Acceptance

Acceptance is a term which has entered the common parlance of people-work, not least through the seminal works of Rogers (1951), Egan (2010) and Truax and Carkhuff (1967), each of whom emphasised the importance of the personal relationship between the counsellor/worker and the 'client' in a helping relationship. They argued that it is only when a person seeking help believes that they are being accepted for who they are, without being put down or being judged, that any real progress towards change can be achieved. Upon these foundations, the increasingly complex disciplines of counselling and other people-work disciplines have been built (Nelson-Jones, 2011).

The roots of this approach run deep within western philosophy, and also draw particular strength from the monotheistic traditions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, where the uniqueness of each individual and their accountability to a divine creator is a central tenet of faith. In some ways the current, postmodern fascination with spirituality is highlighting the same point, that each individual seeks their own deep sense of meaning and purpose, which deserves to be respected and valued by others.

Counselling, of course, is a discrete discipline, even though some of its skills are used by other professional groups. Counselling is not social work anymore than social work is counselling. But the key tenet of acceptance, so vital to counselling, has also become part of the value base and codes of conduct not only of social work but of many other helping professions. It emphasises the importance and uniqueness of each and every person with whom the professional worker comes into contact, and their right to expect to be treated with dignity and respect.

All of this, however, is easier said than done. The big question for any worker is how to put this basic tenet of a professional value base into practice when faced with people whose behaviour is oppressive, abusing and damaging to others. Professional people-workers are called upon daily to work with people whose lifestyles blatantly contradict this value base; their victims testify to their inhumanity. The one thing that acceptance is *not* is any sense of approval for behaviour that demeans and damages others. It is part of

the responsibility of people-work professionals to protect those who are vulnerable and at risk in society, and this necessarily involves challenging those who behave oppressively towards others.

It is this tension between these two aspects of our professional value base – acceptance of each individual as unique and precious, and the protection of the vulnerable from abuse – which places this theme firmly in the arena of communication skills. It is arguably one of the most difficult skills to develop for any worker, not least because our sense of moral outrage at some people's behaviour will seep into our dealings with them, however scrupulous we are with the language we use in our interviews and discussions.

Activity 1

To illustrate this point, imagine for a moment you have to interview or nurse someone who has committed a heinous offence against a vulnerable child or older person. The graphic details of their behaviour are outlined in your file and you feel physically sickened that someone could do this sort of thing to another human being. Just spend a few moments by yourself or with others whom you trust, quietly imagining yourself face to face with this person, and identify the feelings which are churning around inside you, and what you would like to do to them if you had them alone in a dark alley. It could, after all, have been your child, your parent or grandparent.

And now get in touch with how these feelings are manifesting themselves in how you are sitting – your facial expressions, the tenseness of your body language – how your fists so easily become clenched – 'and now I am supposed to accept this person? You must be joking!'

If you have attempted this activity honestly, you will be firmly in this tension-filled territory which has already been described. Your professional value base insists that you treat this individual with dignity and respect; your own humanity rebels against what they have done. It is precisely because of this tension, however, that Codes of Conduct have been drawn up to ensure that we do not allow our own feelings and (let it be said) our prejudices to get in the way of the tasks which society expects of us. The significance of the activity you have just completed is its power to remind you how strong your feelings can be, and to make the point that, whether you like it or not, those feelings will be communicated to a greater or lesser extent to the person with whom you are seeking to work. In other words, you may be able to use all the appropriate words in your interview but the high emotions of how you are *really* feeling will seep out rather like a bad smell, and will pervade and strongly influence how the other person responds. They will then respond

not so much to your words but to your non-verbal communication, and that gives them a very clear message: you are *not* accepted.

Ways forward

The discussion so far has aimed at uncovering, as honestly as we can, the way we sometimes feel about those whom we are seeking to help or look after. The following pointers to best practice are offered to help you begin to deal with this particularly difficult area.

Supervision and preparation

If you know you are going to have to deal with a situation that stirs up strong feelings in you, it is imperative that you prepare properly. This includes talking through with a trusted supervisor, manager, ward sister or practice educator, how you feel about this particular scenario, and being honest about your feelings. You will find, more often than not, that this discussion will help you put things into perspective and enable you to deal with the person professionally. To know that you have a safe place in which to deal with *your* feelings will enable you to provide a safe place for the other person to deal with theirs. It also opens up the possibility that your supervisor may feel that someone else should take over responsibility for this case. For example, if it has triggered off within you some deep-seated hurt which cannot be easily resolved, then it would be better for someone else to handle this particular referral.

Accept yourself

Acceptance is not just how you treat other people: it has a dimension to it that involves how you think of yourself. We all have our strengths and our weaknesses; things we are good at and things we struggle with; our personal victories and our individual wounds. The best people-workers are often those who have come to a deep understanding and acceptance of who they are, warts and all, and who reach out to others not from a position of moral superiority, but from their shared humanity. Yes, we may abhor what some people have done to hurt others, but few of us as people-workers have been able to avoid hurting people in our own relationships. The sense of our own frailty and capacity to be unloving and uncaring, however, can be channelled into a more humble approach in our work with others, and help us realise that we all struggle with trying to make a success of our lives.

Remember to practise the basics

Your basic communication skills training is there, not only for you to fall back on but to use as an essential strategy in offering acceptance to another person. The way you introduce yourself; your tone of voice; your non-verbal communication skills; your active listening skills – all are there to be used to help put the person at their ease. They will then begin to feel that this is a space and time for them, so that no matter what they have done they are being listened to and accepted in a respectful and dignified manner.

Be honest

Even if the person you are working with shows no remorse for their actions, you can still legitimately raise with them how many people in society (and by implication you too) feel about how they have behaved. It is perfectly legitimate to be clear with people that their actions have damaged others and that part of your role is to help protect vulnerable people. Importantly, if they can see you as an ally to help them change their behaviour, and begin to realise that in your acceptance of them as an individual you are opening up the possibility of a changed lifestyle, you will have done them an immeasurable service. To demonstrate a belief that the person can change is perhaps one of the most important messages you can ever communicate.

Be focused

As with all people-work, you will need to communicate clearly with the person you are working with why you are involved; how you can agree in partnership with them what needs to be achieved, and how this will be effected; and also what the consequences are likely to be if progress is not achieved. Accepting the *consequences* of a person's behaviour is as important as accepting the person themselves.

Celebrate diversity

So far, the discussion has focused on a particularly sharp set of issues that throw into high relief the tension that is inherent in this theme of acceptance. However, it is important now to widen the context in order to demonstrate its relevance to the whole range of people-work. As already noted, the communication skills aspects of the discussion arise from the value base of our work, which may be characterised by the celebration of diversity.

Diversity is, by definition, a complex theme, but in this context it reflects the multicultural, multi-faith and multi-dimensional aspect of society. If racism, sexism, classism, disablism and homophobia are the shadows cast by oppressive world views, then the positive aspect of it is the celebration of society where people and their chosen world views, lifestyles and various differences are both respected and celebrated as being an enrichment of our communities. As before, it is important that you understand the implications of this value base for people-work. You need to explore your own world view and prejudices in an honest and open way, otherwise you may jeopardise the work you seek to undertake.

