Representing Children’s Identities in Core Assessments

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Abstract

This paper reports findings from a qualitative research study of twenty-six core assessments, concerning thirty-two children, completed over a six-month period in one Welsh local authority. The data reported in the paper come from the twenty-six written assessment reports and interviews with the thirteen social workers who completed the assessments. The study was concerned with how social workers assess and report on children’s identities. Identity is one of the seven developmental needs of children categorised in the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (National Assembly for Wales, 2001). It is noted that practitioners display a broad understanding of identities when discussing their own identities in interview and report a practice commitment to learning about the details of children’s lives in an attempt to ‘get to know’ the children. However, the assessment reports tend to convey only narrowly defined and negative aspects of the children’s identities, with many descriptions standardised and replicated between reports. Similarities to findings from a study conducted by one of the authors prior to the introduction of the Assessment Framework are noted, and it is suggested that bureaucratic constraints, the need to argue a case and defensive practices may have impeded change.

Keywords: Assessment, bureaucracy, children in need, identity

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Introduction

This article explores the issue of how children are portrayed in assessment reports. Using the specific example of the ‘identity’ section in the Core
Assessment of the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families1 (National Assembly for Wales, 2001b), we examine how children’s needs and strengths are analysed and represented by practitioners for the purposes of decision-making arenas such as the family court and case conferences. How children are represented in this way is pertinent for two reasons. First, how children are portrayed in the assessment as a whole is important because assessment reports can become persuasive and enduring pictures of a child’s situation. They may influence how a child’s needs are approached and re-assessed for years to come. It is known that once a case has been categorised, practitioners tend to filter all new information about the family situation in the light of that categorisation (Farmer and Owen, 1995) due to a human tendency to be ‘verificationists’ (Sheldon, 1987). As Teoh et al. (2003) remind us:

The importance of the written records, reports and files are crucial to the way ‘cases’ are constructed. After a while a file takes on a life of its own, and it can be very difficult to question what it appears to represent (Teoh et al., 2003, p. 157).

Second, the specific category of ‘identity’ is important because it touches the core of one’s being, the subjective sense of ‘self’ and therefore it could be argued that it is vitally important to be sensitive and balanced in how a child’s identity is portrayed.

In this article, we report on a qualitative study of the assessments of thirty-two children from one local authority area team in Wales. We explore how the functioning of the task of assessing and reporting children’s needs creates a dissonance between the practitioners’ identity knowledge (of what constitutes identity and knowledge of the particular child) and what they produce in the confines of an assessment report. The reports themselves are generally narrow, negative and relatively impersonal, in many ways replicating the findings of one of the authors in a study conducted a decade earlier (Holland, 2004). We conclude the article by suggesting ways of balancing and broadening the perspective produced in an assessment report, whilst exploring the question of whether portraying a child’s identity in this format is, in fact, an unrealistic task.

Background: identities and assessments

There appears to be growing interest in exploring the subjective experiences of identities, with the term ‘identity’ being used in association, or sometimes interchangeably, with the notion of ‘subjectivity’. Rejecting an essentialist position in which identities are ‘presented as discrete, necessary, historically stable, and personally unalterable’ (Verkuyten, 2003, p. 374), current sociological and psychological approaches recognise that an individual’s identity is not fixed and is contextually contingent (Segal, 2008).
Our identities are dynamic and interactional. We construct and accomplish our understandings of self through culturally available discourses and everyday interpersonal interactions. There are a multitude of potential theoretical influences on how we might understand identities, across a number of disciplines, and here we briefly survey some important theoretical influences.

