Competency – views from one child protection front

Elisabeth Starbuck

Definitions of competent practice which were developed by a team of child protection workers are re-examined in light of current debates about enterprise competency standards. Such definitions indicate that competence is more aptly analysed in terms of the nature of workers' process objectives and their capacity to work within tensions and contradictions than in terms of listings of specific skills and knowledge.

Recent articles in *Children Australia* (Burgell, 1993; Cooper, 1993) have shown some of the debates with which the term 'competency' is now imbued. Together the articles give some local form to conflicts about the use of enterprise competencies and competency standards.

This article outlines constructions by a group of practitioners of their definitions of competence-in-action in the field of child protection (Starbuck, 1991) and re-examines their definitions for possible contributions to discussions of competency standards.

The project

The practice examined in the project is that of one team of statutory child protection workers in metropolitan Victoria. It is their practice of mid-1990, when enterprise re-structuring, competency based training and standards in the social and community services field, although named and commenced, were hazy in their forms and impacts. It is child protection practice before major funding cuts to support services and burgeoning numbers of child death inquiries, before the maelstrom of a mega human service department and individual worker contracts. Nevertheless, it is practice bombarded by major uncertainty - of settling dust of barely half a decade of direct

Elisabeth Starbuck worked as a practitioner and manager in public welfare agencies in Scotland and Australia (including the former Community Services Victoria) over a period of twenty years. She is currently a lecturer in social work at Victoria University of Technology.

government responsibility for child protection intervention, of the early days of a 'single-track' system of intervention with narrowing police responsibility and consolidation of assessment of child abuse notifications with ongoing post-court intervention. Above all it is practice in the aftermath of concerted public scrutiny and media dissection (see Loane, 1988).

The qualitative design of the project was developed from concepts of professional practice which assert the significance of practice-wisdom as accumulated knowledge and skills and the inherent, non-explicit, seemingly intuitive, cohesion of each worker's practice (Schon, 1983; Scott, 1988). All twelve members of the team took part in the project - senior, advanced and base-grade workers. Each worker was asked to describe a case in which s/he saw her practice as being competent and to identify the competent aspects of the practice of another, respected, worker. From the cumulated examinations of practice prompted by these questions and through team discussions, several themes of competence emerged.

Members of the team are now widely dispersed. However I have re-examined the themes they articulated in light of current propositions and debates about enterprise competencies. How might this team's constructions of competence-in-action in child protection contribute to the debates surrounding competency standards?

Elements of competent child protection practice

What stands out in this project is that workers' articulation of competent practice took the form, not of prescriptions for specific skills or knowledge, but of a series of process objectives.

Within the framework of competency standards, such process objectives could be viewed as 'elements'

> ...the building blocks of units.... expressed as outcomes, which describe what the worker is able to do, in terms of actions that are demonstrable or assessable.
>
> (SACS, 1992, p.6)

One of the underpinning elements of the definition of competence was the very notion of 'appropriate process'. Whilst the workers saw their competence partly reflected in action toward an over-riding goal of ensuring that young people were provided with the optimal protection feasible within legal and community norms, they were equally sensitive to the dangers of defining competence solely on the criterion of short-term outcomes of their intervention. In doing so they drew attention to the complexities inherent in all human services which reflect their multiple and contradictory goals, their reliance on prevailing and diverse community norms and their potential for ongoing impact (Hasenfeld, 1983).

Further elements of competence-in-action for this team of child protection workers are conveyed through eight other process objectives.

(1) Recognising that action and behaviour are context-bound, not occurrences that can be objectively measured or defined in isolation:

Workers emphasised that understanding specific incidents of abuse does not occur in isolation from the child's total experiences in that family. To be effective responses to protect that child need to be devised in the context of that family's specific experiences and capacities.

(2) Ensuring that intervention decisions are derived from assessments which are broadly-based, not narrowly focussed only on 'proving' whether or not the child has been abused:

In developing assessments, workers must look beyond the single issue of whether or not a child had been abused, to differentiate between different degrees of risk and to assess that family's capacities to modify its ways of behaving.

(3) Making decisions and selecting interventions which have a purpose of protecting the child/ young person in the long-term through change for the family:

In various ways, workers emphasised that recommendations and interventions must be directed, not only towards a child's immediate safety, but also towards ensuring her long-term well-being. They were very conscious of the long-term, in some circumstances potentially destructive, impacts of intervention by protective services for young people (concerns similar to those examined by Mallucio, 1984 and Tierney, 1985).

