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## **Is there such a thing as a person-referenced construct of competence (being competent)?**

We all live in the hope that authentic meetings between human beings can still occur.  
- R.D. Laing.

Now what would happen if we were to reopen the question of human motivation and use our long-range view of man to infer just what it is that sets the course of his endeavour? Would we see his centuried progress in terms of appetites, tissue need, or sexual impulses? Or might he, in this perspective, show a massive drift of quite a different sort? Would he not have his theories, test his hypotheses, and weigh his experimental evidence? And, if so, might not the differences between the personal viewpoints of different men correspond to the differences between the theoretical viewpoints of different scientists? - (Kelly 1963)(i)

Here Kelly, in arguing his case for the theory of Constructive Alternativism, makes the point that man exploring his (humanistic) world might follow similar methodological paths to the scientist exploring his (behaviouristic) world; a world described so wonderfully by Johnson (1984) (ii) as driven by "Messianic Industrialism". Kelly's questions raise the issue that there are ways of thinking, doing and achieving that are equally as effective based on the notion of the person rather than the system. The essential variable, however, is that the individual not only has the right to their own mind and how he/she might want to change it but also that the changing of his/her mind is inevitable and inexorable and therefore systems that view and assess people must take account of the individual and how they really function.

In this essay I shall make the case for a person-referenced construct of competence. In fact I shall argue that this construct is always used to decide an individual's fate, good or bad. I shall argue that, in reality, any perception other than the particular as to how an individual is viewed in the context of his/her function, job, profession, vocation is unworkable and, ultimately, irrelevant. When a decision is made all general criteria are rejected in favour of the specific. I shall also claim that this is the healthiest view of "competence", whatever that means, as it is an organic and developmental one; it is one that affirms the person by enabling them to identify the continuing growth of their ability rather than the trend identified by Noddings (1984)(iii) that competencies, assessed objectively and discretely at a specific moment, have a habit of "disappearing".

This "healthy" perception is not only of value to the individual themselves but also to the workplace, organisation or institution in which they work. People who understand their value, working in environments that appreciate people who understand their value, appreciate their working environment. As Klemp (1977) says, when exploring factors of success in the world of work, "workers whose expectations are positive and high are also more likely to behave in ways that encourage and reward the people with whom they come in contact" (iv). These are situations that set store by such attributes as endeavour and integrity as well as responsibility. This "Nirvana" just described seems so unfamiliar, so distant, because reality is plagued by the nagging

fears of judgement, appraisal, assessment, even "evaluation" when the anxiety level gets really high, associated with the word "competence". So,

### **Competence - what is it?**

Competence n. sufficiency of means; ability; legal capacity. (The Little Oxford Dictionary 1969)

This definition of the noun describes a status that would suffice just as well for a profession or a job as for a glass of whisky. It does not define what it is, just that it is. The dictionary definitions of the term "competent", however, give us a bit more of an insight into being, as people, in this place, position, condition or having this status.

Competent, adj. 1. Having sufficient ability or authority. 2. Possessing the requisite natural or legal qualifications; qualified. 3. Sufficient; adequate. [MF competent competens,-entis, ppr. of comptere. Be fit, be proper. com- together petere go, seek.] (Britannica World Language Dictionary)

Competent a. Having qualifications required by law or by work in hand. (The Little Oxford Dictionary 1969)

"Competent", as we see, is an adjective; it describes aspects of a state of being and this state is a human one. Both these definitions have in common the contrast between the two paths to competent status in question: the person-referenced notions of "sufficient ability", "natural qualifications" and "qualifications required...by work in hand" and those that are task-related; "sufficient authority" and "legal ("required by law") qualifications". They both highlight this valuable ambiguity or confusion. That this ambiguity or confusion should remain is essential for to clear it up would mean that "competent" would have to mean one thing or the other - or the unthinkable, something else - and the resulting two terms would have to vie with each other for value and status. This would be an unnecessary distraction in the search for meaning.

