Munro, 2005; Bell et al, 2007; Broadhurst et al, 2009). Emotions and prejudices can affect assessments, for



example, fear of certain fathers (Smith and Nursten, 1998), where practitioners have beliefs that mothers provide better care than fathers, or where the availability heuristic - the tendency of people to take into account over other potentially relevant issues, those matters which are called to mind most readily within a situation - has influence (Middleton et al, 1999; O'Connor et al, 2006). Fear and the prevailing culture of blame both through the popular media and in the system of inspection and regulation of social work practice (Sue White, pers. comm.) are also relevant as is an approach to supervision that continues to focus on managerialist and bureaucratic requirements above others (Marsh and Triseliotis, 1996; Bradley and Hojer, 2009).

It can be argued therefore that the current framework and accompanying structures are insufficient for taking into account the range of issues relevant to an assessment and although the focus of this paper is on non resident fathers the discussion is relevant to all service users.

### **Considerations of Approach**

The incentive to consider social workers assessments of inclusive practice with fathers came from teaching and interacting with students undertaking post qualification learning. Colleagues and I were increasingly aware of recurring messages in student written and verbal reports of difficulties in engaging with and involving some fathers in assessment. Anecdotally students were confirming previous findings in the literature of fathers being absent or marginalised and as a result the opportunities afforded by fathers and wider family networks were being minimised. A significant minority of practitioners had not considered the issue of paternal normalities and culture particularly if the father was unknown, absent, difficult to work with or a risk to the child. It appeared that the rights of some fathers and children to contact were being negated despite the 'ecological' construction of the Framework for Assessment and the inclusive intentions of the Common Assessment Framework.

Consideration was therefore given to exploring practitioners approach to assessment involving situations where contact was an issue and to their understanding of fathers' rights to contact and what might impact upon realisation of those rights and subsequently the child's paternal identity and culture. A case-study (see appendix), based on an actual situation, was used to develop discussion and insight. A number of practitioners (n=33) undertaking programmes of post

qualification training or learning agreed to participate in a thematic analysis of assessment practice centred on the case study and based on their own practice experience. Subsequently a smaller group (n=12) were presented with the same case study and asked to plan for an assessment using a hypothesis tree for intervention based on the Minto Pyramid Principle (Minto, 2008) and the McKinsey Approach to Problem Solving ([www.mckinsey.com](http://www.mckinsey.com)). This latter group reported greater satisfaction in approach, were more explicit in their decision making with a wider range of hypotheses used.

A narrative approach enables the practitioner to talk individually or in groups and write of practice in the context of social, cultural and institutional influences (Gergen and Gergen, 1986; Wertsch, 1991 cited in Moen, 2006, p.59), to give voice to each participant and to the influences that shape practice. The approach fits with the demands placed on practitioners undertaking post qualification learning to critically reflect upon and discuss practice and with the narrative tradition of social work. A thematic method is useful for seeking common themes across a number of participants and events.

The idea of dialogical praxis (based on Freire, 1996) was also drawn upon. Dialogical praxis includes the notion that consciousness is developed through dialogue that illuminates both the personal and political and thus the structures and discourses that perpetuate oppression. Dialogue is key and the researcher and participant are seen as having different but equivalent wisdom (Ife, 2001, p.151). The participants worked primarily within five unitary authorities, four of which had a shared history as a larger metropolitan body. Participants from these four took part in discussions as mixed groups. The fifth was geographically distant from the others and the participants from this group therefore had a common employer.

The emerging themes resonated with the contemporary literature into statutory social work practice with fathers and ultimately led us to ask how assessment practice might be enhanced.

### **Synopsis of Findings**

Within groups one to four discussion and feedback from the case study revealed several issues of interest. The majority of the practitioners (over seventy percent in each groups) began by focussing on the concern for harm suggested in the case study and indicated an approach to their assessment that concentrated solely on

this. As such many of the practitioners rely on the presenting information without seeking to enquire into the family's history thus focussing on the child's needs as identified by the resident mother rather than on a broader needs assessment. The remaining practitioners did consider the maintenance of contact with dad to be a priority but of these only three held the potential for contact to involve the wider paternal family at this early stage.

