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COMPETENCE – MORE THAN JUST A BUZZWORD AND A PROVOCATIVE TERM?

Toward an Internal Perspective on Situated Problem-Solving Capacity

INTRODUCTION

Following the Progress in International Literacy Study (PIRLS), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS), and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), moves are now afoot to extend the measurement of competencies to the higher education sector. This prompted me to take a critical look at "competence". Taking the current "competence boom" and the established concepts of competence as a starting point, the aim of this paper is to argue that competence – as an action-related category – must be conceptualized from the subjective perspective. Precisely because it is such a fragile thing from the individual's point of view, it is not unusual for actors to undertake self-appraisal in order to reassure themselves of their own competence.

THE "COMPETENCE" BOOM

"Competence" is ubiquitous nowadays. The concept enjoys such overwhelming popularity in a wide variety of contexts that hardly any sociological works on the subject in Germany fail to allude to its inflationary use (recent examples: Späte, 2011; Ott, 2010; Kurtz & Pfadenhauer, 2010). The emotional reactions that the term provokes in academic circles outside of the field of empirical educational research are a clear indication that the buzzword "competence" has become a term of provocation. The irritation it causes reflects the resentment felt toward developments in the education sector. In Germany, these developments are associated with keywords such as "G8",[1] "PISA", "the Bologna Process" and "outcome orientation".

In education policy in particular, this "competence-oriented shift" (Arnold, 1997) has been implemented so thoroughly that it is hard to imagine how people managed without the term in the past. Moreover, this "competence boom" has led to the massive displacement of hitherto established terms such as "qualifications", "learning goals" and "education" (in the sense of *Bildung*, i.e., self-formation). From a systems theory perspective, this development must be regarded as semantic displacement, which indicates a systemic change from an education system that emphasizes self-formation (*Bildung*) to one that stresses outcomes. Hence, the

structural correlates of the transformed system are no longer the educational professions and humanities-oriented education science, but rather the organizations within the education system and empirical educational science whose representatives have joined forces in order to objectify competence:

> The organizations of the education system work on assessments of the competencies that individuals acquire during the periods they spend in the organizations. The empirical educational sciences develop scales that classify competencies and rank them at least ordinally and, ideally, also metrically (Hartig, 2007); [these scales] *measure* on the basis of populations the degree of competence that has actually been realized and that – depending on the interpretation – can be attributed to the individuals as a product of the educational work [of others], as a characteristic of the individuals themselves, or as a residual or confounding variable of [that part of] society that is beyond educational control (the milieu of origin) (Brosziewski, 2010, p. 131; our translation).

According to Richard Münch's institutional economic analysis, this transformation of the education system is due to the fact that two groups are working against each other: on one side, there is an increasingly powerful global elite made up of leading international scientists and economic operators; on the other side, there are increasingly disempowered regional authorities. As the agencies responsible for national educational institutions, the status of which was once unquestioned, these authorities are practically speechless in the face of the dominance of one global culture, the economistic guiding principles of which (for example, education as competence and human capital) are spreading throughout the education system. This confrontation has brought about a "hybrid educational system" (Münch, 2009, p. 31) that – at least in Germany – "is paralysed by massive contradictions" (ibid.). Münch points out that, analogous to the consequences that PISA brought about in schools, "hybrid modernization" with a growing pressure to perform is also to be expected in higher education institutes if elementary competencies are measured that are not, however, being imparted because professors continue to "[plague] students with expectations of academic excellence that, to a large extent, cannot be fulfilled, and thereby render academic studies a myth" (Münch, 2009, p. 52; our translation).

What is striking is that the social dimension – that which Odo Marquard (1981) calls "authority" and which is as much a characteristic of competence as the cognitive dimension (ability) and the non-cognitive dimension (willingness) – has been largely lost sight of in the competence debate.[2] In this paper, in addition to highlighting this social aspect, I argue that competence is by no means a stable – and thus relatively easily measurable – phenomenon, but rather a distinctly fragile thing that inevitably requires self-affirmation on the part of the bearer. Taking the established concepts of competence as my starting point, I identify the gap that exists from a phenomenological-action theoretical perspective and propose a definition that overcomes this shortfall. Against the background of the

accompanying shift in focus, I then explore the assessment of competence from the internal perspective.

