CHAPTER 1 — What Is Social Work Assessment?

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CHAPTER OUTLINE

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to

- understand the role of assessment as part of social work practice
- describe similarities and differences between conventional approaches and Indigenous perspectives on assessment and how they are applied
- explain how assessment can be applied when working with individuals, families, groups and communities
- examine the components of a w/holistic approach to assessment and how they can be useful in social work assessment
- describe how including features such as nature, land, and place serve to extend assessment practice

Seeds of Thought

Social work needs to include an understanding of how people's life experiences are related to land and other features of their physical environment, in addition to the social environment. We must also recognize that spirituality and creativity nourish people and help us all feel that we belong to the Earth and to our social and physical environments. Spirituality means believing in something greater than ourselves while creativity is the ability to use imagination and produce something new. Everyone has the ability to be creative and to feel a sense of being surrounded by a greater being.

Our Connection to the Content

Tuula Heinonen. Much of my practice, teaching, and research is in the field of health. I have also had international experience in which I learned a great deal about social work in health care, the way health and well-being are understood in non-Western and Western cultures, ideas and practices in social work. This background has shaped my views on assessment and practice in social work.

Amanda Dawne Burton. My practice, research, and social work has been primarily in the child welfare and mental health/well-being fields. As a Two-Spirit Métis woman, I am partial to Indigenous ways of practice and assessment, although I do use Western methods and tools as well. Seeing people, and helping people see themselves, within a larger context has greatly enhanced my social work skills and practice.

Laura Taylor. Laura Taylor's life was committed to social work education and practice. She was a strong support to students, particularly those who were starting out in the field. Laura's areas of interest were many but primarily aging, health, disability, and generalist social work practice. Her depth of knowledge about social work assessment and practice was developed over her long career.

Introduction

In social work, *assessment* generally refers to a process of learning through collecting information, making observations, checking information from different sources, and synthesizing all the information to develop goals and actions. Assessment is an integral part of social work practice, although it is often viewed as a separate step. Information is shared, and the relationship between clients and social workers is negotiated. The process involves both parties and includes the purpose, expectations, time frame, and tasks for each. The different ways of viewing assessment in social work are discussed below. Although it may be described as a form of appraisal or

evaluation of information, in social work practice, assessment includes a relationship between social workers and clients and a process of engagement involving respect, concern, commitment, and trust.

An Indigenous View: Assessment as a "Sacred Responsibility"

While assessment is often perceived as a clinical and mechanical process, we offer the approach of assessment within social work practice as a "sacred responsibility" (Robinson, 2021), not in a religious sense but as the most personal and intimate form of research, in which the assessor recognizes the honour of hearing and holding another's story and is committed to walking with the person as they move forward in their journey. The manner in which we enter into an assessment shapes the entire process, influencing the relationship between the assessor and client, the quality and depth of information gathered, and the outcomes and recommendations. Try to recall a time when you were asked to be vulnerable and share intimate information about yourself. How would you want your story to be held? Empathy and respect are the basis of the assessment process.

When appropriate, an Indigenous assessor should demonstrate traditional Indigenous helping values in their work, which may include self-disclosure, non-hierarchical relationships, a focus on healing, the use of ceremony, storytelling, and the ethic of non-interference (Hart, 2002). As Wilson (2008) asks, "Do we want to give more strength to the connections that are building our forms into that which we can see as beautiful and positive, or give strength to connections that are detracting us and moving us away from the form we would like to take?" (p. 79).

A settler perspective on assessment includes some similar values for the practice of social work, but others are quite different. Most practitioners would draw on and apply a social work code of ethics (e.g., Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005; National Association of Social Workers, 2021), which sets out core values, ethical principles, and practice standards. Values are interpreted and applied within different situations by individual social workers. Chapter 3 discusses the topic of values and ethics in greater detail.

Assessment Includes Practising Reflection

Entering into the "sacred responsibility" of assessment requires that the assessor acknowledges their self-location (factors such as race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, gender expression, socioeconomic status, and ability) and subjectivity (Absolon & Willett, 2004) and how these impact their assessment work. This includes recognizing social location in terms of the power differential between the assessor and the client, and addressing the impact of "socio-political attitudes and personal and professional biases" on their work (Strega & Eski Esquao, 2009, p. 142). It is essential to recognize that "there is no such thing as objectivity … a lens and value base through which one views the world is inherent … it is just that some of us are upfront about this, while others pretend that this … does not exist" (Baskin, 2011, p. 223).

Social work assessment, we believe, requires serious reflection to fully understand the often-complex and shifting situations of our clients. If social workers do not reflect on what they do in their practice, they could reproduce oppression. Critically reflecting on and questioning our practice and learning better ways to work with

practising reflection Critically reflecting on our assumptions, ideas, behaviours, and actions is important when working with people, particularly because many may have experienced discrimination, injustice, or forms of oppression in their lives. Reflection helps us to question ourselves and to become aware of our biases and prejudices, which we must work to confront in a profession in which social workers usually hold a degree of power over clients.

clients can lead to greater respect, concern, and care in the relationship and in social work. **Practising reflection** is important for all social work practitioners. Coggins (2016) refers to the individualized worldview model, which can help us understand "the multi-faceted lives of individuals embedded in multiple systems" (p. 82). The model identifies a large group of factors that affect a person's life. Some of these are health status, age, life experiences, socioeconomic status, family of origin, political views or beliefs, physical environment, and more. The factors can be useful for social workers as a tool for assessment. This individualized model can also help social workers to understand their own worldviews and to reflect on which factors might shape how they approach their work in assessment and practice. Some factors in the individualized worldview can be considered in detail while others may be less relevant for a particular client situation or for the current purpose. For example, the physical environment factor includes emotional and/or spiritual attachments to the land, as well as numerous characteristics related to where a person lives (e.g., its safety and available natural spaces), including both adverse and beneficial features (Coggins, 2016). Exploring this factor may be important when land and place are significant in the history and current situation of a person. The individualized worldview as an assessment guide can provide a flexible tool for different populations and circumstances, as well as for different fields of social work practice.

