

Defining Metacompetence for Child Welfare Investigators Using Qualitative Data from Simulation Training

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Simulation training is a form of experiential learning that incorporates realistic settings, trained actors, and standardized scenarios that provide trainees the opportunity to practice essential job tasks before going into the field. Simulation incorporates competency-based practice into the training experience (see, e.g., Kolb, 2015). Competency in a range of skills is essential for effective child welfare practice; here we examine competencies specifically for the investigators who respond to an allegation of child maltreatment. The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services utilizes a full-scale simulation training that employs mock settings (e.g., a family's home, a courtroom), child protection investigation scenarios and learning objectives, actors, training staff, and group-based debriefing (Goulet, et al., 2021). Trainees provide daily ratings about their own competencies as they move through the week-long simulation experience. Both the classroom training they complete and the simulation training that follows it are key steps in their preparation for the work of child protection investigation.

Holistic competence involves two distinct concepts: procedural competencies and metacompetencies (Bogo, et al., 2021; Tufford, et al., 2017). Procedural competencies are applied skills that trainees learn in classroom settings (Bogo, et. al., 2020), such as avoiding jargon or being aware of nonverbal cues. Metacompetencies are more complex, weaving theory and policy knowledge with interpersonal and professional capacities—such as critical thinking, self-awareness, and emotional processing—applied in unique and situational contexts. Procedural competencies lend themselves well to observation or self-report measurement as they represent specific skills that can be demonstrated during one simulated client interaction. In contrast, metacompetencies are more developmental and grow over time (a process, not an event). A framework developed by Tufford and colleagues (2017) suggests four domains of metacompetence: skills in action, deepened perspectives on diversity, managing affective intensity in the moment, and openness to learning.

Skills in action involves the ability to interpret and apply abstract concepts and apply them in practice. Competency in this area means the ability to move beyond the abstract to the real-life decision-making in dynamic and varied contexts. The next domain concerns the **deepening of perspectives on diversity**. Competency in this area relates to self-awareness and an understanding of assumptions and biases that may impact an investigation. It also relates to a better understanding of diverse people and their experiences during the interaction and investigation. This domain also correlates to valuing client perspectives and strengths.

Managing affective intensity in the moment is the ability to complete necessary investigative

tasks while managing emotional responses. It should be assumed that child protection workers will encounter many reactions from others because of their involvement with a family and must be able to judge any risk; to think critically about the information being received and to make decisions about child safety in difficult, sometimes even dangerous situations; and to regulate their own affective responses in order to remain professional, safe, and effective in the field. Lastly, **openness to learning** is the trainee's willingness to learn from mistakes, to understand one's own strengths and learning needs, and to integrate new knowledge that comes from different perspectives and voices. This domain also related to good use of supervision and commitment to continual professional development.

This study was guided by the research question, *in what ways does this child welfare simulation training address the four domains of metacompetence as defined here?* Our overall aim was to begin to define metacompetencies for future evaluation based on data collected from simulation participants. The findings will inform ongoing efforts to include metacompetencies, alongside existing evaluations of procedural competencies, toward a holistic model to guide child welfare simulation training.

Methods

The Daily Experience of Simulation Training (DEST) survey has been used to evaluate the simulation training since 2018 (Chiu, et al., 2023). In addition to asking trainees to rate their skills, the DEST also contains two open-ended questions: What were the most meaningful concepts or skills you learned today? What was the most helpful feedback that you learned from your individual debriefing? And why? We applied the metacompetence framework described above to guide data analysis of the two open-ended questions in order to explore if and how those constructs are reflected in participant experiences. The sample consisted of all trainees who participated in the simulation training for newly hired child protection workers in the state child welfare agency from December 2018 through September 2021 and contributed data on the DEST. Over that period, there were 66 cohorts at two sites in the state with a total of 448 participants. Within that time period, 56 trainings were provided; participants attended one week of simulation after the foundational classroom portion of training.

