

## An Evaluation of the Extended Community Based Model (ECBA) for assessing parents and children

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### Abstract

*Assessments in care proceedings are a particularly complex area of social work practice. In recent years there has been a substantial and continuing increase in the number of care applications to court by local authorities. In this context 11 court assessments (spanning a 4 year period) using a unique model termed the Extended Community Based Assessment (ECBA) were examined qualitatively in the context of existing models of assessment. The architects of the ECBA suggest it is a unique model that utilises several key assessment tools, i.e. the Parenting Assessment Manual, Adult Attachment Interviews, where assessors are expected to spend long periods in the parents' home directly observing interactions between the parent and child. A common criticism of social work assessments has been that they lack good analysis (Beesley, 2010). The findings from this research challenge that criticism, with the 11 reports demonstrating a complex level of analysis. However the findings also reveal inconsistencies in the approach to the ECBA model itself. Most importantly the findings reinforce the centrality of relationship based practice to effective social work practice in assessment.*

### Acknowledgement

This study would not have been possible without funding from the East of England Development Agency and the kind permission of the Ministry of Justice

### Introduction

Assessment is one of the core defining processes of what social workers do in their work with service users and an integral part of social work practice (e.g. Thompson, 2005; Thompson and Thompson, 2008; Trevithick, 2005; Walker and Beckett 2003; Wilson et al, 2008). Indeed in some respects in an effort to understand the complexity of social work, some authors (e.g. Crisp et al, 2004) point out that student practitioners can reduce the whole process of social work itself to this one aspect of practice. In this context assessment remains one of the, if not *the* defining aspect of social work practice. Sometimes when asked to define what they do social workers have referred to their work as *assessment*.

Assessing parenting capacity is a particularly complex aspect of social work (Reder and Lucey, 1995), particularly where there is concern that a parent may have abused their child (Jones et al 2008; Parker and Bradley, 2003). Some authors have been critical of social work practice in that "*Assessment*" has been limited to the provision of already-available options, rather than *identification of new services*. Arguably, the process of assessment should also identify options for the user not already in existence (Baldwin & Woods, 1994, p. 316).

Assessments for court are still the primary mechanism by which decisions in care proceedings are determined. Courts have to decide between competing assessments, and sometimes competing claims by professionals. In June 2009, care applications in England and Wales reached their highest ever recorded level (784 cases) with Section 31 applications between April and September 2009 up 47% on the same period in 2008 (CAFCASS, 2009). By March 2011 there had been an all time record reached in the number of care applications- 882 The total for 2010/11 continues the surge in applications in recent years. The number of applications for each of the last five years is as follows: 2006/07: 6,786; 2007/08: 6,241; 2008/09: 6,488; 2009/10: 8,826; 2010/11: 9,137. Graham Cole, chairman of the Local Authority Child Care Lawyers Group, said: "*The increasing resource limitations will make it difficult for local authorities to manage these cases effectively. All agencies including the courts, are under pressure as a result of these limitations.*" (Local Government Lawyer website, 2011)

Munro (2008) had a significant message in relation to assessments in the wake of the death of Peter Connelly. She was critical of governmental understanding of child protection work and stated that "*we can begin to understand the dynamic flow of a family's life and detect abuse only by spending time with parents and children. We can improve childcare only by forming relationships and working with parents. The organisation needs to be centred on supporting that human contact with the family. Instead, what we have now are organisations centred on feeding the Government's ever-growing appetite for hard data at the expense of the complex and subtle information social workers actually need to form a realistic assessment of child welfare*" (Munro, 2008 p. 24).

Farnfield (2008) suggested that cases involving child protection are still primarily legally driven so that some assessments provided for courts *ended up as little more than lists of parental errors and omissions*. Farnfield, 2008 argued that *'too many cases seemed hopelessly stuck, with social workers relying on information from other agencies rather than meaningful interactions with parents themselves'*. This appeared a particular problem when parents were involved in substance misuse. Farnfield's experience echoed the findings of a small study by Woodcock (2003), who noted that social workers seemed trapped in a *'surface-static model'* of parenting—one that looked at the surface of parental behaviour and saw parents possessing intrinsic characteristics that were static and did not form part of a dynamic system capable of change. First, it distinguishes between crucial dimensions of parenting, which apply to all parents, and modifying conditions which are not intrinsic to parenting but can modify parenting behaviour. Second, it describes how the critical dimensions and the modifiers interact as part of a dynamic ecological system.

The system that most directly concerns assessors is the care-giving system, which is sometimes reduced in assessments to parenting ability or competence (Hoghugh, 2004; Department of Health, 2000; Jones, 2001). The care-giving system interacts with the spousal system, namely the adult attachment and sexual partnership, which, in turn, interconnects with the extended family and wider social support networks. Containing the whole are the wider cultural and socio-economic systems, which include norms about how children should be brought up. The impact of these inter-nested systems on the child is represented here in terms of the child attachment system. This is the intimate relationship that the child forms with his or her carers and which functions to protect the child (e.g. Howe, 2005).

## What is the ECBA?

The Extended Community Based Model (ECBA) is a model for evaluating parents in the care proceedings arena. Often such assessments of parents take place in residential units, where a holistic approach to assessments can be applied, and extended contact between the assessor and the parent and child/ren can be more easily facilitated.

Its advocates suggest the ECBA is a unique model for assessing families where the focus in the assessment is upon 'enabling' the parent, through observations that are combined with teaching input, feedback throughout, visual aids, praise, modelling, reinforcing and highlighting positive interactions. It is sometimes referred to as 'parenting the parent'. The ECBA requires particular skills of assessors, for example assessors need to be accepting of parents with vulnerabilities or learning disabilities, receptive to new ideas and competent and confident in their own knowledge of childcare and parenting.

The originator of the ECBA's argue that it can be a tool for empowering parents and one commentator termed the ECBA '*old fashioned social work*'. He suggested that "*We can see when we get referrals to the ECBA that they seem stuck in that local authorities have tried to intervene in a superficial way. So we get families who say to us this is the first time that social workers have actually sat down with us and tried to do things with us*" (Interview with Mark Willis, 10/1/11).

