Chapter 2
Defining and Selecting Competencies: Historical Reflections on the Case of IQ

John Carson

Introduction

What can an historian and science studies scholar contribute to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) project Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations (DeSeCo)? The goal of the project is to provide a resource for the process of defining, selecting, and measuring the competencies necessary for individuals to lead a successful and responsible life and for societies to face the challenges of the present and the future. Certainly historical sources can provide little direct data that might help identify those competencies or measure them more precisely. But perhaps a cautionary tale, drawn from the not-too-distant past, might shed light on some of the challenges involved in such a project and some of the work necessary to realize it in whatever terms it is taken up. The DeSeCo Project is not without precedents; indeed, attempts to establish standards in the physical and biological sciences have a long history. In the social sciences, however, such endeavors are of more recent vintage. One of the first major attempts to define and measure a key human competency was the work done at the turn of the century in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States on mental measurement, efforts that resulted in the production and dissemination of the modern notion of intelligence, the IQ, and of the instruments to assess it.

Just to mention the term IQ, of course, is to send up warning flags for many readers. Arguably the first truly standardized universal measure in the mental sciences, it has been a source of controversy almost from the moment it was first proposed by the German psychologist Wilhelm Stern and then subsequently adopted and championed by the American mental tester Lewis M. Terman. To some, the IQ test signifies precise scientific measurement of a basic biological feature of the human mind that accounts in large measure for individual competency in a range of domains, while for others, IQ’s hereditarian, elitist, and racializing connotations demonstrate vividly that the process of scientific universalization is one of the imposition of white, male, Euro-American standards on the entire world. Even to point this much out is to provide at least one cautionary lesson for the DeSeCo Project: the articulation of universal competencies cannot easily be disengaged from powerful political and moral concerns about the very nature of any such program, especially one initiated by elite
Western institutions such as the OECD. While it is clear that the DeSeCo Project is aware of the example of IQ, it might still benefit from an examination of the history of IQ’s production. An investigation of the way in which IQ came to be established and deployed, with varying degrees of success, throughout the West, and then the subsequent effects it had once established, may provide some important general insights into the DeSeCo Project’s goals of defining and selecting key competencies.

To condense and schematize a complicated history, the first successful psychological technique for quantifying differences in individual mental ability came early in the 20th century. In response to a request from a governmental commission on children lagging behind in school, French psychologist Alfred Binet and his colleague Théodore Simon developed a psychological instrument, the Binet-Simon Intelligence Scale, designed to reveal deficiencies in overall intellectual ability. Created in 1905 and subsequently revised in 1908 and 1911, the Binet-Simon consisted of an individually administered set of tasks whose final output was a number assessing the subject’s mental age: his or her intellectual level as compared to the norms for all others of the same age group. Not only did this number allow test-takers to be compared to each other according to the presumed degree of their intelligence, but it suggested as well that intelligence itself was something singular and quantifiable.

Especially with the advent of the 1908 revision, the Binet-Simon scale became the standard against which all further developments in the field were compared. Numerous improvements were proposed during the 1910s, culminating in Terman’s 1916 revision of the scale, the Stanford-Binet, which almost immediately came to dominate the practice of mental measurement. One of Terman’s most important innovations was to introduce the concept of the intelligence quotient (IQ), a ratio of mental age to chronological age that he adopted from Stern. Before mobilization for World War I, intelligence testing was restricted largely to psychological research and some clinical applications. During the war, however, a new way of administering mental tests, by groups, was developed and its successful application to 1.75 million U.S. Army recruits introduced intelligence testing on a large scale to the general public. In the postwar period, many schools and industries, especially in the United States and Britain, turned to testing as an efficient means of assessing students and staff. New instruments continued to be developed, so that by the end of the 1920s intelligence and its assessment had become well entrenched throughout the U.S. and parts of Europe.