Results

The data provided concrete examples we can apply to building an understanding of metacompetence as a goal of simulation training and part of the evaluative framework. Examination of metacompetence as an outcome of simulation training may allow for a better understanding of how trainees synthesize knowledge and skills into an overarching ability to act ethically, according to policy, and in a way that is responsive to unique individuals and contexts. Together with the measurement of key procedural competencies, a better understanding of metacompetencies as outlined here offers a holistic framework for simulation training and evaluation. Findings indicated that relevant knowledge and skill development for each domain are supported in the training; they also point to areas that may be further enhanced. More nuanced evaluations could better assess procedural and metacompetence and more fully operationalize holistic competence for child welfare professionals. Below is an overview of

findings according to the four domains above with participants' words which help to illustrate ways in which the training promotes or potentially fails to promote key areas of metacompetence.

The domain we defined here as “skills in action” has many parallels to the concept of transfer of learning. The trainees of this child welfare state agency reported that through child protection simulation training they were able to reference and apply their knowledge of the state policy and procedures to assess child safety and the family. Interactions with the standardized clients/actors who played the family members allowed trainees to adapt to each situation. As noted by Strand and Bosco-Ruggiero (2011), in-service and classroom training in child welfare settings does not always effectively translate into informed practice in the field. They argue the importance of a combination of didactic and on-the-job experiential training for a transfer of learning approach that enables learners to apply knowledge acquired in one setting across other circumstances and retained over time.

Operationalized metacompetencies by domain with quotes

Domain	Operationalized skills conceptualized as demonstrated ability to...	Participant quotes that demonstrating select elements of the domain
Skills in action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reference and describe agency policy across the investigation and for varied case parties • Apply knowledge related to specific circumstances and their impact (e.g., awareness of domestic violence in the home results in application of approaches learned in training) • Be consistent in decision-making across dynamic and varied contexts • Articulate roles of others in relation to self; to assert own role and professionalism in interactions • Ask informed and appropriate questions in interactions with health care professionals, attorneys, therapists, etc. • Adapt interactions to ensure completion of task (firm, assertive approach with some, a more supportive stance with others, to ensure the investigation can be completed) • Maintain awareness of own body language, approach, choice of words, etc., and impact for interactions • Articulate own “use of self” in practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The most meaningful concepts or skills learned today was being prepared to address difficult conversation and expressing empathy at the same time. I also think is imperative to be prepared with speaking with doctors and other professionals.</i> • <i>I truly believe this experience really cemented how to conduct myself during an investigation. I would not have known if I were making any mistakes or missing important aspects of procedure and protocol without this training.</i> • <i>Trying to piece everything together so that it makes sense when in the field...</i> • <i>This simulation was very eye opening for me. I realized a lot in supervision and how to form my words, never assume and to be respectful of the home.</i>

The domain of “deepening of perspectives on diversity” starts with building self-awareness and understanding of assumptions and bias that may impact child welfare investigations. Self-reflection is upheld as a foundation for anti-oppressive practice in both work and life (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015; Thomas & Green, 2019) and self-awareness and critical thinking are essential anti-oppressive child welfare practice (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005; Yee, 2015). These competencies also involve an individual’s efforts to better understand diverse people and their experiences. The findings revealed what may be a gap in the training around the domain of

deepening perspectives on diversity. While there were meaningful responses connected to self-awareness, managing bias, and seeing strengths in diverse others (all critical to culturally-sensitive, anti-oppressive practice), there was very little feedback related to client culture and identity or diversity in the context of a child protection investigation. Viewing simulation training through the metacompetence lens highlights the need for enhanced content and/or processes aimed at helping trainees to better understand and respond to diversity in the field. Opportunities to enhance this domain include: hiring a range of diverse actors to represent different clients; integrating reflection and discussion that is specifically focused on diversity and difference; offering multiple simulation experiences that address scenarios related areas of difference (i.e., disability, sexual orientation, race); and engaging a variety of professionals to assist with the court and medical portions of the simulation. To support learners' ability to engage diversity and difference in practice, both procedural and metacompetencies are critical (Kourgiantakis, et. al., 2020). Ortega and Faller (2011) argue that child welfare training should be anchored in a cultural humility paradigm marked by individual self-awareness around social location and bias as well as an openness to learning about others as diverse individuals and communities. They state that cultural humility in practice means that "the worker relinquishes the role of expert to the client and instead becomes a learner who supports the client's role of being a capable, contributing partner to the service delivery alliance" (p. 34).