In this philosophy the ECBA is seen as a mechanism for "*getting alongside parents, developing a relationship and understanding what was going on for the child, of a better understanding of what was happening in the world of the parent. Lots of observation, seeing the parent and child together. That data is crucial. We wanted to build the model on those factors relationship building, developing trust*" (Interview with Mark Willis, 10/1/11). As Thompson and Thompson (2008) argue partnership is central to the process of assessment, that assessment is something which is done *with* people rather than *to* them. How far do the ECBA's meet this requirement was one of the tasks of this research?

Key to the successful outcome of the ECBA is the motivation both of the assessor and parents being assessed, where rapport and relationship building is essential to facilitate change. However external stressors can influence the parental acquisition and maintenance of new skills, but within the ECBA the impact of these inter-related systems on the child can be assessed in terms of the child attachment system (e.g. Howe, 2005). The ECBA utilises the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) to facilitate the assessment of the parental relationship and the AAI can define individual's description of their relationship to their own life.

The ECBA's also assess Parenting skills through direct observation of the parent and child interaction using the Parenting Assessment Manual (PAM) framework. The PAM is intended for use with individuals, by professionals carrying out an assessment, and intended for use in a parent's home (McGaw et al 1998). The PAM includes an Initial screening tool; 'I need help' form; Parent Questionnaire; Planner; Equipment list; Skills Index – knowledge and understanding; skills; practice; Worksheets (Child); Worksheets (Parent); Observation form; PAM Profiles (child and parent) and Drawing conclusions and recommendations.

## Dynamic assessments

The ECBA is seen as a dynamic assessment process in that the assessment is used to work with parents over 8-10 weeks developing their skills. This is done by teaching them, demonstrating, role modelling, highlighting, praising and trying to make changes to their parenting abilities during the assessment process. This gives parents a meaningful opportunity to change and to evidence whether they can sustain those changes, over a period of time under what is quite intense observational conditions, e.g. being observed for 6-7 hours. *“Beneath it all this is all about empowering the parents to try and to make them feel that they are part of the formulation of the assessment, partnership and empowerment rather than punitive and directive”* (Interview with Mark Willis, 10/1/11).

With the vast increase in care applications the ECBA philosophy has a crucial role in trying to reduce the number of children entering the care system and ensuring that children remain with their birth families with the right support, as this can be better for children in the long term. Willis believes the ECBA philosophy matches the wider political agenda, which is focussed more on what social workers can to ensure parents and children have the best opportunity of remaining together? *Providing high level support and trying to keep families together is a different way of thinking than what has been going on for the last 15 years.* (Interview with Mark Willis, 10/1/11). Walker and Beckett, 2003 viewed assessment as *‘the art of managing competing demands,’* whilst having the personal integrity to hold to ones core values, whilst being bombarded by conflicting feelings and pressures.

Whilst it is possible to suggest the process of assessment is dynamic ,the reality is that by the time the ECBA are documented, approved and presented to court, they become static, unchanging. Is it possible to have an assessments process which not only facilitates change but continues to do so even after the involvement with the family has ended?

Aspects of the ECBA are supported by researchers who have pointed out that it is important that the care-giving system is assessed for how it interacts with the spousal system, namely the adult attachment and sexual partnership, which, in turn, interconnects with the extended family and wider social support networks (Hoghugh, 2004; Department of Health, 2000; Jones, 2001).

## Long term outcomes

If assessments such as the ECBA are deemed to be successful, one measure may be the longer term outcomes for children. One issue raised by research by Hertfordshire SCD (2010) suggested that often measuring success was based on engagement with services rather than positive outcomes for children (Hertfordshire SCD, 2010). This raises a question which is difficult to address in this short piece of research, in that longer term outcomes such as emotional well being are much more complex issues to measure. Instead the reports have been examined in terms of whether they focussed on outcomes for children or parental engagement with services.

## Methodology

In this research each ECBA report has been compared with established theoretical approaches to assessments. A common criticism of social work assessments has been that they lack good analysis (Beesley, 2010). The unique nature of the ECBA assessment were assessed for this aspect- did they exemplify good analysis? This was assessed by examining how far each report compared with

existing models of assessment (i.e. Psychodynamic approaches; Ecological approach; Family systems; Competence/ Task Centred approach; Educative approach or Risk assessment).

There are a number of approaches to assessments: **Psychodynamic approaches** emphasise the link between early childhood experiences and present functioning in adults. This approach has had significant influence in social work practice with ideas such as the Adult Attachment Interview, which are designed to surprise the unconscious. Psychodynamic concepts such as defence mechanisms are useful ways into understanding how some people manage their emotions.

The **Ecological approach** influenced the DoH (2000) publication *Framework for the assessment of Children and their Families*. Key to this approach is locating individuals in the context of their family, community and culture. *"The ecological perspective uses ecological concepts from biology as a metaphor with which to describe the reciprocity between persons and their environments...attention is on the goodness of fit between an individual or group and the places in which they live out their lives"*(Sands, 2001). Bronfenbrenner (1979), suggested four levels of ecological components as a useful framework in understanding how individual or family processes are influenced by hierarchical environmental systems in which they function.

**Family systems** approach to assessment views the problems of the individual as located within the family and social system they live within. Family boundaries are crucial for understanding the functioning, for example how open or closed is the family?

**Competence/ task centred approach** this approach was integrated into BAAF assessment forms in 2000, and is linked to the growth in competence based approaches in social work education, with a focus on outputs and outcomes. The criticism of these approaches is that they can result in very mechanistic assessments to the detriment of reflection and developing insight.

**Educative approach** this approach is characterised by greater emphasis on self assessment, and focus on the parent being an active participant in their own assessment. This can rely on applicants own ability to articulate their own views.

**Risk assessment approach** in many respects child protection and the risk parents pose to their children underpin the philosophy behind all assessments. Most risk assessments rest on potential capabilities of the assessed, their ability to manage risk, stress and conflict, to be open and communicative and to seek and utilise support.

