

Beyond competencies: Field instructors' descriptions of student performance

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Using competency-based evaluation to assess student skills in the field practicum has the appeal of objectivity and comprehensiveness, but may not capture the implicit criteria that field instructors use to judge competence. This exploratory qualitative study elicited the complex constructs underlying experienced field instructors' perspectives about competence. Themes that emerged revealed the importance they gave to a constellation of personal qualities and characteristics, a range of meta-competencies, as well as the procedural skills characteristic of competency-based evaluations.

Professional educational programs are entrusted by society to ensure that graduating students have mastered the knowledge and skills necessary for ethical and effective practice. In meeting this obligation, programs identify the components of professional performance that are associated with effective entry level practice, operationalize these

professional components in the form of learning objectives, provide opportunities for students to achieve these operationalized objectives in the curriculum, and ensure the mastery of these objectives through evaluations of the students. While social work educators use a range of methods to assess student learning and program

outcomes (Garcia & Floyd, 2002), a recurring theme is the difficulty of evaluating field learning (Lager & Robbins, 2004; Raskin, 1983; 1994). Social work educators have used a variety of theories or bodies of knowledge to articulate essential or core components of knowledge, values, and skill. For example, some researchers have used generic social work practice theory (Bogo, Regehr, Hughes, Power, & Globerman, 2002; Bogo et al., 2004); Koroloff & Rhyne, 1989; Vourlekis, Bemby, Hall, & Rosenblum, 1996), others have used task-centered social work practice (Reid, Bailey-Dempsey, & Viggiana, 1996), and others findings from psychotherapy outcome research (O'Hare, Collins, & Walsh, 1998).

One promising approach in this effort has arisen from the competency-based education (CBE) movement, which explicitly broadened the focus of education and evaluation to include performance in both academic courses and field practicum (Arkava & Brennan, 1976; Clark & Arkava, 1979; Gross, 1981). Proponents of the competency-based model encourage educators to identify relevant educational outcomes, to define these outcomes in specific

behavioral terms, to describe indicators that reflect increasing levels of performance, and to create methods of evaluation to ensure that these indicators have been demonstrated by students at the appropriate level (Brennan, 1982). Many field educators embraced the CBE approach in the hope that broad and ill-defined practicum learning goals would be replaced with rigorous, clear outcomes and an objective way of assessing student learning. Indeed, entire competency-based programs were designed and offered, mainly in undergraduate social work programs (Boitel, 2002).

Despite initial excitement about this approach however, progress has been slow. A recent review of the social work research literature (see Bogo et al., 2002) revealed only four studies that produced and tested CBE oriented scales (Koroloff and Rhyne, 1989; O'Hare et al, 1998; Vourlekis et al., 1996), and an analysis of these efforts revealed a variety of practical difficulties, particularly in defining and operationalizing the scope of practice that should be evaluated. On a more theoretical level, several critiques have arisen questioning the foundations of the

CBE approach in professional education. British social work educators expressed concern that the approach characterizes social work practice as mechanistic, is devoid of context, and loses sight of the holistic nature of practice including the person (Kelly & Horder, 2001).

Qualities of professionalism such as judgment and reflection, necessary when working with complex and uncertain value-laden situations, are not well captured in this approach (Eraut, 1994). Similarly, in medical education Talbot (2004) has raised concerns regarding the reductionist nature of the competency movement, whereby performance is broken down into its subunits and the student is graded according to successful, serial completion of each. He argues that this behaviourist-based approach, which places an inappropriate focus on “signing off” across series of discrete competency-based standards, leads to an undue emphasis on procedures and runs the serious risk of negating a deep and reflective engagement with a professional practicum. In a similar line of argument related to evaluation methods, van der Vleuten and colleagues (1991, see also Norman et al., 1991) drew a distinction

between objective (“value free”) and objectified (“judgment free”) methods of evaluation. They suggested that while objective tests are a valuable goal, objectified methods of evaluation, consistent with those promoted by the CBE model, run a constant risk of trivializing the performance, resulting in a loss of content validity in testing situations, and reinforce rote memorizing strategies without an understanding of the outcome of a particular skill.