There are four aspects of this history of IQ and its tests to which I would like to draw attention, springboards that may prove useful for discussing some of the issues raised by the DeSeCo Project: 1) the identification of competency as a problem and a need for a standard; 2) the process through which the measurement of IQ was developed and gained widespread acceptance; 3) the social embeddedness of measuring IQ; and 4) the potential impact of such testing and measurement on individuals and societies.

Identifying the Need for a Standard

To begin with the most basic question: in what sense, if any, was it necessary to establish a standard such as IQ at all? As many of the legion of critics of IQ testing would suggest, the world might actually have gotten along decidedly better if IQ had never been constructed and then ensconced in such a transportable technology as the intelligence test. The problems it was meant to solve, some would argue, either did not really exist – the menace of the feebleminded comes to mind – or else could have been better approached by using different methods, ones taking into account the multitude of ways in which people perform cognitively in the world. From such a perspective, psychologists and other experts got swept up in turn-of-the-century worries about eugenics, degeneration, the purity of the race, the maintenance of the elite, and the like, and saw in the methods of science the possibility of producing an objective measure of human competency that would allow for the efficient reorganization of the social world.

In terms of the DeSeCo Project, therefore, one might begin by asking whether there really is a problem of competency at all in the early 21st century. Is it clear that people feel suddenly less competent, or are less competent, or that competency is something that a vast majority of the inhabitants of the planet are lacking? While national or international surveys might be one way of at least partially answering these questions, such surveys could also exacerbate them, provoking worries that otherwise might not have arisen, as IQ testing seemed to do in the United States during the 1920s vis-à-vis questions about the national intelligence. One might also ask what sort of work is being done by casting competency as a significant social problem. Who is gaining and who is losing by the politics of that move? What kinds of strategies and resources are being mobilized, and what kinds are being deflected? For example, it is possible that at the beginning of the 21st century, questions of the differential access to information and capital, the imbalance in basic health care provision, the rise in international environmental threats, the implications of globalization, and the inequities in food distribution are far more pressing problems than the differential access to forms of competency – or perhaps not. But it is an issue that seems critical to the agenda of any project such as DeSeCo. What sort of problem is competency and how pressing is it?

Part of the reason that competency is seen as an issue of such potentially immense significance at the present moment may be that there is a presumption in much of the literature that this is a time of intensely rapid technological change which is radically reconfiguring the social-economic worlds in which competencies must operate, and that 21st century citizens must be able to adapt themselves to this new reality. There is now a virtual celebration of just what a dramatically changing, different, vital, vola-