The more complex an assessment process there is, the more likelihood it is to be a combination of all these approaches. As a result the reports were analysed in so far as how they reflected each of these approaches.

The original methodology had outlined an evaluation of a sample of ECBA's- 11 in all, together with interviews with parents involved in the process, interviews with social workers and interviews with commissioner. As the ECBA's are court reports they are subject to privileged access conditions. As a result of these conditions *"None of the parties to the cases, nor their representatives, may be contacted directly using information drawn from the ECBA or Court File"*. It was not therefore possible to interview parents and social workers who were the main participants of the assessments, but this may be a consideration for future research into the ECBA's. The restrictions of the Ministry of Justice therefore determined the sampling frame employed and the methodology for the research.

The reports were analysed for both quantitative data, i.e. number of children involved in the assessment, ages of parents, assessor data, outcomes and specific recommendations, and the gender, experience, and status of the assessors

The second and more extensive analysis was based on qualitative data and covered a number of issues: what tools (e.g. PAM; AAI) were used to carry out the assessment; how 'creative' was the report- i.e. how does it relate to different theoretical approaches to assessment; How far did the assessor utilise their own assessment approach in the report?; How does the ECBA assess the adult's attachment pattern childhood experiences of love, rejection and neglect- i.e. is the parents' attachment pattern (secure, dismissing, preoccupied or unresolved) and how did this related to the outcome of the assessment?

### Ethical issues

Research involving reports for court is particularly sensitive and explicit restrictions were placed on the research by the Ministry of Justice, which meant that the original plan to interview social workers and parents involved in the ECBA was no longer possible. Therefore a review of the ECBA's themselves formed the central aspect of the research. Identifying names were removed from all the reports and identifying features have been anonymised.

Inevitably research which is limited to an examination of the documents itself can only yield a restricted view. The research would need to be broader, and include interviews with the actual assessors and where possible parents who were the subject of the assessments to give a more useful and fuller insight into the effectiveness of the assessments. Lockyer (2006) has argued that greater confidence can be had in findings which are gathered from different sources and subjected to different analytical strategies. This research therefore can only be the start of a more extensive analysis which combines methodologies, an interrogation of the reports and a later research involving interviews with assessing independent social workers (referred to here as the assessor).

There are great limitations over generalisability with any research involving a small sample group, but it is intended that this research can begin to consider broader assessment issues which inform social work practice particularly in the light of current practice in assessments for court.

## **Results**

A clarification over the terminology used in this section: a positive outcome or recommendation is where the report recommended rehabilitation of the child with his or her parents (8 of the reports did this), and a negative outcome is where it is recommended the child be cared for outside the family (3 of the reports did this). Clearly this is only positive or negative from the parent's point of view and a recommendation that a child be cared for outside the family is not per se a negative outcome for the child and may be considered to be a positive decision which keeps the child safe.

### **1. *Length of the reports how long did the report take?***

7 of the reports were commissioned by local authorities and 4 of the reports by family solicitors. The shortest report took 36 days and the longest 266, but the longest report stands out as something of an anomaly, in that the nearest longest report was 108 days in length and the average report took 76 days to complete. If the final report is omitted the average length of assessment was 57 days. Given the requirements of 35 days for a core assessment, this appears remarkably efficient use of time for such complex and lengthy assessments such as the ECBA. 2 reports did not record their exact start and finish days so the number of days in these reports were estimated on the basis of information within the report.

The design of the ECBA required direct observations of the interactions with the parent and child to take place over 8 to 12 direct observations involving the parent and child's interaction. However there was great range of whether this was applied and interpreted by the assessors. For example one report was based on only 4 direct observations between the parent and child, whilst another report was based on interviews with parents, with no recorded direct observation of the interaction between the children and the parent. Some reports were misleading in how they recorded the number of sessions, for example one report (5) indicated only 4 direct observations at the start of the report but examination of the report revealed it actually contained 10 direct observations.

The model of ECBA requires 2 assessors, and in 10 of the reports this was the case. One report was carried out by one assessor, but this was due to ill health on the part of the second assessor, and it is perhaps not surprising that this was the report which took the longest amount of time to complete.

### **Suggestions for future practice**

Many reports did not state their start and end days for the assessment and this would be useful for the commissioning bodies. Where possible for the purpose of this comparison I have made estimates at what appears to be the length of time of the involvement in order to obtain some comparative data. It would appear that such complex assessment as the ECBA require a minimum of two assessors.

### **2. *What were the tasks for the ECBA, and how were they allocated or completed?***

In many of the ECBA's the key assessment tasks were listed at the start of the report. There was a wide variation in the key assessment tasks, for example some were extremely brief and just contained the instruction *Jointly instructed parenting assessment*, whereas other reports contained extremely detailed instructions, for example 16 separate specific assessment tasks (over 3 pages) for the ECBA to address. These often included very specific tasks e.g. *'What are the prospects of success*

*for any treatment, therapy or other support identified as necessary?’ and ‘Please comment on the parents’ understanding of the risk of sexual harm that exists within the family network and their respective ability to protect the child from sexual harm?’* There was no correlation between the length of the instructions and length of the final report. Whilst most of the reports did directly address the key assessment tasks, one of the reports failed to address the key assessment tasks, in the instructions from the court.

None of the reports made reference to the initial screening tool, but many utilised and made explicit reference to some of the key tools from the PAM e.g. ‘I need help’ form; Skills Index and Parent Worksheets. The reports often made reference to and used the results of the Adult Attachment interview to inform the final recommendation. Only one report (the first one) made specific reference to the Parenting Assessment Manual score.

#### Suggestions for future practice

Given the centrality of the PAM and AAI to the effectiveness of the ECBA it was a little surprising that the reports themselves did not consistently make reference to these assessment tools in their final recommendation, although there is substantive evidence of their use throughout 9 of the 11 ECBA.

