Fostering a Culture Shift: Assessment of Competence in the Education and Careers of Professional Psychologists

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What is professional competence and how should it be assessed? Professionalism in psychology requires the habitual and judicious use of knowledge and skills as well as ongoing assessment. The authors synthesize discussions of the Assessment of Competence Workgroup that met during the Competencies Conference: Future Directions in Education and Credentialing in Professional Psychology. The workgroup discussed how to establish a culture of competence and elaborated principles and considerations necessary for the development of methods to assess competence. Principles identified include maintaining a developmental perspective, practicing multicultural sensitivity, and conducting formative and summative, career-long assessment. Recommendations are offered that support a “culture shift” from the current levels of competence assessment to an embracing of continual assessment of professional knowledge and skills over the life span.

Professional psychologists take pride in being called professionals, yet although the status of “professional” incurs certain privileges, it also invokes a number of obligations. A professional psychologist receives some level of respect, status, financial reward, and power. In addition, the psychologist carries the responsibility for adhering to high standards of ethics, committing to the acquisition of specialized knowledge and skills, and applying all for the betterment of others.

The obligations and standards of professional psychologists are different from those expected of others using the term professional, such as professional golfers or professional basketball players. Consistent with both uses, however, is the issue of what is a competent professional. In the case of sports, the achievement of a professional level of skill may be easier to define and measure: The ball rolls into the cup or drops through the hoop. In the case of professional psychology, competence has been more difficult to define and measure. Although it has been long discussed (e.g., Fantuzzo, Sisemore, & Spradlin, 1983; McNamara, 1975; Peterson & Bry, 1980; Shaw & Dobson, 1988; Tyler & Weaver, 1981), attempts to define competence in psychology have been thought to be inadequate to some degree. Graduate training programs, internships, postdoctoral training programs, licensing and regulatory bodies, and certification boards vary in their definitions as well as in their procedures and instruments for assessing competence in the profession of psychology. The profession of psychology has learned a great deal about what it means to be a professional psychologist.
professional from the diverse attempts to define and assess competence.

Epstein and Hundert (2002) offered an excellent and comprehensive definition of professional competence: “the habitual and judicious use of communication, knowledge, technical skills, clinical reasoning, emotions, values, and reflection in daily practice for the benefit of the individual and community being served” (p. 227). They elaborated that “competence depends on habits of mind, including attentiveness, critical curiosity, self-awareness, and presence. Professional competence is developmental, impermanent, and context-dependent” (p. 228). This definition helped guide the development of this article.

We synthesize here the discussions and conclusions of the Assessment of Competence Workgroup, which met during the Competencies Conference: Future Directions in Education and Credentialing in Professional Psychology, held in Scottsdale, Arizona, in November 2002 (see Kaslow et al., 2004). The workgroup was given the charge “to focus on the assessment of competencies across domains, and to generate an effective plan or set of plans by which to assess the attainment of overall competence in professional psychology” (Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers [APPIC], 2004, p. 61). Given the relatively fledgling state of development in the field of evaluation of professional competencies (Sumerall, Lopez, & Oehlert, 2000), we chose not to delineate how competence should be measured. Instead, key principles and considerations were articulated as necessary for the development of processes and measures to assess trainees’ and professionals’ competence. In the process of identifying basic principles of the assessment of competence and developing a model of assessing competence, we identified an existing definition of professional competence that reflected the general sentiments of the workgroup members’ views (viz., the quotation from Epstein & Hundert, 2002). The task of assessing competence then led to the articulation of an aspirational goal for all of professional psychology: establishing a culture of competence in the field.

The Culture of Competence and the Culture of Assessment

A culture shift will be needed for the assessment of competence to become more routine, systematic, and “institutional”—that is, implemented into routine work of the professional. In the current culture, there are relatively few instances of competence assessment occurring, and these practices typically wind down at the point of a professional achieving licensure. In changing this culture, assessment of competence will need to be a highly valued priority among faculty, students, and professionals. Thus, we believe that two cultural shifts must take place in the training and practice of professional psychology: a shift to a culture that emphasizes acquisition and maintenance of competence as a primary objective and a shift to a culture that promotes assessment of that competence at all levels over time. The “culture of competence” and the “culture of assessment” should be introduced early in the professional development process (i.e., in formal, replicable ways during training). In our view, the culture of competence has become a professional emphasis reflected in the Competencies Conference itself; we urge the development of a corollary emphasis on assessment of competence. The culture shift to more institutionalized and internalized assessment of competence needs to be infused throughout all aspects of professional psychology and the career path of the professional psychologist. As the cultural shift toward enhanced assessment of competence becomes more routine and institutionalized over time, there increasingly will be full cohorts of practitioners who were trained in and accepting of continual assessment as a fundamental part of everyday life as a professional psychologist.