Here too, however, there are points of tension for people-work practice. Not every world view may be of equal value; some litmus test has to be applied to make judgements about whether the behaviours towards others which flow from certain world views are deemed to be respectful or oppressive. In exploring these issues, however, the same approach as we outlined above needs to be adopted, and the same communication skills implemented, to demonstrate that acceptance is not an empty theoretical perspective but rather a commitment and an energy which pervades all our communication with others.

Activity 2

Choose an example of an issue that you find difficult to celebrate that reflects diversity in our complex society. Try to identify what it is about this topic that causes you disquiet. Having identified the various issues, invite your supervisor or practice educator to help you role play a scenario where you are seeking to engage with these issues in ways that are respectful and demonstrate the value base of acceptance. After you have done this, see if you can draw up a set of guidelines to help you develop your practice in this area.

Final thoughts

This discussion has shown how a topic like acceptance, which is fundamental to the value base of much people-work, pervades every aspect of communication skills. It is not a neat, self-contained concept: indeed, the ease with which it can be defined belies the challenge which is inherent within it for all people-work practice. It raises for you, in all your work, both in the preparation, delivery and evaluation of your engagement with others, the powerful question of whether the person you have been working with really feels accepted as a result of your intervention. There is possibly no greater challenge.

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Related concepts: active listening; anti-discriminatory practice; counselling; non-verbal communication; spirituality.

Active Listening

Active listening ensures that everything that a person is trying to say is fully received and understood by the listener. This includes attempting to understand not just what the person is saying with their chosen words, but what some of their underlying thoughts and feelings are, which may be conveyed as much by what they do *not* say and by their body language, as by the words they use.

The term 'active listening' is frequently used by helping professionals to underline the importance of this activity. It has several layers to it, and is not merely hearing the words which are being spoken.

Active listening is, of course, easier said than done, which is why such an emphasis is laid upon it as a core communication skill. To illustrate its complexity, undertake the following activity either by yourself, with a companion or in a small group.

Activity 1

See how many different tones of voice you can use in saying the words 'Can I help you?'. You will quickly discover that some tones of voice can contradict the words you are using, just as a very defensive body posture can have a similar effect.

This is what is sometimes called the 'music behind the words' – and it is the music which conveys the *real* meaning of what is being communicated. If the listener takes the words simply at face value, the real meaning could be ignored.

Of course, you may speculate why this should be so, and the reason may vary from person to person. What Activity 1 illustrates is that communication is a complex activity, and that if you are going to work successfully with people, your whole being must be attuned to what is being said.

It goes without saying that in any interaction with someone you are seeking to support, nurse or work with, you need to be clear about what you are trying to do. The listening skills that you need will vary according to the nature of the task. For example, if you are a welfare rights worker doing a benefits check for someone, you will certainly need to adopt a caring,

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understanding approach throughout, but for much of the interview you will be gathering and interpreting factual information which you need to help you calculate their eligibility for particular benefits. In a similar way, a doctor or nurse may need to elicit crucial information about a patient's symptoms in order to reach an accurate diagnosis. A social worker or probation officer preparing a court report will need to elicit and interpret information about a person's behaviour. By contrast, a counsellor working with a deeply distressed person following a major loss in their life will be focusing heavily on that person's feelings, and will be exploring a very sensitive aspect of their life, which requires a different set of skills as they seek to explore and develop that person's self-awareness. Someone who is working with people whose relationships are breaking down will use the skills of trying to help each of them understand what the other is saying, and using interpretative skills to a considerable degree to help people who have become deaf to each other to begin to hear each other's 'music' once more.

These examples illustrate the complexity of the listening task. One common theme, however, is the type of questions that can be used in active listening. These are commonly grouped together into two categories: open questions and closed questions.

Open questions are used when you want to help someone 'open up' about themselves, to give you some insights into how they are feeling, or to explore a situation in more depth. They do not allow a straightforward 'yes' or 'no' response, but instead invite the person to talk about the topic. For example:

- Can you tell me how this happened?
- What did your parents think about …?
- Can tell me in your own words about …?
- Why do you think that was?

Some people discourage the use of the 'why?' question as being too threatening; it can put people 'on the spot' and may make conversation more difficult, especially if it assumes that a measure of blaming is implicit or even explicit in the question (*Why* on earth did you do that?). But good communication skills are not about slavishly following a set of rules with their 'do's and don'ts': they are about developing your own style, and realising that with sensitivity and appropriate voice tones you can encourage people to open up and share their story with you.

It is your sensitivity that is all-important. Not everyone will feel able to 'open up' easily and share their deep thoughts and feelings. Some need to go step by step, and to be led by the interviewer cautiously until they gain the confidence to go deeper. This is why closed questions also have such an important role to play.

Closed questions invite a straightforward 'yes' or 'no' answer ('Did you hit him?'), and are necessary in gathering factual information in as straightforward a way as possible. Closed questions can give a message to the interviewee that you are in charge, know what you are doing and where you are going, and that they can put their confidence in you.

It is certainly not the case that open questions are good and closed questions bad: that is a gross caricature. Each has its part to play in a well-balanced effective interview, and it is up to you to judge which of them will be most appropriate and effective as the interview unfolds.

Basic skills

The complexity of active listening is well illustrated by Trevithick (2010: 123), who lists 20 basic skills involved in listening. These are:

- being as open, intuitive, empathetic and self-aware as possible.
- maintaining good eye contact.
- having an open and attentive body orientation of posture.
- paying attention to non-verbal forms of communication and meaning.
- allowing for and using silence as a form of communication.
- taking up an appropriate physical distance.
- picking up and following cues.
- being aware of our own distracting mannerisms and behaviour.
- avoiding vague, unclear and ambiguous comments.
- being aware of the importance of people finding their own words in their own time.
- remembering the importance of the setting and the general physical environment.
- minimising the possibility of interruptions and distractions.
- being sensitive to the overall mood of the interview, including what is not being communicated.
- listening for the emotional content of the interview and adapting questions as appropriate.
- checking out and seeking feedback wherever possible and appropriate.
- being aware of the importance of timing, particularly where strong feelings are concerned.
- remembering the importance of tone, particularly in relation to sensitive or painful issues.
- avoiding the dangers of preconceptions, stereotyping or labelling, or making premature judgements or evaluations.
- remembering to refer to theories that are illuminating and helpful, and also where appropriate, to explain, in an accessible language, theories that may aid understanding.
- being as natural, spontaneous and relaxed as possible.

Put like that, listening skills may seem daunting, even impossible to get completely right. They are a challenge, and it sometimes needs a list like that to remind us that to listen actively can be one of the hardest tasks we ever undertake.

Activity 2

By yourself, with your supervisor or in a small group, go through the 20 skills listed above, and make sure you fully understand them. Try to think of examples to illustrate each one, and explore how you would want to put these into practice yourself.

Summarising

Summarising is a useful skill, which helps to check the pace and progress of an interview. Essentially, this means taking some time out from the actual flow of the interview and trying to put into words the story so far as you perceive it. This serves several useful functions:

- It demonstrates to the interviewee that you have been listening to what they are saying and that you have grasped the main issues clearly.
- It provides the interviewee with an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of your summary and (importantly) to put right any misunderstanding you may have developed.
- It facilitates the process of empathy between you and the interviewee.
- It provides a structured staging post in the interview to take stock and to decide how to move on to the next stage.
- It is also a useful technique to use when the interview 'runs into the sand' and you need to 'get unstuck'.