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1 See, for example, Rafter, 1997.
2 The literature on eugenics, degeneration, and the rise of scientific racism in the late nineteenth century is enormous. See, for example, Hawkins, 1997; Kevles, 1986; Kraut, 1994; Nye, 1984; Pick, 1989; and Stepán, 1991.
3 On the intelligence and democracy debates in the United States in the 1920s, see Gould, 1996; Cravens, 1978; and Degler, 1991.
tile, out-of-control, life-is-a-constant-struggle world we live in. It is announced every
day, and many of us seem to live it in every part of our lives. But from an historian's
perspective, it must be pointed out that people at the end of the 19th century, with the
invention of the telegraph and telephone, felt that way; people in the middle of the
19th century, with the great technological transformations associated with the steam
engine and the railroad, felt that way; and people in the late 18th century, with the first
rumblings of the Industrial Revolution, also felt that the world was changing in ways
at speeds that were almost unimaginable. So it seems clear that part of what
needs to be done is to step away from a wholesale embrace of this language of con-
stant flux and consider first, what consequences ensue by imagining the world along
these particular lines. What is being accomplished by saying that we now live in the
midst of a series of technological revolutions that will completely transform the ways
we live? One function of such a characterization, to take the cynical view, is that it
makes the stock of corporations like Microsoft go up. While not the whole of the
picture, this view does reflect one part of the reality, which is that certain people gain
and others lose from promoting particular visions of what the future holds. As com-
PELLING as the life-as-constant-change representation of early 21st century life may be,
there are also other ways of looking at this complicated, complex, and variegated
world, ones which may, for example, concede that there are areas of rapid change but
also insist that there are places of enormous stability, and all kinds of mixtures in
between.
Thus, a whole series of possible understandings of life can be envisaged. We who
are academics by and large live in a postmodernist moment, and so the tendency is to
see it as variegated, multiple, rapidly changing, identity-is-fractured, as a world
where computers and electronic mail and the whole variety of techno-vaules con-
stitute the warp and woof of the reality in which we live; for many of us, it is a kind
of de-centered, virtualized space. But that is only one of a number of scenarios we
could project onto the planet at this moment that would be consonant with the lives
of a significant fraction of its inhabitants. In fact, in many ways the postmodern version
may well be the least appropriate for the simple majority, were it to be a question
of sheer numbers. So however the world is to be represented, it is in some sense
a choice that itself involves particular simplifications and complexifications, the
plausibility of which will depend in part on the cultural place where those doing the
choosing stand. As such, there is a politics involved, for each representation of the
world will open certain avenues and possibilities and remove others.
To return to the IQ example, from the perspective of the social engineers of the
early 20th century, the world was unquestionably an unruly, chaotic place that needed
to be rendered orderly, efficient, and comprehensible. Objects such as IQ and its tests
helped to accomplish this task, by allowing for a simple and efficient method of
ranking individuals in terms of their overall intellectual capacity. As a result, the
world did become partially reconfigured, made in some sense more rationalized and
orderly, with consequences good and bad rippling out in all directions. Educational
opportunities, for example, were opened to certain individuals and groups who previ-
ously had been routinely excluded, while at the same time these benefits were denied
to others in a more thorough way than had ever before been possible. For others liv-
ing at exactly the same moment, however, a much different reality was experienced,
one in which the preconditions of industrial capitalism, or the excesses of Western colo-
nialism, or the unpredictabilities of rural life were most salient. Such individuals and
groups may or may not have felt that there were issues of competency fundamental to
their lives, but it seems clear that if they did, the kinds of competencies needed in
their worlds would have been far different from those most important in the world
experienced by the social engineers. It is not that one was real and one was false, but
rather that multiplicity may be unavoidable, that there may be an enormous number
and variety of micro-cultures jostling into each other at any given moment. Thus, in
addition to determining whether indeed there is a problem of competency at the be-
inning of the 21st century, it seems relevant also to consider what vision of society is
being represented and thereby created and sustained.

Development and Acceptance of IQ Measurement

The second aspect of the history of IQ I will discuss is the historical development of
IQ testing. It is important to underscore that the IQ version of intelligence, the tests
invented to measure it, and the practices developed to keep it robust did not emerge
whole and ready to operate, but were rather the final products of prodigious and dif-
ficult effort that spanned decades and involved thousands of researchers, teachers,
administrators, and individual test takers. It took work to construct IQ, and to build it
in such a way that it could seem able to traverse diverse continents, cultures, and time
periods. While it is easy to imagine the large amount of effort involved in building
the IQ test, another part of that work – the act of turning some specific set of capa-
bilities tied to particular groups of human subjects into a universal human competen-
cy – may not be so obvious. Although it may be in some sense reasonable to say
that IQ was discovered by Alfred Binet (or was it Wilhelm Stern, or perhaps Lewis
Terman?), the story of its articulation and use suggests much more the language of
construction: psychology did not so much identify a universal competency as make a
particular competency universal.
Now if that is the case, and what is more, if such practice is routine when scien-
tific universals are produced, then the DeSeCo Project will have to grapple with some
of the implications of this process for its own program of identifying and assess-
ing a set of key competencies. Most immediate is the charge that adopting this
constructivist interpretation implies that anything goes, that any powerful agency can
unilaterally foist its values on an unsuspecting public because reality is ultimately
about power rather than truth. Certainly such arguments are not unknown among
critics of IQ testing, nor more broadly within anti-essentialist critiques of many dis-
tinctions drawn along racial and sex/gender lines. Here, however, it may be much
more pertinent to draw on work in science studies which contends that the issue is
less whether universals such as gravity or evolution or the meter stick are fictional or
not, as it is to realize that their universality must be propagated, not proclaimed.
Cambridge University historian Simon Schaffer, for example, has argued that one of
the great achievements of late 19th century physics was its creation of a "manufactory of ohms," a site where a standardized electrical unit could be produced and converted into a physical object capable of being dispatched around the world to regulate electrical practice and the electrical measurements on which it depended (Schaffer, 1992). In Schaffer’s telling, the ohm did not start off as a universal standard, but was made into one; such could also be said of IQ. In the late 19th century, there may well have been as many ways to assess the mind as there had earlier been methods for measuring electricity. IQ was only one of these methods, initially visible only in very specific populations. It became universal as intelligence tests were standardized, statistical methods applied and refined, protocols and procedures reformulated, researchers in psychology and education recruited, sample populations expanded, methods of administration altered, social implications adduced, and so on. Researchers did not make up intelligence, but they did help to make it into a particular thing, a specific kind of natural object, and they did so by creating networks of people, objects, and institutions in which IQ could be meaningful and flourish.