Object-relations theorists such as Winnicott (1956) emphasised how our sense of self is developed in early infancy through relationships with primary care-givers. He noted that an infant requires ‘good enough’ parental care in order to be able to develop a sense of self from ‘I’ to ‘I am’ to ‘I am alone but there are others I can relate to’. Similarly, attachment theory emphasises relationships with primary care-givers as central to an individual’s development of an internal working model of self and how they expect others to respond to them (Ainsworth et al., 1978). These theories centre on primary relationships, particularly with mothers. Other theories have tended to explore wider societal relationships, roles and cultural norms. Mead (1934) saw the self as divided into two halves: the ‘I’—the inner self, which contains the inner wishes of the individual, and the ‘Me’—the outer self, which considers the individual’s perception of how others perceive it. For Mead, our internal self-recognition (the Meadian ‘I’) is involved in a constant dialectic with our perceptions of how others perceive us (the Meadian ‘Me’). As such, Mead considered identity to be a product of social interaction, in that people come to know who they are through their interactions with others. Berger and Luckmann, in their seminal work, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), also consider identities as constructed by social interaction. The authors maintain that identities are, at the same time, willed creations and constraining structures: ‘Societies have histories in the course of which specific identities emerge; these histories are, however, made by men [sic.] with specific identities’ (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 173).

Post-structural theorists such as Butler (1990) and Walkerdine (1999) emphasise how identities are enacted and produced through discourse rather than forming an essential, interior and stable sense of self (Dunn, 1998). For example, Butler (1990) argues that gender exists only through performance and thus is neither a pre-determined nor necessarily a binary condition. Walkerdine (1999, p. 4) defines it thus:

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\text{... the human subject is produced in the discursive practices that make up the social world (as opposed to a pre-given psychological subject who is made social or socialised).}
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Some of the most recent theorists of identity, including Butler’s recent writings, acknowledge that the biological and material interact with the cultural in the ‘doing’ of identity (Segal, 2008). McAdams (1993), a psychologist by background, draws on attachment theory, cultural studies and understandings of social structures to develop what he claims is a new theory of human
identity. He suggests that the process of understanding and narrating the story of who we are and how we fit into the world is the central psychological task of adolescence and adulthood and that the groundwork for this task is begun in infancy. He suggests that our early attachment experiences influence the tone of optimism or pessimism in our ‘personal myths’ that we develop throughout our lives. He emphasises that there are no universal norms and that how we develop a sense of self varies by individual, culture and class.

Social workers who are required to assess and analyse children’s identities thus have a broad theoretical basis on which they might draw their understandings of identities. The guidance accompanying the Assessment Framework advises practitioners that assessments of children’s identities may include the following:

- Identity: Concerns the child’s growing sense of self as a separate and valued person. Includes the child’s view of self and abilities, self image and self esteem, and having a positive sense of individuality. Race, religion, age, gender, sexuality and disability may all contribute to this. Feelings of belonging and acceptance by family, peer group and wider society, including other cultural groups (National Assembly for Wales, 2001a, p. 19).

The guidance provides a broad definition of what might be defined as identity in the assessment context, and arguably incorporates many of the theoretical strands outlined above, including the influence of primary caregiving relationships, wider social relations, material and biological categories and culture. Previous studies of the assessment of children have suggested, however, that social workers have tended to draw on a fairly narrow interpretation of theory when representing children’s needs in assessment reports, and provided rather brief and formulaic descriptions of children in which children’s own interpretations of their situation have rarely been reported (Kähkönen, 1999; Holland, 2001). Recent evidence suggests that disabled children may be even less likely to be involved in the process (Shaw et al., 2009). Indeed, even where practitioners have had specialist training in child participation, the involvement of children has only been partially successful (Vis and Thomas, 2009). It has been suggested that practitioners’ ability to provide reflective and contingent accounts of family situations in verbal, informal practice settings is constrained through the reporting process into ‘scientific’ rational accounts in which the messy and uncertain aspects of family life are somewhat hidden (Holland, 2004; Parton, 1998). Nonetheless, there have tended to be livelier and fuller descriptions of parents in assessment reports (Holland, 2004), suggesting perhaps that it is not just the reporting process, but also a view of children and childhood that leads to brief and formulaic descriptions of children. It is increasingly acknowledged that ‘childhood’ is a contested concept, not a fixed category. It is recognised that dominant discourses of childhood such as innocent and vulnerable or
(some) children as evil and out of control (James et al., 1998) can serve to constrain our understandings of children’s experiences. Additionally, societal expectations of children from particular socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, and societal expectations of gender roles, will affect how people respond to children and how children develop, enact and experience their identities. Perhaps reflecting this, the Assessment Framework, unlike previous guidance, provides specific instructions to seek and include the views of children and young people in assessment reports. This, alongside an increased sociological understanding of children’s agency and a policy emphasis on promoting children’s voices in society in the past two decades (Thomas, 2007), might lead to an expectation that contemporary assessment reports would include a focus on the child and on the child’s view of their own situation. However, findings from this small study in one location suggest that it can still be difficult to gain a sense of the child who is the subject of the assessment, or of their views, from the report itself.

