BEYOND COMPETENCIES: FIELD INSTRUCTORS’ DESCRIPTIONS OF STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Marion Bogo  
University of Toronto

Cheryl Regehr  
University of Toronto

Michael Woodford  
University of Toronto

Judy Hughes  
University of Toronto

Roxanne Power  
University of Toronto

Glenn Regehr  
University of Toronto

This exploratory qualitative study elicited the complex constructs underlying experienced field instructors’ perspectives about competence. Eighteen experienced field instructors were asked to describe exemplary and problematic students, as well as student performance on 7 core dimensions. Themes that emerged revealed the importance that field instructors gave to a constellation of personal qualities and characteristics, a range of metacompetencies, 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, Bembry, Hall, & Rosenblum, 1996), others have used task-centered social work practice (Reid, Bailey-Dempsey, & Viggiana, 1996), and still others have used findings from
psychotherapy outcome research (O’Hare, Collins, & Walsh, 1998).

One promising approach to articulating the components of practice 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 students have demonstrated these indicators 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, 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 & Ryne, 1989; O’Hare et al., 1998; Vourleakis et al., 1996). In addition, 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 (Erault, 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 behaviorist-based approach, which places an inappropriate focus on “signing off” across a 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, Norman, and De Graaff (1991) (see also Norman, Van der Vleuten, & De Graaff, 1991) drew a distinction between objective (“value-free”) and objectified (“judgment-free”) methods of evaluation. They suggested that although objective tests are a valuable goal, objectified methods of evaluation consistent with those promoted by the CBE model run a continual risk of trivializing performance, resulting in a loss of content validity in testing situations, and reinforce rote memorization 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 coexist 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 comprises the knowledge, skills, and judgment that the professional is expected to use in managing these encounters. Thus, not only does the assurance of competence unquestionably involve the evaluation of students’ performance across the range of situations relevant to the scope of practice, but it also must 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 although 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 “metacompetencies” of professional practice that include communication and relationship, self-development, analysis, and judgment (see Talbot, 2004) will be needed. Thus, although 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 “metacompetency” evaluations must be grounded in, and evolve from, the everyday, real-life experiences and reflections of practicing social work instructors.

In recognition of this need, in the present research project, we sought to develop an in-depth understanding of field instructors’ assessment of student performance and the implicit criteria that 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, we chose qualitative methods because our intention was “to uncover and understand what lies behind” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) field instructors’ judgments of student performance. Although 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.

**Method**

**Procedure**

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 (Padgett, 1998; Patton, 2002) 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., 5 years or
more), possessing strong competencies as a field instructor as determined by the practicum director, and having recently supervised students (i.e., within the last 3 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) of practice experience with their current employer. In total, participants possessed a mean of 18 years (range: 8–32) of social work or related practice experience, with an average 8 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 were asked to describe one exemplary and one problematic student in general terms. Second, they were asked to describe 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. Earlier research identified these factors as having theoretical and practice coherence (Bogo et al., 2002). Probing questions were used to elicit concrete examples of student behaviors and practice interactions. The interviews were audiotaped, to ensure accuracy of data, and transcribed. Data were analyzed for themes with the aid of a computer program (Nvivo).

In the initial stage, open coding allowed 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 grounded in the themes that emerged. This theory was then challenged through reengagement with and reexamination of the data. The use of member checking involved 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 interrelated themes emerged in the field instructors’ depictions of exemplary and problematic students. They found that the students’ personal qualities affected the students’ approach to learning, behavior in the organization, and ability to conceptualize practice and practice abilities. Practice abilities consisted of relational and procedural/operational components. The following sections amplify the field instructors’ discussion of the impact of these various factors on themselves and the dilemmas that they face 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, inde-
INSTRUCTORS’ DESCRIPTIONS OF STUDENT PERFORMANCE