At the core of the debate between proponents and opponents of the CBE approach is an apparent disparity in the construction of professional practice, a dispute about whether professional practice can be captured effectively by a set of behavioral indicators. As a potential resolution to this debate, Kane (1992) has argued that the two constructions of professional practice may reasonably co-exist as complementary rather than competing concepts. That is, Kane suggests that there are two major components in conceptions of competence. One component can be expressed as the domain of possible encounters that the professional is expected to manage

effectively, and the other component is comprised of the knowledge, skills and judgment that the professional is expected to use in managing these encounters. Thus, the assurance of competence unquestionably involves the evaluation of students' performance across the range of situations relevant to the scope of practice, but must also involve an evaluation of the *judgment* needed to combine knowledge, skills, and abilities into effective solutions to client problems.

This dual formulation of professional competence implies that, while CBE-based evaluations are not inappropriate for the measurement of practice, they are likely to be insufficient. As a complement to the evaluation of domains of competence covered by CBE measurement tools, a measurement tool that evaluates the "meta-competencies" of professional practice that include communication and relationship, self-development, analysis, and judgment (cf, Talbot, 2004) will be needed. Thus, while efforts to refine CBE measurement tools should likely continue, parallel efforts to capture these more nebulous, but crucial, aspects of practice will also be necessary. It is

important to note however, that in order to be appropriately robust as measurement tools, such "meta-competency" evaluations must be grounded in, and must evolve from, the everyday, real life experiences and reflections of practicing social work instructors.

In recognition of this need, the current research project sought to develop an in-depth understanding of field instructors' assessment of student performance and the implicit criteria they use to judge students. More specifically, we wished to explore the views of experienced field instructors by examining their depictions of exemplary and problematic students in the field. Consequently qualitative methods were chosen as our intention was "to uncover and understand what lies behind" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) field instructors' judgments of student performance. While the majority of students in the field practicum do not fit into either of these categories, selecting depictions of these two small groups of students allows us to identify more distinctly issues presented by students and encountered by field instructors.

Methods

This study attempted to elicit field instructors' depictions of exemplary and problematic students utilizing the long-interview method of data gathering (McCracken, 1988). A purposive sample (Patton, 2002; Padgett, 1998) was drawn from all of the field instructors of a large graduate program in social work who offered placements in health, mental health or child welfare. Inclusion criteria were: being an experienced field instructor (i.e., five years or more); possessing strong competencies as a field instructor as determined by the practicum director; and recent supervision of students (i.e., within the last three years). Participants were recruited by telephone. All who were contacted agreed to participate. The sample of 18 field instructors consisted of 13 women and 5 men, 8 from mental health, 6 in child welfare, and 4 in general hospital settings. All held Master of Social Work degrees with an average of 12 years (range 4-25) practice experience with their current employer. In total, participants had a mean of 18 years (range 8-32) of social work or related practice experience, with on average eight years (range 3-16) of experience with the school's practicum

program. The majority (79%) also were field instructors for other schools of social work.

Trained qualitative interviewers conducted all interviews. All interviewers were doctoral students with social work practice experience. Each field instructor was asked the same set of open-ended, guiding questions. First, they described one exemplary and one problematic student in general terms. Second, they described student performance in each of seven core practice dimensions: assessment skills; intervention skills; relationship building skills; differential use of self; ethics and values; report writing; and presentation skills. These factors were identified in earlier research as having theoretical and practice coherence (xxxxxxx). Probing questions were used to elicit concrete examples of student behaviors and practice interactions. The interviews were audio taped to ensure accuracy of data and transcribed. Data was analyzed for themes with the aid of a computer program (Nvivo). In the initial stage, open coding allowed for the development of broad categories. Next, data analysis followed an iterative process in which the research team

reviewed the open coding reports, engaged in selective coding and developed a theoretical understanding which was grounded in the themes that emerged. This theory was then challenged through re-engagement with and re-examining of the data. Member checking was used by presenting the emerging theoretical understanding to another group of field instructors in order to assess transferability and confirmability (Cresswell, 1998; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

Findings

A number of inter-related themes emerged in the instructors' depiction of exemplary and problematic students. Personal qualities of students affected their approach to learning, behavior in the organization, ability to conceptual practice and their practice abilities. Practice abilities consisted of relational and procedural/operational components. Finally the instructors discussed the impact on themselves and the dilemmas they faced when teaching exemplary or problematic students.