Research design

The study was conducted by the first author as doctoral research and was supervised by the second author. A single case study approach was chosen to enable an in-depth approach within the resource constraints of a doctoral study. The research took place in a generic child-care social work team in one local authority in Wales. The local authority includes both rural and urban areas and is a typical welsh local authority area in terms of socio-economic indicators, with slightly lower Welsh-speaking and ethnic minority populations than average. The team was based in the second tier of a two-tier organisational approach to intervention. This means that service users first encounter the agency’s ‘intake team’ for a duration of up to three months before their case, if ongoing, is routinely transferred to the second tier of intervention, the ‘locality team’. The locality team’s role consists of managing longer-term involvement, comprising children in need, child protection and looked after children. In order to engage in these various and complex needs, the team typically undertakes a detailed assessment of the child and family known as a ‘Core Assessment’, which is carried out under the Assessment Framework.

The data consisted of twenty-six core assessments concerning thirty-two children and completed by thirteen practitioners in the locality team. They were a universal sample of the core assessments completed by the team over a period of six months in 2006. Standard electronic report forms exist for the completion of core assessment reports. There are expandable blank boxes under each assessment heading. Nonetheless, the style, length and formatting of the reports varied considerably. The length of assessment reports ranged from seven to eighty-six typed pages, averaging at twenty-eight pages in length but with a mode of seventeen pages. A total of eighteen boys and
fourteen girls were subject to assessments in this time period. The age range of the children was fairly evenly spread across the younger age ranges and with fewer children of fifteen years or older. This suggests, as in Cleaver and Walker (2004, p. 225), that in this setting, younger children were more likely to be the subject of assessment (see Table 1).

Data collection consisted of reading of assessment reports, semi-structured interviews with the thirteen practitioners, semi-structured interviews with thirteen parents or carers and semi-structured interviews and research-related games and activities with ten children. Interview guides were constructed following a thorough literature search and an earlier pilot study conducted by the first author. Interviews were carried out in a location chosen by the participant and all were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. The findings reported here relate solely to the assessment documents and the interviews with practitioners. The research methods and results with children and parents will be reported in future publications.

The research was approved by the Cardiff University School of Social Science research ethics committee. Full assessment reports were read and initially analysed on site, with only fully anonymised identity sections copied verbatim and removed from the research site. Participants were provided with full written information about the research and they were given the opportunity to withdraw their written consent at any point in the research process.

The data were initially coded using a coding frame developed during a first reading of the documents. From the codes, analytic categories were derived and developed using the ‘constant comparison’ method of analysis, paying particular attention to similarities and differences between and within the documents (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

The research strategy was able to explore both how practitioners talked about their assessment of children’s identities and how they wrote about these as part of a formal assessment report. Thus, the research was able to gain some purchase on both informal and formal reasoning in this area, albeit within the limitations of a single case study.