### **3. Details of children and parents**

The 11 ECBA reports concerned 15 children- 10 boys and 5 girls, the mean age of which was 2.8, but only 3 reports concerned children over the age of 3. 7 of the reports concerned children aged only 1, suggesting that the cohort of children in the report sample was very young in comparison with the mean age for the children in the care system. 8 reports concerned both parents who were directly involved in the ECBA and 3 concerned the mother only. No reports concerned father on their own, and 7 of the reports recorded parents’ ages.

#### Suggestions for future practice

The ECBA is an assessment tool which is concerned with parenting skills of young children so it is not surprising that the average age of the cohort of children in the sample was particularly young. It is noteworthy that the two shortest reports (in terms of their length) were reports which concerned the oldest children in the sample (aged 4, 7 and 9) and did not make explicit reference to the AAI or the PAM in their final recommendation to the court.

### **4. What were the gender, experience, and status of the assessors?**

Apart from one assessment each of the 11 ECBA had two assessors. The one single female assessor was due to ill health of the co-assessor. Out of the 21 assessors were 18 female and were 3 male, which represents an 85% female breakdown of gender. This reflects the current breakdown in gender in the social work profession itself. The combined years in experience of the assessors group was 352 years, with a mean age of 16.8 years in practice. This indicates that the group of assessors for the ECBA were a very experienced group of practitioners, when compared with the average length of experience of social workers in child protection practice where a disproportionately large number of newly qualified and inexperienced social workers begin their career in child protection work (Burns, 2011).



## **5. Multi-professional involvement**

The role of other professionals in relation to the ECBA report was also considered, i.e. did the reports themselves rely on information from other professionals (as this has been another key criticism in relation to social work practice in the past) or did the reports make use of their own 'generated material' for assessment purposes?

Out of the 11 reports only 3 reports made reference to the assessments of other professionals, e.g. one ECBA made reference on 17 occasions to a report by a Psychiatrist, another made frequent reference to report by another independent assessor and one made reference to Consultant Psychologists assessment of the mother to help inform their own assessment.

Therefore one could suggest that the reports form a unique predominantly uni-professional approach to the process of assessment, in that they are presented as 'stand alone reports in their own right' based on the views of 2 social work assessors interactions with a family.

## **6. How long was the final report**

The 11 reports constitute a total number of 768 pages, and the mean number of pages was 70 for the ECBA. The longest was 99 pages in length and the shortest was 20. The total word count was 232,734 and the mean word count 21,158.

2 ECBA reports were noticeably much shorter than the other reports. In both these cases neither followed the ECBA 'model' as outlined above, so neither had an AAI nor PAM tool in their assessment and there was much less contact recorded between the parent and the child- i.e. one report contained four 6 hour observed sessions between parent and child as opposed to 12 in other cases. In one case there was no recorded observation between the parent and the child, and the report was based almost exclusively on interviews with the mother.

### Suggestions for future practice and other considerations

If the ECBA constitutes an explicit and unique model for assessment then there is a great range in how it is applied in these 11 reports. Whilst 9 of the reports made clear references to the PAM and AAI, 2 did not.

Given that periods of up to 8 hours were spent with the parents, the reports contained extensive and very detailed information. It was unclear from reading the reports how this was recorded. Given the extensive details contained in some of the reports, were these written shortly after the observations, or during the observations? It is important to ensure recordings are made accurately and appropriately, and it may be useful to consider the use of digital recording techniques for future assessments.

## **7. How 'creative' was the report- i.e. how does it relate to different approaches to assessment (i.e. Psychodynamic approaches; Ecological approach; Family systems; Competence/ task centred approach; Educative approach or Risk assessment)?**

The 11 reports were analysed for how they utilised aspects of existing models of assessment (i.e. Psychodynamic approaches; Ecological approach; Family systems; Competence/ task centred approach; Educative approach or Risk assessment). 8 out of 11 reports utilised psychodynamic

concepts such as defensiveness (e.g. *Mother presented as extremely defensive-* report 8); and containment (e.g. *Mother unable to contain her own mood-* report 2) and the long term traumatic effects of abuse in early childhood (e.g. *Mother showed degree of insight into her childhood trauma, but found some memories too painful to recall-* report 3).

Aspects of what can be termed an Ecological approach to assessment featured in 7 of the 11 reports (e.g. *Noted that couple did not have access to a support network-* Report 7; *Ecomap used with child to assess his relationships-* Report 6).

The family systems approach to assessment featured in all of the reports except for the last one (e.g. *Volatile arguments between the parents noted for how they impacted on the children-* Report 9 *couple relationship described as not good-* Report 8; *Relationship between the couple seen as strong and secure –* Report 3).

Given that the ECBA's key feature is on the parenting skills and abilities it is perhaps unsurprising that Competence based aspects of assessment featured in 9 of the 11 reports (e.g. Report 3 *Competence featured highly- focus on practicalities i.e. could mother appropriately comfort child;* Report 1 *could parents competently change nappy, bath child?;* Report 7 *Mother's ability to demonstrate competence in providing routine for the child*).

A further key feature of the ECBA is the 'teaching' of parents, and the reports were analysed for this aspect of the assessment process. The research found that this featured in 10 of the 11 reports making it the most common aspect of assessment, and reflects the unique approach of the ECBA, e.g. Report 4- *various aspects of care had to be pointed out to mother;* report 5 *mother not conscious of time and had to be reminded by the assessor;* Report 7- *Throughout the assessment mother able to learn from sharing of information and 'teaching' by assessor; increased her knowledge of cooking;* Report 8- *Mother bringing unhealthy food to contact- other food suggested;* Report 9- *Road safety and safety in the home 'taught' to father* and Report 10- *Assessor commented that it was difficult to assess how much information mother retaining during the 'teaching'.*

A final aspect of assessment considered in the reports was risk. The word risk was counted for the number of times it appeared in each report and specific aspects highlighted e.g. Report 4 *Focus on concerns with regard to mother's contact with risky males- word risky explained to mother, together with the concept of grooming and understanding the psychology of sex offending;* Report 8 *Risk featured highly in this report- the word itself occurred 33 times alone, necessary for assessor to intervene when mum's actions distressing the child.* In some respects Report 8 read more like a risk assessment, as it was very detailed and negative in its conclusions: *Overall, therefore we would have significant concerns about either parent's capacity to meet the child's needs on a consistent basis. The ongoing chaotic situations, which take away the parents focus from the child's needs, are continued and unpredictable in nature. The parent's personalities, failure to recognise risk and reluctance to work with social services combine to place the child at significant risk.* The report also expressed disappointment at the mother's inability to change.