Dropping the language of discovery and identification thus brings to the fore the dynamic and contingent nature of the process of establishing universals. It should remind those who want to establish broadly applicable competencies that there is an inescapably normative dimension to their undertakings. On the one hand, there is the normativity associated with choice: it is not nature alone that is determining which individual capabilities are turned into universal competencies, but the active agency of researchers who must not only select what will become a competency but must also determine how its propagation will be accomplished. On the other hand, there is also the normativity associated with result: the very acts of choosing and producing universals change the social landscape, often in profound ways. Making IQ meant making a world in which IQ would matter; for good or for ill many of us still live with the results of that decision today.

Thus, it would be wise for the DeSeCo Project, in its consideration of key competencies, to take into account two aspects concerning their potential universality. First, there should be a consideration of what would ideally result, imagining the best possibilities, imagining all the ways in which universals can do important work, be it providing solid grounds for meaningful comparisons, or criteria for justifying reallocation of resources, or ways of looking beyond the specifics of local situations. But second, the project should also think hard about what is actually likely to happen. Because, as we know, the gap between what is ideally imagined – and here the critiques of Enlightenment universality come to mind – versus the kind of actualities that get produced is often quite large. DeSeCo must thus consider carefully the ways in which universals are defined within particular regimes of cultural power, and should be aware that the translation of idealized competencies into everyday practice is a complicated one, not always likely to go along the lines most to be hoped. IQ has certainly not only been pernicious, but it has also undeniably been embedded within political and social agendas that have had tragic consequences for a variety of groups and individuals.

The language of construction serves an additional useful purpose by highlighting the various kinds of work it takes not only to make objects into universals, but also to keep them that way. The story of IQ is only in part one of the labor of producing a human competency and its measure. It is at least as much the saga of how IQ became integral to determinations of mental handicap, admission processes to colleges and universities, decisions about hiring or promotion, and assignments to college-bound or vocational educational tracks, to take only some American examples. Constant revision of IQ tests, continual production of validity and other research studies, stories about the IQs of Albert Einstein or Stephen Hawking, jokes in the lunchroom about a person’s IQ, even debates engendered by The Bell Curve and other such publications elaborating the presumed social consequences of IQ differences have also contributed to the process that maintains IQ as a basic human competency (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Jacoby & Glueberman, 1995). Thus, having accomplished the work of selecting certain competencies and arguing for their universal applicability, only a part of DeSeCo’s job will be done. Like any other objects or constructs, work will also be necessary to keep them vital and in place, especially within ever-changing socio-cultural worlds. This is especially true because of the high political charge elaborations of human competencies carry. Taking the construct, say, of basic literacy and turning that into something that can be maintained across time and space will not be easy and will require efforts that far transcend its simple definition and measurement.