Findings
Practitioners’ views of identities

In this study, the practitioners’ self-reporting of their own identities was rich in personal details that included an understanding of identity as relational,
dynamic and contextual, as indicated by this practitioner’s reflections on her changing identities:

Um, social worker, mother of two, Irish, married, um, live in Wales, um female, um feminist. Um, I think that’s about it really. I think that just about covers it, how I see it, how I see myself at the minute but it’ll probably change . . . if you’d have asked me this 10 years ago . . . Yeah, it would be things like, um, Duran Duran fan, netballer, oh um going out with um, whatever boy it was at the time, whatever gang I was in, who my friends were, um, where I hung out, drinker not drinker, smoker, smoker would have been one, um. So that you wouldn’t think that your friends were a big part of your identity but when you are a kid they are important to you, who you’re seen with, who you’re not seen with, or what you do in your spare time down to even if you wouldn’t speak to someone if they didn’t smoke or if they didn’t like the same band as you, but you grow up and it’s a bit sad isn’t it? (Lola, social worker, semi-structured interview data)

Practitioners’ depictions of their own identities were generally comprehensive and colourful. They almost always mentioned national identity, often language, religion and values associated with their families of origin. Some, like Lola, had moved to Wales from elsewhere, causing them to reflect on issues of language, nationality and culture. Only one practitioner vocalised her difficulties in describing her own identities:

Gosh (laughs) to be honest, I’ve read and re-read that one [question] and I haven’t got the faintest idea! I, well, the only thing I can think of is Welsh. Um, (laughs) it’s just not something that I’ve ever thought about! (Frances, social worker, semi-structured interview data).

Frances’s struggle to describe her own identity highlights an important point: how often, if at all, do we consciously take the time to think about our identities? This is a pertinent point in how social workers construct identities for children, as practitioners are being asked to undertake a task that is uncommon and less concrete than many other assessment tasks. The following sections provide examples of how practitioners’ knowledge of the children with whom they are working is transformed into a formal output on an assessment form. It can be seen that children are standardised, descriptions of them are replicated from guidance and other assessments and the definition of identity is narrowed to mainly encompass only self-esteem and family relationships.

The content of identity sections

The identity sections in these reports tended to concentrate on two main areas: family relationships and self-esteem. All but eight of the assessments mentioned family relationships; these were usually concerned with the child’s knowledge of who is who in their family, and levels of attachment and affection between the child and other family members. Relationships with intimate others is a core aspect of one’s identity according to some
identity theories and to the practitioners’ accounts of their own identities; therefore, this appears to be a vital ingredient of the assessment of identity. In this study, the focus on relationships was the most positive aspect of identity to be commented upon, with many assessments noting that children had strong attachments to birth family members. For example:

Chester appears to be happy and settled in his placement with his grandparents, and appears to feel a secure member of their household and family (Chester, age four, Core Assessment 26 (combined assessment)).

Nonetheless, this focus on family relationships often led to a discussion of how the parents’ actions and inactions were likely to affect this (or sometimes any) child’s sense of identity, rather than relaying any sense of how the child themselves view the relationships. One rather extreme example of an assessment that focused on the parents’ actions rather than the child’s responses is the following identity section for a young baby, reproduced in its entirety:

Jessica [mother] stated that Daniel is the father of her baby [Tommy] and they intend to bring the child up together. Initially Jessica stated that she intended to live alone with Tommy in her flat and Daniel would remain in his flat in [city]. However they decided to live together [date omitted] in Jessica’s flat. Both stated that this decision was made due to advice from Daniel’s legal advisor. Both considered that they would have a better chance of getting care of Tommy if they lived at the same address (Tommy, age six months, Core Assessment 3).

Although an identity section for a baby could not, of course, include any vocalised sense of identity by the child, it could include observations on the child’s primary and other relationships as well as familial cultural, ethnic and religious identities.

The second most common area to mention in the identity sections was self-esteem, and this was included in eleven of the thirty-two assessments. In all but two of these assessments, the child’s lack of self-esteem, or low self-esteem, was the focus. In the remaining two, any child’s need to develop positive self-esteem was the content of the discussion. In no identity section were any positive comments made about a child’s self-esteem. Here are two examples of identity sections that focus on children’s low self-esteem:

Some of Stephanie’s behaviour appears to demonstrate that she does not always have a positive view of herself and that her appearance of self-confidence is not how she really feels. For example she is indiscriminately over friendly with strangers and has developed some inappropriate attention seeking strategies. Such behaviours indicate that Stephanie does not feel she is always valued for herself, so she learnt to hyper activate certain behaviours to be noticed. It is likely that Stephanie is developing a fragile self-esteem, because of the inconsistency and at times chaotic care she has been afforded by her mother. Reinforcing this perhaps is the
fact that she is no longer living with her mother, which she may interpret as rejection (Stephanie, age four, Core Assessment 2).