Other tools have also been developed and adapted for use in social work practice to understand different dimensions of people. For example, a social worker's own experiences with power and privilege can be assessed using the "flower of power," initially developed by Enid Lee (1985). It is particularly helpful in social work education for shedding light on how holding power and privilege, and being affected by the power and privilege of others, influences people. The flower of power is also helpful for students to complete to understand the nature and effects of power in their lives. The flower of power is an image of a flower with long petals. An inner circle of petals depicts different forms of social oppression in society, such as ability/disability, class, sex, race, ethnicity, age, and others. The outer petals are left blank for an individual to write how these forms of oppression have affected them personally. Bishop (2002) explains that this tool is useful for discussing who holds power in our society and the effects on those who do not. After individuals have completed their assessments of power and privilege using the flower diagram, it is helpful for them to discuss what they experience in relation to power and privilege in their lives. A group discussion helps in understanding where individuals and groups are located. Such discussion, although a difficult process, can lead to meaningful sharing of experiences, deep insights, and ideas for change.

Function and Purpose of Assessment in Social Work Practice

In social work assessment, the professional has in mind or on paper a list of questions to ask and is expected to chart the answers from the client. The social worker may lead or guide the process, but clients or users of social work services provide accounts and views from their perspective. It is imperative that the social worker includes the client's own ideas in the assessment process. The practice of assessment with clients confers power on social workers as they determine outcomes, the interventions put in place, and the resources provided. Consider a social worker completing an assessment in the child protection field or completing a pre-sentencing report in the justice field: decisions

made can result in children being removed from parents or determine for how long someone's freedom will be taken from them. These are life-changing outcomes; social workers need to be mindful of the power they hold and not abuse it (Marten, 2010).

Assessment can be seen as the first phase of practice, but it is usually a process in which circumstances, situations, and information can change over time. It is often an ongoing process that might even continue until the practice relationship between client and social worker ends.

Notes on the Historical Development of Assessment

Mary Richmond, a pioneer and founder of social work in the western traditional form, began her work with the Charity Organization Society. From her observations, research, and work experience, she developed and wrote about social work assessment in *Social Diagnosis* (1917). Richmond showed how clients' surroundings influenced their abilities to cope with their physical and social environments, using a circle diagram depicting six sources of power available to people, located in the household, in clients themselves, in the neighbourhood, in the wider social network, in civil service agencies, and in private and public organizations. It is possible to see how her work foreshadowed systems theory in social work (Social Welfare History Project, 2011).

Richmond (1917) also explained over a century ago how to use problem solving drawn from casework. Her model of problem solving was further developed by Perlman in 1957 (Mordach, 2011). This method describes steps to be followed that include problem identification, assessment, establishment of goals and a contract or agreement for the work that will be done, intervention or actions, and finally, an ending or closing. During all the steps, evaluation of the process takes place and changes are made as needed (Heinonen & Spearman, 2010). Social work assessment, as seen through the lens of a problem-solving model, is the second step in the process, after identification of a person's problem and before the setting of goals and intervention. The problem-solving process reflects a conventional Western view of assessment; currently, assessment applies the strengths perspective, which examines environmental assessments and asks what strengths a person brings from their own environment (Graybeal, 2001). Indigenous writers and practitioners have contributed **w/holistic perspectives** and principles for social work (e.g., Baskin, 2011; Hart, 2002, 2009, 2010; Sinclair et al., 2009) that have challenged traditional Eurocentric social work views, values, and principles and provided important knowledge for this book. Assessment is an important part of social work practice that is improved and refined with knowledge and experience.

The Assessment Process

During the assessment process, a social worker attempts to engage a client (person or persons with a problem) to learn details about their situation. In this sense, the client provides their perception of the issue and what transpired to cause it. Clients will likely have other concerns and explanations to share, if they choose to. More than a thousand studies (in the child protection field) have shown that the quality of the relationship between the worker and the client has more impact on outcomes than does any other factor (Fairbairn & Strega, 2015). Cultivating and maintaining a positive, collaborative relationship is important in terms of reducing clients' fear of the power imbalance, obtaining the most detailed and pertinent information to help

w/holistic We have changed the spelling of the word *holistic* to *w/holistic* to emphasize the whole, as Indigenous author Kathy Absolon (2010) has done. She states that she uses the spelling *wholistic* because "wholism indicates whole as in wholistic, complete, balanced, and circular" (Absolon, 2019, p.74). We added a forward slash after the *w (w/holistic)* to combine *holistic* with *wholistic* as we view both as acceptable.

guide decision making and interventions, ensuring respectful interactions, and helping to lay a foundation for the most positive outcomes for all involved.

Reliance on a problem-solving process that begins with identifying a problem can be a barrier in developing a trusting relationship. To avoid focusing on problems too soon, a social worker needs to first listen carefully to what a client has to say about their situation, what concerns them, and how it affects them, before making any assumptions or judgments. A focus on the person's problems may be debilitating for clients. Practitioners use their skills in engagement, communication, and relationship development to learn from clients about their concerns or issues and the circumstances related to how they came about. Assessment needs to involve both social workers and clients, unless the client is not able to participate (e.g., because they are very young, have cognitive limitations, or are unwilling).

COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY

A good communicator is also a good listener. To avoid focusing on problems too soon, a social worker needs to first listen carefully and use their skills of engagement to learn about concerns or issues and the circumstances related to how they came about.

In the field of social work, it can be easy to jump to conclusions based on intake notes or referral information prepared by someone else. We often face time and resource limits and pressure to get many things done quickly. However, relying only on other professionals' opinions, assessments, and case notes can be detrimental to forming a relationship with a client. Case notes reflect one person's assessment, at a single point in time, which may or may not be pertinent to the situation at hand. After notes are on file, they remain there, regardless of current circumstances. Also consider that professionals' notes are taken as fact and granted legitimacy, regardless of the fairness or accuracy of the assessment, while the client's "experiences, perceptions and opinions are often invisible, invalidated or marginalized" (Fairbairn & Strega, 2015, p. 170). In addition to not capturing client's perceptions, documentation rarely acknowledges the impact of societal and structural factors (such as poverty, lack of resources, racism). This obfuscates the larger societal issues while focusing on "individual shortcomings," which creates an incomplete and unfair assessment of a person's situation.