The Social Embeddedness of Measuring IQ

The third aspect of the process of making competencies that should be examined is what might be termed their social embeddedness. IQ was not the only way in which intelligence was conceptualized at the turn of the century. It was a particular answer to a particular question set in a particular social order. It began as the response of a number of turn-of-the-century psychologists in France, Germany, Britain, and the United States to perceived difficulties in readily identifying the higher orders of the “feebleminded,” those individuals thought to be neither profoundly mentally impaired nor of normal intellectual ability. Suffered with the ideology of science, the ambitions of social engineers, and the worries of old elites about the new industrial order, these mechanics of the mind sought to produce objective measuring instruments that could unambiguously distinguish the healthy from the deficient. The result was IQ and its tests, technologies that allowed entire populations to be ordered and arranged into intelligence hierarchies, stratifications that could then serve as the basis for an array of administrative decisions efficiently rendered. Whatever aspects of the competent mind IQ captured, they were intimately related to these specific ways of approaching the world and these presumptions about what a useful measure might entail. DeSeCo’s project of identifying key competencies will inevitably find itself in a similar position. It is not any competent individual that is being imagined, but at the very least one able to function successfully in the liberal democracies and capitalist economic regimes that characterize the OECD nations.
First and foremost, such a world is one in which the individual is posited as the fundamental unit of analysis. One could readily imagine other situations where some sort of group, or community, or larger organizational unit would constitute the ontological reality of primary importance, but interest in collectivities of this sort is not much in evidence within the DeSeCo Project. Such a choice has important implications in at least one respect, for it seems to mitigate against giving much attention to an approach to competency of much current interest within the fields of philosophy, cognitive science, and science studies: distributed competence. Within this analytic framework, it is not the individual that matters so much as the system of individuals and non-human objects that together produce the complex competencies characteristic of the contemporary world (see, for example, Hutchins, 1995). It is argued, for example, that the competencies necessary to produce this printed volume are not situated in the head of any single individual, but rather distributed in the bodies of authors, the capabilities of printing apparatuses, the skills of typesetters, the accuracy of spell checkers, the knowledge of editors, etc.

Historically, of course, one of the solutions to the problem of individual competency has been to move it elsewhere, into machines and technology, into institutions, into normativities. That can be seen everywhere from the de-skilling within industrial technologies in the 19th century, to a whole range of ways in which computers now take on routine tasks that were once performed by copy editors, statisticians, or the mail service, to the functional differentiation of the modern corporation when compared with the jack-of-all-trades individual entrepreneur, to the early modern proliferation of etiquette manuals to enhance success in polite society. Viewed over time, competencies appear to be neither static nor necessarily inherent in individual human agents. This does not mean that the possession of particular competencies in particular social settings is valueless; clearly that is not the case. But it does suggest that there are many possible kinds of solutions to the problem of a perceived lack of competency, and that the re-training of individuals in that competency is only one. If competencies are understood to be transmutable and mobile, social as well as individual, embodied in artifacts as well as human bodies, then the tasks of identifying, locating, isolating, and enhancing them cannot become, as it did with IQ testing, solely a matter of focusing on the isolated individual. From this broader perspective, competency may be something that exists not at all in a given person, but only in a social field. Thus any particular individual may manifest only some small part of it, but together a group of individuals may prove able to manage very complicated forms of competency. How this version of competency can be squared with the rights-bearing autonomous individual postulated by the liberal Western democracies and the DeSeCo mandate, however, is not immediately apparent.

Equally important to consider in terms of the social context that gets built into constructs such as key competencies is the pervasive tension in the Western democracies between celebrations of egalitarianism in one form or another and the realities of the existence of high degrees of social stratification. On the one hand, as the DeSeCo initiative itself testifies, all of the OECD nations are firmly committed to expanding opportunities within every sector of the citizenry; on the other hand, both within educational systems and life in general, people are being trained for particular functional places in highly differentiated economic and social systems. Again, the history of IQ is apposite. In one sense, intelligence testing embodies and reproduces a particular form of equality: all test takers are measured against the same standard, regardless of race, gender, class, or any other specifics of their background, and one of the justifications for testing was that it would replace arbitrary and subjective judgments open to the influence of such characteristics with an objective determination able to reveal the underlying biological reality of those being tested. And for some, testing did work that way, opening educational and employment opportunities that would otherwise have been closed to them. At the same time, however, IQ testing was also used, as is well known, to rationalize and strengthen systems of occupational and social stratification already in place, by suggesting that different levels of intelligence did and should translate into different educational opportunities and different occupational niches, as well as into more pervasive forms of discrimination.