Ruby appears to have low self-esteem, and lacks in confidence. Ruby’s self-worth appears to be enmeshed with meeting her mother’s needs, as her perception of herself is that of her mother’s carer. This is reflected in her refusal to attend school, and her association with people younger than she is (Ruby, age fifteen, Core Assessment 11).

Both of these sections are notable in two aspects. First, they portray an entirely negative picture of the children’s identities. This was common throughout the data-set, with negative comments far outweighing the positives. This is related to the perceived audience and purpose of the assessment report, which is discussed later in the paper. Second, it is not reported what these children’s own views were, and, again, this was a common theme. In only three of the thirty-two identity sections were children’s views recorded. These were fairly disparate in content, with one referring to the child’s views on contact arrangements, the second about the child’s experiences of being bullied and the third about a young person’s view on a youth club she had recently joined.

Whilst the child’s views were generally absent from these sections, so were other aspects that might be seen as core to identities. Only five of the assessments mentioned the child’s cultural, ethnic or linguistic identity and only two mentioned religion or spirituality, on both occasions stating that the child did not practise any religion. Nonetheless, in interview about the children in the assessments, fuller understandings of the children’s interests in these areas emerged. For example, one child’s identification with Welsh culture being more prominent now that he was placed in England was mentioned in interview but not in the report. For one of the two children who was said not to practise any religion in the report, the practitioner mentioned in interview that:

Dominic didn’t class himself as having any religion whatsoever and it came out in discussion ’cos there was one day after school when Kenton was coming out with stuff about believing in God and religion and stuff whereas Dominic was quite clear in saying ‘well I don’t believe in anything’ so it wasn’t part of his identity ’cos he didn’t have an opinion on that (Benita, student social worker, semi-structured interview data).

It was in Kenton’s assessment that the comment was made that he did not practise any religion. It might also be argued that his brother, Dominic, also held views that might have meant that he held an identity as an atheist, humanist or rationalist, but no mention was made of this in the report.

It can be seen therefore that the identity sections in these assessments tended to focus on specific aspects of children’s identities, most notably family relationships and self-esteem. Whilst these areas are undoubtedly important aspects of identity, there was a notable lack of other aspects of identity, such as cultural identity, religion and spirituality, friends and
interests, and, perhaps most vital of all, the children’s own view of their identities.

The standardised child

Many identity sections in this study centred on what a child of this age generally requires in order to develop a positive sense of self. This section gives examples from the assessment reports, whilst the following section explores practitioners’ explanations for this standardisation:

Identity is, in my opinion, a particular area of need, which should be supported and monitored closely. A positive sense of identity will need consideration to be given to his age, gender, sexuality and any disability (Steve, age ten years, Assessment 15, italics added).

Leon, like any other child needs to know his place within the family and to be a valued member of it. In order to develop a strong sense of identity, he needs consistency of care from at least one primary care giver who will provide him with consistent and supportive parenting (Leon, age 9 years, Assessment 20).

Summary of Child’s needs [identity]: This concerns Tamsin’s growing sense of self as a separate and valued person. This includes her view of self and her abilities, her self image and self esteem and having a positive sense of her individuality, feelings of belonging and acceptance by family, peers and the wider community (Tamsin, age 10 months, Assessment 32).