Before a culture of competence can be established, the professional community must come to an agreement about what are the significant values in the profession and what are viewed as good professional habits. Accordingly, we subsequently describe basic principles of assessment of competence and propose a model that can be used to guide the assessment process.

Basic Principles of Assessment of Competence

Developmental Perspective

A developmental perspective underlies the assessment of all competencies. Naturally, different expectations for competence exist as a trainee develops and a professional matures. Differences occur in the specific competencies relevant to each stage of development as well as in the criterion levels to be set for the same competency at different developmental levels. Currently, the Guidelines and Principles for Accreditation (American Psychological Association, 2002b) take such a developmental perspective in the statement, “Training for practice is sequential, cumulative, graded in complexity, and designed to prepare students for further organized training” (p. 6). Similarly, the sequence of exposure–experience–expertise relies on a developmental orientation to professional education and training as outlined in the training recommendations for psychologists to provide services to children and adolescents (Roberts et al., 1998), for training school psychologists (Phelps, 2001), and for training gerontology knowledge dissemination (Farkas, Jette, Tennstedt, Haley, & Quinn, 2003). In similar terms, Stoltenberg, McNeill, and Crethar (1994) described therapist development and changes in supervision. A variety of methods of assessment will be needed because of the nature of the different goals at each developmental level.

Considerations of Diversity

Competence in and sensitivity to diversity and multicultural considerations are required at all levels of professional psychology (American Psychological Association, 2003). Individual psychologists and the profession of psychology as a whole must attend to both cultural aspects of competence assessment (how an assessment itself is sensitive to culture) and assessment of cultural competence (how competence in cultural and ethnic diversity is defined and measured). The role of these considerations needs to be developed further (see, e.g., Stuart, 2004; Trimble, 2003), particularly regarding how to evaluate competence while taking into consideration concepts of equity and diversity (including gender, ethnicity, culture, language, sexual orientation, and disability).

Formative and Summative Assessment

Both formative assessment and summative assessment are needed in professional psychology (Lamb, 1999; Parsons & Mey-
Assessment of competence should involve multivariate-multidimensional and multimethod input and should include multiple perspectives (inputs) at all levels of professional development. Multiple perspectives might be gathered in “360-degree evaluation” or through multitrait feedback that integrates input from multiple sources, including supervisors, peers, those who might be supervised by the individual, and perhaps clients, as well as the individual’s self-analysis (e.g., Atkins & Wood, 2002; Fletcher & Bailey, 2003; Maurer, Mitchell, & Barbeite, 2002). Currently, 360-degree evaluations are in vogue in business settings and human resource activities for leadership development. Search engines generate a number of commercial Web sites devoted to selling 360-degree evaluation procedures and products (with and without the support of cited research bases).

Another innovative approach worth examining is the use of standardized patients or simulated clients to assess clinical skills. It is common practice for medical schools to use comprehensive Objective Structured Clinical Examinations through standardized patients and to find these to be useful assessment tools (e.g., Barrows, 1993; Colliver, Swartz, & Robbs, 2001; Colliver & Williams, 1993; Joorabchi & Devries, 1996). These are used in both formative and summative evaluations (e.g., Stanford University School of Medicine, Office of Student Affairs, 2004; University of Kansas School of Medicine—Wichita Family and Community Medicine, 2004; University of Massachusetts Medical School, Office of Medical Education, 2004). The United States Medical Licensing Examination (2005) uses standardized patient-based examinations in Step 2 of the assessment process to becoming licensed as a physician.

Some social work training programs have also used simulated or standardized patients in teaching and assessment procedures (e.g., Barsky & Coleman, 2001; Linsk & Tunney, 1997). A few professional psychology training programs have used them in various forms. These techniques could be extended as a means of assessing specific skills as well as globally assessing overall skills sets. The assessment process might be used to measure patient and trainee attitudes and values that are evidenced in the quasi-clinical interactions. The standardized patient approach could be used in both formative and summative evaluations (e.g., Suler, 1987, 1989).