(4) Forming assessments and selecting interventions on the basis of theory and knowledge, not from idiosyncratic, personal judgements:

In describing their actions, the workers made repeated references to the general significance of drawing on theories about human behaviour and change as reference points in determining assessments and action, for example, theories of child development, empowerment frameworks, attachment/separation dynamics, grief and loss.

Equally, they incorporated technical information within their respective knowledge frameworks. Reference to knowledge about matters such as judicial procedures, specialised social issues (such as drug use), depart-

mental program protocols and organisational dynamics and politics, all attracted comments by which the workers delineated competent practice.

(5) Using a repertoire of skills and roles and being able to identify them and justify their use:

One of the most striking features of the practice described as competent was the diversity of skills and interventions undertaken. Competence-in-action was seen to lie not only in using a wide range of skills, but also in being able to select when to apply them, regardless of the complexity of the case at hand. It also included the ability to devise new interventions and to be able to swiftly improvise different approaches when common or initial responses were not effective.

Competent practice was marked by skills and roles whose use is timely, flexible and relevant to the risks and client's capacities - not fixed, codified or standardised responses. They were described as requiring the setting of appropriate priorities, acting within the organisation's dynamics and requirements, being able to persevere and to improvise. They also included workers being clear about their multiple, separate and varied roles and authority. More specifically, the array of skills identified by the workers included mediation and conflict management, interaction and relationship skills, effective communication with clients and with other systems and agencies.

(6) Ensuring that critical decisions are widely examined by people important for the child, with other professionals and within the organisation:

One mark of poor practice designated by this team was limited consultation with other significant people in order to critically examine the basis and relevance of assessments and to devise appropriate decisions.

(7) Ensuring maximum feasible participation by clients in all processes:

Fulfilment of this objective was judged by several criteria - opening client access to information, facilitating clients' articulation of their views and feelings, involving clients in decision-making processes and ensuring that there is mutual understanding of the worker's roles and powers.

(8) Always focussing on the child/ young person being protected:

Workers recognised that their purpose of protecting the child might easily be diverted by organisational or community demands (such as prematurely removing a child in order to be seen to be acting proactively) or even by the excitement of engaging in techniques (such as family therapy) which might be effective in other settings, but which may not necessarily contribute to protecting a child.

These process objectives defined the coherent framework which guided this team's application of specific skills and knowledge. I would suggest that for this team it was achievement of these objectives, not the mastery of specific, segmented skills and knowledge, which constituted their elements of competence.

Dealing with tensions and contradictions

However there was a further critical dimension of this team's construction of competence. Whilst it could be argued that this dimension is another element of competence, it was too pervasive in workers reflections to be curtailed as a single element.

The notion of 'range of variables' (or performance conditions) had not been widely discussed at the time of the study –

...the specification of the context and conditions to which the performance criteria apply. (SACS, 1992:6)

However the workers in this team emphasised themes which could be interpreted as an outline of the range of variables pertinent to their practice. This they did through their recurring attention to tensions and contradictions of their practice. In various forms throughout the project, there was a powerful undercurrent of workers grappling with multiple tensions - between individual practitioners and within individual cases.

There is a sense of workers constantly having to weigh up conflicting factors and demands, a 'balancing act' between immediate protection and ongoing development and empowerment. The challenge of having to anticipate potential long-term impacts of every action by workers was persistent. They spoke of their own actions potentially creating major dilemmas which actually may

be destructive to protecting children, such as by breaking tenuous support networks or contributing to self-destructive behaviour by adolescents.

Intertwined with this was the intensity of ongoing self-examination – the challenge to find something that works, making sure that all options have been found and considered:

> ...we questioned ourselves 'til we were blue in the face...what have we missed...what is unsaid...
>
> (Doug in Starbuck, op cit : 53)

Recognising and naming the tensions became vital to the expression and realisation of their competence-in-action. This became a complex task, only partially completed. Many tensions were seen to fluctuate, shifting with forces such as particular organisational re-structuring, new learning required for a change in legislation or administrative systems, the impact of several demanding cases reaching crises at the one time, a colleague absent but the work spread around, their own immediate well-being or mood.

Through a process of cumulative content analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Becker & Geer, 1982) five streams of tensions or contradictions were constructed from the team's examination of their practice.