The more accurate the information collected during assessment, the more prepared the social worker will be to understand clients' situations and work with them to set goals and plan for actions to be taken. An agreement or a contract is usually written that provides a plan for the work. However, creating this document is not easy if a trusting relationship has not been given time to develop, and, often, the time constraints in social work settings do not provide opportunities for social workers to get to know clients in a meaningful way. Regardless, it is the worker's responsibility and duty to maintain an open mind, approach clients with respect and care, and create an environment in which collaborative solutions can emerge. There were several times in my (Amanda's) career in which I read and/or heard from colleagues about how "problematic" and "resistant" certain clients were. While I took this information under consideration, I made a conscious effort to form my own assessments. In each case, I was able to develop a respectful and collaborative relationship with the clients, simply by listening and demonstrating empathy. Never underestimate the

importance of your attitude and approach when working with people. For better or worse, social workers draw on their own knowledge and experience to understand the information collected from the assessment process and how it can be interpreted given clients' situations. Take utmost care in what you bring into an assessment process. It can have profound consequences.

Sometimes, only a limited amount of information may be needed to assess people's situations and make decisions—for example, when determining eligibility for practical help or a service, such as a referral for a day care subsidy. Even then, if we can learn more about a person's life, it might be possible to offer additional help. In such situations, though, assessment usually produces little deep or meaningful conversation with clients. In either case, a positive approach serves both parties involved in the interaction.

Review of Conventional Approaches Used in Generalist Social Work

Assessment in social work tends to be shaped by the approach or model a social worker uses, such as a problem-solving process, ecosystems theory, the strengths perspective, structural theory, a feminist approach, Indigenous worldviews and principles, which may include a narrative method, or some other. As Badger (2021) explains in a publication of social work bibliographies, assessment in social work is not carried out only to collect and review information; it includes a "conjunction with theory to gain a better understanding of the subject of focus" (para. 1). The theory or lens used can have a significant impact on the information gathered, and the subsequent outcomes of the assessment.

These approaches and the principles and values applied to practice are explained in detail in a number of social work books (e.g., Bricker-Jenkins et al., 1991; Compton et al., 2005; Hart, 2010; Saleebey, 2013) and will not be discussed at length here, except for assessment shaped by Indigenous and strengths perspectives, which fit best with our own model of w/holistic assessment. We provide a brief explanation and critique of ecological/ecosystems theory, strengths perspective, attachment theory, and structural theory as these perspectives have some relevance to our model.

Ecological/Ecosystems Theory

Although not acknowledged as such, the ecological theory is an "infant to Aboriginal ways … the relationships between individuals, families, communities, nations and the world around them … [and] these relationships and the wholeness of the universe" (Hart, 2002, p. 34). In present-day social work practice, these views have been "taken and reinterpreted" (Hart, 2002, p. 34), resulting in a diluted imagining that first gained traction in the 1970s. In many fields of social work, an ecological (or ecosystems) framework has been adopted for practice as it helps in understanding how individuals interact, affect, and are affected by other people and institutions such as workplaces, schools, and faith-based settings; public policies and laws; and the broader environment of their nation and beyond.

According to Corcoran and Nichols-Casebolt (2004), ecological theory uses a person-in-environment perspective that incorporates social, economic, political, and cultural aspects and considers **micro, mezzo, and macro levels**. In their view, assessment using ecological theory considers factors such as the individual, family, community, social settings, networks, and the wider cultural values, laws, customs,

micro, mezzo, and macro levels Social work often refers to three (but sometimes more) levels of human interaction that loosely refer to individual and family level (micro), group and community level (mezzo), and the broader societal level (macro).

and resources. The strengths and challenges a person faces within their environment can be assessed, and appropriate interventions can be determined (Bonecutter & Gleeson, 1997). Other levels may be useful to include when considering people's relationships and interactions between them in their environments. For example, Guy-Evans (2020) describing Bronfenbrenner's ideas (1977), also included the exosystem (a person's neighbourhood and mass media) and chronosystem (social environmental change affecting a person's development, including historical events and transitions in that person's life) (Guy-Evans, 2020).

However, recent social work literature has questioned the limited view of the wider environment acknowledged in the ecological approach with its focus on person-in-environment (e.g., Dominelli, 2012; Erickson, 2018). We agree with authors such as Zapf (2009, 2010) that the physical, human-built environment and natural environment, including water, land, air, and more, have been missing. A further criticism of the person-in-environment and ecosystems approaches in practice is that they do not acknowledge power differences in social worker–client interaction—namely, that the professional holds most of the power in the situation. Other authors state that assessment should include a critical lens that acknowledges the oppression and complex reality that affects many of those with whom social workers interact (Milner & O'Byrne, 2002). Social work assessment needs to draw from the experience of social service users as they are the experts on their own situations and need to be heard. The social worker listens more than talks, acting as a facilitator who makes space for a client's story, and their experience of that story, from their own perspective.

Strengths-Based Assessment

The strengths perspective developed in social work over 30 years ago, and its tenets were described in a number of editions of books by Saleebey (1992, 1997, 2006, 2009, 2013). The strengths perspective was also discussed in relation to clinical assessment by Cowger in 1994. The perspective offered an alternative to the problem-solving process that many social workers appreciated because of its focus on how people's own strengths, capacities, and resources can be drawn on to improve their situations. Instead of doing an assessment that starts with a client's problems, or "deficit-based assessment" (Cowger, 1994, p. 264), a practitioner using a strengths-based assessment acts as a supportive catalyst who provides encouragement and assistance for people to work on change in their lives. Cowger (1994, pp. 265–266) indicates a number of guidelines for strengths-based assessment, which we believe are characteristics of all good social work practice:

1. Focus on the client's view, the meaning of their situation, and how they feel about it.

2. Learn about the client's needs and expectations in their situation.

3. Engage the client in identifying their individual and external strengths and discussing how these strengths have been helpful.