In professional psychology, methods for assessment should be investigated using direct observation, work samples, simulations, and practice or research portfolios (depending on the graduate or internship program’s training model and on the career path of the particular professional psychologist). Although the field is reasonably able to assess knowledge, there is a particular need to improve the methodology for the assessment of skills as well as attitudes and values. Operationally defining important values and attitudes, gaining a professional consensus, and measuring them properly are difficult tasks. The profession of psychology needs to test empirically different methods of assessing competence to meet criteria for validity, reliability, specificity, and sensitivity.

The type of setting and type of required professional functioning will influence or dictate the nature of the assessment of competencies. The most central competency domains may not be the same throughout the professional psychologist’s career, and thus, domains may become differentiated at various points over the career life span. Appropriate tools and approaches still need to be
Competence in the Profession

Important Considerations for the Assessment of Competence

Dual Roles in Assessment of Competence

Although most assessment occurring during training is formative, eventually there are requirements for summative evaluation by trainers and by credentialing agencies. Of critical concern for ethical assessment processes, an inherent dual role persists in the assessment models currently in use, and this role conflict needs to be acknowledged and managed. This duality of roles specifically involves the developmental and affirmative functions of training while also ensuring professional competence vis-à-vis the gatekeeping function (e.g., for threshold events such as internal training program requirements, graduation, licensure, and American Board of Professional Psychology credentialing). Objectivity may be difficult to achieve when evaluations are done within the context of a teaching or supervisory relationship. In a formative evaluation, supervisors and raters need to be free of demand characteristics (or, at the least, they need to acknowledge potential demand characteristics) if they are to provide useful information (without pressures to produce favorable ratings when not justified). That is, the contextual and interpersonal aspects (the “politics”) of the assessment process must be recognized and possibly changed to improve the outcomes of training. Teaching evaluators (e.g., faculty, supervisors, colleagues) how to give honest feedback while maintaining good working relationships with those being evaluated is needed. In addition, evaluation methods (e.g., grading systems, forms) that make honest and useful evaluation possible are needed. Similarly, evaluators may need to be held responsible for how they evaluate. Perhaps the profession should consider adding to training program accreditation criteria or the ethical code of conduct an explicit obligation to make evaluations accurate (e.g., letters of recommendation for internship, postdoctoral, or professional positions). Doing so, however, will require the development of instrumental (tools) and environmental (program context) supports for giving accurate feedback.

Important Considerations for the Assessment of Competence in the Profession

Depending on its purpose, an assessment of competence might involve a combined compensatory and noncompensatory model (e.g., the individual needs to meet a minimum overall competence total score, but if a single domain score falls below a certain level, he or she cannot compensate with a high score in another domain). That is, certain skills are deemed basic and important by the profession (e.g., rapport-building skills, diagnostic interviewing skills, case conceptualization). If an individual scores very high on one skill but not at a passing level on another basic skill, he or she should not pass the assessment, even if the combined score for the two skills is high enough to pass the test overall.

Competency-based evaluation should include measurable indicators of behaviors, skills, and attitudes and values. Skills are best evaluated by reviewing a sampling of behaviors (e.g., through direct evaluation or observation) through multiple perspectives, including those of experts, peers, self, clients, and community members. Specifically, clinical skills should be assessed by a sample of clinical behaviors. Ideally, this assessment should be done with a valid and reliable method of observation and evaluation. Further, there should be an openness or transparency of the assessment process to ensure that the procedure is clearly outlined, with definitions of objectives and criteria provided in advance.

In particular to professional values and attitudes, this explicitness should involve providing in advance definitions of the values to be assessed, delineating how these values will be observed, and clarifying how these values will be assessed comprehensively. In that professional ethics and values are manifested in the behaviors exhibited and the choices that trainees and professionals make, assessment of these elements in competence is necessary. The stated values of the profession are described in the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (American Psychological Association, 2002a). Personal preferences and values are not necessarily the concern in the assessment of competence in professional values. Yet it should be recognized that the evaluator’s perceptions of professional ethics, attitudes, and values are inherently involved in the process of assessment of competence in this domain. These subjective filters, too, should be made transparent, to the greatest extent possible.

Skills assessment needs to be done using an integrative approach, not just a review of a set of competencies singly assessed. Similarly, assessment of competence should be not only individually oriented but also directed at assessing systems (e.g., training programs, service delivery programs) and the impact of services on the community. That is, there should be multiple levels of integrative assessment as part of practice, teaching, and training models. An iterative process of feedback should be implemented.