Analysis in assessment is also revealed as narrowly focussed as the practitioners rely on practice wisdom and intuitive reasoning to dictate the assessment strategy, only four practitioners of the thirty three developed a strategy that included a number of hypotheses, for example the impact of loss, in addition to that of the impact of harm. The practitioners did not explicitly identify the empirical evidence that they rely on in developing their analysis, underpinning their reliance on intuitive reasoning. Practice wisdom is also supported in the guise of advice from legal representatives by their peers and managers.

The practitioners were supportive of the Assessment Framework but were concerned about the 'clunky' nature of the Integrated Children's System and believe that it hinders practice rather than supports it. The demands and temporal dimension of the ICS leaves practitioners with less time to spend with service users than they would otherwise like. This is exacerbated by the prevailing practice context including high levels of vacancies and absence leading to significant case loads. Only a quarter of the practitioners explicitly indicated a willingness to organise meetings et cetera at a time convenient for the father whereas over sixty percent acknowledge wariness over the father's presentation. Of these only one was male although only twenty percent of the total practitioner participants were male.

In the fifth group, who were asked to develop a hypothesis tree, the outcomes were potentially much better for the family. Not only were the practitioners much more aware of the issues that influence and constrain their practice but importantly each was able to develop a wider range of hypotheses. Whilst the issue of harm remained a concern it was also noticeable that the majority included attachment as a focus and more than fifty percent considered loss. These in particular led to more explicit consideration of contact and to the potential offered by the wider paternal family. The practitioners were also able to identify possible models and methods for intervention however the majority weren't clear about the empirical evidence to

support these suggestions. An example of a hypothesis tree is provided as an appendix.

The main issues arising from the case study are explored further below.

### **Qualified Rights – the ‘normal chaos of family law’**

It is no surprise that legislation is identified as a theme given its centrality to statutory practice and the ongoing struggle between partnership, rights, empowerment and accountability in practice (Braye and Preston-Shoot, 1997; Shardlow, 1998). The practitioners believe that they have good knowledge of the law but acknowledge some anxiety in working with the law and legal processes.

This anxiety is partly developed out of perceived conflicts and contradictions within the law, for example, s1 of the Children Act 1989 asserts that the welfare of the child is paramount but Article 3 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child expresses welfare as a ‘primary’ consideration. Whilst there is a duty to assess a child who is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm under s47 of the Children Act 1989 there is not similar statutory duty associated with children in need under s17 of that Act. A father has to do something to gain parental responsibility, a mother does not. Need and the rights of fathers, including the need and right for contact between a child and father therefore, lose emphasis. These are further undermined because of the qualifications in other national statute and international treaties, for example, The Human Rights Act 1998 confirms into UK law the European Convention of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR), Article 8 of which declares that:

*(1) Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence.*

However the conditions set out in Article 8(2) mean that the right is qualified and not absolute:

*(2) There shall be no interference by a public authority with the exercise of this right except such as is in accordance with the law and is necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security, public safety or the economic well-being of the country, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.*

Such qualification is also a feature of Article 9(3) of the UNCRC which declares that:

*States Parties shall respect the right of the child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child's best interests.*

Contact is understood by practitioners therefore as a qualified right with such qualifications within their remit to define.

However, whilst practitioners believe they have a good understanding of the law, and at a surface level they do, there is a significant decline in law knowledge not regularly used in practice (Preston-Shoot et al, 1997). Even when discussing the peculiarities of more often used statute, for example, s47 or s17 Children Act 1989 (HM Government, 1989) there is consistent inability to cite these sections verbatim and variation in understanding and interpretation of the relevant central concepts of 'significant harm' (s47) and 'need' (s17). Whilst some of this is due to the policies and thresholds of particular agencies, and it can be agreed that these are not fixed concepts, it was interesting that none of the practitioners regularly kept their legal knowledge up to date as an essential requirement of the social work role and therefore do not as a matter of course refer to case law but instead relied on lawyers for guidance and direction.