Personal Qualities of Students

A predominant finding in the interviews was a consistent tendency by

field instructors to discuss personal qualities and characteristics that the students brought with them to the placement. In describing exemplary students, field instructors often began by identifying attributes such as maturity, initiative, energy, independence, responsiveness to others and commitment. Field instructors made comments such as: "*Well she exuded confidence, which wasn't over-confidence.*" "*She brought a kind of personal maturity with her. She in fact did not have very mature clinical skills but she was a risk taker and learned quickly.*" "*She was bright and very knowledgeable and she was motivated and interested.*" Instructors did provide examples of behaviors relevant to students' personal qualities, but these behaviors did not appear to function as competencies that others might be expected to achieve, but rather as evidence or indicators of the exemplary students' personal qualities. For example, as evidence that they were risk-takers in meeting and exceeding challenges, these students were described as "going beyond" the expectations of the placement and producing work that benefited the

organization as a whole, such as developing a resource pamphlet or developing a committee to review the organization's policy on the duty to report abuse.

By contrast, field instructors frequently described difficult characteristics in the students that they identified as problematic. These students evoked descriptions such as being irritable and having a "bite back quality," as defensive, judgmental, cynical and intolerant, as lacking empathy, or as being quiet, shy, and intimidated. Some students had health or mental health problems that they did not disclose when contracting for the placement, but that later impacted the practicum in significant ways, particularly over-identifying with clients. Again, behaviors relevant to these personality characteristics, such as challenging in a hostile manner, lying, sleeping in meetings, tended to be invoked as examples of qualities rather than as lack of competencies. Interestingly, despite these descriptions, field instructors appeared somewhat reluctant to negatively depict students that they identified as problematic and often described positive characteristics

as well. As one instructor stated, "[*The student*] was genuinely a nice person who wanted to do well but couldn't" or "*was patient and calm, and sympathetic to particular clients' perspectives.*"

For both exemplary and problematic students, personal characteristics were viewed by the instructors as being a very important aspect of student success. As one field instructor summarized their selection of students, "*I am not looking at ...assessment and those kind of skills, but I am looking for the qualities of the person.*"

Approach to Learning

The student's approach to learning is an important personal characteristic that was repeatedly singled out by instructors. Exemplary students were described as bringing to the placement a great deal of initiative in learning. They were portrayed as having a desire to learn skills, to understand the conceptual basis behind the skills and develop their own approach to practice. They were bright and quickly picked up new skills and concepts. When educational challenges arose, they were viewed as adaptable and flexible and worked hard to find solutions. As one

field instructor commented: “...*he was eager to learn, he was self-directed, had clear ideas of what he wanted to learn, what was important to him and when we discussed things and you gave feedback, you can see the feedback showing up in the next interview.*” As support for these descriptions, instructors repeatedly referred to activities such as students’ tendencies to seek out challenges, to seek and accept feedback, to integrate feedback into their clinical activities, and to spontaneously perform literature searches and read about the specialized knowledge required for the placement. It was noted that the “*basics are not an issue*” with these students. Furthermore they recognized the place of learning in a clinical setting and placed their client’s needs first.

Problematic students were described as not very interested or enthusiastic about the learning process. One student was described as “*Just going through the motions to get a degree, to be employable, to finish it and get on.*” A field instructor suggested that another student projected the sense that, “*I just have to be here.*” Other instructors described problematic students as doing the minimum to get by.