Currently there exists a government-driven initiative to establish National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). This initiative is intended to create a system whereby individuals can demonstrate that they have the necessary standard of competence to fulfil a task or job. If an individual can demonstrate this standard satisfactorily the demonstration can be NVQ'd. This system then is both industry-led and industry-centred; it defines what the industry wants the worker to do. The Arts and Entertainment Training Council (AETC), the Industry Lead Body presently developing standards for this "industry", has stated:

All NVQs....consist of occupational Standards of Competence. Competence is defined as 'the ability to perform the activities in a job or function to a standard acceptable in employment'. (AETC 1993) (v)

(The derivation of the definition quoted in this excerpt is not acknowledged but I imagine it comes from the guidelines of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ), the body supervising the introduction of NVQs.) The above would seem to confirm my industry led/centred analysis. Under the heading "Why have standards?" this document states that "they provide a written benchmark against which a person's ability to do a job competently can be assessed." -

(AETC 1993) (vi). MacLure and Norris (1991) discussing "Competence and its relation to performance" in the context of the literature associated with the Standards Programme of the Manpower Services Commission (MSC), subsequently the Training Agency (TA), quote the "TAG notes" definition of competence as:

The ability to perform the activities within an occupation. (MacLure and Norris 1991) (vii).

Though these constructs of competence are industry (task) led they are also person-referenced, the "ability to perform" is that of a "person", albeit within an occupation. This may not be the most romantic view of the person-referenced construct but it is a start from which to try and shift the perspective. The ways of man's world are man-made; "industry" is a euphemism for lots of people working together to try to make something. It is a value-driven rather than profit-driven view of the world that will reflect on the "person".

The TAG notes further describe competence as a 'wide concept which embodies the ability to transfer skills and knowledge to new situations within the occupational area. It encompasses organisation and planning of work, innovation and coping with non-routine activities. It includes those qualities of personal effectiveness that are required in the workplace to deal with co-workers, managers and customers.' A description preceded by the sentence; 'However performance is not to be conceived in narrow, task-focussed terms.' (MacLure and Norris 1991) (viii).

If (competent?) performance is not to be conceived in narrow, task-focussed terms then what criteria are to be applied; person-referenced ones perhaps? This description embraces complex areas of human relations and possibly the ability to deal with what Kitchener and Brenner (1990) called "wicked-decision problems" (ix), aspects of human behaviour and activity that notoriously defy quantification and standardisation. In his provocative introduction to "The Trouble with Competence" Norris (1991) states:

The language of competency-based approaches to education and training is compelling in its common-sense and rhetorical force. Words like "competence" and "standards" are good words, modern words; everybody is for standards and everyone is against incompetence. (x)

Here the distinction between the doing and the doer is highlighted to great effect by inferring the current, attempted process of abstracting the value of the task performed from the context of the performer. However, the issue is, in the end, about performance; a significant term that is liberally distributed throughout the literature relating to competence. I will take performance as a concept, a perspective from which to view "the abstraction process as a means to clarity".

### **The person-referenced construct as a re-view of the task-related construct**

The person-referenced construct is an interactive one; it engages the actor and the audience, the object and the subject, the assessed and the assessor, even if all of these are the same person, in a process of deduction rather than inference as described by MacLure and Norris (1991)(xi) outlining Chomsky's definition of competence (1965). To explore this further in the context of performance we must consider the personal attributes of the performer in relation to the objectives and outcomes of the task, their understanding of what these are and how and why they are to be achieved. The performer then has to perceive the quality of the task, has to understand it,

which then means that they have to understand why they do their job, what its value is to them. However, before we do this we have to consider the most popular contemporary view of competence; behaviourism.

Norris (1991) points out that:

The most prevalent construct of competence is behaviourist. It rests on descriptions of behaviour (sometimes called performance) and the situation(s) in which it is to take place (sometimes referred to as range statements) in a form that is capable of demonstration and observation. (xii)

This description stresses that the ability to perform the task must be testable and verifiable. It would almost seem that the very objective and outcome of the task is to prove it can be done; "behavioural objectives are outcome and product oriented" (Norris, 1991) (xiii).