4. Practise assessment as a collaborative process to help reduce power differences between social worker and client.

5. Listen for and appreciate the uniqueness in each client.

6. View strengths that come from the person's unique qualities, features, and talents, as well as from their external resources (e.g., groups, communities, and networks with which they are associated).

7. Avoid blame.

The centrality of individual strengths and a person's own resources are highlighted in assessment and practice that use a strengths approach. Often, people will be able to draw on their own and external resources and use these to help them move beyond the difficulties they face. Encouragement and support can help to initiate the process. It should not be assumed that people's involvement with social services is due to personal failings or inability to be agents of change for themselves. We often underestimate people's capacities if we rely too much on the descriptions and interpretations of problems in client records written by others.

Criticisms of the strengths perspective include that it lacks empirical evidence regarding its usefulness; that it is grounded in neo-liberal assumptions of individual responsibility and autonomy, "blur[ring] the structural causes of social problems" (Gray, 2011, p. 8); and that it detracts from government responsibility, offloading issues onto communities and social networks. While there is value in its optimistic view of human potential, it requires a more critical look at the broader social issues (Gray, 2011). We agree that the troubles and issues faced by clients of social workers cannot be viewed solely as those of an individual. It is imperative to view each person's situation more broadly and understand that often there are structural issues that cause or exacerbate people's situations, social welfare policies that do not respond well, and social services that are inadequate or inappropriate for people's needs. In addition, funding by various levels of government for human services such as health, education, and social services are usually insufficient, and as a result, programs and services are limited. Blaming the victim (or survivor) seeking help is unjust given such circumstances.

Attachment: A Micro-Level Relationship Issue

Attachment theory is prominent in child and family assessments and focuses on the relationship between a child and the primary caregiver (usually the mother). This theory holds that the attachment between the two is indicative of future relationship styles (Nichols, 2009). Assessment centres on the caregiver's ability to nurture and protect the child (Cyr et al., 2012). If the attachment is *secure*, the child trusts that their needs will be met and sees their parent as a safe base from which they can venture out and explore their world. *Insecure* attachments occur when caregivers aren't able to meet the child's needs, resulting in disturbed attachment patterns such as *anxious-avoidant*, *resistant*, or *disorganized*. Insecurely attached children may express a variety of maladaptive behaviours, such as resisting relationships, displaying attention-seeking behaviours such as crying, whining, or acting out; or clinging excessively to the caregiver (Nichols, 2009).

Despite its frequent use in child and family assessments, attachment theory has been "widely criticized as being the textbook case of a politically conservative research programme, smuggling social norms under the cover of scientific claims to objectivity" (Duschinsky et al., 2015, p. 173) resulting in the policing of caregiving, emphasizing the role of mothers while ignoring fathers and other caregivers, and ignoring the social, economic, and political realities in our society. It also lacks cultural context for Indigenous cultures in which many caregivers are present, including mothers, fathers, extended family, and kinship networks (Neckoway et al., 2007).

Structural Social Work Theory

Structural social work theory focuses on the underlying causes of social problems and works to ameliorate their impacts on people. Lundy (2011) states that it is considered

"as a practice that acknowledges the role of social structures in producing and maintaining inequality and personal hardship and the importance of offering concrete help to those in need or difficulty" (p. 87). It gives direction to the practice of social work by providing a way forward in terms of social justice efforts and offers a moral compass to social workers (Weinberg, 2008). The goal of a structural perspective is to reduce societal inequalities, both institutionally and socially (racism and sexism, for example). Structural theory posits that the current societal arrangements provide power and privilege to the few while maintaining inequality for the many. It recognizes that individuals have too little or no power to confront broad social factors and moves away from an individual pathology approach that often blames persons who experience the effects of social issues.

The difficulties of individuals and the public issues that adversely affect them reflect a division in social work practice between meeting the needs of individuals and families and working for social change at the societal level to advocate for better human rights and social justice. Structural social work aims to address both individual needs and social justice. At the level of front-line practice, for example, social workers are encouraged to develop more egalitarian, non-hierarchical relationships with clients (Weinberg, 2008). They also need to consider how societal structures, such as race, class, age, gender, disability/ability, and others, are often unjust and oppressive and may lead to difficulties in situations that people encounter when they seek help from social service organizations (e.g., discriminatory agency practices, insufficient social assistance programs, and assumptions that frame agency policies). As well, it is also important to know about the role that internalized oppression can play for persons who have experienced oppression individually or in social systems, such as at school or work (for a detailed description of internalized oppression, see Mullaly, 2002, pp. 122–145).

One of the criticisms of structural social work theory is its failure to recognize that social workers are agents of social control and serve to uphold the dominant order in many cases. The social work field rarely has clear right and wrong decision-making situations. Often, decisions will be made by weighing positive and negative outcomes, which are likely to affect people differently and have impacts that are difficult to predict. It has also been criticized for focusing on macro issues and neglecting the micro interactions that form the basis of social work (Weinberg, 2008).

Assessment from an Indigenous Perspective

It is important to recognize and understand that there is not one group of Indigenous Peoples. There are many nations and communities with considerable differences between them (Blackstock et al., 2004). That being said, some underlying similarities differentiate Indigenous Peoples from non-Indigenous people, including values of interdependence, non-interference, and permissiveness (Baskin, 2011); a shared history of colonization; and an emphasis on extended family and kinship networks, spirituality, and ceremony. When assessing Indigenous people, it is imperative on the part of the social worker to avoid assumptions and to learn about that specific person's or family's community, values, beliefs, and practices. To do otherwise risks treating Indigenous Peoples as a monolith and losing important cultural differences. Individuals may also have differing perceptions and experiences from others in their families or communities. They may be less interested, for example, in receiving services that draw from Indigenous worldviews, practice approaches, and methods.

From an Indigenous perspective, conventional assessments are problematic for many reasons. For example, within children and family services systems, they are mother focused and disregard the importance of the father and the wider community and kinship network (Neckoway et al., 2007). Individual families are the focus of assessment, and the impact of the wider colonial system is disregarded (Kennedy-Kish et al., 2017), such as the effect of centuries of colonization and genocidal practices, including land theft, residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and ongoing colonial processes that result in poverty, racism, and the stereotyping of Indigenous mothers (Bennett & Blackstock, 2007). The importance of spirituality (Simard & Blight, 2011), ceremonial practices, Indigenous developmental milestones, discipline, and language are not considered (Muir & Bohr, 2014), and assessment tools privilege White perspectives and values and have not considered those of Indigenous populations (Choate & McKenzie, 2015).