These students frequently were discussed as over-estimating their abilities and “*didn’t know what [they] didn’t know*” thus, being unwilling to “*start with the basics*” and “*wanting to be seen as a peer, even though she did not have the knowledge.*” They were seen as being unreceptive to new ideas or to suggestions for change or improvement. Frequently they were described as passive learners who were reluctant to take risks, were not self-directed and “*needed to be spoon-fed.*”

Behavior in the Organization

Social work field education takes place in an organizational and team context and social work students, particularly in multidisciplinary settings, must represent social work well. Exemplary students were frequently attributed with an intuitive understanding of the role of the social worker and the social work student in the organization. In mental health and health settings they were able to advocate appropriately for clients in a manner that did not negatively affect their relationships with members of the multidisciplinary team. For example, one exemplary student was identified for her bravery in raising difficult issues with

other staff in a non-threatening manner, and another for her ability to present information that was contradictory to information documented by other team members. *“I was impressed with her tactfulness and hearing other people’s points of view.”* These students did not become embroiled in the politics of the organization and were able to work within constraints imposed by the setting. Exemplary students were described as respectful of others, as being able to gain the respect of team members and as good team players. They were also able to approach other members of the organization in order to get their learning needs met, thereby expanding their opportunities and reducing the load on the field instructor. An instructor sums this up: *“It is that engagement piece. The genuineness, the introducing yourself, clearly identifying who you are and what your role is...And that came very naturally. The student had a good sense of self-identity, of what a social worker is and what she could and couldn’t do.”*

Problematic students had a variety of characteristics that negatively impacted their relationships with others in the organization. Some were

described as excessively needy and demanding. For example, team members avoided speaking to a student because *“there was no such thing as a two minute chat with this guy. We are just too busy for that.”* Other students were described as opinionated and overly confrontational, presenting their own views in rigid and extreme ways, and portraying team members as *“all good or all bad.”* Instructors described other problematic students as having difficulty working within the formal structure of large multidisciplinary organizations. Organizational rules were experienced as a personal affront. One student was described as seeing herself in an elevated position in the organizational hierarchy, another *“knew everything and was quite outspoken”* and seen as over-reactive and becoming personally wounded by suggestions of team members.

Conceptualizing Practice and Practice Abilities

When discussing clinical performance, frequently field instructors not only described the students’ performance per se, but also the links between what students are actually able to do and their more general capacity to conceptualize practice broadly.

Instructors underscored the importance of students' understanding what professional social work is about and using a theoretical framework(s) or concepts in all stages of the helping process. They observed a cyclical process or domino effect when students are able to link theory and practice. When students grasp the concepts that underpin social work, it is evident in the way they behave in the relationship with the client, in the way they use the relationship to gather information, and in their explanations of the client's problems. Their understanding is actively used to guide goal setting and provides a rationale for the choice of interventions. Conversely, when students are not able to conceptualize, they do not have a firm notion of what professional social work is about and the nature of a professional relationship. They do not know what to do in the interview. Assessments have no direction and interventions are just "*thrown out.*" These students were described as "*lost.*" While they might be able to gather considerable data and describe the client's problem in great detail, they "*can't take it anywhere, can't pull it together into an assessment and specific*

intervention plan. There is a missing link, they want you [the field instructor] to connect the dots for them." Thus, while clinical performance was often described in behavioral terms (what students could or could not do with clients), these behaviors were not seen as ends in themselves, but rather were couched as mechanisms for instructors to form more general impressions of the students' abilities to conceptualize practice. These abilities to conceptualize practice appeared more important to the instructors than any particular performance with clients.

Relational Abilities

In relationships with clients, exemplary students were described as warm and genuine, yet able to confront, challenge, deal with anger and hostility, manage risks and set boundaries. Exemplary students engaged in active listening, responded to both verbal and underlying content, and built respectful, collaborative and empowering relationships with clients. "*She was able to maintain focus, going for deeper levels of empathy, helping a person make connections to other aspects of their lives.*" In practice with involuntary clients in child welfare they could

understand the impact of their presence in clients' lives. They were able to reflect the client's feelings and at the same time help clients understand the effect of those feelings on clients' ability to work with the student to achieve goals.

Relationships with clients, and in particular ethical issues related to client relationships and boundaries, were often highly concerning with problematic students. Frequently students over-identified with clients due to their own personal histories. One student shared his own medical history with clients. Another shared her pain surrounding her divorce. One student became enmeshed with an adolescent client whom she brought to her home and sided with against the foster parents. Some students were viewed as too casual and friendly with clients or *"too free with hugs."* There were also problematic students who were unable to engage with clients or empathize with clients. *"She didn't have very much empathy. She could connect with clients, but there were things I would hear her say afterwards that appalled me."* Other students had *"kind of a wooden quality"* or could not *"connect with the client. She was just*

firing questions at him." One student was described as *"unidimensional"* in her work with clients, and could only address concrete issues. Field instructors often attributed limited empathy to anxiety, but were concerned when students did not appear to improve with practice and supervision.