MacLure and Norris (1991) further describe the behaviourist construct as "seeing competence as mastery of repertoires of precisely specified behaviour" and this view would seem to subsume the "generic construct" as a specialism, "the potential to perform.. ..(with) expert conduct and judgement in any specific situation"; and the "functionalist construct" as being the "ability to perform an occupational function or role at a specified standard". (xiv) I have chosen to lump these constructs together for it seems to me that they strive (if I can use such a person-referenced term) to abstract the task from the performer; it is the task that demands the technique. It is "instrumental problem-solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory" ...."It is specialised, firmly bounded, scientific, and standardised." (Schon 1983) (xv).

In reference to the demonstration and observation of the behaviour (sometimes called performance) that is the objective here, Gagne and Briggs (1974) observe that:

..most important of all, the objective must indicate what kind of human capability is to be inferred from the performance that is under observation. (xvi)

I think this may have been a slip; an unintentional dip into "people place", it could even be a spanner in the works. They do not speak of technical facility and they could; they do not even speak of just human capability but "what kind of" human capability. They implicitly acknowledge that the performer may have a range of capability of which only certain aspects may be appropriate to this task, and this level of skill in relation to "the objective" must be "inferred", not measured, by the observer who is, therefore, also presumed to be human.

This issue of "human capability" is an interesting one; what might this be? Might possible capabilities under consideration be such attributes as reliability, honesty or mastery for instance? Or might they be the capacity to "keep smiling" or "put on a brave face" or to be creative? Perhaps they might be what Noddings (1984) called "dynamic characteristics - personality and motivational factors, beliefs" ? (xvii) Might they be aspects of potential? Something of and for the future and beyond a "career plan"?

As we move from the behavioural overview to a more humanistic and qualitative perspective of competence we pass through the "phenominological construct" which "construes competence as inherently variable, depending on the viewpoint and interests of the judge/observer." MacLure and Norris (1991) go on to state that

what might seem competent conduct to one group might be judged incompetent or immoral by others. Similarly, since competence is relative to the perspective of the observer, so too would be the significance of knowledge. (xviii)

We now move explicitly into the realms of judgement and value. These are seen here related to the assessor(s) and the assessment process which in themselves are linked to how the nature of the assessee's values and judgements are viewed with regard to their knowledge base. The key word missing here is "experience". It is missing because it defies assessment; it does not conform to a standard. Experience is the basis for a range of actions and responses that are made sense of by values and judgements generated by knowledge (in the sense of knowing) and reflection on prior action.

It is very much more difficult, however, to assess flexibility, judgement, awareness, and creative response because the knowledge and the values which inform actions are only available to the person taking the action. (Schostack, Phillips and Robinson 1991) (xix)

These authors go on to say "in order to assess competence - other than technical skill competence - it is necessary to be able to find out how the person being assessed perceives the practical significance of particular aspects of a situation and analytically builds them into a model of the total situation." (xx)

In order to explore the context of performance through the personal attributes of the performer, as suggested at the beginning of this section, we must find a way of making sense of these humanistic qualities. The key then is to try to make sense of the way people try to make sense of what they know. Everyone has knowledge; it is what they know though they may not realise that it is. What makes sense of knowledge is understanding gained through experience. However an understanding of knowledge gained through experience is only achieved by valuing and relating to the experience and the self; by seeing knowledge as a personal development process. If knowing is seen in this way then it becomes a process of, hopefully, continually refined judgement. Kelly (1963) puts it well:

Experience is made up of the successive construing of events. It is not constituted merely by the succession of events themselves. A person can be a witness to a tremendous parade of episodes and yet, if he fails to keep making something out of them, of if he waits until they have all occurred before he attempts to reconstrue them, he gains little in the way of experience from having been around when they happened. (xxi)

What is spoken of here is not the "underpinning knowledge and understanding" that, it is claimed, should bolster every Element of every Unit of every NVQ Standard - i.e. "Element 1122 of Unit 112 of the Draft Standards for Music - "Establish financial and resource requirements to support artistic practice" - Underpinning knowledge and understanding (including) Realistic Budgeting, Cashflow Calculations." AETC (1993) (xxii) - but a process of making sense of the world that leads to a process of making sense of the person. It is from here that a true vocational and/or professional knowledge is derived. This is something that Elliott (1991) calls "situational understanding". This concept stems from the argument that "professional (and competent?) practice in advanced modern societies needs to be responsive to unstable states of discontinuous and fragmentary, rather than incremental and evolutionary, social change." (xxiii) Stenhouse

(1970) also argued for "developing an understanding of human acts, social situations, and the controversial issues they raise" (xxiv) as a process of professional practice.