To ensure assessment processes are appropriate for Indigenous people, both anticolonial and Indigenist perspectives are required. Hart (2009) states that an anti-colonial lens is used to 'push back' against colonizing theories and tools, and to deconstruct and critically analyze the impacts of colonialism, but further states that it is crucial to go beyond 'reacting against' the status quo (which maintains the system rather than moving beyond it). Conversely, an Indigenist perspective focuses on Indigenous rights and centres and privileges Indigenous ways of being and doing. An Indigenist perspective is "not only a stance, process and discourse; it is a way of life" (Hart, 2009, p. 34), emphasizing the relationship with the land and centring kinship roles and Indigenous history. Indigenism is locally based but has implications for Indigenous people across the globe as it highlights common values, practices, and experiences. Centring Indigenous knowledges and practices allows for the creation of relevant assessment practices and tools.

One example of an Indigenous-based assessment model is Burton's (2017) work on parenting capacity assessments (PCAs), commonly used in child protection cases. While this research focused on PCAs, the model is adaptable to other assessment purposes as well.

❚❚   PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

An Indigenist perspective, as Hart (2009) explains, centres on land and kinship relationships, as well as on a person's history. Reflecting on your experience and view of life, how and in what ways might these features be of importance to you as an individual and to your family or cultural group?

The model in Figure 1.1 illustrates both anti-colonial and Indigenist stances. Indigenous ways of knowing and being are centred (Indigenist), while the adaptations to trauma, healing, and colonial violence factors are included but are recognized as being separate from their impact on individuals, families, and communities. This acknowledges the enormous impact of colonization and the responses to colonization but separates these processes from those whom they affect to ensure that individuals, families, and communities are not being pathologized for factors that are beyond their own control (anti-colonial).

To illustrate, if you are working with a person struggling with alcohol or drug use, rather than view this issue as a personal deficit and individual issue, you could take a more w/holistic view. The person's gifts, Indigenous identity, and connections

Figure 1.1   Indigenous-Based Assessment Model

Colonial violence

Responses to trauma

Indigenous ways of
knowing, being and
doing/identity
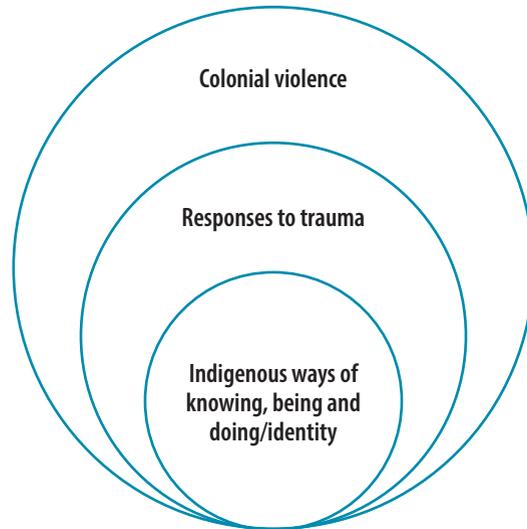
Colonial violence—external factors affecting individuals, families, and communities: child welfare policies and practices (past and present), land theft/forced removal, environmental violence, assessments, patriarchy, standards/policy/legislation, racism/victim blaming, and forcefully imposed belief systems

Healing needs/responses to trauma—outcomes of colonial violence and trauma that require healing: substance misuse, poverty, parenting issues, family violence, relationship issues, mental health issues, and criminal involvement

Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing/identity—understood to be inherent and may require rediscovery or enhancement: may include relationship to land/creation, health and well-being, relationships, Elders and traditional teachers, child development and rites of passage, familial roles, education and work, spirituality/connectedness/meaning, ceremony, language, history, blood/genetic/molecular memory, self-determination and social action, and gifts/purpose

Adapted from Burton (2017)

to culture and ceremony, land, and creation (the factors listed in the centre circle) would be explored, which are assumed to be inherent in each person but may require rediscovery or enhancement because of the impacts of colonization. For example, the person may be interested in attending a sweat lodge ceremony or speaking with an Elder. This should be encouraged and supported so that the person can "get to the place of feeling that power inside of themselves" (Anderson, 2000, p. 176). The alcohol or drug use issue is then viewed as a response to trauma, a means of coping with memories, emotions, and feelings that are unmanageable otherwise (Haskell & Randall, 2009). Healing the trauma becomes the focus rather than "treating" the substance use. For this to occur, the traumatic impacts of colonial violence need to be acknowledged and the connection between an individual's issues and current and past experiences of racism, harmful policies and legislation, residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and current child welfare systems (which have had devastating impacts

on families and communities) must be clearly drawn to render an honest and accurate assessment. Those who struggle with substance use or addictions are prone to internalizing a great deal of shame and stigma, ultimately shouldering centuries of the impacts of colonization. It must be recognized that individuals pay a heavy price for the actions of many. (This model will be further explored in Chapter 6, Field of Practice: Children, Youth, and Families.)

In health care, some hospitals have hired Indigenous resource persons or other staff who can respond using Indigenous belief systems and practices if preferred by clients. Hospitals, especially those that are far from an Indigenous person's community (land and people), may be experienced as frightening, lonely, and cold places. Having someone to talk to who offers culturally oriented knowledge and understanding in a strange and complex setting can be instrumental for healing.

Commonly Used Assessment Tools

Many social workers make use of tools for assessment in their practice. Assessment is a complex process and social workers need to collect and interpret information to understand people's situations, including the significance of others in their lives, resources available to them, any risk of harm to themselves or others, and possible courses of action.

genogram A visual tool that can be used in social work practice, including in assessment and during intervention. A genogram provides a picture of a person, their family, and other significant relationships, with their connections to the person. Different shapes with names and ages in them provide information on each person in the genogram. Other information, such as the nature of relationships, separation, death, and more, may also be provided to show more detail.