...did not disclose when contracting for the placement. These undisclosed problems later impacted the practicum in significant ways; in particular, students overidentified with clients. Behaviors relevant to these personality characteristics, such as challenging in a hostile manner, lying, and 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 whom they identified as problematic and often described positive characteristics as well. As one field 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, field instructors viewed personal characteristics as being a very important aspect of student success. As one field instructor summarized how students are selected, “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 field instructors repeatedly singled out students’ approach to learning as an important personal characteristic. 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 to develop their own approach to practice. They were bright and quickly learned new skills and concepts. When educational challenges arose, they were viewed as adaptable and flexible and worked diligently 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, field 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 perform spontaneously 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, the students recognized the place of learning in a clinical setting and placed their clients’ 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.” One field instructor suggested that another student projected the sense that “I just have to be here.” Other field instructors described problematic students as doing the minimum to get by and felt that these students overestimated their abilities and “didn’t know what [they] didn’t know.” Consequently, students were unwilling to “start with the basics” and one student wanted 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. Often 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 nonthreatening manner, and another for her ability to present information that was contradictory to information documented by other team members. Regarding the latter, this comment was made: “I was impressed with her tactfulness and hearing other people’s points of view.” Exemplary students did not become embroiled in the politics of the organization and were able to work within constraints imposed by the setting. These students were described as being respectful of others, able to gain the respect of team members, and good team players. They were also able to approach other members of the organization in order to achieve their learning needs, thereby expanding their opportunities and reducing the load on the field instructor. This statement by one of the field instructors sums up one particular exemplary student’s understanding of her role as a social worker: “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 possessed 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 one student because “there was no such thing as a 2-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.” Still other problematic students were described 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, and another “knew everything and was quite outspoken” and was overreactive to and personally wounded by team members’ suggestions.

*Ability to conceptualize practice and practice abilities.* When discussing clinical performance, frequently, field instructors described not only 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. Field 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 a relationship with a client, in the way that 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, nor do they understand the nature of a professional relationship. They do not know what to do in an interview. Assessments have no direction and interventions are just “thrown out.” These students were described as “lost.” Although they might be able to gather considerable data and describe a client’s problem in great detail, they “can’t take [the data] anywhere, can’t pull [the data] 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, although 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 field instructors to form more general impressions of the students’ abilities to conceptualize practice. These abilities to conceptualize practice appeared to be more important to the field 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. For example, this was said about one of these students: “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, students could understand the impact of their presence in those clients’ lives. They were able to reflect clients’ feelings while also helping clients understand the effect of those feelings on their ability to work with students to achieve goals.

Relationships with clients, and particularly ethical issues related to client relationships and boundaries, were often of great concern with problematic students. Often students overidentified with clients as a result of 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.” In addition, some of the problematic students were unable to engage with or empathize with clients, as demonstrated in this comment: “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 “unidimension-
cussion was identified as an important skill in all settings. Exemplary students were able to translate their thoughts effectively into written form. They wrote clearly and concisely, yet comprehensively and thoroughly, while balancing the positives and negatives appropriately. The report writing of problematic students was sometimes strong, but more often it 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 overdue. Others lacked information and depth and barely met the requirements of the agency. Frequently, the field instructor was repeatedly involved in the rewriting process.

Interestingly, students identified as exemplary did not always have the strongest practice skills in this area. Whereas some, for instance, had excellent presentation skills, including being prepared, clear, organized, focused, and engaging, others were nervous and intimidated. One field instructor commented, “Probably not the strongest presenter I have ever seen.” Another stated, “Her documentation was good [but] needed some fine tuning.” And yet another stated, “She struggled a bit with what degree of personal information she should share.” Sometimes these skills improved over the course of the field practicum, and sometimes they remained less than ideal.

**Impact on the field instructor.** Exemplary students were characterized as those whom field instructors did not have to worry about; they could depend on them. They knew that these students would follow through on the next steps with clients as discussed in supervision, that they would not be inappropriate with clients, and that they would not cause problems in the team or organization. Field instructors felt that exemplary students brought “value added” to the field instructor and the organization, because learning was reciprocal. The students brought energy and a keen ability to question, which stimulated field instructors to reflect critically on their 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. Furthermore, they were open to discussing the challenge of dealing with the strong feelings evoked within them when working with particular client groups.