This is in part a consequence of the deemed expertise of the lawyers but also of the prevailing environment of risk aversion, practice scrutiny and regulation. In the pursuit of error free practice expertise the practitioners do not believe themselves to be adequately informed to instruct or enter into a debate with legal representatives with power subsequently vested in these representatives. This introduces an element of utility into the decision-making process as local authority legal representatives have a dual but contradictory role – to advise the practitioner but also to protect the interests of the agency (Dickens; 2004, 2006). These lawyers are also impacted upon by their own experience, values and stereotypes. The relationship between practice and law, and the extent to which practice is shaped and determined by legal frameworks (Braye et al, 2005) remains contentious. When working with any family practitioner's have a responsibility to come to a balanced decision taking into consideration the rights of the child, the rights of others, including parents, and the utility expected because of their position and role, including their own powers to intervene and the broader welfare issues (Parker,

1992; Eekelaar, 1994, Henricson and Bainham, 2005). This is a difficult balance to achieve as the factors facing the practitioner extend beyond the 'normal chaos of family law' (Dewar, 1998, p.467). Practitioners worry about accountability both within and outwith the courtroom and practice in an atmosphere of increased public hostility and scrutiny. Utility is determined not just by statute but by working practices and culture, by knowledge and skills, and the prevailing social and political priorities of the day and this does not necessarily favour positive outcomes for fathers. The tension between the Children Act 1989 and the wider rights legislation remains unresolved despite continued suggestions of the need for review (Reece, 1996; Herring, 1999; Eekelaar, 2002, Ashley et al, 2006). Practitioners are conscious of public vilification and attitudes that they themselves are a risk to society and they emphasise the knowledge, expertise and experience of lawyers and underemphasise their own. In this environment utility is accentuated over rights and this can be particularly illustrated in consideration of the concept of parental responsibility (PR).

### **Interpreting Rights - parental responsibility yes, but...**

PR is

*all the rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority which by law a parent of a child has in relation to the child and his property.*

*(section 3(1) Children Act 1989)*

It is automatically attained by mothers but, at the introduction of the Act, by fathers only if married to the mother at the time of the child's birth. This was later amended in December 2003 to include unmarried fathers as long as their name appears on the birth certificate at registration.

PR can also be attained by a father if he obtains the agreement of those who already hold PR or by court order, in effect a father has to do something to attain PR. Mothers always attain PR, unmarried father's do not.

This and other discrepancies, such as s52(9) of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (ACA) which allows that a father without PR is deemed to have consented to the placement even if he later obtains PR and objects, mean that PR is a contested if not nebulous concept, as Evans and Harris (2004, p. 885) when citing Handler (1973, p.138) point out:

*...rules, even though we often think of them as unambiguous, can contribute to the uncertainty that creates discretion. He (Handler) noted the imprecision of statute law and the inability of policy makers to make clear rules stemming from statutes. Instead, law and policy are expressed in vague phrases, which are open to interpretation, and this creates wide discretion for the interpretation or generation of policy in the absence of guidance from managers.*

Knowledge and understanding of the law have a role in practitioners' decision making in relation to PR but the respondents again indicated that they did not systematically enter into debate or actively seek out case law. As a consequence interpretation of the rights and rules pertaining to PR were influenced by practice wisdom and the prevailing working climate.

This brings into consideration the views of Lipsky (1980) concerning 'street – level bureaucrats' and their willingness and ability to make ad hoc decisions based on their own needs rather than those of the client. According to Lipsky more power afforded to the practitioner leads to broad interpretation of policy and objectives, interpretation in turn emphasises utility. Evans and Howe (2004) provide a useful critique of those who argue that discretion has been curtailed by the introduction of managerialism through the increased use of rules and regulations but also point to Dworkin's (1978) typology that includes the possibility of 'weaker' discretion or the ability of the practitioner to interpret within the rules. In discussion the practitioners reported a primary concern to adhere to the laws, rules and regulations that define PR but the propensity to interpret within those rules in light of the prevailing practice context the outcome of which is that the 'rights, powers and authority' enshrined in the definition of PR are underemphasised in favour of the 'duties and responsibilities'. As such PR may come to mean parenting capacity as enshrined by the Framework for Assessment (DH, 2000):

*While the Children Act 1989 does make reference to parental responsibility, when more fully analysed it is described as capacity – perhaps reflecting the personal relationship and sometimes fluid and externally determined element of the parenting role. It also suggests a hint of something inherent, over which the parent does not have complete control. (Henricson, 2003, p.44).*

Concern about the quality of practitioner assessment of parenting capacity have been previously raised (Budd et al, 2001; Conley, 2003) including questions about the focus and definitions used in such assessments. For example, Conley (page 16) considers parenting capacity to involve 'good enough' parenting over a sustained period. 'Parenting ability' however is the capacity to meet a child's needs over a short period or in specific circumstances. Stewart and Bond (2002) discuss the differences between parenting style and parenting practice and question the cultural relativity of some parenting assessments. Cultural relativity is problematic in that all competing views of the world are deemed to be equal (Littlechild and Reid, 2007).