One useful tool is the **genogram** (McGoldrick et al., 2008), which is a visual way to describe family composition and relationships between family members and others who are important in people's lives. A genogram does not need to be a static diagram and can be changed to reflect new information over time. The perspective of a client on the content of their genogram is important as it depicts their changing life context.

Another tool often used by social workers is the ecomap. In addition to the elements included in the genogram, an ecomap includes features important to the family members that extend beyond them into their community and broader society. For example, employment, friendships, clubs, recreational activities, extended family, and social systems or programs might be named in circles that surround the family group at the centre of the ecomap (Stiborova, n.d.). Finally, relationships between family members and other features important to them can be connected by different kinds of lines (e.g., bold, broken, wavy, or dashed) indicating the quality of relationships. There is much information in an ecomap that can help in assessment and intervention practice with clients. As with a genogram, changes can be made to the ecomap as circumstances or clients' perceptions change. Such tools are useful for both social workers and clients as living illustrations that show changes over time.

Other assessment and practice tools include the culturagram (Congress, 1994) and ecogram (Hodge, 2005; Yasui, 2015). These tools are often associated with work with families but can be adapted to social work practice with individual clients. The Vidaview Life Story Board is a creative and adaptable tool in the form of board game, developed by Robert Chase nearly 25 years ago. It is a tactile, visual, and interactive assessment method useful for many situations, cultural groups, and life stages (see Chase et al., 2010). The Life Story Board is especially useful for generating people's stories and encouraging their reflections on experiences from their own perspectives.

As with all assessment theories and practices, any tools used for assessment and intervention should be carefully considered for relevance and suitability to the

person, family, or group with whom you are working (see Choate & McKenzie, 2015; Haskell & Randall, 2009; Linklater, 2014). Assessment tools are developed within a particular cultural and societal context and often with a certain population in mind (usually White and middle class), so it is crucial to determine whether the model or tool is appropriate to your situation.

Assessment with Families, Groups, and Communities

Social work assessment is often described as an activity performed with an individual client, although a family, a group, or even a community could be the focus of assessment. Different approaches to assessment are used with families, groups, and communities (Hardcastle et al., 2004; Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2015; McInnis-Dittrich, 2014; Netting et al., 2008; Weil, 2005). For example, a social worker conducting an assessment with a family group needs to consider the whole family, as well as individual family members. A potentially large number of factors may need to be discussed to understand the circumstances of the family as a whole: interactions between family members and the ways in which issues and conflicts may be seen differently by family members. Individuals in families play different roles and may disagree with other family members. For example, parents with different parenting styles may not agree on how to punish their child who has bullied other children at school. Or, a child who fights with classmates at school might be affected by problems at home and unable to voice their distress in any other way but physical aggression. A family assessment is useful in learning about the situation of the family, in terms of how difficulties have arisen, the family members' perceptions, and their hopes for change.

Assessment in groups is challenging as groups can be diverse and group members very different from one another. Some initial assessment with individual participants could be helpful to ensure that the group will fulfill the needs of each person and address their interests and expectations. Group function and purpose, composition, roles of members, and length of time that the group will meet are important. Assessment is focused on the needs and interests of group members. Some groups are primarily task groups that function to complete specific work they have agreed to do. A committee of social workers developing a workshop activity or a workbook is an example. Another kind of group combines education and member support, often referred to as a psychoeducational group. They might be found in health care settings, where participants are given information about taking care of themselves after a serious illness or surgery and are supported by the group as they discuss questions and issues that arise. Another well-known type of group is the self-help group, not usually led by a social worker but by a designated group member or members who collaborate with others in the group to determine topics of discussion, activities, and how the group will operate (see Mesbur, 2002; Toseland & Rivas, 2012). Assessment of a group might include satisfaction with the group's process (e.g., leadership, communication, cooperation, fair division of tasks), achievement of outcomes, satisfaction with new skills or knowledge gained, and the contributions of individual members.

In community work, social work assessment focuses on the needs and interests at the level of neighbourhood, First Nation community, village, or collective of people, addressing issues of concern and improving quality of life for members (see, for example, Homan & Homan, 2016). Assessment practice might involve observation of larger group meetings, such as town halls, smaller committee groups, and participation by members in understanding the situation and determining action

strategies and plans. In these meetings, problems and needs are discussed in sufficient detail to identify the ideas for actions that people want to pursue. Assessment could be ongoing within the groups or committees and conducted by a leader or facilitator with the members. (See Chapter 5 for a detailed description and a case scenario on assessment and practice with groups and communities from an Indigenous perspective.)

Another form of community assessment with neighbourhoods begins with exploring the assets, including gifts, strengths, and capacities, among people in a local community. The assets-based model of community development in neighbourhoods (McKnight & Block, 2010) has similarities to strengths-based approach in social work practice described by Saleebey (2013) but is centred on the level of the neighbourhood or community, where assessment starts not with identifying problems or needs but with identifying assets and strengths within the community.

Over the years, McKnight and his colleagues have collected hundreds of stories from community residents across the United States who reflected on what people do to make life better in their communities. The people who responded shared their own stories of successful neighbourhood initiatives. The projects and activities described in the stories were evidence of people's commitment to improving the quality of life in their neighbourhoods (see the video in which McKnight appears and discusses this work: *Asset-Based Community Development—Part 1*; McKnight, 2012).

By starting with an assessment of assets in a neighbourhood, participants engage in a process that helps them become interested and motivated to identify what can make their neighbourhoods better and how they might do it. It is important to listen to those experiencing the reality of the situation. Often, so-called experts come into a situation with preconceived ideas of what needs to take place, which can start the relationship off on the wrong foot and have a negative impact on the ultimate outcomes of the assessment. This frequently occurs between government agencies and First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples in Canada. The government's interpretation of 'consultation' with the Indigenous community is often perceived quite differently by the community itself.