THE CONFLICT OF COMPETENCE WITH REGARD TO "COMPETENCE"

The competence discourse is conducted mainly by two disciplines: pedagogy and psychology. In pedagogy, the concept gained relevance in the 1970s because it facilitated the circumvention of the long-standing dispute about the relationship between general and vocational education. The shift in the established semantics toward the concept of competence promised to overcome the narrow focus on the cognitive aspects of (vocational) education and an overly restrictive imparting of directly job-related skills in training and continued education, and to move in the direction of a more holistic form of competence development that takes into account an individual's whole personality. In the field of research into pedagogy and vocational education, a broad concept of competence prevails. Focusing on comprehensive ability and maturity, it comprises not only cognitive but also affective and motivational components (cf. Baethge et al., 2006; Fischer, 2010; Straka & Macke, 2010a).

In psychology (and in psychology-oriented educational science), on the other hand, one finds a narrower understanding of competence as "the ability (disposition) to master different demanding situations" (Jude & Klieme, 2008, p. 11; our translation). In contrast to the decontextualization which is symptomatic of intelligence testing, competencies are defined as "learnable, context-specific performance dispositions that relate functionally to situations and demands in certain domains" (Klieme & Hartig, 2007, p. 14; our translation). Hence, competence is related to concrete tasks, whereby the cognitive ability to master these tasks, which is acquired through the acquisition of specialized knowledge, is psychometrically modeled and measured.

In the field of vocational education research in particular, the problems ensuing from this reduction of the concept of competence to the specificities of the context, specialized knowledge and the cognitive dimension have been highlighted. These problems are also acknowledged by empirical education researchers. As "competence" in a broad sense resists measurement, the object of research is adapted to the logic of measurement – "operationalized", say the protagonists; "missed", say the critics.

A CONCEPT OF COMPETENCE BASED ON PHENOMENOLOGICAL ACTION THEORY

While highlighting the problem-solving aspect of competence, the following proposed definition does not confine competence to the cognitive dimension of being (mentally) capable of something because, at least as regards problem-solving action, understanding competence merely as the knowledge required to solve a particular problem is too restrictive. Ability based on actively acquired and socially imparted sedimented experiences must be seen in dialectic relationship to action

(cf. Fischer, 2010, S. 143). In other words, it is a question of "practical knowledge" (Knoblauch, 2010, S. 249), i.e., "know-how". As regards action, this ability must be accompanied by a willingness (for whatever reason) to master the problem at hand. Competent action also calls for motivation that stems from relevancies and interests. This motivation goes beyond the usual motivation to put a plan into action insofar as it requires an attitude toward penetrating a problem. This attitude is not "automatic", but must be assumed consciously.

However, the proposal advanced by vocational education researchers that competence should be regarded as "an entity [comprising] motive and the ability to act" (Straka & Macke, 2010b, p. 226; our translation) is also too restrictive. In the words of Christiane Hof (2002, p. 158; our translation), this concept also points to "the question of authority[3] and the assumption that competence manifests itself in the execution of a job in accordance with the expected standards." According to this view, competence should be perceived as an ascription in the sense that observable behavior is deemed to be in accordance with standardized expectations. Straka and Macke (2009, p. 16) also refer to the semantic content of competence as "socially ascribed authority" (which finds expression specifically in occupational profiles). However, in both cases, "authority" is formulated from the observer's perspective.

It was with reference to the law that Max Weber established the sociological connotations of competence in the sense of Zuständigkeit "as a basic category of rational authority" (Kurtz, 2010, p. 9). The legal distinction between formal and material competence indicates that authority can be formally ascribed (i.e., externally attributed) on the basis of a social position or an organizational function (competence by virtue of an office or position), or that it is the material outcome, as it were, of a subjective store of knowledge (competence by virtue of knowledge) (cf. Kühl, 2010 following Luhmann, 1964). In the latter sense at least, "authority" must be formulated from the subjective perspective.

According to Schulz-Schaeffer (2007, p. 14), the constitution of action through ascription can be viewed as a second way in which events are constituted as action. It can be seen as an "independent act of interpretation" which can "either supplement the constitution of action by the actor, compete with it, or be the only form of constitution of the event in question as action" (our translation). On the one hand, authority can be the result of external ascription ("being considered responsible for something"). On the other hand, however, it can also manifest itself as a subjective claim ("considering oneself to be responsible for something"). From an action theory point of view, this subjective claim develops in a complex manner and is related to the perception of a situation as one that concerns me. However, it does not concern me solely because of my individual motivational situation and my ability, but because of a prevailing interaction order. In both cases, the concept of competence connotes "responsibility", as defined by Alfred Schütz (1972, p. 256), or the established evolution and socialization theory considerations of Thomas Luckmann (2007). In the case of external ascription, I am responsible to someone, namely the person who made me responsible for something. In this case, my competence is a fragile thing, in the sense that it is not

I, but someone else, who decides whether or not I am competent. When competence is subjectively ascribed, I consider myself responsible for what I do or have done. In this case, competence is a fragile thing insofar as I need a frame of reference in order to decide whether or not I am competent, and this frame of reference must not itself be fragile.