Obviously, in the course of an interview lasting, say, for an hour, you will not want to use this summarising technique too often: that would become tedious and mechanistic. Perhaps two or three times, including the summary you will want to offer at the very end of the interview, will normally be about right.

Paraphrasing

This is a similar skill to summarising, but it provides a narrower focus in that you can use it frequently to 'mirror' or reflect back to the interviewee a particular thought, concept or feeling they are trying to express. This skill involves putting into your own words what you think the other person is trying to express. This has several advantages:

- It enables you to show that you have been listening to the interviewee.
- It provides an opportunity for the interviewee to confirm, or adjust, the feedback you have provided.

- It helps to establish empathy.
- It provides an opportunity for the interviewee to see themselves in the 'verbal mirror' you have provided as a stimulus for further reflection.

However, as with all 'techniques', it is important that they are used sensitively and not 'robotically': that would be extremely frustrating and counter-productive. The interviewee may end up feeling that they cannot get it right because you are always changing what they have said into something 'more acceptable to you', and that is the last message you will want to convey. Use the technique, therefore, if you get stuck, or feel that the other person is struggling, or you feel you need their help to understand them better.

Clarifying

It will come as no surprise to you to discover that people cannot always easily put into words what they are feeling or what they need to tell you. If you need any confirmation of this statement, look no further than yourself. Think back to an occasion when you were deeply upset or distressed and had to talk to someone. The chances are that all your usual confidence and articulacy somehow drained away, and you were left groping for the words that might express how you felt.

There will be occasions in an interview, therefore, where it is likely that you will not understand what is being said, for whatever reason. The skills of clarifying are important, because you do not want to get to the end of a long complex interview and still feel in the dark about some key issues and facts.

The important thing to remember here is that the interviewee will be doing their very best to communicate clearly, often under difficult circumstances. So you do not want to give out a message that they are 'making a hash' of it. Instead, it is important that *you* take responsibility for not fully understanding, and ask them to help you to gain the fuller picture. As is so often the case in interviewing, you need to find a form of words that feels right to you: there is no magic mantra which will always work. But something like the following may be helpful to start you off in your search for your own best approach:

> J, you have given me a very clear picture of how upset all this has made you feel. I wonder if you can help me with some of the details which I'm afraid I have not been able to sort out in my own mind yet.

> Gosh J, this is a very difficult situation – no wonder you feel so …; I wonder if you could help me understand a bit better about 'x'.

> J, this is like a jigsaw – you have explained very clearly about 'x' and 'y', but I need your help please to understand about 'z' and how this fits into the overall picture.

> J, I wonder if it would help if we put some of the things you have told me up here on the flip chart – it would certainly help me get a better picture.

You might also find that the use of a genogram or an ecomap is a good way of clarifying the situation.

Further issues

There are additional complexities to be taken into account. They may be stated briefly but each of these issues deserves detailed consideration and reflection. The issues are gender, age, race and disability.

Gender

The impact of gender must not be overlooked. For some people, and within certain cultures, it is of great importance that women have the opportunity to talk with a female worker, just as in medical matters many women prefer to have a female GP. Similarly, in some cultures, a man would want to be able to talk things over with a male worker. But even if there are not cultural imperatives to consider, this dimension will always be present, and it is important that, as a worker, you think about what impact this will have upon each professional encounter you experience. There will be occasions when you need to raise this issue specifically with the other person so that it can be appropriately addressed and not fester.

Age

There is no denying that ageism can sometimes undermine a relationship you are trying to develop. For example, a very young worker at the outset of their career may meet with a much older person who may be tempted to disregard their expertise and potential effectiveness simply on the grounds of age and assumed inexperience. By contrast, a much older worker, when trying to work with a younger person, may find that they represent a parent figure so strongly that the young person 'puts up the shutters' and refuses to have anything to do with them. There are no easy ways around this. Sometimes it is a question of how 'cases' are allocated within an agency. What is important, however, is that you will need to raise these issues directly and try to talk

about the 'blocks' that are being put up, in the hope that by airing them they can gradually be removed, and a trusting relationship established. That will be a challenge to your communication skills admittedly, but until the 'block' is identified it will not be possible to move forward.

Race

One of the tenets of anti-racist practice is that, ideally, people should be able to have a worker from a similar ethnic background to themselves, to help ensure that they are fully 'heard' and that a fully sensitive assessment is made. This involves being aware that for many black and minority ethnic people to go to a predominantly white agency carries the risk of a continuation of racist attitudes and behaviours. However welcoming an agency may try to be with multicultural welcome posters on display, the reality of only being able to offer a white worker can be worrying for a member of a minority ethnic group in this country. It is important to state clearly that this fear or misgiving will have been based on previous experiences of living in a racist community, so the onus must be upon a white worker to acknowledge these issues in a sensitive way, and to check out how best to proceed. There are many examples where this 'checking out' has led to a reduction in mistrust and misgivings, and a good working relationship has subsequently been established with good outcomes. The crucial thing, however, is for white workers to be honest about the issues; to acknowledge that it can be difficult for a predominantly white agency to provide sensitive and appropriate services; and to take the initiative in talking about these issues at the first meeting.

It must also be said, however, that workers from minority ethnic groups can sometimes experience racist behaviour from white people seeking to use the service, and who express resentment that they cannot be seen by a white worker. This calls for strong anti-discriminatory policies by the agency to support all their staff and to make it clear that all members of staff are committed to delivering the best possible service to everyone who needs it. It should also be noted that discriminatory behaviour towards staff should not be tolerated.

Disability

All organisations need to ensure that their services are disability-friendly. This means that those who seek to use the services of the agency must be able to fully access them, and that the agency must also be a disability-friendly employer. There are, of course, some particular challenges, for both staff and users of the service, when working with people who are Deaf or hard of

hearing; people who have communication difficulties, or lack of vision. It is important that due consideration is given to these issues so that people are not marginalised and excluded from services.

> Activity 3
>
> Spend some time thinking through by yourself, with your supervisor or with a group of colleagues, what the challenges are for communication skills in regard to the four issues outlined above for your particular service or agency.

Language, dialect and culture

One further set of issues deserves to be added to the list of complexities for active listening skills. It is best practice that people who wish to access services should be able to do so in their language of choice. This will mean that, on occasion, you will need to negotiate for a skilled professional interpreter to be present for your interviews, so that information can be accurately exchanged. Your agency should be able to access interpreter services in your area. This includes British Sign Language for people who are Deaf. Somewhat more complicated, however, is the issue of dialects, especially if you are new to an area and are unfamiliar both with the music of the local dialect and some of the words and phrases which, for local people, enrich their sense of identity, but which can significantly disempower a worker seeking to accurately communicate with them. There is no substitute for seeking out some local people who would be willing to spend some time with you, helping you to become attuned to the dialect and giving you a glossary of common terms which are used. But until you are comfortable, you will need to develop the skill of asking sensitively for explanations and translations, in a way which makes it clear that it is you who are on the learning curve: it is not the other person's fault! There are also important issues to consider around intercultural awareness, and some of the 'messages' that white people, for example, may (however unwittingly) give to members of minority ethnic communities that may imply racist or stereotypical attitudes.