W/holistic Assessment and Practice, Well-Being, and Attachment to Place and Home

Our 10-component w/holistic model of social work assessment and practice is not really a new conceptualization; it is an integration of existing aspects with some additions that provides a more inclusive and broader way to understand people in relation to their relevant physical, material, social, mental, spiritual, historical, cultural, and emotional contexts. Also important in this broad approach to assessment are the strengths of connection and attachment to a place, home, the land, and a way of life. Worldviews and concepts from Indigenous (primarily Canadian) knowledges, beliefs, values, and experiences are drawn upon, as are effects from a legacy of European colonization that continues to this day. Box 1.1 below shows the 10 components of the w/holistic assessment model that we have developed. It is based on our collective experiences, knowledge, and views and will appear in chapters that follow to demonstrate assessment in case scenarios related to particular fields of social work practice or populations.
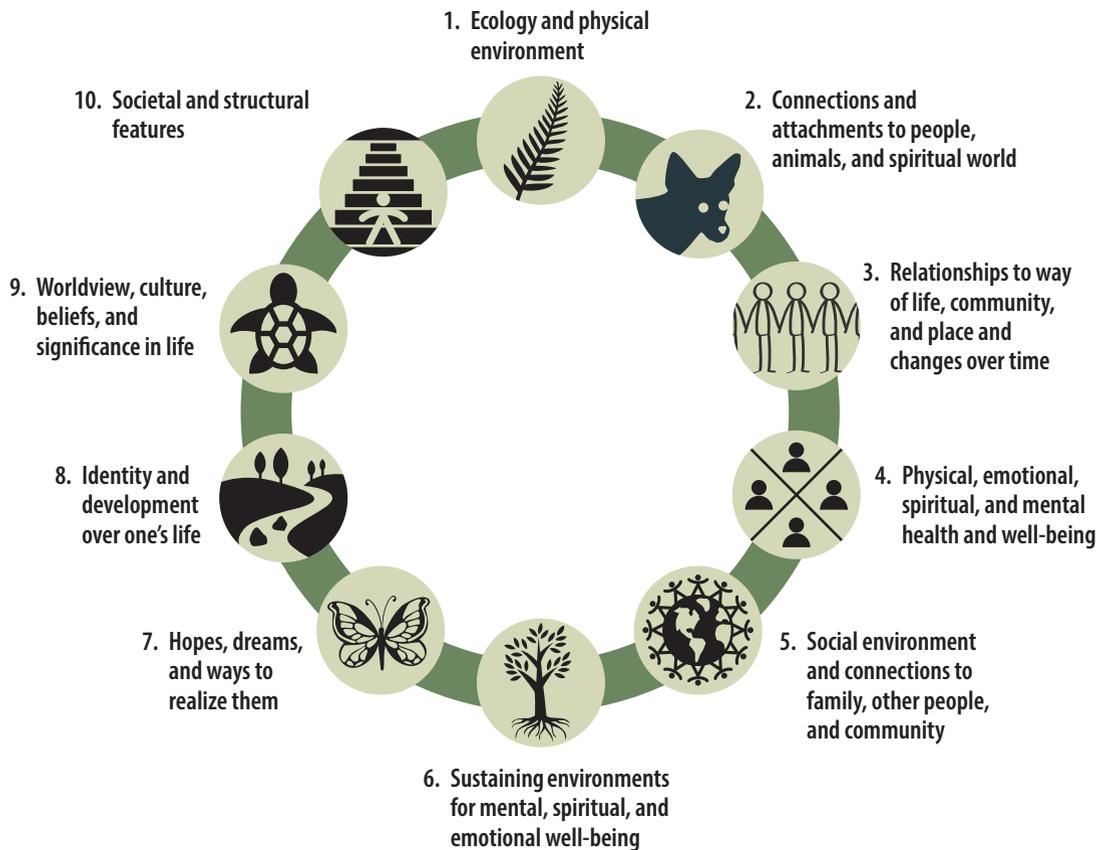
For those who prefer diagrams, we produced the w/holistic model in a visual format in Figure 1.2.

BOX 1.1   TEN COMPONENTS: A W/HOLISTIC ASSESSMENT AND PRACTICE MODEL

THE TEN COMPONENTS

1. Ecology and physical environment
2. Connections and attachment to people, animals, and spiritual world
3. Relationships to way of life, community, and place and changes over time
4. Physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental health and well-being
5. Social environment and connections to family, other people, and community
6. Sustaining environments for mental, spiritual, and emotional well-being
7. Hopes, dreams, and ways to realize them
8. Identity and development over one's life
9. Worldviews, culture, beliefs, and significance in life
10. Societal and structural features

Figure 1.2   Ten Components: A W/holistic Assessment and Practice Model

1. Ecology and physical environment
2. Connections and attachments to people, animals, and spiritual world
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10. Societal and structural features

Applying a Broader Inclusive Model of Assessment: Nature, Land, and Place

Although the ecosystemic view has been heavily endorsed by social work, the origins of this approach, drawn from explanations about plant and animal interactions in nature, is missing. Less often mentioned is the significance of people's roots and connections to a place (or places), land, identity, and a way of life. Hart (2002) describes this as "harmony … which includes respect for one's relationships with others, and within oneself, as well as the give and take between entities … it is a process involving the relationships of all the various powers, energies, and beings of the cosmos and this happens when everyone—human, animal, plant, and planet—fulfills their obligations" (p. 43). As Zapf (2010) points out, although many social work authors mention the environment, most ignore the physical environment consisting of air, water, the Earth, and its living beings. Yet these features, which compose the world in which we all live, are being seriously threatened by human actions and inaction.

Many concepts from nature, such as adaptation, habitat, and niche, parallel human life (Besthorn & Saleebey, 2003). Most people live in a human-built, urban world but also in a natural world. Even in cities, nature is present in the birds that nest on buildings, the parks where plants and trees grow and where people visit. Humans crave interaction with a natural environment so they can be nurtured, renew their energy, and enjoy a sense of calm. As social workers, we must "recognize the extent to which our physical health, mental health, and happiness depend on a vital, diverse, bio-rich planet. This means we must alter our attitudes about what constitutes the good life" (Besthorn & Saleebey, 2003, p. 14).