Other key aspects of assessment were found to be present in the reports, firstly the assessment of empathy, e.g. Report 5 *Parents demonstrated empathy for the older children's situation and regret that they had 'failed' them;* Report 4- *Mother and fathers ability to empathise commented upon;* Report 10- *Talked about need for mother to empathise and to be more 'mind-minded' in her*

*parenting of her son*. Report 9 contained much detail about father's openness and honesty with the assessors and how he demonstrated good insight and 'genuine empathy'. It was also unique in that it utilised both a checklist of questions designed to obtain significant information regarding past and present relationships from Fowler (2003) and utilised Horwath's *The Child's World* assessment framework. As a result it was less reliant on PAM or the AAI for the final recommendation. Indeed where it was found that parent failed to demonstrate empathy, this was often linked to a negative outcome. Report 9 noted that the mother demonstrated a lack of empathy and the report recommended a rehabilitation to the father who 'had good insight' and a good attachment with the child.

Many of the reports featured what might be termed unique and creative aspects of assessments. For example Report 3 described the mother as suffering from a *wrath of abuse in her early formative years*. The significance of this is that it underpins the assessor's empathic relationship with the parent, and the assessors own skills in trying to see the world through the eyes of the parent. Two reports made explicit reference to anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice in the assessment process.

In some reports the assessors demonstrated a degree of 'atuneness' to the distress on the part of the children during contact. In report 2 the first comments on observation are characterised by distress and fractiousness on the part of the children, almost as if the children had picked up on the tensions within the parental relationship. In this report the assessor used various opportunities to explain the concept of empathy to the parents and relate this to being emotionally available for the children. Lack of empathy was used to help the parents understand concerns over how this may be perceived by others e.g. *lack of empathy is a common feature amongst men who behave aggressively (Report 2, p.74)*.

Reports noted the emotional response from the mother to the assessor, e.g. report 3 noted '*the initial reaction to me was less than positive, but she has struggled in the past to express herself positively without appearing defensive or aggressive*'. Mother 'closed down' during one interview about abuse by her own mother and the assessor decided to terminate the interview, demonstrating sensitivity to the needs of the parent.

Some reports contained unexplained information, for example Report 5 contained a lengthy discussion of the father's criminal and gang related activity, dealing drugs, and it was unclear the relevance of this information to the assessment of his parenting ability.

One report (6) made their recommendation explicit at the start of the report rather than at the conclusion, i.e. "*no cause for concern over mother capacity to plan menus, shop within budget and provide balanced meals. Our limited observations suggest she has capacity to manage a full range of practical parenting tasks*". This report differed from the others substantially in that the assessor utilised an ecomap to ascertain the child's wishes and feelings and a narrative story stem to assess the child's 'internal working model' of relationships. This report was unique in that it focussed on a much older child and a mother on their own, but did not follow the ECBA model in that neither the PAM nor the AAI appeared in the conclusion to the assessment. However the child's relationship with his brother was also assessed in depth and the report provided useful insights into that. The direct work with the child was helpful in the assessment.

Report 7 made explicit reference to Anti-Oppressive Practice, the need to avoid jargon and recognised the stressful nature of assessment at the start of the report. Report 7 was also unique in that it the mothers relationship history were elicited using a checklist from Fowler (2003) states as *'Information about the pattern of previous relationships can give clues as to how individuals operate, what expectations they have about relationships, and what they expect of themselves in relationships'*. This report noted that the father was teasing the mother and this was seen as additional stress in their relationship, as a result the assessors recommended relationship counselling.

#### Suggestions for future practice and other considerations

The ECBAs in this research demonstrated a complex spectrum of different aspects of theoretical tenets in assessment. No one tenet 'dominated' the ECBA process, but teaching and competence featured most significantly, followed by family systems and psychodynamic aspects of assessment.

There was a close correlation with the ability of the parents to demonstrate empathy and successful outcome for them (i.e. rehabilitation plans for the child). It may be helpful to consider a more formal assessment process for this aspect of assessing parental skills and competence, as it appears so closely related to success in the assessments, i.e. if a parent is more able to demonstrate empathy, they are more likely to be deemed competent to safely care for their child.

The assessors appeared to demonstrate a sophisticated ability to establish positive relationships with the parents, in difficult and challenging circumstances (many parents described the assessment process itself as stressful). The parents were then able to disclose painful early childhood experiences, and in some cases to develop empathic responses to their children, develop their parenting skills and develop their own reflective abilities. This is a noteworthy and important aspect of social work practice which has wider implications. The evidence from the ECBAs suggest that the empathic responses and abilities of the assessors themselves helped them to develop positive relationships with the parents who were then able to parallel this relationship in their relationship with their children. This is most significant where social work is required ethically to work towards the long term rehabilitation of children with their parents.

The reports varied greatly in how they were presented and it would have been beneficial for the commissioners for all the reports to be presented in the same format, for example some listed the instructions, some included PAM scores, some included detailed notes on observations whilst other did not. Observations in one report (4) were presented in a note form with bullet points as opposed to more detailed notes in other reports. If the ECBA is to be presented as a consistent assessment process, it would be an improvement for all ECBAs to have a consistent structure and content. Occasionally reports contained spelling mistakes, but in only one report (10) were these notable.