Dreyfuss (1981) put a very strong case for recognising the intuition of an experienced manager in decision-making and other key functions as stemming from a situational understanding as described above. The actor here performs on the basis of an understanding of his/her field that is intuitive and may, or may not, be conscious in the sense of being planned or governed by rules or procedures. Dreyfuss points out that:

Only rarely can problems and opportunities in the business world be objectively recognised and defined....Objectively defined problems are clearly within the proper domain of systematic analysis. We are interested instead in unstructured situations. (xxv).....

Understanding through interpretation is an essential activity of policy makers and of business managers. Sometimes the understanding of experts is the basis of prediction, generally used to assist the planning of others....Besides providing predictions based on situational understanding, a second essential role of managers is the determination of a resolution when the situation is perceived to require action. In this case, one cannot divorce understanding from decision. (xxvi)

Dreyfuss goes on to argue "that formal models do not represent abstractions of expert understanding but rather that a model represents a type of understanding that is typical of inexperienced beginners". (xxvii) I would go further and say that, in the context of person versus task-referenced constructs of competence, the model reflects the requirements of the task and is, therefore, a very limited context and poor criterion for the judgement or appraisal of people. According to Dreyfuss the "expert" functions in a world governed by "a much superior mode of human situational understanding totally different from that represented by a model." (xxviii)

Dreyfuss' thinking brought him to a concept that describes a five-stage development of a practitioner that begins with the "novice" state and moves through the "advanced beginner", "competent" and "proficient" states to that of the "expert". This development is described through the definition of "mental capacities" and how these have become contextually refined at each stage ("skill levels"). Dreyfuss' concept of this developmental process is outlined in the table below. (xxix)

SKILL LEVEL	NOVICE	ADVANCED BEGINNER	COMPETENT	PROFICIENT	EXPERT
Mental Capacity					
Component recognition	nonsituational	situational	situational	situational	situational
Salience recognition	none	none	present	present	present
Whole situation recognition	analytical	analytical	analytical	holistic	holistic
Decision	rational	rational	rational	rational	intuitive

This concept then proposes the transition from the "novice" whose - understanding of the parts of a job or function is theoretical and not grounded in an understanding of the situation

- perception of the relevance of their role is non-existent
- understanding of the work context is based on analysis that is inherited
- decision would be based on a received rationale

to the "expert" whose

- understanding of the job is based on experience
- perception of the relevance of their role exists
- understanding of the work context is based on an overall knowledge gathered through experience
- decision is based on their understanding of their own experience and knowledge.

The function of the "expert", then, is an interactive one. They apply their "mental capacities" as an interactive whole in the process of intuitive decision-making; gathering the information, considering all the angles, rejecting irrelevant data and reflecting on the implications before acting. Inevitably, describing this procedure argues a process that is at odds with itself in that the "expert" experiences aspects of decision-making intuitively, spontaneously and, very possibly, simultaneously.

Interestingly, Dreyfuss places the "competent" person in the middle of his concept of the developmental stages of capable people. This not only confirms "competence" as the mean average of potential but highlights the degree of ability possibly to be found beyond that level. However the terms of reference used in his analysis of these superordinate states - the proficient and the expert - indicates the difficulty of defining an abstracted and demonstrable level of ability. Here we are considering individual human abilities that are based on the capacity of the performer to make sense of the world, based on his/her experience and knowledge, in order to operate effectively.