The incorporation of authority into the definition of competence once again places greater emphasis on the social dimension of competence. The social aspect was already present in the linguistic concept of competence in the form of the normatively employed concept of acceptability. It is highlighted in all attempts to define communicative competence that emphasize the situational appropriateness of verbal and nonverbal utterances, whereby a real-time reference to performance, i.e., a reference to the situation and the prevailing interaction order, is implied.

A concept of competence that avoids addressing the action problem in a one-sided way includes three components: ability, willingness and authority. From this pespective, competent action is constituted through a capacity for iterative problem-solving that is characterized by "being able to", "wanting to", "being allowed to" and "being obliged to" do something, as perceived by the actor himself or herself.[4] Actors do not simply "have" this capacity habitually. Rather, they must bring it into the situation by applying an "action template" to an action goal. This capacity, which despite incorporation cannot simply be accessed like a construction kit, is the prerequisite for multifaceted and always domain-specific problem-solving action. It enables the actor to master problems in an intentional rather than a random way; in a systematic rather than "any old" way; and repeatedly rather than on a once-off basis. Moreover, this capacity is not visible from the outside. Indeed, even in the case of actors who are confident in their own competence, it manifests itself only when the action is being executed.

COMPETENCE FROM THE INTERNAL PERSPECTIVE

Composite terms such as social competence, media competence and information competence, to name but a few, indicate that competence is a multi-layered phenomenon. Efforts have been made to curb this inflation of competence types with the help of competence models. In his frequently cited classification, Heinrich Roth (1971) deconstructs the concept of competence into its experiential components: things, other people and the self. What is most striking about this classification is the fact that the aspect of language or speech, which is central to competence concepts that have recourse to Noam Chomsky, is not assigned particular importance. By contrast, Jürgen Habermas' (1984) distinction between cognitive, linguistic and interactive competence, which is based on the differentiation of the human environment into the regions of "external nature", "language" and "society", not only incorporates Piaget's developmental psychology-based concept of competence, but also Chomsky's concept of linguistic competence. Habermas expands Chomsky's concept from an action theory perspective and relates it to his understanding-oriented theory of communicative action. In Germany, the differentiation of action competence into subject-, method-,

social- and reflexive/personal/human competence (cf. Erpenbeck & Heyse, 1999) has risen to particular prominence. However, these stereotypical categorizations are not really reflected in the meaningful stratification of actors' experience, as I have demonstrated using organizational competence as an example (cf. Pfadenhauer, 2008b).

The latter study revealed that, from an internal perspective, a competent organizer is someone who divides organizational processes into various sub-projects, then breaks these sub-projects into "manageable" tasks, then divides these tasks into action steps which are as distinct as possible, then lays down the spatial and temporal order in which these steps are to be performed, and finally assigns the task of implementing the individual steps to the actor best suited to the task in question. A competent organizer of projects based on the social division of labor is someone who lays down in the most distinct and precise way possible what is to be done, by whom, when, where and in what way. A competent organizer is someone who, with these "rules of procedure", provides a binding, reliable basis for actions to be carried out by others that proves flexible even when unintended side effects occur. A competent organizer of this social division of labor is someone who is capable of ensuring that every individual involved in the realization of the project does what he or she is supposed to do and abides by the prescribed targets, forms of action and time limits. Finally, a socially competent organizer (i.e., an organizer who works on the basis of the given demands, or the demands that are accepted as given) is someone who also reflects on and evaluates the actions performed by the individual actors in terms of the adequacy of their contribution to the achievement of the target values.

Whereas, in the standard model, organizational competence is subsumed under "method competence" (cf. Schaeper & Briedis, 2004, p. 5), organizational competence encompasses all of the facets of action competence, which precludes the artificial division into categories. Competence – in this case, organizational competence – is linked to the inter-connected components of the process of organizing action, which entails providing the prerequisites for the actions of others, influencing their actions in a certain direction and evaluating these actions in terms of the target values (cf. Pfadenhauer, 2008a). In contrast to our everyday understanding of organizing, in which preparation and implementation activities are "mixed up", organizing is perceived scientifically as "higher order action" (Spann, 1969, p. 315); in other words, as meta-action that gives rise to other actions.