Taking Risks:

Stress from facing personal risks was a recurring theme. Risks were seen to emanate from threats of, or actual, abuse (verbal or physical) from clients and occasionally colleagues. Equally, the experience of their own emotional responses constituted personal risks for them.

> The sheer thing of removing a child is very stressful for me...you weigh up whether this is the right thing,.... you're really questioning your whole practice and your ethics...
>
> (Irene, ibid : 55)

Another key source of risks was the need to take action without having clear-cut, proven, tried and tested patterns of responses. Abusive situations are rarely demarcated by obviously draconian or comprehensively pathological behaviour but are interspersed within otherwise acceptable circumstances.

> I'm not sure I felt competent...I felt helpless...I was questioning my assessment,....you go back to what you know about young children... you have to go back and intellectualise, theorise...'a nine year old doesn't lie'...'this child is fright-

ened'...but you keep coming back to 'this mother seems quite nice ...'

> (ibid)

Conflicting principles of professional action:

All members of the team hold social work qualifications and at several points the requirements and realities of child protection work were perceived as conflicting with traditional principles of social work practice. Workers commented in particular on conflicts arising from their social control function relative to the principle of client self-determination; from operating within organisational programs of 'case-management' rather than support and counselling for clients; their commitment to joint responsibility for assessments and intervention proposals was maintained uncomfortably with their perceptions of professional responsibility for autonomous action; their attempts to ensure holistic assessment of families' capabilities and needs were seen to be over-ridden by demands for focused protective 'investigations':

> Well I have found that I have less time and opportunity to work with clients because there's such an emphasis on cases getting through the system quickly, being farmed out.
>
> (Eric, ibid : 58)

The most difficult tension for them to articulate was their dilemma between their professional responsibility for responding to client and organisational demands and their own legitimate self-protection:

> ... but sometimes you get really cheesed off and for weeks you hate it, the work, the clients, you wish they'd all go away. You tend to avoid things when it gets like that.
>
> (Julie, ibid : 58)

Manoeuvring amongst competing priorities and accountabilities:

> Part of competence is coming to terms with the media. Our knowledge is that we will be held accountable to the community, even on small issues; there is a sense of personal attack which is not easy to separate from the personal framework of self as 'professional'.
>
> (Cathy, ibid : 59)

I think the problem for the public is (appreciating) the time that that takes...it might seem as if nothing is happening. Like with (this case) I had seen her weekly, (at Flinders St. Station) until the week before

she told me where she was (living). If something had happened in that time ... it would have looked as though I wasn't doing anything ...

> (Karen, ibid : 59)

Setting priorities within limited time and high commitments:

Ebbing and flowing throughout the team's comments is the element of time – time to complete all the tasks set by practitioners and their organisation and the operation of intrinsic barriers to fully meeting those demands in an ordered and controlled way:

> ...high workloads, a full day on duty, working at home. In practical terms you can't attend to all the things you would have liked to,....the day-to-day stuff...I'm talking about volume... rather than the nature of the work.
>
> (Grant, ibid : 60)

Articulating these tensions helped workers convey the web of conditions within which their child protection practice operated, creating both constraints and impetus for action. They are formed from the interplay of professional training, policy and administration demands, protocols, job descriptions, personality and individual idiosyncrasies. The nature of tensions was seen to be such that many were never resolved. They were continuous over time, so that workers were required to not only repeatedly attempt to resolve them, but also to live with them.

What is raised but not addressed by this examination is the issue of how workers resolve and deal with the tensions of their practice in ways which can be conducive to competent practice, rather than confusing or destructive. How do they both control and empower clients? On which formal and intuitive knowledge do they draw? How do they develop their understandings of their professional, political, and organisational contexts so that these are personally tenable and organisationally legitimate? What are the 'situational rules' (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986) which guide their competent practice?

Conclusion

Dimensions of competence developed in this examination are consistent with several other studies (such as Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986; Ryan et al. 1993) which highlight analysis of professional competence through

notions beyond those of lists of skills and knowledge.

For this team competence was distinguished by two categories of components - the nature of the objectives and processes undertaken in individual cases and workers' capacities to perform in conditions of tension and contradiction, both in clients' circumstances and goals and from organisational and community demands on them (similar issues to those examined by Healy & Springall, 1988, and Donovan & Jackson, 1988). Technical demonstration of individual, segmented skills and knowledge were implied and occasionally designated by workers within the project, but were presented only as illustrations of possible means to achieving their critical process objectives. They were not of themselves perceived as core measures of competence in their child protection practice.