> Activity 4
>
> What are the issues around language and dialect in your area? How are you dealing with these? Can you prepare a glossary for new members of staff or students joining your team? Or perhaps make this into a student project?

Activity 5

Read Judy Ryde's (2009) book, *Being White in the Helping Professions*. What are the key themes and messages that need to be taken seriously? Make a list of them and use them as a discussion starter for your next group supervision or team meeting.

Final thoughts

Active listening skills are complex, but they are the fundamental bedrock of good practice. They cannot be taken for granted. They need to be worked at, and as we have seen, some of the issues you will need to explore and deal with may be particularly challenging. But without good listening skills, your people-work career will never get past first base.

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Related concepts: acceptance; ecomaps; empathy; genograms; getting unstuck; interpreters.

Advising

Across the wide spectrum of people-work, advice giving – or advising – receives frequent mention, either in terms of what the organisation offers to those who use its services, or in terms of what is definitely not on offer. In counselling, for example, and in organisations such as the Samaritans, there is a strong ethos against giving advice. For this range of people-work, giving advice can be counter-productive: it smacks of telling people what to do; of making people's decisions for them, or pointing them in certain directions, with the implicit assumption that the professional knows best. In counselling, therefore, the worker's role is to help the person being counselled to think through the issues and the likely consequences of any decisions they take, and to decide the course of action that they feel is best for them, and for which they, and they alone, can take responsibility.

By contrast, there are other organisations and professional people-workers where advice giving is their *raison d'être*. If we need to understand some legal, technical, medical or financial matters, we naturally go to those people who have accredited expertise and who can explain things to us, and advise us accordingly. Any decisions remain ours to take, but they will be taken in the light of professional advice we have received from appropriate experts, upon whose judgement and advice we rely, and against whom we can apply for legal compensation if their advice is at fault.

In between are a range of people-workers, such as social workers, youth and community workers and probation officers, whose role may include an advice-giving element (for example, welfare benefits advice) alongside a combination of care and control responsibilities. Decisions about people's lives may sometimes have to be taken against their express wishes, in order either to safeguard themselves or to protect vulnerable people and children in their care. In such scenarios, a social worker may well advise someone about their rights, but will still take their child into care if that is deemed necessary.

Alongside all of this is the ever-increasing independent advice sector represented by such organisations as Advice UK and Citizens Advice. A wide network of bureaux exists to give anyone who needs it free, confidential and impartial advice across a wide range of issues, including welfare benefits, debt,

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housing, immigration and employment. Trained volunteers spearhead this service, but professionally trained workers are also involved, sometimes as a result of commissioning by the Legal Services Commission (www.legalservices.gov.uk). Welfare rights and other forms of advice are also commonly made available in social services departments and in a range of health care settings.

This brief overview indicates the complexity of advice and advice-giving services, and highlights the difficulty in providing a succinct definition of what advice is. In their advice work monograph, Robson and Savage (forthcoming) suggest that:

> Advice work can best be described in terms of an alloy, a composite of a range of functions which when welded together form the basis of what is generally described as 'advice work'.

As far as the communication skills needed for advice work are concerned, it is important to recognise that the government has made strenuous efforts in recent years to establish standards for advice-giving which, although targeted primarily at legal advice work, also provide a quality framework for all advice-giving organisations. The Community Legal Service Quality Mark (April 2000) (www.legalservices.gov.uk) regularised processes and procedures, while the National Occupational Standards (NOS) for Legal Advice (April 2000) (www.skillsforjustice.com) provides important benchmarks for functions and activities performed by advisers.

Robson and Savage (forthcoming) outline the key communication skills in advice work as follows:

> Non-verbal skills; active listening, questioning, summarising, paraphrasing, presenting/explaining/interpreting information; checking/clarifying understanding; using the telephone; written skills; letter writing, form filling, presenting of information; negotiation (persuading and influencing) and advocacy (representation–verbal presentation skills).

Activity 1

Choose an example of some work you have done which involved giving advice to someone. Explore the work you did by itemising the exact nature of what was being asked of you, and the response you gave. Now look up the National Occupational Standards (www.skillsforjustice.com) and use these as a checklist for the work you have chosen to analyse. How do these NOS help you understand your role as an advice-giver, and how might these NOS have helped you deal differently with this person?

Final thoughts

It will be clear from this discussion that advice-giving uses the full range of communication skills that many other professional helpers utilise, and that these are essential in order to maintain the high standards of the agencies involved.

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Related concepts: active listening; advocacy; establishing a professional relationship.

Advocacy

The dictionary definitions of advocacy describe the role as being 'one who pleads the case of another'; in other words, to defend, support and argue positively on behalf of someone else (*Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*, 1901). This seemingly straightforward definition does not, however, reflect the complexity of advocacy as an activity which is practised by a range of people-workers and others. For example:

- In court, a solicitor or barrister will advocate on your behalf by providing detailed and sometimes legally complex information and opinion to the magistrate or judge.
- Social workers and health workers will, from time to time, speak up on behalf of their service user, client or patient to support their claim for a particular welfare benefit or a claim to housing.
- A social worker or youth worker may well speak up for a young person who is finding it difficult to find employment, and help them to obtain a job interview.
- A Citizens Advice Bureau adviser will represent you and speak on your behalf at a tribunal.
- Someone involved in Citizen Advocacy may act as a befriender or as an encourager to someone who lacks confidence, perhaps because of emotional difficulties, medical problems or a learning difficulty, and will help them put forward their views.
- A group of people may get together as a self-advocacy group or organisation to help further their cause or to seek an improvement in their circumstances. This is sometimes referred to as Peer Advocacy.

This spectrum – from the 'hard end' of legal advocacy to the 'softer' informal style – involves, to a degree, all the skills needed for effective advocacy, even though some forms of advocacy may require specific training and experience (for example, legal advocacy and Citizens Advice Bureau work).

Activity 1

1 Spend a few moments thinking about a situation where you have been involved in an advocacy role. Note the main issues involved. What were you called to do? Were there any difficulties or dilemmas for you? Where do you think the real power lay? What was the outcome of the advocacy? How did it make you feel?

(Cont'd)

2 Think now of an occasion where you have perhaps needed an advocate. How did that make you feel? What would be your expectations? How would you define good advocacy and poor advocacy? How would each make you feel?

The issues you have identified in this activity will form a useful background to this discussion, and we invite you to refer back to your experience when reflecting on the issues being raised.

The first point to stress is the importance of being very clear in your own mind about what the issues are. Without such clarity, you could end up in a complicated and confused situation. You also need to be clear, when considering your role, exactly what it is you are being asked to do. Will you be speaking up on behalf of the person, representing their views and needs, and being their sole mouthpiece? Or will your role be to facilitate and encourage *them* to do the talking, with you remaining in the background as a friendly support? In other words, will you be working for them, or will they be working for themselves, but with your support?

Ethical considerations

It was made clear in the introduction that any discussion about communication skills has to include an ethical dimension. Skills are not used in a moral vacuum, but reflect the values of the person using them. It is important therefore in advocacy work to ensure that formal communication skills are used within the basic principles of this type of work.