Operationalized metacompetencies by domain with quotes

Domain	Operationalized skills conceptualized as demonstrated ability to...	Participant quotes that demonstrating select elements of the domain
Deepening of perspectives on diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify cultural or other characteristics impacting client interaction – ensured no language barriers, ask before assuming, etc. Use adaptive resources and services as needed per client needs and characteristics (provides translation services, ensures accessibility of information and materials for persons with disabilities, etc.) Ensure common understanding of words and concepts, e.g. how safety is defined by families or individuals vs. the state; actively seek to ensure language or cultural differences don't become issues of discrimination or marginalization Engage in strengths-findings with clients; facilitates client identification of strengths and resources and incorporates client strengths in planning Present a nonbiased attitude toward client diversity and difference Engage in active self-reflection in supervision related to internalized bias Seek and apply knowledge about a client's culture and its relevance to the investigation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Be aware that our definition of something may be different than the family's definition, for example, safety.</i> <i>I love that the facilitators really provoke more in-depth analysis of the cases and make us think more critically about our responses to scenarios.</i> <i>...how to be a bit more compassionate and guiding when going through the home safety checklist with families, and to be more cognizant of recognizing strengths of the family and sharing those with the family.</i> <i>I should not make assumptions and should talk to everyone and collect all the evidence before thinking I have the answer; they remain hypotheses until all evidence is collected.</i> <i>Please provide actors who are of African Americans decent...Please make the adjustments for a more realistic experience.</i>

The domain of "managing affective intensity in the moment" reflects trainees' ability to complete necessary investigative tasks while attending to the emotional responses of oneself as well as others (Bogo et al. 2012; Bogo et al., 2013; Bogo et al. 2021; Tufford, et al., 2017).

Emotional responses may impact thoughts, judgements, and behaviors, however there is little empirical work to date that explores that dynamic or the experiences of child protection through this lens. Trainees frequently reported that they have learned to effectively respond to resistance and engage in emotional self-regulation during interactions throughout the training, validating the importance of emotional regulation and affective management for child protection investigators in the field. Howe (2008, p. 1) refers to social work with children and families as “emotion work of a high order” and is perhaps nowhere as important to understand as in the context of a home visit (Cook, 2020) such as the one simulated in this training. Building on the importance of emotion to social work preparation and practice, Rajan-Rankin (2014) discusses the development of emotional resilience as a protective defense for worker wellbeing as well as for effective and ethical practice. Bogo, et al. (2017) found emotional regulation is a primary factor related to social work student confidence and the ability to apply learned knowledge while integrating client responses in a field setting; they suggest that increased attention to emotions will better prepare people for highly charged client interactions. Chung (2010) found experiential learning in social work education a useful pathway to meet the emotional needs of students during their learning process and to demonstrate ways to make sense of the unpredictability of people/clients. Grant and colleagues (2014) discussed the importance of related concepts including emotional competency and emotional literacy and found that proactive attention to this element of social work preparation enhanced student confidence and psychological wellbeing. Perry and colleagues (2020) recommend simulation training as a pathway for the development of emotional intelligence and noted the lack of articles meeting their review criteria aimed specifically at child welfare work.

Operationalized metacompetencies by domain with quotes

Domain	Operationalized skills conceptualized as demonstrated ability to...	Participant quotes that demonstrating select elements of the domain
Managing affective intensity in the moment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remain aware of physical surroundings; ability to discern potential safety hazards in the location or the circumstance • Recognize and respond to the emotional cues of others (signs of anger, escalation, relief, etc.) • Set and maintain clear boundaries around safety during the interaction • Think critically about the persons and information presented in a case: ability to resist assumptions and utilize problem-based decision-making • Assess child safety elements consistently across settings and dynamics • Effectively respond to resistance; be persistent • Effectively respond to active safety concerns when they emerge • Engage in emotional/affective self-regulation during client interaction; ability to tolerate discomfort (separate from safety issues) • Engage in self-reflection and debriefing after client interactions • Manage one’s own affective responses in order to remain professional, safe, and effective in the field 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How to address the resistance I may face when first engaging with a family. I learned to stay calm, slow the pace down, and normalize the family's feelings about being fearful, concerned, or on edge about why an investigator was showing up to their home.</i> • <i>Knowing to slow down so that I won't miss anything. Sometimes it may take me being uncomfortable...</i> • <i>I learned how uncomfortable it can be to ask strangers to show me their baby and how to overcome that in a professional and respectful way.</i> • <i>To always observe my surroundings and make sure I do not put myself in unsafe situations. For example, not having my back to the door.</i> • <i>When the caregiver provides information relating to domestic violence, know when or how to address it in the absence of the perpetrator.</i> • <i>We talked a lot about our concerns and fears, and it was helpful to address things we were afraid of before going into the home.</i>