#### ***8. How does the ECBA assess the adult's attachment pattern childhood experiences of love, rejection and neglect- i.e. is the parents' attachment pattern (secure, dismissing, preoccupied or unresolved)? How is this related to the outcome of the assessment?***

Adult attachment assessments featured in 9 out of the 11 assessments. Most often the reports would begin with their assessment of the adult attachment patterns and these are significant for several reasons. Firstly this process enabled the assessors and the parent to be able to establish a

link and bond in their relationship, so that the assessment process could be grounded in a knowledge of the parents own childhood and significant experiences. The attachment was utilised to build a relationship from the 'ground up'. The two reports which noticeably did not utilise the AAI were much shorter in length and also involved significantly older children than the cohort mean (4, 7 and 9).

The AAI enabled the accounts parents gave to be measured against what the assessors knew of the parent's background and utilised to make an assessment of their own style of attachment, a key predictor in how they too would relate to their own children. Significant also was the depth and intensity of the parental disclosure. In some respects reading the reports one is struck by how crucial both confidentiality and trust were to the relationship. Some of the parents described horrific experiences of childhood and on reading the reports one is struck by how sensitively this information was handled by the assessors.

A key factor in this process was the parents own ability to make sense of their past experiences and to utilise this to either make changes to their own pattern of parenting (particularly where they had been unsuccessful parents in the past) or to help them make sense of their own emotional states. When for example a parent "*struggled to make sense of his negative childhood experiences*" this was then linked to his presentation as a '*needy and immature individual*'. For example in report 1 the analysis is used by the assessor to help understand the conflict between the parents- i.e. mother had needs to be a care giver, which were undermined by fathers drug use, which then lead to conflict in their relationship. This appears to be an imaginative use by the assessor of the considerations around childhood attachment patterns and their impact on present adult functioning, particularly given the outcome of the assessment was recommendation of rehabilitation between parents and child.

There were clear correlations between negative attachments and negative outcomes for the assessment, for example Report 2 noted that "*Mother denied she experienced physical abuse and neglect, although there was evidence in previous records of these experiences and the assault.*" By Observation 9 it was clear that *Mother emotionally unavailable for the children. Neither parent understood the concept of empathy. Her mood was noted to be erratic.* There was an explicit link between the parental pattern of attachment and the parents ability to safely care for their own children. The inability to demonstrate an understanding of empathy was significant for the assessor and reinforces the centrality of empathy in the assessment process.

Where parents demonstrated either secure childhood attachments, or an ability to reflect on their own insecure past attachments e.g. report 4 father is described as having no wish to be '*like his own father*', there is a correlation with a positive outcome in the assessment. Report 5 found that "*Despite the very damaging childhood experience with her own mother... she had reflected on her own childhood and was committed to not repeating these for her child*". In report 7 the mother was described as *unstable and isolated*. She had an abusive childhood, but *she was able to reflect on her own childhood experiences and make links to this to achieve the changes which are required for her to safely care for her own child.*

Suggestions for future practice and other considerations

The AAI is a well established process in assessing parenting skills and abilities. Key to the successful outcome of the ECBA was a parent's ability to reflect and make sense of their own past, and where possible make changes to their own attachment patterns. There is a need to consistently measure the adult attachments across all ECBAAs, even those involving much older children.

**9. What does the report record has changed in the family in the course of the assessment?**

A number of the reports noted considerable changes on the part of the parents, for example Report 1 noted that *'Both parents developed confidence in their handling of their child and responded positively to learning new skills'*. In report 5 the *'Assessors noted there had been considerable changes since previous assessments particularly in terms of consistency, no longer resisting help, being more committed and no longer reluctant to discuss their own childhood'*. Unsurprisingly perhaps the positive changes parents made were related to positive outcome in the reports, although not necessarily so, for example Report 6 noted few changes, but still recommended the child be returned to the mothers care. The changes or lack of them were sometimes related to who the care giver was, for example where there were few changes on the part of the father, this was seen as less significant by the assessor, as the mother was the primary carer for the child (e.g. Report 7 recommended rehabilitation with support despite noting that *"At times father was rigid in his approach and lacked flexibility, and panicked when faced with crying child which 'immobilised him'*). One report (9) noted significant negative changes by the midway review, but then recommended rehabilitation to the father.

4 reports noted negative changes on the part of the parents e.g. Report 2 noted that *"By session 11 mother had not engaged with services, she withdrew from the assessed sessions, although the comments of assessor demonstrates a desire on her part to ensure mother did engage with services"*. Report 8 found that *"Neither parents demonstrated an ability to change their behaviour: and had not been 'motivated to make changes even when they have apparently accepted advice'*. It appears therefore that a negative outcome was more closely correlated with an inability to change than a positive outcome correlated with an ability to change.

Suggestions for future practice and other considerations

The ECBA is promoted as dynamic assessment process focussed on enabling parents to change their behaviour. The findings from this research support that assertion, as many of the reports record changes on the part of the parents. Even where the changes are negative, this is not necessarily a bad thing for the child as it is far better to find evidence of a parents inability to safely care for a child, than place a child with a parent who is unable to safely care for them. Positive outcomes in assessment have been linked to engagement with services (Hertfordshire, 2010) rather than in terms of genuine and lasting changes by parents. The findings from this research support that assertion and suggest a reason for it. It is the relationship between the parents and social workers which is key to the parents' ability to change, which is then linked to the outcome of the assessment. Unsuccessful outcomes appear to be related to the inability of the parents to sustain relationships in the assessment process.

**10. What are the external stressors to the family recorded in the report? How have these impacted on the assessment?**

There were a number of external stress factors noted in the reports, for example the parents own health problems, poor home conditions, potential abuse from existing family relationships and gang related activities by older children. However none of these factors appear to have impacted on the assessment with the reports primarily focussing on the parenting skills and relationship with the children. For example Report 2 referred to the father's inability to cease drinking, but the negative recommendation of the report was based on the parent's inability to successfully complete the PAM.

**11. What resistance from the parents was experienced or recorded in the ECBA? How did this relate to the final assessment?**

There appeared to be no correlation between resistance on the part of the parents and the outcome of the final assessment, for example where resistance was evident in report 5 (*father frustrated by the assessment process*) and report 9 (*father unhappy at being repeatedly assessed by social workers, of whom he had a 'permanent mistrust'*) both reports recommended rehabilitation to the parents. This challenges the findings of the research by Hertfordshire (2010) that outcomes are related to engagement with services and suggests that a positive assessment relationship was key to working effectively with the parents and achieving good outcomes for children.