Such definitions and variation in understanding of the concept of parenting are not systematically debated by the practitioners nor is guidance always available from managers in supervision despite 'definitional clarity' being fundamental to effective parenting capacity assessments (White, 2005, p.13). In addition there is also inconsistent use of the parenting assessment tools accompanying the Framework for Assessment and when they are used it appears that a tick box approach is adopted with little consideration to the relative nature of identified strengths or weaknesses (Donald & Jureidini, 2004).

There are several outcomes of this that potentially negatively affect the practitioner's work with fathers including; the lack of understanding to communicate to him explicitly what is being assessed and deficits in analysis and interpretation that favours consideration of paternal deficiencies over strengths (Farnfield, 2008) . In all the practitioners' approach to parenting reflects the 'surface-static' model of parenting identified by Woodcock (2003), that is, understanding of parenting is at a 'surface' level and the intrinsic characteristics of fathers is 'static'.

### **Father's as risk and the nature of the parental relationship.**

A father's risk to or ability to protect a child is of central concern to practitioners undertaking an assessment of parenting (Woodcock, 2003). Indeed, despite the plethora of evidence of the benefits to a child of father involvement much of the contemporary social work discourse has continued to concentrate on fathers as a risk (Clapton, 2009). Scourfield's (2003) findings that the predominant construction of men as a threat continues to resonate and many practitioners continue to adopt an approach that is wary or at least hesitant of fathers. Research, of course does not



straightforwardly conclude that perpetrators are likely to be fathers. In addition to being influenced by such discourse practitioners are also influenced by a working environment that is more readily orientated towards mothers (Ghate et al, 2000; Moran et al, 2004), the resistance or aggression of some fathers (Ryan, 2000), and by their own experience of fathers (O'Hagan and Dillenburg, 1995; Daniel and Taylor, 1999; Ghate et al, 2000). Practitioners are also likely to use common sense reasoning devices when making decisions in situations involving decisions involving the likelihood of harm (Parton et al, 1997).

For some practitioners assessment of the father's capacity is affected by their wariness and perception of threat either towards the child or to themselves, exacerbated by a lack of departmental or managerial guidance or training on how to deal with fathers and/or aggression. Despite acknowledgement of the benefits to children of father contact, they also suggested the possibility of following the path of least resistance particularly when faced with barriers or reluctance for contact from the resident parent. Peacey and Hunt (2009, p86) found that all but one of the parents interviewed in their sample reported bad feeling or conflict with their ex partner. Almost all also reported angry exchanges or verbal abuse from them, with a few describing harassment or even violence. Given the nature of social work it is likely that the practitioner is involved with the family at a time of particular tension and or conflict thus confirming established practice wisdom and gender stereotypes. Indeed, gender stereotyping is also a feature in deciding which practitioner would undertake the assessment with some explicit expectations that when fathers were deemed aggressive or angry with workers that male colleagues would be the nominated worker or there would be a co-working arrangement.

Practitioners also find it difficult to work inclusively with both parents when one is accusing the other of harming the child. Peacey and Hunt (page 88) further found that resident and non resident parents are equally as likely (approximately 25% of the overall total) to have concerns about the welfare of a child based on a range of issues from abuse to drug and alcohol misuse to derogatory comments. On occasions practitioner support for the contact afforded to the father is determined by the deemed capacity of the mother to otherwise safeguard and promote the welfare of the child. In situations where tension, aggression, conflict or fear are present affect and the availability heuristic play a role in heightening the practitioners' perception of risk (Keller et al, 2006) which in turn increases the likelihood that partnership is

based upon the power, duties and utility of the practitioner rather than equity and empowerment. The significant level of father dissatisfaction is not indicative of effective partnership and points to continuing deficits in practice despite the introduction of the Framework for Assessment.