MEASURING COMPETENCE

Against this background, the definition of competence as the capacity to solve problems iteratively aims to take into serious consideration the action aspect, insofar as one must always clarify what characterizes the type of action to which the competence in question refers. This problem-solving capacity is classified as "situative" because competence refers in principle to a situation – a situation that is not simply "given", i.e., objective. In view of the fact that situations are generated

when certain parts of the *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld) acquire relevance, and by virtue of being situations, acquire distinct contours, Vonken (2005) defines competence in a fundamental way, namely as the capability to bring forth situations. According to Vonken, competence is "that which causes one to perceive and address – i.e., to generate – a situation" (Vonken, 2005, p. 186; our translation). As a rule, the usual understanding of competence as the ability to master situations neglects the fact that, to the actor, the situation appears to be both "given" and definable (cf. Hitzler, 1999). The actor usually experiences situations as a manifestation of social order structured by institutions, for example norms, or constructed in the course of interaction. In other words, situations are perceived as being characterized by a complex web of behavioral patterns, i.e., as being predefined with a claim to bindingness. In addition to these "given" conditions, the individual's subjective experiences and interests also enter into his or her definition of the situation, thereby giving the socially objectified definitions their specific importance for him or her as an actor.

Every situation in which action takes place has many aspects: (frequently, but not necessarily) other actors; "things" (in the broadest sense, i.e., techniques, language and knowledge); the self in his or her concrete mental (intentional, contra- or peri-intentional) orientation and physical condition (healthy/sick, sober/inebriated, etc.); surroundings (temperature, air, atmosphere, weather); spatiality (narrow/wide, good visibility/fog); sounds (noisy/quiet); smells, etc. In other words, every situation is equipped with correlates of sensory perceptions to which experience (perception and imagination) can – and to a certain extent must – be directed if the situation is to be mastered in accordance with one's own goals and responsibilities.

Moreover, as in the case of competent organizing (cf. once again Pfadenhauer, 2008b), every solution to a problem which is not exclusively cognitive is based on a conglomeration of elements of knowledge, techniques, strategies and reflections that can be broken down into various individual aspects. A considerable number of these elements are accessible to the conscious mind when one considers: (a) what one usually does (and has to do); and (b) how, using what practical knowledge, techniques (including physical techniques), social strategies, cognitive procedures, etc. does one manage to do what one does in a manner which is adequate in the situation at hand.

This does not dispute the fact that, during such an analysis of one's own problem-solving action, aspects which are relevant to the resolution of the problem, such as one's own impact, implicit knowledge, unintended side effects, etc., may be neglected. Although competence encompasses an individual's entire problem-solving ability, it goes without saying that someone who provides information about his or her competence may give information only about the components that he or she considers to be pragmatic or necessary for the situational mastering of problems. Occasions for such a disclosure of (personal) information are especially likely to arise when there are grounds for doubt – be it doubt on the part of others in the light of prior problem-solving actions, or self-doubt. One may doubt that one is actually able to master something that (for

whatever reason) one considers oneself to be "actually" prepared to do, "actually" capable of and, having generated the situation, for which one is "definitely" responsible.

CONCLUSION

Assessing one's own competence serves to reassure oneself. It allows one to objectify the "subjective and social capability for appropriate action" (Knoblauch, 2010, p. 248; our translation), which one does not simply have (like money in a bank account), but which (like stocks and shares) become manifest only on the point of transfer. The fact that one can access it and hold on to it for only as long as one uses it renders competence a fragile thing. Only the recollection of a prior problem-solving action, which is sedimented as experience, can provide evidence of an iterative problem-solving capacity. Hence, such considerations are not unusual, but are rather an everyday (albeit rarely explicit) process of assessing one's own competence.

NOTES

[1] "G8" refers to the change from the nine-year to the eight-year Gymnasium (secondary school leading to higher education entrance qualification).

[2] In addition, as will be shown below, in the rare cases in which this dimension is addressed, it is introduced as an observer category. In contrast, I argue that, like the other two dimensions, the social dimension must also be defined from the internal perspective.

[3] Henceforth, I use the word "authority" as hopefully the best translation of the German term "Zuständigkeit" (cf. Mulder, 2007).

[4] Due to its consistently internal perspective, it is only at first glance that this concept of competence fits in with the definition proposed by Straka and Macke (2009, p. 16; our translation), who argue that competence should be interpreted "as the product of an interaction between 'being allowed to act' (having been assigned competence) and 'being able and willing to act' (being able and willing to comply with the assigned competence)".

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