

A Comprehensive Framework for Conducting Client Assessments: Highlighting Strengths, Environmental Factors and Hope

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Consultants are often asked to conduct comprehensive assessments of clients, which must be conducted in a way that affords the most complete and accurate data to inform the ensuing recommendations. Appropriate and effective assessments require comprehensive examination of both the individual and the setting. Attending to strengths and weaknesses within clients and the client's environment allows for a more complete understanding of a client's situation. Specifically, professionals must attend to four aspects of a client: (a) the client's psychological and behavioral strengths, (b) the client's psychological and behavioral weaknesses, (c) the strengths in the client's environment and (d) the weaknesses in the client's environment (Wright, 1991). In addition, this approach can be enhanced by using hope theory (Snyder, 1994) as a framework for understanding client goals, along with the routes to those goals (pathways thinking) and the motivation to use those pathways (agency thinking). Finally, the advantages of using this innovative assessment approach to inform the recommendations and professional interactions are considered.

The ultimate goals of consulting are ameliorating problems, increasing functioning, and developing and strengthening resources for fending off future problems. The degree to which interviews and assessments answer these questions will shape the ensuing recommendations to the client. In this way, conducting the assessments and interviews as a consultant plays a powerful role in people's lives. Our thesis is that it is important, even crucial, to examine the "good" along with the "bad" in people, attempting to understand their strengths as well as their weaknesses. In addition, to fully understand a person and his or her behaviors, the environment in which they exist must be explored.

Not Oversimplifying the Complex

People are not completely autonomous beings who operate in a vacuum. Instead, they and their behaviors (both good and bad) exist in a variety of contexts. Hence, it is important to understand the situations in a client's life and work, along with the extent to which that client does or does not alter behaviors across different situations.

Not only do people exist in contexts, but so too do their problems. By attributing the source of all of a client's problems to the person's biases consultants hamper their abilities to assist clients effectively in achieving their goals. By assessing a client's environment, consultants increase their ability to detect the various sources of the client's problems. This is a crucial aspect of assessment because the assumed source of problems influences the intervention approaches that are used (Wright & Lopez, 2002). For example, one may find that the optimal client treatment simply is to change the environments in which that client places himself or herself. Without knowing anything about the context in which the problem presents itself, it is difficult to infer that it is partly an environmental issue, rather than simply a matter of changing a client's maladaptive behavior. In addition, examining the environment helps delineate how pervasive or circumscribed any particular problem might be.

In summary, comprehensive and balanced assessments need to provide information regarding the individual's assets and environmental settings. Conducting a balanced assessment provides a more complete (and therefore accurate) conceptualization of the person and the surrounding environment. In the remainder of this article, we will outline a particular method for achieving these desired results in assessing a client and in formulating the subsequent recommendations.

An Approach to Balanced Assessment

To ensure that the assets and weaknesses of the client and his or her environment are assessed, the use of a four-corner matrix (see Figure 1) may be helpful. A first aspect of this matrix is *valence*, with two subsets: the client's assets and weaknesses. A second aspect of this matrix is *source*, with two subsets: factors within the client and factors within the client's environment. Thus, the 2 (valence: assets vs. weaknesses) by 2 (source: within Client vs. within environment) matrix has four quadrants:

- Quadrant 1: assets; within client
- Quadrant 2: assets; within environment
- Quadrant 3: weaknesses; within client
- Quadrant 4: weaknesses; within environment

As the interview unfolds, the interviewer uses this matrix to collect and organize information about the client.

By using this approach, the interviewer is prompted to explore other aspects of the client. It is important that the information recorded on the matrix includes more than simply the client's self-report. The consultant must also pay attention to the behaviors exhibited by the client during the assessment process. Again, client strengths can be noted, such as having good interpersonal skills (e.g., maintaining appropriate eye contact), showing evidence of intact reality testing, or displaying psychological insight. The consultant can explain to the client how these observations

normally would be interpreted in the report in easily understood terms. Clearly distinguishing between aspects of the person and aspects of the environment may be challenging. Part of the consultant's task is to recognize these types of interactions and how they impact the client's life.