In these extracts, it can be seen that the foci are the identity needs of any child. In Leon’s case, this is made explicit with the words ‘any other child’. We highlight (in italics) terminology that is directly taken from the Assessment Framework guidance. Eleven of the twenty-six identity sections contained words and phrases from the guidance. The reader may note the summary of Tamsin’s needs is a verbatim account of the definition of ‘identity’ contained within the practice guidance. There is no application (as is also the case within the other given examples) of how these needs specifically relate to Tamsin. As such, the account of Tamsin’s identities provides us with a prescriptive representation of the needs of ‘the standardised child’ (White, 1998) rather than an account of the baby herself. There are striking similarities here with an assessment report in Holland’s (2004) earlier study, in which a seemingly vivid and individual description of a baby was revealed to be a verbatim quotation from the Sheridan development chart. A similar standardisation could be seen across assessments. Within the data-set, three sibling assessments consisted primarily of replicated text with the names of the children ‘cut and pasted’. Whilst such replication is to be expected and indeed encouraged through the advent of e-assessment for factual information and shared features such as parental background, it is more surprising to find identity sections replicated for siblings.
This replication also took place where children were unconnected, as can be seen in the examples below, completed by different practitioners:

Dominic presents as a caring child who is aware that he is the oldest of 3 siblings. Dominic presents as being very confused and angry about his position within his family. He seems unclear about his role as either the man of the house or a child having no male role model and the need to crave attention from his mother as a child (Dominic, age thirteen, Core Assessment 10).

Within his nuclear family context, Lyndon presents as a child who feels he needs to take charge and control, as he recognises that he is the oldest of three siblings and that his mother often presents as a child herself in terms of her vulnerability. He appears to be very confused and angry about this position within his family, as he is either the man of the house or a child having no male role model and the need to crave attention from his mother (Lyndon, age eleven, Core Assessment 19, italics added to show replication).

It is not uncommon for practitioners to share their ideas, observations and assessments within the closed team setting or to re-use completed assessments as templates for future assessments. Yet, the textual closeness of these two sections brings into question the concept of some core assessments as unique, individualised and child-focused documents. In the final findings section, we use interview data to gain some insight into why practitioners might be producing standardised and narrow assessments of identity.

**Time, tick-boxes and routine completion of forms**

In interview, some practitioners spoke candidly of the temptation to provide ‘bog standard’ answers within the identity section:

I always find it quite a struggle because you get the bog standard answers don’t you? ‘White Welsh, working class, you know, blah, blah, blah’. And sometimes it’s difficult, with time you know, to think about more to put in it [identity section] (Gethin, social worker, semi-structured interview data).

I have found in the past that I am heavily influenced by the parents and their view of the child’s identity and that sometimes I can’t invest the time to spend with the child to explore these ideas and so, I guess, what I’m putting in my assessments is the views of the parents rather than what the child is actually saying about its identity (Chantelle, social worker, semi-structured interview data).

Both of these interviewees note that in a time-limited piece of work, identity is the area that gets missed out. Time is a theme emerging strongly from current research into assessment practices in the UK. Recent research by White and colleagues has suggested that 60–80 per cent of social workers’ time is spent completing forms on computers—a finding that
has received political and media attention (The Guardian, 2009). Their research has also uncovered the considerable frustration that practitioners feel with unwieldy forms and fixed categories (Wastell et al., forthcoming). In this study, practitioners noted that ‘identity’ is difficult to write about as a separate category, because it is so intertwined with other aspects of a child’s life. This might lead to a completion of this section in a routine manner or by copying and pasting information so that it is repeated more than once:

Identity and emotional / behaviour development is often a little bit repetitive, I find, and they can be false divides. And you get, I think you can get a bit tangled up in that there is the false divide and you start, ‘well where shall I put this bit?’ ‘Shouldn’t it have been in that bit?’ ‘Should I repeat it?’ And then that’s when you get into tick-box, checklist frame of mind, rather than actually looking at the child and trying to give an overview of the child’s needs, all of them (Sioned, assistant team manager, semi-structured interview data).

I think that’s part of my difficulty with identity as a stand-alone assessment, um, indicator because it overlaps with so many of the other aspects of our assessment. And I know it’s supposed to, because you know, one section of the assessment process, is supposed to inform the other. It’s not like a checklist however. With identity on the occasions when I’ve thought ‘well let’s have more of a stab at this than I normally do’, um, I invariably find myself duplicating information that is already there in the other parts of the assessment anyway. . . . Usually identity is the most cursory, um, part of my completed assessments (Christian, senior social work practitioner, semi-structured interview data).