Aware of this history, it could justly be argued that the DeSeCo Project’s focus on competencies that can be acquired is precisely an attempt to avoid some of the pernicious aspects of defining human capabilities associated with IQ. Nonetheless, the mere invocation of words such as “equality” may not begin to do justice to the complications of a world in which, without fundamental changes, some people will inevitably be in lower classes than others. Whose competencies will matter, and what kind of world are these competencies meant to prepare them for? Will these competencies include those fundamental to challenging and changing the social landscape, or will they, as in the case of IQ, in the end be those that reproduce that world, that world whose analysis and measure gave rise to them in the first place?

In this vein, it might be worthwhile to consider figures such as that notorious, irascible 19th century American crank, Henry David Thoreau. He and the many others of his ilk are relevant as reminders of a kind of person who, while not marginalized on economic or social grounds, nonetheless does not fit the normativities and competencies that have been laid out as socially most desirable, and indeed who may see their roles precisely to be one of criticizing the complacencies of their middle-class “competent” fellow countrymen and countrywomen. They bring to the forefront the question of where the crank is likely to fit in the definitions of competency that DeSeCo is trying to develop. Can people who are deeply idiosyncratic be accommodated within models that are, by and large, attempting to acculturate the run of the population to particular regimes of truth and power and economies? Are they to be tolerated, ignored, or even obliterated, and what might happen if such outside perspectives as they represent are somehow lost? Many would argue that the most unsettling ideas and those that do the most to remake the future, come not from the center of a culture, but from its periphery. How will that periphery be taken into account, sustained, and even nourished in the project of determining norms of competency designed to help individuals adapt to particular social realities? It may well be, for example, a very important skill for individuals living in the modern interdependent cultures of the OECD nations to be able to work with each other in groups. But is

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4 Thoreau, like French Enlightenment writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau, was famous for his rejection of contemporary society in favor of the "purity" of nature. He was the author, among other works, of *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854).
someone like Thoreau, who refuses that competency, then to be deemed incompetent, or in need of further training? And if not, then how will it be decided who gets provided with what range of possibilities?

Changing the Social Landscape

This suggests the fourth and final observation to be drawn from the story of IQ and its instruments, which concerns the impact that defining key competencies might have once the work is done to put and keep them in place. If the history of intelligence testing shows nothing else, it surely demonstrates that successfully and persuasively identifying and measuring a human competency is unlikely to be a socially neutral activity. A number of the consequences that IQ testing has had on the societies that have adopted it have already been pointed out. Individuals’ and groups’ horizons of opportunities have been altered, educational systems have been rationalized according to its logic, justifications for political and social discriminations have been refashioned to incorporate its presumptions, and conceptions of the nature of human abilities have been reformulated in the light of its methods. Perhaps more prosaically, intelligence itself also came to be transformed, and in a sense flattened out, as the range of competing ways in which the mind was understood at the turn of the century largely gave way, especially in the United States, to quantitative, unidimensional IQ.

It is important to emphasize this power to reshape what people think and how they live not to dissuade the DeSeCo leaders from undertaking their project, but to remind them that there will inevitably be far-reaching and long-term consequences of their efforts, and that it is crucial to try and anticipate some of those consequences. Certainly the scope of the project and the number of important researchers enrolled in it almost ensures that whatever gets demarcated as a core competency and however it is defined, that articulation will carry enormous weight in the field as a whole. It is also extremely likely that the DeSeCo understanding of those competencies, especially embodied in instruments of measurement and league tables for international comparisons, will have significant influence on policy makers throughout the OECD and beyond. This suggests the need for a certain modesty in the findings proposed by DeSeCo. If there is one charge that could easily be leveled against the IQ testers in specific and social and human scientists more generally in the early 20th century, it is that their, at times, overly confident belief in the power of science to solve social problems left them too often blind to alternative interpretations of the phenomena they were observing and to the social effects that their work was actually having.