Furthermore, extrapolating the extent to which certain attributes are strengths or weaknesses may be difficult. One reason for this is that a characteristic may be adaptive in one setting and detrimental in other settings. For example, spontaneity may serve a client well in recreational activities, whereas it may interfere with a job that requires a more serious, calculating approach. In addition, strengths may become weaknesses when they are overused or used inappropriately. Therefore, although a client may have a great sense of humor, that humor may be inappropriate at times. Appropriate categorization of the interactions between an individual and his or her environment can be difficult, but it is useful for accurate case conceptualization and treatment planning.

Integrating Hope in the Assessment Process

In addition to making the concerted effort to examine a client's strengths and environment, incorporating hope theory (Snyder, 1994) in assessment may also be beneficial. Hope theory consists of three components:

- *Goal-directed thinking* is the cornerstone of hope theory. Goals are the mental targets of an individual's purposeful efforts. People are predominantly goal-oriented beings.
- *Pathways thinking* is the perceived capacity to produce routes to desired goals.
- *Agency* is the motivation to use those routes under both normal and impeded circumstances.

In the context of the four-corner matrix, there are two reasons to use hope as an additional variable in the assessment processes. First, hope theory offers a useful model for understanding people. By asking about goals, pathways and agency in the context of each of the four aspects of our clients' lives, we are gaining a comprehensive yet concise overview of the crucial variables in a client's life. Thus, hope theory offers a framework for more balanced data gathering and case formulation.

A second reason for using hope theory in interviewing and assessment is that it gives the consultant insight into assessing the exact variables (pathways and agency thoughts pertaining to the client's goals) that subsequently will play important roles in the treatment process. Hope provides a common factor that underlies the workings of all interventions (Frank, 1968). In summary, the concepts of goals, pathways and agency of hope theory enable the consultant to gather specific details about a client in the context of the four-corner matrix. The resulting assessment will contain information on the very elements that will guide the client's success, regardless of the recommendations that he or she is given. Client conceptualization should guide subsequent interventions, and the use of goals, pathways and agency of hope theory within the four-corner matrix approach facilitates doing so.

Advantages of This Approach

The proposed assessment approach offers a multitude of advantages to clients and consultants alike. From the point of view of a client, there are several advantages. First, clients are likely to realize that the consultant is trying to understand the whole person or organization, rather than focusing on the client’s problems. Second, clients come to see that they are not being equated with “the problem.” Third, this approach is likely to facilitate an alliance of trust and mutuality in the professional relationship. Hence, including strengths may increase a client’s hope, which has a robust relationship with having a stronger professional alliance.

This approach to assessment also has advantages for the consultant. First, it provides a more accurate picture regarding the extent of the client’s problems and overall level of functioning across situations. Hence, the information gathered provides a better measure of functioning and makes it easier for professionals to construct accurate reports. Second, assessing a person’s strengths gives the consultant clues as to client assets that can be tapped to aid in the intervention process. A balanced approach to assessment is likely to uncover client strengths and should be woven into recommendations and interventions and will allow clients to derive maximal benefit from the assessment process. Finally, the bond of mutuality and trust that is fostered between the client and the consultant is likely to make the consultant’s job much easier, as the quality of the professional relationship is predictive of intervention success (Martin, Garske & Davis, 2000). As such, it is in the professional’s own best interest to use techniques that will nurture this relationship.

Closing Thoughts

Consultants must look at both the strengths and weaknesses in the client as well as in the client’s environment. The four-corner matrix approach described here offers a template for comprehensively examining a client. The use of hope theory fits within this balanced perspective. The examination of client goals in each of the four quadrants leads to an interview and derived report that provide ideas about how to intervene with the person as a whole to improve functioning and life satisfaction. Therefore, the evaluation of a client’s weaknesses and assets is a highly beneficial method for creating a thorough picture of the client.

		Source	
		Individual/Client	Environment
Valence	Assets		
	Weaknesses		

Figure 1. The four-corner matrix for client assessments.

About the Author

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