“Openness to learning” begins with an individual’s ability to pursue personal growth by accepting different perspectives and voices (Bogo et al. 2012; Bogo et al., 2013; Bogo et al. 2021; Tufford, Bogo & Katz, 2017). Our findings indicate that the simulation training provided trainees rich opportunities to engage in active self-reflection with many trainees mentioning the feedback from the trainers, actors, and courtroom professionals. The importance of training and ongoing professional development in child welfare cannot be overstated; as expressed by Nissan and colleagues (2014, p. 385), “professional preparation programs acknowledge that professional identity is best grounded in an understanding that knowledge needs to be renewed, expanded, challenged, and redefined throughout a given career.” Trainees provided feedback on the experience of the simulation training as well as ideas and frustrations around improvements that might better support learning.

Operationalized metacompetencies by domain with quotes

Domain	Operationalized skills conceptualized as demonstrated ability to...	Participant quotes that demonstrating select elements of the domain
Openness to learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage in active self-reflection about areas for improvement; can identify and verbalize learning needs Engage in active self-reflection about own strengths; can identify and verbalize areas of knowledge and skill Recognize own limitations and self—care needs; maintains awareness of impact of child welfare work for the workers Seek knowledge and resources necessary to meet the needs of diverse clients Recognize and articulate own mistakes; seeks and can articulate lessons learned Proactively use supervision – coming prepared with questions and reflection; engagement in discussion of self; Willingness to utilize feedback and supervision; able to articulate specific actions in response to feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I think the most useful thing I learned is that it's ok to not know everything and to be in a position where you have to revisit a previous topic to get more.</i> <i>It's okay to be nervous until you find the style that works best for you...</i> <i>Recognizing that you will have to adjust and feel comfortable and that it gets easier as time goes on</i> <i>...to hear the feedback from the instructors as well as actors on what I did well, and the areas I was strong in, and also the areas I struggled in from the actors - how I made them feel by the way I was asking questions and interacting with them...</i> <i>I really enjoyed the feedback from the actors as well. They were able to express the experience of the client and feedback from that angle is always necessary. It ultimately helps you learn how to communicate with your future clients more effectively.</i> <i>Testifying in court is something that I want to get better at...I know that experience will help. So just need to wade into those waters...</i> <i>I would have liked to be able to testify in the direct as well as the cross to understand how I should formulate the response...if the simulation portion of training was extended and the in-classroom was reduced it...would allow for each individual...to develop those skills through trial and error.</i>

Implications for future simulation training lie in how reflection and feedback may be identified and utilized by trainers to promote the elements of metacompetence that we explored. As mentioned above, this could include more focused feedback and reflection related to diversity dynamics in the child protection context. Participant data highlights the value of group debriefing and feedback from varied perspectives, including the actors who portray the family members involved in an investigation. Future training could involve scenarios and actors that reflect community diversity (e.g., race, disability, citizenship), giving workers the chance to navigate the investigation in a range of environments and situations. Actor training and development of sound scenarios takes time and resources but would allow the agency to better

introduce new investigators to different perspectives. With each new exposure and experience with diverse people in simulations, trainees also have a safe environment to practice managing their own bias, emotions, and assumptions. Paying attention to an individual's openness to learning may also be an indicator of their willingness to learn from diverse people in the field. Additionally, the idea that metacompetence is developmental makes space for trainees to recognize areas for improvement as well as areas of strength, to learn from mistakes, and to value supervision as an opportunity for future growth. In turn, this lens on metacompetence can help inform supervisors how to support investigators in the field.

The findings from this exploratory study also suggest that more nuanced data collection could help to better assess both procedural competence and metacompetence. A critical step in that process is operationalizing, or defining that distinction in terms of observable behaviors, for instance, the ability to measure critical thinking or emotional regulation. Based on our findings and guided by the existing literature on metacompetence in social work and more specifically, child welfare, we created measurable definitions under each domain for use in future data collection. Together with a tool that gauges procedural competence, measuring metacompetencies may be added as a tool for gauging holistic competence in child welfare investigators.

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