Procedural/Operational Abilities

The assessment and intervention skills of exemplary students were generally described as strong and frequently as intuitive. *"She was very natural at sort of knowing what to get and why it was important...could go through that on her own and figure it out."* These students could also probe behind the presenting problem and identify other underlying issues or social problems. They were identified as being able to deal with highly complex cases, where there was a great deal of emotional intensity. These students were versatile; they could assume different roles, such as crisis manager, mediator, supporter, and discharge planner and easily move between using therapy skills and addressing the basic needs of clients. *"Right down to the basic stuff. Getting people clothing, developing the kind of*

relationship where you can do the basic needs stuff...and establish trust."

While some of the problematic students were described as having good assessment skills, more commonly these students could not formulate the case. One student would consider many factors in the assessment and then *"would get kind of bogged down in the planning and executing of the plan."* At times case formulation and planning of problematic students seemed independent of the client's feelings and wishes or did not focus on the most pressing issues.

Communicating about practice in written forms and through case presentation and discussion were identified as important skills in all settings. Exemplary students were able to translate their thoughts effectively into written form. They wrote clearly and concisely yet comprehensively and thoroughly, and balanced the positives and the negatives appropriately. The report writing of problematic students was sometimes strong, but more often was identified as having no focus, purpose or direction and no appreciation for the needs of the intended audience. At times the reports were long, diffuse,

and over-due while others lacked information and depth, and barely met the requirements of the agency.

Frequently the field instructor was involved repetitively in the re-writing process.

Interestingly, students identified as exemplary did not always have the strongest practice skills in this area. While some for instance had excellent presentation skills including being prepared, clear, organized, focused and engaging, others were described as nervous and intimidated. *"Probably not the strongest presenter I have ever seen."* Another instructor stated *"Her documentation was good [but] needed some fine tuning."* A further stated *"She struggled a bit with what degree of personal information she should share."* At times, these skills improved over the course of the field practicum, at other times they remained less than ideal.

Impact on the Field Instructor

Exemplary students were characterized as those that field instructors did not have to worry about; they could depend on them. They knew they would follow-through on the next steps with clients as discussed in supervision, they would not be

inappropriate with clients, and they would not cause problems in the team or organization. Field instructors felt that exemplary students brought “*value added*” to the instructor and the organization, as learning was reciprocal. The student brought energy and a keen ability to question, which stimulated the instructor to critically reflect on her own practice and agency services and consider how they might be improved. Exemplary students exercised good boundaries and kept their personal issues out of field instruction. They came well prepared for supervision, were able to identify areas for self-improvement, and were receptive to feedback. They were open to discussing the challenge of dealing with their strong feelings, evoked when working with particular client groups.

Not surprisingly, field instructors described the experience of working with problematic students as very difficult, draining, and painful. Field instructors worried about these students. Since some students were guarded and withheld samples or descriptions of their work, field instructors became hesitant when assigning cases to them, wondering what the student would

actually do with clients. Having observed their provocative behavior in the team, they worried about their behavior with other staff and in the organization. Field instructors reported investing a great deal of time with these students, reviewing cases and tapes of interviews, and rewriting reports. Often there was little or no improvement despite these efforts. Since these students could not generalize the principles they learned in one case or situation to another, there was little evidence of progress in practice performance. While some of these students shared very little in supervision sessions and could not maintain eye contact with the field instructor, others talked exclusively about personal issues and attempted to use supervision for personal therapy. Still others were argumentative and defensive. As a result, field instructors frequently questioned their own abilities as educators.