Among a number of possible strategies to keep this tendency toward hubris in check, two stand out. First, it may be wise to refuse to seek global, one-size-fits-all solutions to the question of necessary competencies for the new millennium. Partial, local, and only somewhat transportable competencies, while perhaps not as elegant nor as accommodating of comparisons as their universalistic cousins, may allow for a textured approach to life in this variegated world that has its own kind of power, while limiting some of the damage possible from all-encompassing schema developed in global cultural centers. And second, it is critical to listen to voices outside of the relevant expert communities, and to do so at every stage of the project. While academics and professionals have much to offer, so too do the people who live and work in the world that shapes the competencies examined by the DeSeCo Project. What skills do they feel that they lack? What ones do they wish that they had? What ones do they think they acquire well on their own? And how do they think that any program attempting to enhance competencies should be implemented? Going beyond what experts define as the nature and problems of competence to what the people involved think themselves as they are living through their own complicated and very localized lives, while by no means a panacea, may at least restrain some of the excesses to which programs such as DeSeCo’s are prone.

Concluding Observations: Toward an Historical Perspective on the Notion of Competence

The story of IQ and its tests has cast a long shadow over the project of defining capabilities in the human sciences. On the one hand, its model of a quantified measure of a basic human attribute that can be applied across cultures, continents, and time has proven enormously influential and continues to beckon as a kind of paradigm for a range of the social sciences. On the other hand, the history of the abuses that have been perceived to be carried out in its name have convinced many that the attempt to define and isolate fundamental human characteristics is inherently problematic, if not simply racist, sexist, and ethnocentric. As a result, universalistic pronouncements about human nature have largely fallen into disfavor, while the quest for interpersonal standards of measurement and comparison remains unabated. It is part of the response to this history of potential abuse that the DeSeCo Project may be best understood. DeSeCo’s focus on a language of competencies marks a decided rejection of the global presumptions that undergirded the articulation of IQ in favor of a move to a construct that implies a more limited and local conception of what people need to be successful. At the same time, DeSeCo’s commitment to defining objective and measurable skills that will enhance the prospects of adapting successfully to 21st century life marks its continued belief that interpersonal and trans-societal norms of learning and development are both possible and desirable. One of the most vexing challenges for the project will be to articulate competencies that can be general enough to be used throughout the OECD and beyond while not losing the texture of the local and specific, the sense that competencies live in particular places and are for particular circumstances, and that attempts to overly universalize bring along the potential for grave consequences.

This need for humility, for want of a better word, on the part of DeSeCo concerning what can and ought to be put into place is underscored by a reading of the history of attempts to establish broadly agreed-on competencies at all. Examined from the

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3 For a theoretical exploration of this approach, see Haraway, 1991.
perspective of the last hundred years, what one would not see is a static process of identifying and then refining a set of human attributes deemed fundamental to issues of competency. Rather, whatever else is clear, it is certainly the case that the determinations of what key competencies are and what they are presumed able to do can change dramatically over time. No set of definitions will ever remain vital if cast into stone, and none will be deemed successful if it fails to incorporate into its very core a sense of dynamism, the ability to change as new circumstances dictate. The history of the use, misuse, rise, fall, and rise again of intelligence and its tests clearly testifies to the volatile nature of such determinations. It suggests that a project that took account of history seriously would, if nothing else, be sure that it saw all determinations and articulations of competencies as provisional, momentary, and continually open to modification. When the time for measurement comes, the trick will be to create instruments that can reveal such competencies without reifying them.

References


Defining and Selecting Key Competencies

Edited by
Dominique Simone Rychen
Laura Hersh Salganik

Hogrefe & Huber Publishers
Seattle · Toronto · Bern · Göttingen
2001