### **Intuition and Analysis – the Value of a Framework for Intervention**

It is already evident from the discussion above that involvement may be minimal or non-existent, never mind 'genuine' and that inclusivity elusive. As an ecological model the Framework for Assessment... lacks substance as it does not include a practitioner domain to consider the impact of such issues as preferred practice method, mores and values on practice. Another of the criticisms of the Framework is that it is too prescriptive (Corby et al, 2002), and does not encourage the practitioner to include in the assessment all of the potentially relevant features within a situation, or for many non resident fathers in particular, the opportunity to define their needs and solutions within that assessment (Langan and Lindlow, 2004; Hawley et al., 2006).

In particular practitioners should be concerned whether or not their practice reflects the circumstances in which service users feel genuine partnership and empowerment, including:

- When honesty and trust has been developed
- Through open and clear communication
- Through genuine involvement in the process
- When empathy and genuine concern is evident
- When practice is accountable – enabling the service user to challenge what is said and written.

(Millar and Corby, 2006, pp887-899)

A framework is required that recognises both the competing and conflicting demands facing practitioners and that enables them to be explicit about their practice whatever their level of knowledge or competence. Such a framework exists in New Zealand where three sets of philosophical perspectives - child-centredness, family led and culturally responsive, and strengths and evidence based – are interwoven with three phases of practice – assessment and engagement, finding solutions, and securing safety and belonging (Connolly, 2007, p.829). Importantly in her discussion

of the New Zealand framework Connolly also provides a series of trigger questions for practice to ensure that the philosophical perspectives are interwoven through each phase of the intervention, these are not repeated here but were considered to be useful by the practitioners in supporting their analysis. However, as with the Framework for assessment the New Zealand framework is insufficient of itself without appropriate tools that make explicit the practitioner's thinking and reasoning, both intuitive and analytical, for pursuing a particular model or method of intervention. This is much more than a tool for recording information but rather a tool that also aids analysis of information.

A noticeable feature of the approach to assessment of the practitioners in groups one to four is their reliance on intuitive reasoning and practice wisdom with little evidence of the use of analytical reasoning, for example, through explicit reference to empirical research or the development of more than one hypothesis. Analytic reasoning is characterised as 'a step-by-step, conscious, logically defensible process' (Hammond, 1996, p.60). Intuitive reasoning typically means the opposite: 'a cognitive process that somehow produces an answer, solution or idea without the use of a conscious, logically defensible, step-by-step process' (Hammond, 1996, p.60). He further comments that:

*No one can read through the literature of social psychology from the 1960s through the 1980s without drawing the conclusion that intuition is a hazard, a process not to be trusted, not only because it is inherently flawed by 'biases' but because the person who resorts to it is innocently and sometimes arrogantly overconfident when employing it ( p88).*

His argument however is not that intuitive reasoning should be expunged and that analytical reasoning favoured but that each should be employed as part of a continuum. This idea is supported by Munro (1999) who acknowledges the use of intuition and the effect this has on practice:

*[Practitioners] resort to taking shortcuts because of the sheer volume of relevant material... And professionals with heavy caseloads and limited time can easily feel overwhelmed by the range of potentially important details to consider when assessing a family. They tend, therefore, to be selective in the information they use but the way they select is biased. They tend to use the*

*facts that come most readily to mind. The way memory works means that these are not necessarily the most relevant (page 17).*

If used solely intuitive reasoning can be criticised for its implicitness, low level theorising, subjectivity, inconsistency and biases towards the emotive and availability heuristic (Kahneman and Frederick, 2002). Practice of this nature does not favour inclusive practice yet it is a consistent feature of the practitioners approach to assessment using the case study. There is dissonance between the practitioners' skills and knowledge in analysis. Concurrently the practitioners are required to use a framework and electronic system of recording that is built upon technical-rationality. Dissonance is also evident in their practical use of ICS (completion of the required recordings means that an assessment is completed) and its intended use as an analytical tool.