Bateman (1995: 26–41) highlights six main principles for what he describes as 'principled advocacy' which, although drawn from a legal context and using the legal language of 'clients', are relevant across a wider range of advocacy work. The six principles are:

- Act in the client's best interests.
- Act in accordance with the client's wishes and instructions.
- Keep the client properly informed.
- Carry out instructions with diligence and competence.
- Act impartially and offer frank, independent advice.
- Maintain rules of confidentiality.

Each of these principles merits detailed discussion and reflection, and you may find it useful to explore their implications for the situation you analysed in Activity 1.

To be an effective advocate, you will need the full range of interpersonal communication skills, linked with a capacity to grasp, at times, complex issues and to formulate and propose solutions. You will need:

- to have the self-confidence to stand up for vulnerable people, and to be willing to stand your ground when challenging organisational bureaucracy.
- to be able to interpret complex issues and to help the person you are representing, or whom you are supporting, to understand what is going on, and to be able to produce an effective response.
- to accept that sometimes you feel inadequate and powerless against the big battalions, but if you are well prepared and know that you have a strong case to present, then you need to have the courage 'to stick with it'. At such times, your own value base, and your commitment to social justice, will stand you in good stead.

There is a further complex issue that surrounds advocacy, and that concerns power. Everything in the last paragraph is important for the advocate, but it must be tempered with the realisation that power can be seductively 'powerful'. It gives you a good feeling to be powerful; it appeals to your sense of achievement and doing a good job; there is a real 'buzz' when you win a tribunal or gain some advantage for a vulnerable person or family. But there is a risk here: you can too often take over, and by the effective use of your skills you can disempower those with whom you work. Sometimes it is far more important to spend time empowering others to 'fight their own corner' rather than to rely on the professional 'expert'. It can also be far more rewarding for you to take pride in watching them succeed, however falteringly at first, in presenting their own case. It is part of your skill, of course, to recognise where this is an appropriate strategy. It would serve no one's best interests to watch someone flounder towards failure.

Activity 2

Look at a recent copy of *Community Care* or a similar magazine such as *One in Seven* and see how many situations you can identify which warrant an advocacy approach. What do you think would be the most effective approach to use, and why?

Final thoughts

Effective advocacy is perhaps one of the most difficult skills to develop, but arguably one of the most rewarding in that you are playing a key role not only in helping someone to be fully valued, respected and at times 'rewarded', but

also in helping them to gain confidence and to develop assertiveness on their journey towards greater independence.

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Related concepts: advising; empowerment, resilience and a strengths perspective.

Anti-discriminatory Practice

In all aspects of people-work, anti-discriminatory practice (ADP) not only forms part of the core value base; it also comprises a set of communication skills through which that value base is put into practice. ADP facilitates the celebration of diversity in our complex, multi-layered, multicultural and multi-faith society. ADP skills, therefore, involve cultivating an awareness of how prejudice and oppression operate at various levels in society to certain people's disadvantage, and then actively working to restore the balance so that people get a better opportunity to live full and creative lives. Challenging oppression is an important aspect of ADP and is often referred to directly as anti-oppressive practice (AOP).

In many ways, social work has led the way in our understanding of how ADP is at the heart of best practice, but the basic principles can apply to all aspects of people-work, particularly in the field of health and social care. One author who has shaped our understanding of ADP is Neil Thompson, whose seminal writing in this area has been hugely influential (see Thompson, 2006, for example). Thompson insists that best practice must take into account three interlocking dimensions to the ways in which prejudice and oppression can operate: the personal (P), the cultural (C) and the structural (S). This theoretical and conceptual framework argues against too simplistic an understanding of the issues surrounding discrimination. An individual white worker, for example, may strenuously uphold a commitment to anti-racist practice, and this commitment may permeate that worker's individual personal dealings with members of the black community. But this does not alter the fact that at wider levels, in various cultural aspects and in how society is structured, racism is still a powerful, negative force which diminishes black people's life chances. It must be dealt with, therefore, as a fundamental principle of best practice.

Activity 1

It is important to take time to explore fully the concept of ADP, and the contribution which the PCS analysis makes to our understanding. Obtain a copy of Thompson's book *Anti-discriminatory Practice* (2006, 4th edition), and read carefully the first two chapters, where the main themes are explored and discussed. This will give you a firm base upon which to develop your ADP skills.

This PCS analysis provides the framework for exploring the range of skills that are needed to put it into effective practice. Thompson puts the practice issues succinctly when he states that:

> There is no middle ground; intervention either adds to oppression (or at least condones it) or goes some small way towards easing or breaking such oppressions. In this respect, the political slogan, 'If you are not part of the solution you must be part of the problem', is particularly accurate. An awareness of the sociopolitical context is necessary in order to prevent becoming (or remaining) part of the problem. (2006: 15)

This suggests a set of basic questions that you can ask about your professional practice with a service user, enquirer or client. These questions include:

- What are the issues which are clearly under the control or influence of the person you are working with, whether or not you help them?
- To what extent are this person's problems and difficulties due to wider influences, from family, peer group or other cultural groupings?
- How far are this person's difficulties and problems a result of structural issues and influences? Is this individual being blamed or 'pathologised' as a result of these influences?
- What course(s) of action are open to me, and to both of us working in partnership, to tackle some of the wider issues we have identified?

Activity 2

Think about some of the people you have worked with, or are currently working with. You will probably have a clear idea about the person's difficulties and problems at the personal individual level (P). Now spend some time reflecting on wider influences at the cultural (C) and structural levels (S), and explore ways in which you think these wider issues might be addressed. Discuss this with your practice educator, mentor or supervisor.

Because ADP is best practice and must therefore permeate all aspects of people-work, it is difficult to know what issues not to include in this brief

introductory discussion. Certainly, key themes such as empowerment, acceptance and partnership working are all central, as is the use of good active listening skills. The following skills, however, deserve particular mention.

Non-verbal communication. In the discussion on non-verbal communication, the point is emphasised that we convey a huge amount of information to another person non-verbally, including our attitude towards them. In a variety of subtle ways, we can convey dislike, disapproval, hostility even, which will be picked up by the other person. They will be made to feel that, for whatever reason, we are being discriminatory, and this may well reinforce other similar messages which they have received from society in general. It is imperative, therefore, that from the very first moment of meeting, we convey a genuine warmth and welcome.

Cultural sensitivity. The service we offer to people needs to be accessible to all members of the community. This is not always easy, of course. Many organisations report that members of minority ethnic communities, or Deaf people, for example, do not make use of their services. They can feel alienated and that the service is not for them, in spite of the rhetoric and the multilingual notices of welcome. On occasion, this is a profoundly accurate perception, and organisations need to look long and hard at ways in which they can improve their inclusivity and the 'community ownership' of their service.

On a one-to-one basis, however, cultural sensitivity is an extremely important aspect of ADP. How you greet people; how you handle gender issues; how you acknowledge the differences between you; whether you offer the services of someone who can enable people to use their first language in the interview – these and many other issues are all significant for ADP. No book or training notes can ever cover all aspects of this, of course. It is, however, incumbent upon you to become familiar with the cultural issues of the area in which you work, and to ensure that you make a serious attempt to put cultural sensitivity into practice.