3 of the ECBA's were negative in their outcomes, in that placement of the children outside the family was recommended. In 2 of these reports significant resistance was noted on the part of the parents, and in respect of the other report the mother herself decided to relinquish the child, although the report recommended placement outside the family. This limited evidence would tend to support the Hertfordshire findings. Therefore it is not possible to conclusively suggest resistance to engagement with services by parents is related to negative outcomes in child care assessments. Instead this is an area for further research and enquiry.

**12. Other qualitative findings from the reports**

Reports were in the main descriptive rather than analytical in the bulk of the report with the analysis at the end of the report. This was puzzling as in some reports (e.g. Report 3) where there was a contrast between the descriptions (which were negative) and the final recommendations for the report, which was positive whereas the comments about the parents were couched in negative terminology. This may reinforce the theory that the assessment was less concerned with whether parents engaged with the assessor and more with whether the parents were competent to meet the assessment tasks. This was also a feature in report 4 which observed the mother's fragility *e.g. she lacked the emotional warmth the child clearly needed* (p.48) at the same time as father's capability was reinforced *e.g. father 'remained consistent and firm with L'* (p.46), which may account for the positive recommendation. One is left therefore with a sense that the reports strove to maintain an even balance in their analyses.

The first ECBA is dated May 2006. Report 5 was the first report to make explicit reference to the results of the PAM in the instructions to carry out the assessment by the solicitor, suggesting that the use of the PAM was becoming embedded with courts and instructing solicitors, by this stage (June 2008).

Report 6 stands out in that it was noticeably much shorter than the other reports and only based on 4 direct observations between parent and child yet reached the conclusion: *'No cause for concern*

*over mother capacity to plan menus, shop within budget and provide balanced meals. Our limited observations suggest she has capacity to manage a full range of practical parenting tasks*'. The word *hopeful* also appeared five times in this report, which is a contrast with some of the other reports. For example the words *hopeful* or *hopefully* appeared two times in reports 1, 2 and 5; once in report 3, and did not appear at all in report 4.

This may to some degree be driven by the legal process which seeks assessments which provide some predictability about the future behaviour and may be less likely to accept the recommendations of assessments which make hopeful statements rather than positive ones. However this can only be assessed fully by comparing the recommendations of the reports with the actual outcomes of the court decisions for the children involved.

Report 7 appears the most complex of all the assessments as it utilised 4 separate assessment tools in the ECBA, i.e. PAM, AAI, DoH Framework and Fowler, 2003. Reading the report there is evidence of the sympathetic approach the assessors took with the parents to their difficulties, e.g. on one occasion whilst attempting to cross the road with the child, the mother had to be stopped by assessor, as the mother was placing herself and the child at risk. However this was not commented on negatively by the assessor, who instead made a recommendation at the end for social services to *teach the parents road safety* (alongside 27 other recommendations). This report also ended with a risk v strengths section which was helpful as it presented a balanced conclusion about what could be changed or what needed to change.

Some reports contradicted themselves, e.g. Report 9 first described the father as co-operative and amenable and receptive to guidance, despite this following a breakdown in the relationship between the father and the social worker. The assessors later qualified this statement by theorising that the father probably saw the independent assessors differently from the local authority social workers.

The final Report (11) the assessor spent some time blaming the gaps in her report to be caused by the local authority and noted conflict between the assessor and the new Social Work team. It was unclear of the relevance in explaining the conflict to the court had been to the assessment process. This report also noted a difficulty in making a relationship with the older children in the family.



## Discussion

*We can improve childcare only by forming relationships and working with parents. (Munro, 2008)*

Whittaker (2009) points out that assessments, like other documents are part of the everyday realities of social work practice, but they are not '*passive records of events*', but can '*profoundly influence the record of those events*'. This has been taken as the starting base, for this research which examined 11 Extended Community Based Assessments (ECBAs) carried out between May 2006 and November 2010.

There has been a burgeoning debate over relationship based practice in social work (for example: Trevithick, 2003; Hingley-Jones and Mandin, 2007; Wilson et al, 2008; Winter, 2009 and Ruch et al, 2010) and it is perhaps no surprise that one of the architects of the ECBA described the ECBA model as 'old fashioned social work'. Relationship based practice has been linked by some commentators to the case work style of practice which dominated social work practice prior to the 1980s. Research suggests that the relationship between an assessor and a parent is twice as significant as therapeutic technique in parents' views of what is helpful (Pocock, 1997).

The findings from this research suggest that in the ECBA, the final outcome is less to do with engagement with services but rather the ability of parents to reflect and talk about their own experiences. The degree to which parents were empathic, honest and open correlated with a successful recommendation in the assessments. Most crucially this is related to the empathic relationships which exist between the assessor and those being assessed. Indeed it is almost as if the evidence of the parenting ability is driven by the empathic response of assessors in their observation and interviews with the parents. The assessors themselves often displayed an attunement to the children's emotional states and this was evident in their observations.

It is possible therefore to suggest that there is an immense value in being physically present and spending much time with the parents as this comes as close to a natural setting, and what the children themselves will experience. The assessors in the reports demonstrated sophisticated understanding and analysis, where they were openly responsive to the needs of the parents and children. This reflects the psychoanalytic tradition of containment. Containment is defined in the analytic tradition as managing another person's difficult feelings which are otherwise 'uncontained' (Reynolds, 2007), a position described by Keats as negative capability '*When a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable searching after fact and reason*' (Casement, 1985, p. 222)

The educative and competence aspects of the ECBA remain the most important. In the main parents responded positively to 'teaching' and suggestions, and were able to act on the advice given. There were good reasons for this, the assessors demonstrated positive regard for parents and at times a tenacious desire to see positive outcomes for children in care. This suggests that inter-personal and intra-personal attitudes and attributes are probably the most important attributes for successful social work with parents and children.