A hypothesis tree is one method of demonstrating explicit reasoning in analysis with the potential for the practitioner to develop a number of hypotheses thus increasing the likelihood of a wider range of outcomes that could both better inform and involve the father. Comparative hypotheses are also important in developing depth and rigour with analysis (Sheppard et al, 2001) and in enabling evaluation of approach by service users, peers, supervisors and the practitioner. The practitioner is much more likely to seek empirical research and less likely rely on only one source for information – both current issues in assessment (Cleaver et al, 2008) Practitioners using the hypothesis tree found themselves being open to a wider range of ideas and more secure in explaining and defending their decision making. They were also more likely to consider at least the need for contact between the children, their father and the wider paternal family and network.

## **Summary**

There are obvious limitations to this study. There were limited numbers of practitioners involved largely from a common geographical area and involving the practitioners was opportunistic insofar as they were undertaking programmes of study or professional development, care should be exercised when generalising from such a sample. The exercise was exploratory and based upon a single case study rather than actual practice. The case study was also focussed on a particular situation at a particular time in the intervention.

Despite the obvious limitations of the discussions the study does provide some useful insight into assessment practice. There are some keenly held beliefs about the Framework for Assessment, the Integrated Children's System and some fathers. The majority of practitioners are exceptionally hard working and concerned to uphold the values and ethics of social work in the face of unremitting public and political scrutiny and a system of regulation that values bureaucratic outcomes above the integrity of the relationship within social work. The fact that many fathers remaining dissatisfied with the interventions of social workers suggests inadequacies in current practices and approaches including those for assessment. Whilst there are contributing factors that are beyond the immediate remit of individual practitioners to control, such as contradictions within the law, these factors are not being mediated by supervision and support of sufficient quality. It is notable that the Inquiries into tragic child deaths in England continue to highlight supervision as a concern. However not all of the factors effecting assessment practice are external to the practitioner and knowledge and understanding, practice wisdom, analytical capabilities and the self all impact upon assessment practice. These factors are not recognised within the current framework suggesting the need for something different. Whilst practitioners appreciate the structure and ecological nature of the framework they continue to confuse the collection of data with the analysis and critical enquiry necessary for assessment. There is error in assuming that following the guidance for the Framework for Assessment ensures a quality assessment (Crisp et al, 2007).

Since the introduction of the Framework for Assessment, the Integrated Children's System and the Common Assessment Framework practitioners have become increasingly concerned about the issue of time limits to complete assessments. This temporal dimension does not easily lead to inclusive assessments nor create a foundation for robust partnership (Bell et al, 2007; Broadhurst et al, 2009). Indeed this situation is exacerbated as social workers continue to carry child protection caseloads up to twice the limit recommended by the Laming Inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié (BBC, 2009).

The Assessment Framework emphasises the technical-rational approach of evidence based practice (Taylor and White, 2001; Horwath, 2007) but assumptions are made about the currency and relevance of the practitioner's evidence base and indeed of the practitioner's understanding of relevant theory. Featherstone's survey of the social work curriculum in the UK identified that father's were not a priority

within the curriculum, fathers do not figure in the legal component of nearly half of courses, gender was not emphasised and that pedagogic practices concentrated on “what” to think rather than “how” to think (Featherstone, 2008, p. 62). Clapton in his analysis of social work’s body of knowledge ‘discovered... that in key literature, policy and educational texts... implicit and explicit negative messages about fathers can be found’ (Clapton, 2009, p.19). It is therefore unsurprising that the participant practitioners expressed a need for more training and learning.

The framework also assumes truthfulness on everyone’s behalf and a level playing field in terms of knowledge, skills and competence (Littlechild and Reid, 2007). The question of balance between the autonomous professional and the mores and practices required as an employee or agent of the state is understated. Whilst the professional continues to exercise discretion within the rules it is clear that the professional autonomy of the practitioner has been affected by greater regulation and accountability. The argument is not that accountability is unwelcome but that the elements used to measure outcomes should recognise the complexities of the social work task.