Personal awareness. Personal awareness is an important aspect of all people-work. It includes our understanding of why we undertake this type of work; what the rewards are and what needs within us are being met by doing it. It also involves being aware of key aspects of ourselves: our age; 'race'; gender; class; sexuality; disability; religious background. All of these components make us who we are, and are part of the package of what we communicate to people directly or indirectly when we work with them. Sometimes who we are – our background – will make it easier to work with some people. A shy Asian woman coming into an agency may be hugely relieved to be met by a female Asian worker of a similar age: an immediate rapport may be that much easier to establish. By contrast, a young person may feel that the older worker who is trying to relate to them cannot possibly

understand 'where they are coming from', and represent unwelcome parental and authority figures. The crucial thing for the worker to bear in mind is to be aware of some of these potential advantages and disadvantages, and to be open and honest about them. Sometimes just the act of putting these hesitations into words, and trying to empathise with the other person about these issues, is enough to begin to break down potential barriers to communication.

Being open and critical about our own practice. The concept of being a reflective practitioner is now well established in people-work, thanks in no small measure to the seminal work of Schon (1983, 1987). This covers a range of issues, including self-awareness and the impact we have upon the people with whom we seek to work. The key point to make here, however, is that the skills of being a reflective practitioner need to be constantly honed and evaluated: there is no guarantee we will get it right. In fact, there is more than an even chance we will get it wrong, to some extent at least. Human diversity and complexity make this almost inevitable. Therefore, we need to have good systems in place to review what we do and how we do it, and to evaluate the impact and outcomes of our work. Supervision is one obvious mechanism for this, particularly if you are still in training, when your practice educator, mentor or supervisor should regularly raise ADP issues with you.

It is also good practice to devise ways of seeking feedback from the service users themselves: they are, after all, the experts in their lives and how you have interacted with them. This is not always straightforward, however. Sometimes people tell you what they think you are hoping to hear! Sometimes their feedback depends upon the extent to which you have been able to deliver what they were hoping to receive. In an era when resources are being cut back, a disappointed service user may reflect that disappointment in the feedback, rather than offer a dispassionate objective evaluation of your practice. But this should not deter you from seeking feedback. Some agencies have a post-event feedback sheet which they send out; or they make a phone call to elicit comments. It is often helpful for a third party to seek this information, such as a supervisor or practice educator. There is no one single, right or best way of seeking this feedback: what is important, however, is that you make it part of your practice to seek it out, and to reflect carefully on what is being said.

Cultivating the wider picture. An awareness of the PCS analysis should mean that with every piece of work you undertake with someone, these wider perspectives are consciously brought into play. In the discussion about assessment, Thomson's (2006a) concept of 'helicopter vision' is used precisely to capture the importance of this holistic approach. This ensures that you take into account wider pressures and influences which may have shaped the person's attitudes and behaviour, and also that you draw back from a facile pathologising of a person's problems. Although each and every one of us has

a measure of personal responsibility for the world view we have chosen to make sense of our lives and the actions we take, it is often the case that wider pressures make certain undesirable outcomes inevitable. In such cases (spiralling debt is a classic example), a response of blaming the individual can be hugely discriminatory, whereas a holistic approach informed by the PCS analysis can be liberating and emancipatory.

Acknowledging and using our shared humanity. This is a skill that is rarely recognised and acknowledged in professional literature, but in many ways it is the supreme communication skill in ADP. It is far too easy to adopt the 'I'm the confident professional, the expert, and I know what is best for you' approach, while underneath we are often hurt, confused and unsure about ourselves at the person level and in our own relationships. If we are honest, we are as susceptible to making a mess of things as anyone else, and often do just that. There is a skill, of course, in not allowing our own 'stuff' to get in the way of our professional relationships. To burden someone else with our problems, or to suggest in some superficial way that to share something of our own hurts will prove therapeutic to the other person, is widely recognised as being unhelpful, even dangerous. Our hurts may inform and even underpin our capacity to empathise with the other person, but they must stay firmly in the background.

There is nevertheless a subtle communication skill at work here. If we recognise and acknowledge our shared humanity with those we become involved with professionally, it will not only save us from the professional arrogance that distances us from people; more importantly, it will communicate to the other person that we too are human, vulnerable and at times hurting, as well as resilient, capable and open-hearted. If there is a tacit recognition that such capacities are open to us all, then we may be far more effective as 'wounded helpers' (Nouwen, 1999) than we realise.

Activity 3

It is sometimes difficult to acknowledge our own hurts, but we owe it to ourselves, our commitment to best ADP, and to those who come to us for help, to be aware of situations where we begin to feel uncomfortable in our dealings with others because the issues are too close for comfort. Spend some time reflecting on your own life and areas where your own hurts may possibly get in the way of your dealings with others. Have you noticed a tendency to shy away from similar 'problem areas' in others, or to be tempted to 'share your own problems with them'? In what ways do you think you can learn how to acknowledge a shared humanity while still maintaining professional boundaries? It is important to discuss these issues in a safe environment, both during your training in tutorials and group discussions, and subsequently in supervision.

Final thoughts

There has been a fascinating development to the discussion of ADP in the contemporary debate about spirituality. This is seen to be a far-reaching concept that includes religion but also has far wider ramifications. Spirituality seeks to raise issues about meaning and purpose in people's lives, and to ask questions about the world view which people choose, consciously or unconsciously, in order to make sense of the world and their place within it. Some also argue for a social justice dimension to spirituality. Moss (2005: 71), for example, argues that this concept of a person's world view, and the impact that a person's spirituality (S) has upon their lives in both positive and negative ways, is an important component of each level of the PCS analysis, and may even warrant its own additional 'category' (S for spiritual), thereby developing it into a PCSS analysis.

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Related concepts: acceptance; active listening; assessment; empathy; empowerment, resilience and a strengths perspective; feedback – giving and receiving; non-verbal communication; spirituality.

Assertiveness

Working with other people is often a challenge. As people-workers, you are required to be good team players; to work within management guidelines; to contribute your ideas and insights; and to value the opinions, ideas and, at times, the specialist knowledge of others. And all the time you have to deal with the fascinating and, at times, bewildering and annoying character traits of those around you.

The challenge lies precisely in how you handle yourselves in this complex set of relationships. Perhaps you remember all too vividly occasions when you have tried tentatively to make a contribution to a discussion, only to feel 'slapped down' by another member of the group whose overpowering presence made you slink away with your tail between your legs, feeling undervalued and worthless. Such intimidating and overpowering behaviour not only makes you feel uncomfortable; it also zaps your creative energies and diminishes your ability to make positive contributions. It also can make you fearful, and therefore the temptation to run away and take flight from the stressful encounter can be very strong.

There may also be occasions, however, when you feel so affronted, or even insulted, by another person's behaviour that your immediate *knee jerk* reaction is to *give as good you get,* and to respond with an angry riposte or a vitriolic tirade against the other person. *No one speaks to me like that*, is your response; *I'll show them what I'm made of.* And before you know it, a full-scale verbal boxing match has started, and no one wins.