Practical issues of competence assessment must be considered. Examples include the cost, efficiency, transferability, and mechanisms for the modeling of assessment as a continual process that is taught at the earliest level and then manifested throughout the career. As the profession attends more to the assessment of competence, careful attention needs to be paid to what is included in any “approved” list of procedures and assessment instruments. Any delineation may imply endorsement—thus, particular caution is needed when applications and decisions are made that are life altering.

A Model of Competency Assessment

The minimum level of competence needs to be defined for the threshold or basic criterion above which individuals are considered competent to function professionally. In addition to this threshold, the field needs to delineate aspirational levels of advanced competence. Questions have long been raised about how to assess competence in professional psychology at different levels (Summerrall et al., 2000). To advance assessment of competence for the future of professional psychology, the Assessment of Competence Workgroup discussed the development of a matrix model that might be used for assessing knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values. In this model, we proposed levels of career development over
the life span at which assessment takes place: graduate student, licensed professional, and specialist. Although these levels might appear reified, the workgroup posited that more fluidity would exist than is implied by the term levels. An assumption inherent to the model was an expectation that the professional will maintain competent performance across time but will add further competencies as development continues through the levels in an additive model. Further, some breadth of competence may be forfeited in favor of depth in a more limited specialty area of practice. Additionally, some circularity of movement through the model exists in the process of assessing a professional who has become impaired and who may need to reconfirm competencies in basic aspects of professional functioning. Of course, although there may be some transfer of training to new tasks, all professionals will need to revert back to earlier levels (sometimes the basic level) of the competence-building process to develop new skills or when new developments are accepted by the profession (e.g., when a new testing instrument or therapeutic technique is established or a test is revised) or new societal needs arise.

The model outlined here is neither linear nor invariant in its application. Within this model, there would be a representation of maximum breadth of knowledge and skills at graduation (core competencies), with increasing depth as professionals develop further in their careers (and some competencies may not be needed or assessed at later stages of development). As a part of this matrix model, the assessment of competence of the professional in psychology requires a delineation of the competencies defined by the numerous content areas addressed by eight of the other workgroups at the Competencies Conference. These domains include (a) scientific foundations and research; (b) ethical, legal, public policy/advocacy, and professional issues; (c) supervision; (d) psychological assessment; (e) individual and cultural diversity; (f) intervention; (g) consultation; and (h) professional development. Some of these domains are cross-cutting and necessary for all professional psychology tasks (e.g., ethics, diversity), whereas others are functional categories (e.g., assessment, supervision) related to specific roles or tasks.¹

In addition to these eight core competence areas for professional functioning, the workgroup recommended the addition of two distinct competencies. First, we endorsed a new core competence called “personal suitability or fitness for the profession.” The workgroup believed that although many elements of professional functioning are achievable through training, other aspects are more inherent to the individual (e.g., empathy). Notably, however, this dimension of personal suitability will require development of both the conceptual basis for this competency and the means for its assessment. The workgroup noted that these issues also were discussed thoroughly in the conference workgroup assigned to discuss professional development (see APPIC, 2004, as well as other articles in this journal issue).

A second important core competence area not covered in the original eight areas is that of “information management and evaluation of the nature and quality of information.” This additional content area would include such aspects of current professional functioning as (a) accessing and evaluating information sources; (b) transferring knowledge to new situations; (c) disseminating information (e.g., communication skills); (d) hypothesis generating, problem solving, and decision making; and (e) self-assessment skills.

Throughout our discussions, the workgroup firmly believed that the institutions within the professional community need to make a significant commitment to invest the economic and human resources to effect a culture shift that will ensure that assessment of competence occurs across the professional life span in a multimodal, multifaceted manner. As we emphasize subsequently, this culture shift can have immense implications for the profession regarding training, evaluation, and maintenance of professional competence over the entire career path of a psychologist. Such a shift toward continual assessment of competence in professional psychology is at the core of all these recommendations.

Discussion, resolution, and implementation of these ideas will be needed as professional psychology undertakes a more focused effort to effect this culture shift to achieve a more comprehensive assessment of competence that is, in the terms of Epstein and Hundert (2002), “developmental, impermanent, and context specific” (p. 228).