The old adage that the best predictor for future behaviour is past behaviour and experiences. However given the high volume of referrals to social services this is not sometime useful as a starting point, in other words because a child is re-referred does not necessarily mean the assessment was

poor. In respect of this analysis though it was clear that many of reports took as their starting point the parents own experiences of parenting and the previous reports which had been carried out on them. What is the likelihood that these assessments will be re-referred to social services? It is hard to assess this aspect of the outcomes for the families and children involved although Forrester (2008) gives some clues to what can happened after a case has been closed by social services. In a follow up study of 400 referrals Forrester found that re-referral were more likely in cases of significant parental alcohol misuse or in cases which involved physical abuse (Forrester, 2008). It is not unsurprising then that one of the 'unsuccessful' assessments (i.e. those assessments which resulted in a termination of the assessment or a recommendation that the children remained in care or 'un-rehabilitated') was due to alcohol misuse on the part of the father.

The success does appear on one level to be related to engagement with services, e.g. if a parent is unable to utilise the experiences of the assessor or to engage openly with the assessor this appears key to the outcome of the final assessment. Department of Health and Department for Education and Schools (2007) study on working with parents with a learning disability found that fear of permanent removal of their children made it harder for parents to respond positively to assessments. Often support is provided by the independent sector or advocates. Almost all the reports recorded that the parents found the assessment process itself stressful. Each assessment spoke positively of the engagement by the parents with the process, why was this? It may have been that the parents viewed this process as a final chance but it may have been due to the factors that may have helped in these assessments. The DoH/ DfES 2007 study highlighted the importance of believing that parents can change and this was a key aspect of the reports, the assessor remained focussed on what the parents could change and placed their observations in the facts of what they saw and experienced.

The ECBAs in this research demonstrated a complex spectrum of different aspects of theoretical tenets in assessment. No one tenet 'dominated' the ECBA process, but teaching and competence featured most significantly, followed by family systems and psychodynamic aspects of assessment. There was a close correlation with the ability of the parents to demonstrate empathy and successful outcome for them (i.e. rehabilitation plans for the child). It may therefore be helpful to consider a more formal assessment process for this aspect of assessing parental skills and competence, as it appears so closely related to success in the assessments, i.e. if a parent is more able to demonstrate empathy, they are more likely to be deemed competent to safely care for their child.

The assessors appeared to demonstrate a sophisticated ability to establish positive relationships with the parents in difficult and challenging circumstances (many parents described the assessment process itself as stressful). The parents were then able to disclose painful early childhood experiences, and in some cases to develop empathic responses to their children, develop their parenting skills and develop their own reflective abilities. This is a noteworthy and important aspect of social work practice which has wider implications. The evidence from the ECBAs suggest that the empathic responses and abilities of the assessors themselves helped them to develop positive relationships with the parents who were then able to parallel this relationship in their relationship with their children.

Could the ECBA be described as a unified model? The key conclusion is that the eleven ECBAs that have been examined and evaluated range greatly. Whilst the ECBA is characterised by key elements,

such as the PAM and AAI, one of the ECBA's did not use these tools, and 2 of the ECBA's relied on other tools such as the 'Framework of Assessment of Children in Need and their Families', (Department of Health Publishing, 2000), and Fowler, 2003 to assess mothers previous relationships. This was unique and whilst the reports were all very detailed, with the possible exception of report 6. Only 2 reports made explicit reference to challenging oppressive practice.

What could improve the assessment tools?

*Circular Questioning-* There are some family therapy tools which may help the ECBA, e.g. circular questions can be a useful tool and, Reynolds (2007) suggests, to encourage parents to take an observer position in their comments and to contribute to their own assessment or narrative. This may help parents recognise the triggers to their own behaviour and what causes particular responses.

*Reflective space for the parents-* whilst in the reports there appears to be much reflection occurring in the relationships between the assessor and the parents; it could be beneficial for the parents to have their own reflective space.

*Empathy-* given the centrality of empathy in its linking to positive recommendations, it might be beneficial to consider a more formal process for assessing empathy. An early assessment of this may be a positive or negative indicator of the viability of the longer ECBA.

## Conclusion

A common criticism of social work assessments has been that they lack good analysis (Beesley, 2010). The findings from this research challenge that criticism, as the analysis contained within the 11 reports demonstrate a complex level of analysis, which was based on lengthy direct observation and interviews with parents and children. The ECBA's in this research demonstrated a complex spectrum of theoretical tenets in the assessment process. No one tenet 'dominated' the ECBA process, but teaching and competence featured most significantly, followed by family system and psychodynamic aspects of assessment.

The ECBA's examined in this research do not in themselves constitute a consistent model of assessment practice as they varied in the tools they utilised. However in 9 out of 11 reports the Parenting Assessment Manual (PAM) and Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) were central to the process of the ECBA.

The assessors, a group of very experienced practitioners, demonstrated a sophisticated ability to establish positive relationships with the parents, in difficult and challenging circumstances (many parents described the assessment process itself as stressful). The parents were then able to disclose painful early childhood experiences, and to develop empathic responses to their children, develop their parenting skills and develop their own reflective abilities. This is a noteworthy and important aspect of social work practice which has wider implications.

That the quality of the relationship between the parents and the professionals directly impacts on the effectiveness of help given is echoed in the Munro Review of Child Protection (2011). She emphasises the centrality of forming relationships with children and parents to understand and help them. She argues that this will be done when social workers exercise more professional judgment and improve their expertise. The review highlighted the importance of social workers' use of research evidence to help them reach the most appropriate decisions. Wider utilisation of the ECBA model by practitioners can only help social workers make better decisions in the challenging arena of child protection work.

There is a need for further research to address key issues, for example where the recommendations contained in the reports agreed at court and acted upon, what was the longer term outcome for the children and where are the children now? How did the process of the assessment impact on the parents, did it facilitate permanent changes in them, and did the process of carrying out the ECBA's facilitate change in the assessors?

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