Competence was articulated as the capacity to selectively interpret and apply an array of diverse information and theories; the capacity to select, utilise and articulate a repertoire of skills for effecting change (rather than prescribed, codified responses); as maintaining a focus on enhancing long-term development and protection rather than only immediate cessation of abusive experiences for the child; and the capacity to operate within conditions of tension and contradiction.

Such themes indicate that in analysing competence it may be more productive to give more attention to examining ranges of variables of practice (performance conditions) and practice frameworks rather than focussing so emphatically on elements of skill and knowledge. ◆

References

Becker H. & Geer B. (1982) 'Participant Observation: the Analysis of Qualitative Field Data' in Field Research: A Source Book and Field Manual, R. Burgess (ed) London: Allen & Unwin.

Burgell B. (1993) 'A Rejoinder: The real story of the H&CS Enterprise Competency Standards' Children Australia, 18(3) 31-34.

Cooper L. (1993) 'A Word Salad: Enterprise based competencies in child protection', Children Australia, 18(2) 26-29.

Donovan F. & Jackson A. (1988) 'Education for public welfare practice: back to the future?' in Advances in Social Work Education, R. Berreen et al. (eds), Sydney: Univ. of New South Wales.

Dreyfus H. & Dreyfus S. (1986) Mind Over Machine: The Power of Human Intuition and Expertise in the Era of the Computer, London: Basil Blackwell.

Glaser B. & Strauss A. (1967) The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research, Chicago: Aldine.

Gonczi A. (1993) 'Competency standards for the professions: a review of arguments for and against', in The Challenge of Competencies in Social Welfare, Proceedings of a National Conference, 9-10 July, Canberra: AASW.

Hasenfeld Y. (1983) Human Service Organizations, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Healy B. & Springall J. (1988) 'The forgotten fieldworker - a challenge for social work practice', in Advances in Social Work Education, R. Berreen et al. (eds), Sydney: Univ. of New South Wales, Sydney.

Loane S. (1988a), 'Child abuse cases shelved', The Age, 2 July, 1&4.

Loane S. (1988b) 'Shake-up for the state's child protection system', The Age, 7 July, 1.

Loane S. (1988c) 'Cain urged to set up child abuse inquiry', The Age, 22 July, 1.

Mallucio A. (1984) 'Promoting client and worker competence in child welfare', Australian Child and Family Welfare, 9(1), 8-24.

Ryan M., Fook J. & Hawkins L. (1993) 'From beginner to graduate social worker: preliminary findings of an Australian longitudinal study', paper presented to AASW Conference, 27-30 Oct. Newcastle University.

SACS (1992) Competency Based Training - The SACS ITB Policy, Melbourne.

Schon D. (1983) The Reflective Practitioner: How Professions Think in Action, London: Temple Smith.

Scott D. (1989) 'Meaning construction and social work practice', Social Service Review, March, 63(1) 39-59.

Starbuck E. (1991) 'Balancing risks: a qualitative and participatory exploration of practitioners' constructions of competence-in-action in one field of public welfare - Protective Services for Children and Young People', unpublished MSW thesis, Univ. of Melbourne.

Tierney L. (1985) 'Some dilemmas in human service administration: the case of child welfare', Australian Child & Family Welfare, Spring, 10(3) 1-5.

The International Year of the Family
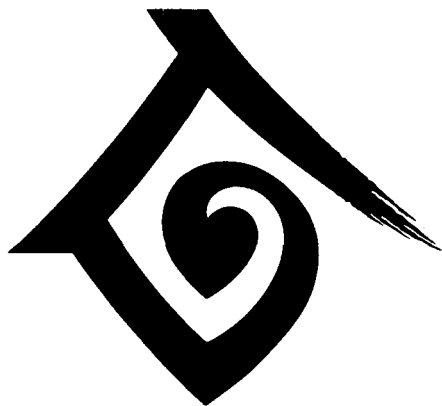
"A heart sheltered by a roof, linked by another heart, to symbolise life and love in a home where one finds warmth, caring security, togetherness, tolerance and acceptance - that is the symbolism conveyed by the emblem of the International Year of the Family, 1994"