Future Directions and Implications

The Assessment of Competencies Workgroup has offered an agenda and has articulated critical points about the operationalization of competencies in professional psychology. Now, two important questions need to be addressed: (a) Who or what groups are responsible for the next steps of implementation? and (b) What are the implications of implementing such a plan? The workgroup members directly pointed to the training councils in the profession of psychology (e.g., constituent organizations in the Council of Chairs of Training Councils) to work together to refine the core competencies and their assessment mechanisms. Joint task forces including other groups with similar goals (e.g., licensing and credentialing bodies) also might assist in solving some of the problems posed in the assessment of competence. Grassroots efforts specific to individual training programs and their models will be necessary to advance the practice of competency assessment and to build the culture of competence. Finally, consumers of professional psychology (i.e., students/trainees and clients/patients) must be involved in the assessment process to ensure that aspects of competence and its assessment are not neglected.

Our agenda highlights what needs to be tackled in training, practice, and research communities. Faculty in doctoral training programs and psychologists involved in continuing education need to refine and operationalize what professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes they value. They can build on their past work and on the reports of other workgroups in the Competencies Conference.² If these professionals make their competency expectations and successful assessment approaches more transparent, they can be more easily shared and will contribute to the new culture.

With this culture shift to career-long assessment of competence, members of the practice community need to document the self-assessment practices and competence-building activities that help them develop and maintain competency. Professionals who pro-

¹ A similar model has been described by another Competencies Conference workgroup, the Workgroup on Specialties and Proficiencies of Psychology (see www.appic.org).
² See http://www.appic.org/news/3_1_News_Competencies.htm for workgroup summaries.
mote the development of competence in themselves and others can foster the development of a culture of competence.

Rigorous research is needed to validate the assessment process and to learn how information gained in the assessment of competence can be used effectively in a way that is iterative (a process of feedback), cyclical, uniform, and facilitative of the internalizing of self-assessment habits. A critical aspect of a research agenda will be to develop effective, valid, reliable, and fair methodologies of competence assessment (cf. Chambers & Glassman, 1997; Epstein & Hundert, 2002; Greenhalgh & Macfarlane, 1997; Joorabchi & Devries, 1996) and a means of determining the quality of a culture of competence. This research agenda, ideally initiated and maintained by members of training councils, should gather the recommendations from the training and practice communities and manage the proliferation of expanded views of competence. That is, training councils may have to work to construct a standardized view of competence and an approach to assessment that can be closely examined over time.

By using the expertise of a broad range of professional psychology educators, trainers, and regulatory groups, the profession can develop more broadly applicable formative and summative assessment models and specific procedures and tools that meet current testing standards of validity, reliability, and fairness. This model and the associated procedures and tools also should be related to eventual functioning of professional psychologists in their multiple roles. As a professional discipline, the psychology profession has the ethical obligation to do no less than its best to ensure that its members are competent and to offer evidence of their competence to all stakeholders through the proper assessment procedures. Through these efforts, a culture of competence can be established.

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**New Editors Appointed, 2007–2012**

The Publications and Communications (P&C) Board of the American Psychological Association announces the appointment of three new editors for 6-year terms beginning in 2007. As of January 1, 2006, manuscripts should be directed as follows:

- **Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition** (www.apa.org/journals/xlm.html), Randi C. Martin, PhD, Department of Psychology, MS-25, Rice University, P.O. Box 1892, Houston, TX 77251.

- **Professional Psychology: Research and Practice** (www.apa.org/journals/pro.html), Michael C. Roberts, PhD, 2009 Dole Human Development Center, Clinical Child Psychology Program, Department of Applied Behavioral Science, Department of Psychology, 1000 Sunnyside Avenue, The University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045.

- **Psychology, Public Policy, and Law** (www.apa.org/journals/law.html), Steven Penrod, PhD, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 445 West 59th Street N2131, New York, NY 10019-1199.

**Electronic manuscript submission.** As of January 1, 2006, manuscripts should be submitted electronically through the journal’s Manuscript Submission Portal (see the Web site listed above with each journal title).

Manuscript submission patterns make the precise date of completion of the 2006 volumes uncertain. Current editors, Michael E. J. Masson, PhD, Mary Beth Kenkel, PhD, and Jane Goodman-Delahunty, PhD, JD, respectively, will receive and consider manuscripts through December 31, 2005. Should 2006 volumes be completed before that date, manuscripts will be redirected to the new editors for consideration in 2007 volumes.

In addition, the P&C Board announces the appointment of Thomas E. Joiner, PhD (Department of Psychology, Florida State University, One University Way, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1270), as editor of the *Clinician’s Research Digest* newsletter for 2007–2012.