Dilemmas Created

Each type of student, the exemplary and the problematic however, raised dilemmas for the field instructors. With the exemplary students, instructors identified that the strengths at times

could become deficits. For instance the student that was “too” bright and assertive *“sometimes found it difficult to be patient and listen to the clients or patients, because she was so much further ahead in her thinking than the patient... there was a risk of putting words in the patient’s mouth or finishing the patient’s sentences. So she needed to exercise a lot of control and discipline over that.”* Another instructor identified that a motivated and assertive student at times pushed the limits. *“She was quite ethical but ...She wasn’t the best in that area.... She wasn’t a rule breaker, she was a rule bender..”* Another instructor stated *“maybe she had a bit of narcissism, she tended to be a bit hard to please around space or computer.”* In addition, when students with strong personal qualities had skill deficits, these were often excused because it was believed that the student had the capacity to learn or because the skills were viewed as secondary in importance, for example presentation skills. These observations often came in the form of BUT statements. That is, the student did not have these skills BUT they would certainly develop them in the future. For instance one exemplary student was

described as outstanding in dealing with practical needs of clients but less able to manage process. Nevertheless, because the student made some progress in this area, her skill level was not of concern. Another field instructor indicated that an exemplary student’s assessment skills needed work, but excused this as due to her lack of formal training in the specialized area prior to the practicum.

Dilemmas with problematic students had a different hue. When the problematic student was viewed as a “nice person,” the field instructor worked harder and invested more energy in teaching, yet worried about compromising expectations. BUT statements in this case were as follows: *“The staff liked them BUT they were too casual, and had poor boundaries with clients.”* Other problematic students had good practice skills such as assessment and following through with clients BUT they had problems in relating interpersonally, seen in poor boundaries with staff, being overly critical of others, being unable to work within organizational rules, personalizing feedback they received, or being overly dependent on the field instructor.

Discussion

In the course of this work, several important findings emerged. Consistent with the original intention of the study, we have been able to evolve a sense of the dimensions of performance on which field instructors spontaneously describe exemplary and problematic students with regard to their professional competence. We found that field instructors pay particular attention not only to students' procedural or operational abilities in assessment, intervention, documentation and communication about practice, but also, of special interest is students' approach to learning, behavior in the organization, ability to conceptualize practice, and relational capacities. These findings provide important insights into the dimensions that should be included in designing field evaluation measurement tools that can claim to be authentic and have content validity. Using dimensions that are valued by the instructors in language that arises from their descriptions should contribute importantly to instructors' satisfaction with their ability to describe students effectively using the measurement instrument provided. A new evaluation

tool has been designed and is currently being field tested.

From a conceptual perspective, in pursuit of greater understanding and evaluation of professional competence in social work practice, three additional related findings are particularly relevant. First, on starting this study, the research team expected to identify a set of skills and competencies that field instructors would use to describe the differences between exemplary students and problematic students. However, what emerged instead was a constellation of personal qualities possessed by students that were perceived as affecting their approaches to learning, their interactions with others in the organization, their relationship with the field instructor and their ability to develop relationships with clients. Exemplary students were described as bright, intuitive, motivated, enthusiastic, self-directed, engaging and tactful. Problematic students were described as irritable, defensive, judgmental, non-empathic, shy, needy and demanding. In general, these personality characteristics seemed to have precedence over skills and behaviors, with the skills and behaviors used more as supporting evidence for

these underlying traits than as evidence of having achieved or failing to have achieved competence.

The second conceptual finding of note in our data is the tendency for field instructors' overall opinions of a student to override their opinions regarding the student's specific skills. Field instructors were often forgiving of skill deficits in exemplary students believing that, due to the student's inherent abilities and motivation, they could be addressed with time and experience. When specific skills did not match expectations, these deficits were viewed as amenable to change with adequate practice or increased knowledge. At the same time, instructors were somewhat dismissive of skill sets mastered by the more problematic students, acknowledging that these students possessed adequate skills in certain domains (such as assessment or report writing), but indicating that these skills were overshadowed by less desirable personality characteristics and interactional styles. It is important to note that there was an interesting asymmetry in this pattern. That is, field instructors appeared more reluctant to label problematic students as having

personality deficits or enduring difficulties in interpersonal relating, and often tried to attribute these to inadequate fit between the student and the setting or the fact that the student was not really interested in the practice of social work. These attributions are consistent with literature regarding inferences about the causes of individual behaviors. That is, that positive performance is more often attributed to dispositional or enduring characteristics of the individual, while negative performance is more frequently attributed to situational factors (Konst, Vonk & Van der Vlist, 1999). Nonetheless, it is these attributed causes of behavior that seem to hold more weight for the instructors than the behaviors themselves in determining a student's level of competence.