A note of caution

There may be times when you are faced with an aggressive person who is threatening violence or who is making you feel too uncomfortable to continue. Your safety is paramount, so you need to remove yourself from any risk as soon as possible.

Activity 1

Think about a situation at work or in your personal life where you have been on the receiving end of such behaviour. Did you opt for fight or flight? How did this make you feel? What impact did this have upon your general well-being and your value as a team member? How would you have liked to have handled things differently?

Handling things differently takes us immediately into a discussion about assertiveness, which is an important skill and mindset for anyone involved in people-work. It involves being able to make your own contribution confidently whilst valuing and respecting the contribution made by others. Thompson (2006, 2011) talks helpfully about a continuum of assertiveness, ranging at one end of the spectrum from being totally submissive and letting other people 'walk all over you', to the other extreme of being very aggressive, domineering, bullying even, stopping at nothing to ensure that you win the day at all costs. At each end of this continuum, we will experience a degree of loss. If we allow ourselves to become 'doormats', we will lose a sense of self-worth, dignity and any thought that we have something useful to contribute. If we adopt an aggressive domineering approach, we will lose the respect and trust of those we are seeking to influence, and (if we are honest) a feeling that we have let ourselves down by resorting to such insecure tactics that undermine the value base of our work.

Genuine assertiveness seeks to occupy the middle ground between these two extremes, and to foster a *win–win* mindset and value base. Each situation you encounter of course is different, and the contexts will vary. If you are in the midst of a particular crisis, perhaps dealing with someone who is critically ill, or needing to act quickly to protect a child or a vulnerable adult from abuse or harm, then proper lines of accountability will mean that, for the good of the person at risk, you need to act quickly, and to respond to orders and requests from the person in charge, whatever your personal views may be. Assertiveness is nevertheless essential if you are to value yourself, your colleagues and the unique contributions you all make to the organisations for which you work.

Assertiveness, therefore, is one example of your value base in action. It reflects the dignity and uniqueness of each and every person with whom you come into contact, and the value and worth you feel about yourself and the trust you have had placed in you by your employer. You have been entrusted to do a good job in partnership with other colleagues, both within your organisation and interprofessionally. You would be selling yourself short, as well as your colleagues and ultimately those for whom you care, if you do not

maintain and develop skills of assertiveness in your day-to-day practice. You are not in the job to be liked: at times, you will need to fight hard on behalf of someone who is ill, vulnerable or in great need. They need you to stand up for them and to argue the case for them to the best of your ability, in a calm, professional but assertive way.

To achieve this, you need to be sensitive first of all to who you are, what your values are, and any potential 'baggage' you may carry with you in your interactions with other people. Your age, gender, experience and training; your position in the organisation; your race and culture are all important 'self-awareness' factors that contribute to this process. You may have had some personally difficult and painful experiences which colour and influence your ability to deal with similar situations with others. Some things might scare you, such as dying, bereavement, severe disability, domestic violence, AIDS, challenging people in authority, for example, and you might feel tempted to take flight when faced with these situations in other people's lives. To be assertive by being confident that you can face such personally challenging moments and deliver high standards of care to this person, or to represent them effectively, takes courage, but if you flinch then you are not delivering best practice. Similarly, you need to be sensitive to other people and how their behaviour can similarly be affected by such issues. If you can remain calm, and try *to hear the music behind the other person's words,* you are much more likely to achieve a win–win outcome. These are some of the essential skills of people-work that need to be practised and developed on a daily basis.

One of the most difficult areas for assertiveness is in challenging discriminatory and oppressive language and behaviour, both with the people you are trying to help and also at times with colleagues, especially if they are more senior to you within the organisation. Again, timing and context are important: on some occasions, it will feel right to say something immediately, by elegantly asking the person to stop using particular language or behaving in a certain way because you and your organisation find it unacceptable. On other occasions, however, it might be better to do this afterwards, either face to face or by sending a brief note or email. There will be instances, however, where the matter is sufficiently serious to make a complaint or to whistle-blow*;* in such cases, however, it is wise to talk it through with a trusted colleague before you take action.

Assertiveness is not just a matter of what you say: it also involves *how* you say it and what message your non-verbal communication skills deliver to the other person. Effective assertiveness will involve a congruence between verbal and non-verbal communication and how you come across to the other person. We all instinctively sense when this does not happen; for example, when we ask a person if they are all right and they say 'Yes, I'm fine', but their general

demeanour tells you they are far from all right. As people-workers, you need to ensure, therefore, that your non-verbal communication skills are enmeshed with the words you use so that you are communicating effectively and authentically.

Activity 2

Think of an instance when you have found it difficult to be assertive. Can you identify why this felt difficult? How did you handle it? In what ways might you have adopted a different approach?

Final thoughts

Be encouraged! One of the spin-offs from developing your assertiveness skills is a greater sense of confidence in yourself and your professional abilities, and your effectiveness as a practitioner. Being genuinely assertive can lead to a win–win situation for yourself, those around you and the people whom you are seeking to help. But you will sometimes need support to achieve this, which is why it can be such a powerful issue to discuss in supervision.

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Related concepts: active listening; challenging; emotional intelligence; mediation skills; non-verbal communication; whistle blowing.

Assessment

There can hardly be any aspect of people-work that does not involve the skill of assessment in one form or another. From the doctor making a complex diagnosis or the nurse keeping a careful eye on a patient's vital signs, to the solicitor trying to obtain a true picture of what happened when an offence took place; from the social worker having to make decisions about whether a child or a vulnerable adult needs care and protection, to a manager of a care home having to decide whether someone is able to go into the town safely if unaccompanied: these are just some examples which illustrate the ways in which we can be called on to make assessments and judgements about other people.

At the less formal end of the spectrum, we all use some of these skills in our everyday life, when we make provisional assessments about another person's trustworthiness, for example. Of course, we sometimes get it wrong: we allow our prejudices and assumptions to cloud our judgement about the other person, but nevertheless we use assessment skills every day of our lives.

Within the professional context of people-work, however, assessment skills are of fundamental importance as they will frequently determine what level of service, if any, a person is entitled to receive. The evaluation of risk features strongly in this: we may be called upon to assess whether a person constitutes a risk to themselves or to others. We then need to devise responses that are not authoritarian or oppressive, but which work in partnership with the person involved. Taking an older person out of their home environment and placing them into residential care for their own protection when their various faculties are beginning to fail may be a wholly inappropriate response, for example. It may be far better to consider offering some support in their own home to enable them to stay in familiar surroundings with their pride and coping capacity intact.

The professional literature provides detailed discussions on assessment, especially for social work, and it is not appropriate to summarise all the main issues here. It is useful, however, to draw attention to the very clear definition of assessment provided by Coulshed and Orme (2006: 24) who maintain that:

> Assessment is not a single event, it is an ongoing process, in which the client or service user participates, the purpose of which is to assist the social worker to understand people in relation to their environment. Assessment is also a basis for

planning what needs to be done to maintain, improve or bring about change in the person or environment, or both.

In identifying the communication skills inherent in all good assessment work, there are three skill sets which are of crucial importance. These may be summed up as: (1) helicopter vision; (2) partnership working; and (3) passing the 'abducted by aliens' test.