Some have argued that the social work profession's use of the ecological model needs to include more than the social environment. As a part of the environment, the place in which a people live their lives is "the immediate, proximal, often small environment" (Saleebey, 2004, p. 7). According to Zapf (2010),

> Environments are not merely lifeless backdrops for human activity, any more than people are merely temporary actors in an ongoing natural system. We are entwined with the natural world in a continuing process of co-creation. Human development cannot be separated from stewardship of the earth. In short, we are our surroundings: people as place. (p. 39)

Most people experience a place, home, or land to which they have an attachment. Growing up on a farm in rural Alberta or on a reserve in northern Saskatchewan tends to shape a person's identity and way of life, whether experiences have been positive or not. We can consider that the concept of place is "a multidisciplinary concept that brings together the natural world with human history, activities, and aspirations. 'Place' is an interactive and holistic concept" (Zapf, 2010, p. 39). Thus, human beings and all creatures are inherently connected to a place that defines and shapes them. As Zapf (2010) suggests, the term *person-in-environment* that we have come to know well in social work, might be more appropriately re-named *person-in-place*.

Beyond the physical interconnectedness humans have with the land and its creatures, for many there is a deep and abiding spiritual connection. For example, traditional Indigenous Peoples' spirituality includes "an intimate relationship with the land" and seeing "life in a broader sense that incorporates both the physical and spiritual realms" (Hart, 2002, p. 49). Many others experience a deep peace and connection from spending time in the natural environment, regardless of religious or spiritual beliefs or practices.

Current Context

At the time of this writing, we are nearly two years into the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has revealed countless aspects of change that we are facing as individuals, families, communities, nations, and residents on Earth. Fear of contagion and how to protect ourselves, our family members, and others in our society have pulled us into a realm that is unfamiliar to most of us. For months, students in primary and secondary schools were not attending physical schools, and at all levels of education, classes were held online, with students using devices to connect through platforms on the internet with their instructors and other students. Meeting socially with friends after school was not possible. Many adults who didn't lose their jobs entirely needed to work from home and were challenged to arrange their lives to accommodate the restrictions that the pandemic conditions posed, including the need to juggle child care, work, and leisure in the home. Others continued to work outside the home but faced ongoing concern about contracting the COVID-19 virus.

Many social workers also had to work from home, and if they needed to be present in a workplace, such as in health or mental health settings, they had to protect themselves from infection by wearing masks, maintaining physical distance from others, washing their hands frequently, and taking other steps to stay safe from infection by others. Many adapted after some adjustment but often not without added concerns, worries, and stress regarding finances, employment, school, housing, health, family well-being, and more. Other people experienced crises because of illness in the family or among significant others and how to ensure the safety of family members who required care.

We saw how our most vulnerable populations were hardest hit by the pandemic, particularly seriously ill older persons in institutional care settings; Black and Indigenous people (not only in North America), who were disproportionately affected; and economically marginalized workers (predominantly people of colour and women) who were forced to work in dangerous health environments (because they were deemed essential although not compensated as such), just to name a few examples. We heard debates that illustrate tensions between supporting economic activity and protecting people's health and well-being in many parts of North America, and saw anger over restrictions introduced to curb infection rates.

Our values and sense of connection are being called into question: are we living in alignment with ways that serve us as individuals and collectively? For many the answer has been no, and some people have chosen to make changes to their lives to better reflect what is truly important to them. There was a trend to shifting from doing and busy-ness to being and spending time in nature and in reflection. While some enjoyed this shift, many others experienced stress and worry.

Mental health and well-being received unprecedented attention as many struggled with isolation and the changes to their religious practices, recreational activities, work, and community involvement. We saw that mental health is far more complex and that we are all far more vulnerable than we knew.

The value and significance of our natural, physical, and social environments cannot be overstated.
Photo by James Wheeler on Unsplash

In our natural world, we are seeing reductions in the harmful impacts humans have on the Earth, our home. There is a reduction in air and water pollution, and we see animals reclaiming territories by wandering into places formerly crowded with human activities. We are being shown the extent to which we are responsible for the damage we are doing to Earth.

During COVID-19, the world learned a new way of behaving and began using new words: social distancing and self-quarantine. Perhaps more than anything, we learned the value and significance of our natural, physical, and social environments. These situations are just a handful of the examples of the unprecedented change we are experiencing and will continue experience in different ways in the future. This global crisis offers a multitude of examples of our interconnectedness and demonstrates the strengths we draw from and the challenges we face globally.

As we write, we know that the future may hold further waves of the COVID-19 virus or variant versions and that people will need to continue following safety precautions much longer. We believe that assessment and practice in social work need to take into account the changes in the contexts in which people live and the impact of COVID-19 on those who are particularly vulnerable and need our compassion, attention, and services.

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Thank you to Nêhiyaw (Cree) Elder Don Robinson for allowing us to use the concept of "sacred responsibility" in our work, a concept that he earlier described in a workshop presentation. We are also grateful to the anonymous reviewers who added to the quality of this chapter.

Reflection and Discussion Questions

1. What opportunities did the COVID-19 pandemic create for you as a social work student or practitioner to engage with others, in a community of learners or within your own neighbourhood? Provide an example that was especially memorable for you.

2. How do you think that social work assessment based on a problem-solving perspective differs from an Indigenous approach to assessment?

3. In what ways do you think that using an ecomap for assessment would be similar or different from the use of the w/holistic 10-component model described in this book (and this chapter)?

4. Imagine part of your job is to assess a community-based project with which you are unfamiliar (in a different area of your city, a different town, or a northern reserve community) and with people who are different from you (in terms of race, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status). In assessment at a community level, which of the 10 components in the w/holistic assessment and practice model might be important for you to consider?

Resources

For more information about asset mapping see the Building Caring Communities website at https://buildingcaringcommunities.ca/community-asset-mapping.

A useful YouTube presentation with detailed information about genograms and their use is located at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRx7J1q6FE4 .

To learn more about assessment, practice, and research applications for social work using a visual, tactile method and tool (the Vidaview Life Story Board), see the website at http://vidaview.ca.

A diagram of an ecomap and a useful visual application of the tool is available as a PDF from the Navajo Nation: https://www.nndss.navajo-nsn.gov/Portals/0/PDF%20 Files/Eco%20Map.pdf.

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