Finally, the data suggest a strong tendency for field instructors to place a very high value on students' ability to conceptualize their practice. Unlike the academic literature that proposes that students use formal theories to conduct practice, these expert social workers identified the importance of the student's analytic and conceptual ability to examine practice in light of theoretical

knowledge and ultimately to use it to guide aspects of the student's actual work. With an understanding of social work, exemplary students could learn a range of practice behaviors and know how and when to use them. However, for students who could not develop this understanding, practice was a mystery. Thus, consistent with other literature (Ericsson & Charness, 1994), these practitioners seemed to conceptualize professional practice as resting on the ability to differentially use skills based on a broader understanding of the context in which the skills are required and on an understanding of multiple outcomes of any given behavior. It appears that, for field instructors, this perceived ability becomes the overarching framework within which all other skills are judged. Coupled with field instructors' comments about the importance of specific personal qualities we conclude that these findings lend support to the importance of meta-competencies as proposed by organizational management theorists and elaborated on recently with respect to medical education. Meta-competencies refer to generic overarching competencies, qualities, and/or skills that

are of a different order and nature than procedural or operational skills. These meta-competencies may be common across a range of professions and also affect students' ability to learn the more specific role competencies of particular professions. Management theorists have referred to qualities such as creativity and mental agility (Reynolds & Snell, 1988) and as skills needed to learn other skills (Hall, 1986). Further examples of meta-competencies are communication, self-development, problem-solving and analytical capacities (Cheetham & Chivers, 1996; Talbot, 2004).

Of course, these results must be interpreted and generalized with appropriate caution, as there are limitations to this study. A purposive sample of 18 field instructors was used. A larger group of field instructors may have identified additional dimensions they considered important when discussing students' practice competence. In turn, the exemplary and problematic student descriptions offered by these instructors were based on the students they had actually instructed. The pool of students they were drawing on may not have represented the full range of student characteristics and

competencies in the larger population of social work students. Furthermore, the field instructors in this sample were drawn from the three most predominant fields of practice in the school's practicum: health, mental health, and child welfare. Had instructors been drawn from other fields, for example juvenile justice, services to the elderly, or immigration and settlement they may have identified different dimensions.

Recognizing the need for further work in this area to establish the generalizability of our findings however, we see several important themes that, if generalizable, could have significant implications for understanding competency and its evaluation in the field. On the one hand, our results appear consistent with the growing chorus of voices expressing concern regarding the reductionist approach to competency assessment that is evoked by the classical interpretation and implementation of CBE. Social work educators critical of CBE approaches have concern that lists of discrete skills omit the crucial dimensions of critical reflection and judgment that characterizes professional practice. They view professional practice as a site of

collaboration with clients and communities where knowledge, value, and skills are brought together in the interests of understanding and interacting with unique and complex situations (Hyland, 1995; Kelly & Horder, 2001) and are used with judgment and critical reflection (Eraut, 1994; Schon, 1987). Certainly the spontaneous descriptions provided by the field instructors in our study would seem to imply the need for a model of evaluation that captures an understanding of professional practice beyond the discrete behaviors that might be mastered in isolation from this understanding. On the other hand, the highly interpretive attributions made by the field instructors regarding the underlying causes of students' behavior, and the relative unconcern instructors appeared to express for gaps in particular skill sets, might generate cause for concern regarding the misuse of evaluation tools that are insufficiently specified from the perspective of the domains in which minimally competent performance is expected. The need to balance both these sets of concerns reinforces the idea that two conceptualizations of professional

competence must be jointly considered. Consistent with Kane's (1992) analysis of professional practice, the concept of competence must incorporate both the domain of possible encounters that the professional is expected to manage effectively, and the knowledge, skills and judgment that the professional is expected to use in managing these encounters. And to be truly effective, our evaluation tools will have to accommodate this duality.

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