An emphasis on the technical-rational approach risks ignoring the practice-moral domain that illuminates how personal and professional experiences and values impact upon practice (Taylor and White, 2001; Horwath, 2007). The practitioner’s own experiences can affect judgment; so that if someone has learnt certain dynamics and ‘normalities’ within their own family of origin, or from the organisational culture, these can bias their practice and decisions about what is normal or acceptable (Connolly et al, 2006). Assessment practice that is reactive to purely external demands, rather than practice that is proactive and responsive to the needs of fathers, and takes into account biases in individual workers, can lead to information being collected that suits practitioner hypothesis or unconsciously held ideas. This can lead to a distorted analysis and poor judgement making (Milner and O’Byrne, 1998). Thus where parental conflict is an issue many practitioners may concentrate on the pathology, in particular, of the father that in turn exacerbates negative perceptions between the worker and the father thus reducing the potential for partnership and constructive involvement (Scourfield, 2001, 2003). For some practitioners the fact that arguments are taking place becomes more important than understanding the debates and themes within those arguments.

Professional judgements involve the interpretative use of knowledge, practical wisdom, a sense of purpose, appropriateness and feasibility (Eraut, 1994, p. 49). Whilst the participant practitioners believe that their practice is evidence-based the majority are unclear of the research and theories informing that evidence base, rather there was a reliance on practice wisdom, on previously held beliefs (including the stereotype of father as risk, mother as carer, father as absent or uncooperative) and previous experience. This is obviously problematic as practice wisdom involves interpretation and intuitive reasoning, “a cognitive process that somehow produces an answer, solution or idea without the use of a conscious, logically defensible, step by step process” (Hammond 1996 p60). Intuitive reasoning is better suited to the temporal dimension of assessment in the UK but the reliability or validity of decisions may be diminished, the decision making process is hidden, it is not objective, it generates only low level theories and it often carries with it a strong psychological sense of feeling right.

There is currently a wide range of tools available to social workers as an aid in the collection and collation of information. In child care social work, deriving from the assessment framework there are Initial and Core Assessment forms, Assessment and Action Records, and the Assessment of Family Strengths and Competences materials, among others. In seeking to ensure that all relevant information is recorded and that nothing of importance is missed, the collection of information has become systematised and structured. The inherent danger is that social workers come to see the completion of the assessment pro forma as the end of the assessment process. This is particularly likely where the tools attempt to combine the process of collecting and analysing information, and do not allow for the unique circumstances of a situation to be fully examined. It is always the case that the completion of an assessment pro forma subsequently requires analysis of the information to understand its meaning and the plans and actions necessary for a successful outcome. Social workers can become constrained in a tick box, check list mentality (Coulshed and Orme, 2006). For example, in the Assessment Framework while being very comprehensive, and helpful for the development and achievement of children within most situations (including the great majority of children in need, it does not adequately address issues of power and abuse within families where child protection is an issue (Littlechild and Bourke 2006).

The outcome for the children described in the case study and anecdotally for other children too, is that insufficient priority is given to the benefits for the children of father contact and as a consequence the opportunities and benefits of the wider paternal family and importantly the social and cultural dimensions of identity are significantly diluted or lost.

One answer might be to develop a Framework for Intervention that incorporates the Framework for Assessment as one aspect. The New Zealand approach discussed by Connolly (2007) illustrates how a framework can be developed that recognises the range of competing demands facing practitioners yet it is one that balances the values and principles of social work with the wider prevailing political and professional demands. However what must also be a feature of any framework is an assessment process that is both explicit and utilises the features of both intuitive and analytical reasoning. Using a hypothesis tree enables the practitioner to develop comparative hypotheses and thus the potential for the assessment that is both more rigorous and more in depth. Crucially this allows for greater examination of decision making and reasoning and therefore for accountability.

As a hypothesis tree also requires the practitioner to consider more than one option there is reassurance that practice moves away from the notion of there being a right answer to a problem, involving practice wisdom and dilution of the rights of some service users, to one which is the 'least likely to be wrong' (Sheppard et al, 2001, p881) and more inclusive. Of course hypothesis trees have their limitations, in particular they do not prioritise issues or concerns nor do they prevent the use of stereotypes or the impact of personal mores. However the explicitness generated through their use enables the practitioner to consider both why and how questions and to share their ideas with other professionals thus enable greater scrutiny of the factors influencing practice.

Overall the use of hypothesis trees within a Framework for Intervention is positively reviewed. In the study it was more likely for the practitioner to identify contact as an issue and for the possibilities offered by the non-resident parent's family, culture and community to be considered.



