



**AASW**

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**Australian Association  
of Social Workers**

***Scope of Social Work Practice  
Psychosocial Assessments***

**December 2015**

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We would like to thank the members of the  
AASW Scope of Practice Working Group for  
their contribution to the development and writing  
of this document.

## Introduction

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The Australian Association of Social Workers' (AASW) *Scope of Social Work Practice: Psychosocial Assessments* document provides an overview of the primary practice tool of the social work profession. The aim of this document is to define psychosocial assessments in a concise, accessible and informative manner, including how they inform social work practice.

## The social work profession

Social work is a tertiary-qualified profession recognised nationally and internationally. The social work profession is committed to maximising the wellbeing of individuals and society. We consider that individual and societal wellbeing are underpinned by socially inclusive communities which emphasise principles of social justice and respect for human dignity and human rights. Drawing on theories of social work, social sciences, psychology, humanities and Indigenous knowledge, social workers focus on the interface between the individual and the environment and recognise the impact of social, economic and cultural factors on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities.

Accordingly, social workers maintain a dual focus in both assisting with and improving human wellbeing and identifying and addressing any external issues (known as systemic or structural issues) that may impact on wellbeing, such as inequality, injustice and discrimination.

## Social work and psychosocial assessments

Undertaking comprehensive and evidence-informed psychosocial assessments is the unique core of the social work scope of practice. Social workers draw on a broad range

of theories, knowledge, research and skills to ensure comprehensive and holistic analysis of the client's situation. Social workers conduct psychosocial assessments in a wide range of fields and practice settings including health, mental health, child protection, aged care, disability, school social work and family violence, to name a few.

Psychosocial assessments are a primary practice tool of the social work profession, and different from other forms of assessment. Social workers bring specific skills and knowledge to an assessment process including considering a person's psychological wellbeing and social context. By understanding the impact of these factors social workers can then identify and develop interventions in order to improve wellbeing and functioning.

When social workers conduct psychosocial assessments they explore the physical, psychological and social aspects of the client and their situation. This includes problems and strengths in social role functioning; in meeting financial and other basic needs; in family interactions, significant relationships and other social supports, and cultural factors. In order to develop an assessment, sources of information include the client, the client's family and significant others, the assessments of other treating staff, and treatment records.

Psychosocial assessments are seen as both a final product and an ongoing process.



## Scope of social work practice: Psychosocial assessments

Professional social workers bring valuable skills and knowledge to the assessment process. Social workers operate from a *person-in-environment* perspective and recognise that individuals can best be understood within the multifaceted context of their environment.<sup>1</sup> With this perspective, social workers are well equipped to assess both the psychological and social aspects of a client's situation, and to develop interventions accordingly.

Given social workers significant training and experience in this process, psychosocial assessments play a crucial role in service delivery by identifying and addressing the barriers that may be limiting the achievement of improved outcomes. In this regard, social work assessments are distinct from other approaches as they address the client's needs at both individual and larger systemic levels.<sup>2</sup>

Social work psychosocial assessments are primarily informed by ecological, systems and life-course theories as they highlight the complex relationship between individual and social factors that influence individual wellbeing. Social workers also utilise strength-based approaches in their assessment processes in order to identify and draw upon an individual's strengths and resilience. These can be both internal factors, such as skills and knowledge, and external factors, such as family and social supports.

**“Psychosocial assessments are a primary practice tool of the social work profession”**

The AASW believes that successful psychosocial assessments are dependent on:<sup>3</sup>

- Establishing an empathic and respectful working relationship with the client
- Exploring with clients their understanding of their difficulties and strengths
- Gathering information with the client from a range of sources, including family members, to build up a comprehensive understanding of the broader context of the client's life, including identifying their difficulties and strengths
- Working from a culturally informed framework that considers the cultural context of the client and using anti-discriminatory practice to build an effective relationship
- Identifying and assessing relevant indicators in order to minimise risk to the client or to others (Risk assessment includes the risk of self-harming behaviour, the client's vulnerability to domestic violence and other safety-issues in the home and living environment, issues of child protection, and the potential for the client's capacity to harm others)
- Applying specific assessment schedules as appropriate to develop a detailed knowledge of specific aspects of the difficulties and strengths of the client
- In consultation with the client, applying knowledge and theory to the information gathered to develop a comprehensive statement linking the client's individual functioning and its strengths and difficulties with those in the client's social context
- Reviewing the assessment statement with the client so as to develop a mutual understanding and agreement about the assessment
- Regularly reviewing the assessment with the client to retain the focus on shared understanding of difficulties and strengths
- Maintaining records of activity as required by agency accountability standards

<sup>1</sup> Kondrat, M. E. (2008). Person-in-environment. In T. Mizrahi & L. E. Davis (Eds. in Chief), *Encyclopaedia of Social Work* (20th ed., Vol. 3, pp. 348-354). Washington, DC: NASW Press.

<sup>2</sup> Turner, F. J. (Ed.). (2011). *Social work treatment: Interlocking theoretical approaches*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> AASW *Practice Standards for Mental Health Social Workers* <https://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/17>

## The contribution of social workers to psychosocial assessments

As professionally trained practitioners, social workers are skilled in relationship building, counselling and interviewing skills. This is a clear distinction as social workers are adept at developing questioning styles that can be both sensitive to a client's circumstances, and also obtain the necessary information. Social workers are trained in specific skills and knowledge in client engagement, including working inclusively and responsively with people from other cultural backgrounds to their own.

The person-in-environment approach that characterises social work assessments is especially critical given the complex psychosocial issues that clients' can experience, and can pose significant barriers to care and improved wellbeing.

Furthermore, social workers' assessments and interventions are informed by the three core values of professional social work, as outlined in the AASW's *Code of Ethics* – respect for persons, social justice, and professional integrity – which apply to relationships with clients, colleagues and organisations.

Thorough psychosocial assessments are the foundations of service delivery and underpin targeted and needs-based interventions. Therefore, social workers as a professional group are well suited to conduct psychosocial assessments given their skills and understanding of the full complexities of clients' circumstances.

## Conclusion

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Social work is a highly skilled profession that is specifically focused on providing holistic care. Social workers as a professional group are well suited to conducting assessments given their focus on understanding and taking into account the full complexities of clients' circumstances. Social workers' demonstrated expertise in navigating complex health and social service systems, combined with their unique psychosocial perspective, illustrates the profession's significant contribution and key role in undertaking psychosocial assessments.

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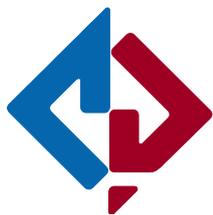
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