In these two extracts, Sioned and Christian illustrate how the categorisation of children’s needs into different domains impedes, for them, their holistic assessment of the child. In this section, it has been seen that being pressed for time and frustrations with the categorisations of the child’s needs required by the form leads to practitioners being self-aware that their reporting of children’s needs concerning their identity may not reach the standards they would wish.

Discussion

It has been shown that in this case, study practitioners’ understanding of identities appeared to be broader than that portrayed in the assessment reports that they produced. When discussing the children who were being assessed, they tended to have a more individual and in-depth knowledge of the children’s identities than is reported. In this discussion, we suggest that two factors may be at play here: the nature of the bureaucratic task and the perceived audience for the reports.

Recent studies into the implementation of the Common Assessment Framework and the Integrated Children’s System (Broadhurst et al., 2009; Pithouse et al., 2009; Shaw et al., 2009) have demonstrated how the
electronic focus of the ‘e-assessment’ necessitates the assessment’s completion away from the clients. Whilst reports were always typed and finalised in offices, not families’ homes, more time than ever is now spent in front of a computer screen rather than in face-to-face contact with family members. It is reported that practitioners are often frustrated by electronic information systems that do not work correctly and that require repetitive inputting of data (Wastell et al., forthcoming). In the same study, practitioners and managers also report that the time restrictions on assessments lead them to feel anxious about their assessments being shallow and lacking meaningful data. It is likely that in this context, the tendencies reported here to reduce the knowledge of the child’s identities to a few short sentences, sometimes copied and pasted from guidance or the assessment of another child, are likely to increase. There is little indication that the practitioners in this study were working in a more child-focused way following the introduction of the Assessment Framework than was found in studies prior to the Framework’s introduction (Holland, 2004).

Whilst the report structure requires much more focus than previous guidance on the child’s needs, it has been shown above that this can be carried out in an impersonal and standardised form in which the child’s wishes, feelings and individuality are not evident.

The Assessment Framework divides up a child’s developmental needs into seven categories, of which identity is one. The others are health, education, emotional and behavioural development, family and social relationships, social presentation and self-care skills. These are based on the categories in the earlier looked after children (LAC) framework (Parker et al., 1991). These categories are a mix of the fairly concrete (health, education) to the more conceptual, of which identity is arguably the least easy to compartmentalise and define, as the practitioners noted in the data extracts above. In this study, practitioners tended to write about family relationships and self-esteem under the category of ‘identity’, both of which might be noted under the categories ‘family and social relationships’ and ‘emotional and behavioural development’. This raises the question as to whether it is possible or desirable to compartmentalise a child’s identities on an assessment form, and whether it might not be better for a sense of the child’s identities to emerge through the other categories. However, what is largely absent from the identity categories in the assessment reports in this study are the child’s own sense of self and the categories with which they identify or reject (such as gender and sexuality, family, ethnic and linguistic groups, religious groups and cultural groups including youth cultures). Whilst these are often relational and contingent and are therefore difficult to capture in a report, they can be missed in the other categories and might therefore be the most useful aspects of identity to focus on here. Within these aspects of identity, there are indeed some fairly concrete aspects that might lead to service provision, such as the need for services through the medium of Welsh or Arabic, the desire to attend Bible classes or an after-school...
madrassa, the opportunity to attend a youth group for gay youth, to have an electric guitar or go to a sports club. Whilst it might be argued, therefore, that assessing and reporting identity is an almost impossible task within the confines of the Core Assessment system, there are important issues that could be addressed here that are not simply standardised statements or cut and pasted from other parts of the child’s assessment report.