Helicopter vision

Social work is not alone in its commitment to holistic assessment: care for the whole person is a concept which pervades much nursing and medical practice, for example. The real challenge for any professional people-worker, however, is to take this holistic approach absolutely seriously, and to devise responses to individual problems and situations that take into account the wider contexts in which people live their lives. This is what Thompson (2005: 64) means by 'helicopter vision': it is the determination to gain as detailed and as comprehensive an overview as possible of the 'person in context'. This means, therefore, that we do not just focus on the physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual aspects of a person's individual life, but also explore the social, cultural and societal dimensions which may impact upon their immediate difficulties. For example, the impact of poverty, racism, disablism, the 'debt culture' or homophobia on a person's life may be of huge importance, and any solution that does not take into account these factors is bound to be short-lived.

In terms of communication skills, therefore, an effective assessment will attempt to explore these wider issues and their impact upon the person. This approach also counteracts the pathologising tendency among some welfare professionals to assume that a person's problems are all their fault, whereas the reality is often that the person has been struggling valiantly against massive societal pressures. To be able to appreciate these wider dimensions to a person's difficulties can be a significant aspect of empathic attunement, and can help them re-direct their energies towards structural as well as individual solutions.

Activity 1

Choose a scenario you have been involved with, and practise using the helicopter vision. What are the wider societal and cultural factors that may exacerbate this person's difficulties? How does an appreciation of these wider issues help you come to a richer assessment of what this person really needs?

Partnership working

This is a theme that pervades all social work practice, but is important in many other aspects of people-work. For it to be more than a 'practice mantra', however, it requires you to develop and practise a range of communication skills which, at all levels, give the clear signal to the other person that partnership working really is 'the name of the game'.

It is temptingly easy for professional workers not only to feel that 'they know best', but also to convey this to the person they are working with. From this, there flows a subtle movement towards dependency, where the professional 'takes over' with the tacit message, 'trust me, I am a professional – do what I tell you and all will be well'. Many people, feeling vulnerable and unsure of how best to proceed, fall gratefully into this trap, only to discover further down the line that they have been short-changed by having their resilience, their expertise, their capacity to change and to take responsibility for their lives, called into serious question. Maybe the professional worker did not intend this to happen; but by not practising the skills of partnership working this was the outcome.

It may be the case, of course, that in the early days of the professional relationship, the other person needs you to take some action on their behalf. A threat of immediate eviction, for example, is usually best removed, or at least delayed, by appropriate professional intervention. But if this is all that is done, and the person then walks away with a sigh of relief, they will soon discover that the 'evil day' returns once more to haunt them. As a worker, you need to establish a trusting relationship where the real issues and problems are identified – and a clear strategy is devised – to help the person deal with them.

You can then begin to suggest to people that they are the experts in their own lives; that they know what is best for them and their family; that they know what needs to be done. If you can begin to articulate these values, then your role as a professional will be to encourage, to support, to provide information and to work with them to help them effect the changes that will be necessary if they are to emerge from their current cluster of problems. If you do all the work, and the person in difficulty remains a grateful but passive spectator, the chances are that whatever caused the problems will recur.

The skill in this approach is not just in the words and gestures that you use, but in your essential value base, to ensure that respect and dignity are accorded to the other person in every possible way.

Activity 2

Put yourself in the position of going to someone for help with a difficult problem. How would you like to be treated? What would partnership working mean for you? How would you feel if you were not treated in this way?

Passing the 'abducted by aliens' test

This somewhat tongue-in-cheek, light-hearted title refers to the importance of accurate accessible recording. Parker (2010) uses this idea to capture an important issue, which he describes as follows:

> If you were abducted by aliens tomorrow, would someone else in the office or agency be able to pick up your work and understand it?

The implications for assessment are clear. No matter how well you have worked in partnership with your service user, if this is not fully, accurately and clearly recorded there is a chance that all will be lost. Professional people-workers often lament the bureaucracy of paperwork and endless reports, but in truth they are the mechanisms for recording important work and for ensuring that others have access to it. Records and reports are also often essential before decisions can be taken by managers to allocate resources.

This means that you need to record all relevant information clearly, succinctly and in plain English, and to state clearly where decisions need to be taken. Recommendations should also be clearly indicated. Most agencies, of course, have standard documents and pro formas for recording information, and it is important that these are used properly. With multi-agency working becoming increasingly important, the need for accurate recording is paramount.

One further aspect of this is the right of access to information which service users, carers, patients and clients now have to their records. You need to have clear in your own mind your agency policy concerning access to records, and to make sure that you consider this when completing your reports. It is best practice to share assessment documents with your service user, and for them to sign them and to have copies, although you will first need to check your agency policy.

Activity 3

Try the 'abducted by aliens' test, either on some of your own records, or with another colleague, by exchanging records and giving each other feedback on them.

The Common Assessment Framework (CAF)

One further aspect of assessment concerns working with children and families. In 2000, the Department of Health produced its *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families*. This is required reading for anyone working with children and families in a professional context. The report states clearly that:

> Assessing whether a child is in need and the nature of these needs requires a systematic approach which uses the same framework or conceptual map for gathering and analysing information about all children and their families, but discriminates effectively between different types and levels of need … It requires a thorough understanding of the developmental needs of children; the capacities of parents or caregivers to respond appropriately to those needs, and the impact of wider family and environmental factors on parenting capacity and children. (2000: 17)

In exploring these issues, the report produced its assessment framework triangle, which indicates the range of issues that need to be taken into account in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of a child. The three arms of the triangle are: (1) the child's developmental needs; (2) parenting capacity; and (3) family and environmental factors. It is only when all of these factors have been taken into account that a holistic assessment can be made. In this respect, the framework reflects the key skills and issues we have highlighted in this discussion, and underlines their importance for the assessment process.

The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) builds on this work by offering a standardised approach to conducting an assessment to help in the early identification of a child's additional needs, and to facilitate a coordinated response to ensure these needs are met. This often involves some Team Around the Child (TAC) interprofessional meetings with the key agencies working with the child and the family.

Activity 4

1. Obtain a copy of the Assessment Framework and look carefully at the assessment triangle with its various components. Chapter 2 provides a detailed discussion of what is involved, and deserves careful study.
2. Look at some core CAF documentation, and evaluate its effectiveness as an assessment tool.
3. Now find some assessment documentation used in connection with Safeguarding Adults (the Care Quality Commission has a lot of resources available on their website at www.cqc.org.uk). Compare and contrast these with the CAF approach.

As will be clear from the third task in Activity 4 above, it is important to emphasise that there are some important issues being raised here in connection with adult care.

The introduction of Personalisation, with its emphasis upon people taking increasing responsibility for their own care and well-being, and how resources can be most effectively used, has highlighted the shared, partnership aspect of assessment. It has, in effect, re-defined 'who knows best', with the service user being empowered far more to 'call the shots' by the worker who is *sitting beside* rather than *standing above*.

Final thoughts

Assessment is one of the most important tasks any professional worker can undertake. If it is done thoroughly by using the range of skills that is required, it can prove to be a most effective and empowering experience for everyone concerned. But it must be done properly and to the best of your ability.

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Related concepts: empathy; establishing a professional relationship; interprofessional collaboration.