Situational understanding and the decisions to be derived from it are grounded in an awareness of the self as an active agent in the situations to be understood, and therefore as one who is capable of influencing the lives of others. This awareness (cognitive initiative) generates ethical obligations with respect to the care and concern for others the practitioner exercises in his or her conduct in the situation. In order to exercise such care and concern (s)he needs to be able to understand other people's thoughts and feelings in the situation (empathy). (Elliott 1991) (xxx)

It is not possible to apply criteria in an abstracted form - i.e. a task-referenced form - that might judge the ability of individuals to function in this way. However, in this world where notions of competence rule and where, if the NCVQ fulfill the task given them by the government, soon everyone will be demonstrably competent there is an increasing trend that seeks to identify the range of ability described above, which, in this context, I shall call "meta-competence".

### **The person-referenced construct of competence as Meta-competence**

Systems are corruptible but not the creative self, not the self and not the world that is created on a human basis. The personal and the intimate give us a compassion and an

insight into other's motives and ways of acting. They eliminate the guilt which is associated with the feeling of individual responsibility. Anais Nin (1975) (xxxix)

McLure and Norris (1991), in their exploration of the relationships between Competence, Performance and Knowledge, point out that "there was general agreement (between professional educators and trainers and proponents of the Standards Programme) that "possessing" large bodies of specialist knowledge is no guarantee of professional competence, and that theoretical or subject knowledge ought to be related more closely to practice";(xxxix) the way people do things. They go on to say that:

There was agreement too over the primacy of "practical knowledge" - i.e. the kind of knowledge which accrues from experience, and which often takes the form of intuition, best guessing and fast decision-making on the basis of incomplete information"... "The need to "know why" - to understand the principles embedded in practice - was also generally accepted, though it was perhaps given more salience as one of the essentials of competence by professionals. (xxxix)

The phrase "essentials of competence by professionals" is an interesting one; to me it implies that this is a state (professional competence) defined by the professionals themselves. It is an expectation of "intelligent practice in unstructured, complex and fluid....situations" (Elliott, 1991)(xxxix) The scenario that is slowly revealing itself here is that the focus is shifting. We are now talking in terms related more to vocation rather than competence. I would suggest that "having a vocation" is a dynamic state rather than "being competent", which is a static state. This is the point at which Noddings' "motivational factors" and "beliefs" come into play.

The expectation, in many professions, that practitioners should be motivated and committed is growing and I firmly believe that this is a good thing. However, this positive and, even, animated state is not measurable as an abstracted competence; consequently it cannot be valued in an abstracted form, distinct from the individual that displays such commitment and capability. A peek at the "Appointments" sections of the newspapers offers an insight into this phenomenon and highlights the emphasis placed on what I have called "meta-competence". Such abilities, experience and achievements as "distinguished records", "inter-personal skills" and "a high degree of artistic talent" are frequently being sought. "Lively", "imaginative" and "dynamic" people are in great demand. It is the individuals who have these attributes that will get the jobs.

So, what criteria are being used to decide on who the appropriate, or even competent, candidate is for these posts? It is a process of selecting the "right man(/woman) for the job". Ten, or more likely, a hundred suitably qualified people may apply but in the end the "right one" will get it; he/she will be chosen because of their particular and peculiar qualities as an individual in the context. The deciding criteria, in the end, will be person-referenced.

If these human qualities are so highly valued why can't we "officially" consider their relevance to professional practice when abilities are assessed? Why can't we formally recognise and develop individuality? Why can't we actively discourage "the guilt which is associated with the feeling of individual responsibility" that Nin spoke of? Nesheim (1990), when speaking of the music students at the Norwegian Academy and the fact that they will still be working in thirty-five years time, said:



Clearly we cannot give them all the knowledge they will need then. But we can give them the attitudes and the ability to be flexible, to respond well to change... (xxxv)

and Higham (1990), writing of the process of training community musicians, spoke of students learning "to re-examine the knowledge and skills they brought with them"... "to set their own problems and resolve them"..and "to refine their own judgement" (xxxvi) in order to develop a technique that achieves learning in a workshop through the "subtlety of the tutor through participation, the identification of technical, physical and conceptual problems experienced by individuals and the resolution of such problems with humanity and without humiliation." (xxxvii) Hagelthorn (1990) spoke of:

another way of teaching, in which both persons involved in the learning situation are curious human beings, and the teacher's task is to empower the student to continue asking questions and pursuing answers. (xxxviii)