A further issue to bear in mind is that of the assessment audience. Core Assessment recommendations will be used as part of the decision-making process about a child, perhaps to recommend that a child’s name is placed on the child protection register or that care proceedings are begun. They are being used to argue a case and this is likely to explain why the children’s identities come across as overwhelmingly negative in many of the reports. The social worker will be using this evidence to build a case that the child is in need of protection or services and therefore positive aspects of the child’s identity are seen as irrelevant or go unnoticed. Reports were also seen to display less personal knowledge of the child than was displayed in interview. Records can be seen as an important means of self-defence for front line workers (Garfinkel, 1967). This might be seen as particularly pertinent in the recent furore over the death of baby Peter³ and the subsequent public naming of practitioners (The Sun, 2009). Bland and standardised accounts of children may be seen to be safer because they are less open to challenge than more subjective and personal accounts. However, it seems unfortunate that records that may become persistent accounts of these (often) vulnerable children should be narrow in scope and fairly impersonal.

Conclusion

It has been seen in this paper that practitioners struggle to summarise a child’s sense of their identity/ies, and any needs for intervention arising from this, in a short section on an assessment form. Any document is produced with an audience in mind and these assessments are produced to argue a case, perhaps for a child to become eligible for family support services, be made subject to a care order or placed for adoption. With these two imperatives, the need to complete an electronic form in a certain timescale and to argue a case, it is not surprising that the identity sections in core assessment reports might appear negative, narrow in scope and, at times, impersonal. The social workers in this study demonstrated in interviews that they had, on the whole, a more balanced and in-depth knowledge of the child, and understanding of the nature of identities, than is apparent in their written reports. We have argued here that it is the nature of the assessment bureaucracy that is producing this distorted account of children’s identities, rather than a fundamental deficit in the practice behind the report.
Nonetheless, this dissonance between the practitioners’ knowledge and what they write in the report is important because the report becomes the ‘coherent, persistent record’, as Noordegraaf et al. (2009, p. 95) note in their study of the assessment of Dutch adopters. The report is the main route through which others, such as judges, team managers, case conference chairs and adoption panel members, come to know the child and will also be accessible to the child themselves if they wish to access their records in the present or as adults. By concentrating on negative aspects of the child’s identities, practitioners risk presenting a distorted picture that could further lower the self-esteem that practitioners are concerned about.

One of the authors wrote in 2001 that the Assessment Framework provided much clearer guidance than had previously been in place on how to incorporate a broader sense of the child’s life, including their wishes and feelings. She also wrote that:

However, the new Core Assessments are required to be completed within a significantly shorter timescale than previous similar assessments and child care social workers in the UK carry heavy caseloads in the face of a recruitment crisis. Within this context, practitioners will almost inevitably still produce reports that provide very limited accounts of children’s complex lives (Holland, 2001, p. 337).

The current study was small-scale and limited to one local authority. Nonetheless, when placed within the context of the larger-scale recent studies of the Assessment Framework cited in this paper, it appears that practitioners may indeed still be producing only limited accounts of children in assessment reports.

This paper has concentrated on only one aspect of the Core Assessment—the assessment and reporting of children’s identities. It can be argued that this section is a key section in helping a report’s readership formulate a view of ‘who’ the child is and therefore it is vital that the description of the child’s identity is balanced, broad and includes the child’s perspective. On the other hand, it might be argued that the separation of the child’s identities is an artificial construct within a bureaucratised and over-stretched system and that practitioners’ understandable and rational response to a very difficult task is to produce brief, standardised accounts. We, however, urge practitioners to produce accounts of children that reflect their broader understandings of identity and their knowledge of the child, and to work to incorporate the child or young person’s perspective.

1. For brevity, hereafter referred to as the Assessment Framework. This Framework was introduced in England in 2000 and in Wales in 2001 and is used with all accepted referrals in children’s social services. Core assessments follow an initial assessment and are carried out on the more complex need cases and for all child protection cases.
2. All names of participants in this paper are pseudonyms.
3. Baby Peter was killed at home in London in August 2007. He had been seen frequently by health and social workers. A media outcry following the criminal
prosecution of his mother and two men from the household, and a serious case review of professional involvement, prompted the government to ask Lord Laming to review the arrangements for the protection of children in England.

References