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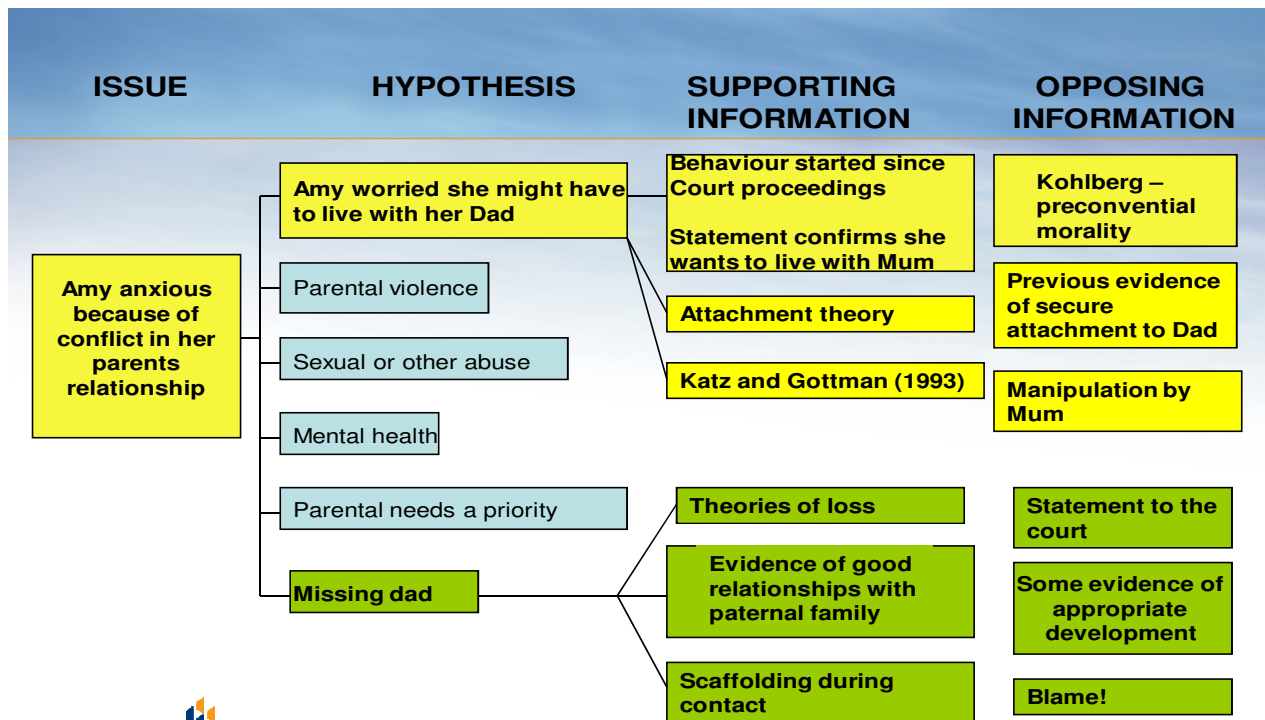
## **Appendices**

### **Case study**

Peter and Sarah had been married for five years before their relationship failed, they separated and subsequently divorced. There are two children, Sally (11), Sarah's child (Peter's stepchild), and Amy (5). At the time of the separation there was agreement that the children would live with their mother on the understanding that Peter would have frequent and unhindered contact, and this worked well for over a year. However on the first contact, following an argument between them, Sarah informed Peter that the children were ill and would not be coming to stay. Over the next year the relationship between Peter and Sarah continued to deteriorate with contact with the children being used as a weapon. Contact between the children and Peter was minimal or non-existent for months on end. Illness was a frequent reason cited and the children also missed periods off school. Peter applied for a contact order and proceedings began. Sarah refused contact during the proceedings, alleging that the children were being adversely affected by the stressful situation. The court eventually agreed a contact order and Peter saw the children again, but only briefly as Sarah made a serious allegation against him and an investigation began.

The previous social worker, a female colleague, found Peter's presentation and behaviour challenging. He has a physical presence and is articulate and knowledgeable about child development.

# Hypothesis Tree



Educating tomorrow's professionals

# The New Zealand Practice Framework (Connolly, 2007, p828)