These views of practice are at odds with anything else than a person-referenced view of the professional. They see competence as embedded in the ability, experience and motivation of the practitioner. There is an element of faith in their view of competence. They have to take a chance; to believe that the meta-competent practitioner will be the sternest judge of their own performance. I point this out for it is the risk element in formally accepting a view of competence that is rooted in human capability rather than "task-ability" that prevents this criterion from being officially accepted. In consequence, many people not only do not fulfil their potential, they do not even expect to!

## Conclusion

Competency-based programmes are likely to maintain the status quo...There is nothing desirable or undesirable in maintaining the status quo. It would all depend on what the status quo is. (Pearson 1984) (xxxix)

So, is there such a thing as a person-referenced construct of competence? I think I have argued that there is. It tends to be seen as unofficial, perhaps even unscientific, but essentially it is applied in every case and is, more often than not, the deciding factor. The problem here is that it is a question of judgement. In our culture we do not, truly, acknowledge or value experience, and we know experience is essential to judgement, therefore we fear judgement. The very word resonates with a profound and conscious misunderstanding, perhaps brought on by guilt?

If we can realise that we should value people's potential rather than a job's description then we shall experience a different level of achievement. The problem is that people are unpredictable when unconstrained, they might achieve all sorts of things and these may not be the things that are desired in a "competent world". Competence, perceived in a task-referenced form, is a means of social control, the enforced abdication of individual responsibility. However, viewed as a person-referenced construct, competence could invest the individual with responsibilities, opportunities and rights. And then "it would all depend on what the status quo is." Kelly (1963) nearly has the last word.

The universe is real; it is happening all the time; it is integral; and it is open to piecemeal interpretation. Different men construe it in different ways. Since it owes no prior allegiance to one man's construction system, it is always open to reconstruction. Some of the

alternative ways of construing are better adapted to man's purposes than are others. Thus, man comes to understand his world through an infinite series of successive approximations. Since man is always faced with constructive alternatives, which he may explore if he wishes, he need not continue indefinitely to be the absolute victim either of his past history or of his present circumstances (xxxx)

or even of his future plans.

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Is there such a thing as a person-referenced construct of competence (being competent)?

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R.D. Laing.

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"Now what would happen if we were to reopen the question of human motivation and use our long-range view of man to infer just what it is that sets the course of his endeavour? Would we see his centuried progress in terms of appetites, tissue need, or sexual impulses? Or might he, in this perspective, show a massive drift of quite a different sort? Would he not have his theories, test his hypotheses, and weigh his experimental evidence? And, if so, might not the differences between the personal viewpoints of different men correspond to the differences between the theoretical viewpoints of different scientists?" - Kelly (1963)(i)

Here Kelly, in arguing his case for the theory of Constructive Alternativism, makes the point that man exploring his (humanistic) world might follow similar methodological paths to the scientist exploring his (behaviouristic) world; a world described so wonderfully by Johnson (1984) (ii) as driven by "Messianic Industrialism". Kelly's questions raise the issue that there are ways of thinking, doing and achieving that are equally as effective based on the notion of the person rather than the system. The essential variable, however, is that the individual not only has the right to their own mind and how he/she might want to change it but also that the changing of his/her mind is inevitable and inexorable and therefore systems that view and assess people must take account of the individual and how they really function.

In this paper I shall make the case for a person-referenced construct of competence. In fact I shall argue that this construct is always used to decide an individual's fate, good or bad. I shall argue that, in reality, any perception other than the particular as to how an individual is viewed in the context of his/her function, job, profession, vocation is unworkable and, ultimately, irrelevant. When a decision is made all general criteria are rejected in favour of the specific. I shall also claim that this is the healthiest view of "competence", whatever that means, as it is an organic and developmental one; it is one

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