

Competency-based Assessment: Using Simulated Patient Interactions to Assess Relational, Assessment, and Intervention Competencies and to Guide Individual Training Plan Development

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Abstract* As the field of psychology continues to emphasize competency-based training, the need to develop methods of assessing and marking progress in the foundational competencies is becoming increasingly important. Whereas some domains of competency are more easily assessed with tests focused on content areas or by collecting writing samples, other aspects of the Relational, Assessment, and Intervention focused competencies, such as the ability to conduct a diagnostic interview or manage a difficult patient interaction, have proven more difficult to assess.

At the Southwest Consortium Doctoral Psychology Internship we have incorporated simulated patient interviews into our competency-based assessment in an effort to assess our trainees in the domains of relational, assessment, and intervention competence. In our process, each intern completes two simulated patient interviews that are observed by a psychologist. In these interactions the interns are asked to engage with the simulated patient as if they are meeting them for the first time and have to conduct an initial intake assessment. The simulated patients have been provided with comprehensive character biographies, suggested responses, and behaviors to engage in based on how the interns interact with their character. The observers are equipped with a behaviorally-based observational tool and a competency checklist, both of which they complete on each intern's interaction. After each intern has completed two simulated patient interactions, the observations and experiences of the actor and the observer are discussed with the training committee, and the intern is then provided behaviorally-based individualized feedback within the competency domains. This information is then considered in the formulation of their training plan for the semester. The entire process is then completed again at mid-year, and the data is used to measure development and progress, and to make any adjustments in their training plan for the second half of the year.

Although simulated patients have long been used within medical education, typically these are paid actors. Most Psychology training settings do not have funds for this. This project represents a proof of concept of the effective use of non-actors in obtaining competency information about trainees. We have found the process relatively smooth, requiring only a single 30 minute training session. Finally, with the addition of the data from the simulated patient interviews we have been better able to plan individual intern training experiences with specific competencies and skills in mind, to communicate more behaviorally with our interns about training targets, and to provide specific information to their supervisors about their strengths and areas of needed development.

Learning Objectives:

#1: The learner will be able to identify three challenges of conducting competency-based assessments for competency domains that address relational and application-based skills rather than knowledge-based domains.

#2: The learner will be able to discuss three benefits of including simulated patient interactions in initial competency-based assessments.

#3: The learner will be able to identify five behaviorally-based diagnostic interviewing behaviors for evaluating a trainee's performance during simulated patient interactions.

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