Not surprisingly, field instructors described the experience of working with problematic students as very difficult, draining, and painful. Because some students were guarded and withheld samples or descriptions of their work, field instructors became hesitant when assigning cases to them, wondering what the students would actually do with clients. Having observed their provocative behavior in the team, field instructors worried about the students’ behavior with other staff and in the organization. They reported investing a great deal of time with these students, reviewing cases and tapes of interviews as well as rewriting reports. Often, there was little or no improvement despite these efforts. These students could not generalize the principles that they learned in one case or situation to another, demonstrating a lack 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, field instructors identified that the strengths at times could become deficits. For instance, one student who 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.” One field 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 field instructor had this to say about one of the students: “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 students had the capacity to learn or because the skills, such as presentation skills, were viewed as secondary in importance. These excuses often came in the form of “but” statements. That is, the student did not have these skills but he or she would certainly develop them in the future. For instance, one exemplary student was described as outstanding in dealing with the practical needs of clients but the student was less able to manage process. Nevertheless, because the student made some progress in this area, her skill level was not of concern. In another case, an exemplary student’s assessment skills needed work but the field instructor excused this, believing it was the result of a 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. A typical “but” statement in this case was as follows: “The staff liked them but they were too casual, and had poor boundaries with clients.” Other problematic students had good practice skills, including assessment and following through with clients, but they had problems in relating interpersonally, such as having poor boundaries with staff, being overly critical of others, being unable to work within organizational rules, personalizing feedback that 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 to 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 field instructors in language that arises from their descriptions should contribute importantly to field 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 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. By contrast, problematic students were described as irritable, defensive, judgmental, nonempathic, 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.

Second, field instructors’ overall opinions of a student tended to override their opinions regarding the student’s specific skills. Field instructors were often forgiving of skill deficits in exemplary students, believing that, owing to the students’ inherent abilities and motivation, these deficits 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, field 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 problem areas 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 the literature regarding inferences.
about the causes of individual behaviors—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, Vink, & Van der Vlist, 1999). Nonetheless, it is these attributed causes of behavior that seem to hold more weight for the field instructors than the behaviors themselves in determining a student’s level of competence.

Third, 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 proposing that students use formal theories to conduct practice, these expert social workers identified the importance of the student’s analytical 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 findings in the 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. These findings coupled with field instructors’ comments about the importance of specific personal qualities lend support to the importance of metacompencies as proposed by organizational management theorists and elaborated on recently with respect to medical education. Metacompencies refer to generic overarching competencies, qualities, and/or skills that are of a different order and nature than procedural or operational skills. These metacompencies 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) as skills needed to learn other skills (Hall, 1986). Further examples of metacompencies are communication, self development, problem-solving skills, and analytical capacities (Cheetham & Chivers, 1996; Talbot, 2004).

Of course, these results must be interpreted and generalized with appropriate caution, because there are limitations to our study. A purposive sample of 18 field instructors was used. A larger group of field instructors may have identified additional dimensions considered important when discussing students’ practice competence. In turn, the descriptions of exemplary and problematic students offered by these field instructors were based on the students whom they had actually instructed. The pool of students that 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 field instructors been drawn from other fields, such as 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 classic interpretation and implementation of CBE. Social work educators critical of CBE approaches are concerned that lists of discrete skills omit the crucial dimensions of critical reflection and judgment that characterize 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 that field 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 of 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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Marion Bogo is professor, Cheryl Regoeh is professor and Sandra Rotman Chair in Social Work,
Michael Woodford is doctoral candidate, Judy Hughes is doctoral candidate, Roxanne Power is
senior lecturer, Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto. Glenn Regoeh is professor and Richard
and Elizabeth Currie Chair in Health Professions Education Research, Faculty of Medicine, University of
Toronto.

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Address correspondence to Marion Bogo, University of Toronto, 246 Bloor Street West, Toronto,
Ontario, Canada M5S 1A1; e-mail: marion.bogo@utoronto.ca.