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**SOCIAL COMPETENCE — AN OVERVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY
RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

The concept of social competencies is indispensable in most fields of work concerning the social psychological and correctional work. Thousands of both scientific and practical publications discuss this topic. This article's first challenge is to define the construct of social competencies, to distinguish between similar concepts and to show essential problems concerning commonly used terms. In a second step we will discuss empirical results, whereas in a third segment we want to deliberate areas of application for social competencies. Concluding the article, an overview of future research tasks is given.

Key words: social competence, socially competent behavior, interpersonal intelligence, political skill

Introduction

These days an inflationary use of the term social competencies can be perceived. Using a well-known internet search engine, more than 2.9 million entries can be found. The high popularity in today's society is mirrored by many publications concerning this topic. When searching for the terms 'social competence' and 'social competencies' in the data bank PsycINFO, one can find more than 2.500 publications with these definitions in the title, and even more than 7.800 publications using those terms in their abstracts. Facing these formidable results, one could think that social competencies are among those psychological constructs that have been most profoundly examined. During further discussion we will show this would be a false conclusion.

Definition

The history of scientific discussion concerning the construct of social competencies is almost 100 years old, and has unearthed a variety of definitions and accentuations. We can agree upon the fact that social competencies are related to interactions between people. The question of how an interaction should be executed to be considered as successful is of interest, as well as which attributes an individual would have to possess or use to create a successful interaction. Two different traditions can be found concerning these enquiries.

On the one hand there are definitions which center on the aspect of enforcing one's own interests [13]. People who are considered socially competent must therefore be able to stand up for their own goals. According to circumstances they would have to enforce their interests at least partially against other

peoples' concerns. Those definitions usually have their origin in clinical psychology and stem from research fields engaged in behavior and perception of socially anxious people. It seems coherent from this deficit point of view to consider social competences primarily as enforcing own interests.

On the other hand there are definitions originating from developmental psychology which focus on adaptation [8]. Here, social competence means to be able to integrate oneself into society and furthermore, to internalize the society's norms and values. This can be seen as an important developmental task.

One can find definitions which include both aspects, if one detaches their view from those rather strict perspectives. Social competencies hence enable the individual to enforce their own goals without socially isolating themselves, breaching valid rules or spurning other peoples' conflicting interests. Social competencies allow for compromises between individuals' interests and those of their counterparts.

Most definitions do not differentiate explicitly between *potential* and *behavior*. Some even put competencies implicitly on the same level with observable behavior, although the term 'competence' rather suggests an accurate distinction. A person's visible behavior is a result of a variety of influencing factors, for example stable traits (degree of extraversion), current conditions (like moods or the state of pain), the counterpart's behavior (e.g. menacing or submissive), as well as situational conditions (e.g. pressure of time). Therefore, it would be near impossible to draw conclusions concerning a person's steady attributes from a one-time observation of one's social behavior [24]. One and the same person would show different social behavior in a changed setting without transforming their traits. The only way to determine attributes that are stable over time is by abstraction over different situations [21]. Literal sense shows that social competencies are a potential underlying one's own social behavior without determining that behavior to the full extent. Thus, a person can have distinctive social competencies, even though they can't solve every conflict in a constructive way. That can be most easily compared to an author who is considered brilliant, and yet not every work he writes down deserves a literary award. The more prominent the social competencies, the more likely it is that it leads to social competent behavior in a specific situation.

The use of plural in 'social competencies' suggests that it is a multidimensional construct (see table 2). Yet it is also conventional to apply the more abstract form of 'social competence'. This is assimilable to the term personality: What it means is an individual structure of parameter-values concerning different competencies.

Table 1 shows the definitions of socially competent behavior and social competence [16], as well as comparing those construct's central attributes.

While differentiating between general and specific social competencies, one can find consideration of specificity of situations [30, 33]. Whilst general competencies, like personality traits, are on a rather abstract level, specific competencies refer only to certain groups of situations, and are

therefore on a lower abstraction level. This is mirrored by using different types of measurements in diagnosing social competencies [18]. General social competencies are determined by using classical questionnaires or tests, wherein choice and definition of scales is derived from research. Specific social competencies in contrast are usually examined in interviews or behavior observations. In this case, choice and definition of competencies are determined locally or specifically for a certain domain. The same principle can be applied to developing practical instruments. A questionnaire that measures general competencies can be obtained from a test publisher — ultimately originating in research —, whereas an Assessment Center, that measures specific social competencies, is usually developed on-site for a certain position.

Table 1

Definitions of socially competent behavior and social competence

	socially competent behavior	social competence
Definition	behavior that enables a person in a specific situation to put their goals into effect whilst preserving that behavior's social acceptance [16]	entity of a person's knowledge, capabilities and skills which facilitates the quality — in the sense of the definition of social competent behavior — of one's social behavior [16]

In principle, most researchers argue that social competencies can be learned or changed by experiences [13, 17]. But the same restrictions can be applied for every learning process: Not every individual can be arbitrarily modified. Until now, there are no consolidated findings concerning how comprehensive the learning potential regarding social competencies really is. Behavior-related trainings like the Behavior Modeling (see below) thus far were able to show effects the size of a little more than one standard deviation ($d = 1.18$) [38].

The construct zone of social competencies consists of different, yet related constructs. The oldest one is that of *social intelligence* [26, 27]. In this concept, Thorndike (1920) includes the ability to understand people and to perform 'wisely' in social interactions. The definition is extremely imprecise. Additionally, the use of the word intelligence mainly suggests cognitive abilities. Classical instruments for measuring social intelligence, that were particularly developed during the first half of the last century, therefore consist primarily of cognitive tasks. Their problem was a lack of discrimination compared to general intelligence [26, 27]. In defiance of that limitation, the employment of that term is still common, even though it is now mostly used as a synonym for social competencies [27, 34].

Compared to that, the construct of *social skills* is much more precise. Every individual learns — during their socialization — how to act around other people to be socially successful, for example by using appropriate greeting rituals. This is a matter of both behavioral and cognitive skills [4]. Those skills are mainly determined by culture and can be considered as different components of social competence, or of socially competent behavior.

The highest regard in the last years has been reached by the construct of *emotional intelligence* [36]. Originally developed by Salovey und Mayer (1990),

it didn't receive much attention from the scientific community at first. After Goleman (1995) wrote a popular scientific bestseller under this label, the construct was then widely researched. In contrast to Goleman, the construct's authors' definition is very strict. It describes the understanding of one's own emotions as well as that of others. In addition to that, it refers to steering one's own emotions [27]. A person with a high emotional intelligence can, for example, deduce the counterpart's mood from their facial expression [7], and can understand why that person might be sad. Furthermore, that person can reflect on their own emotions and can understand where they're coming from, instead of simply being at their mercy. The steering of one's own emotions includes expressing them adequately.

Beyond that, there is a variety of associated constructs which aren't as historically significant as social intelligence, or didn't wake as much interest as emotional intelligence. Examples are the following concepts:

- *Interpersonal competencies* [5]: These facilitate a beneficial cooperation in close human relationships.

- *Interpersonal intelligence*: It describes the ability to both comprehend and influence the motives, emotions and intentions of others.

- *Intrapersonal intelligence*: The ability to understand and regulate oneself.

- *Political skill* [10]: This concept describes a set consisting of four different competencies (networking, influencing others, social craftiness, ostensive sincerity) which facilitate a fast rise in a job-related context. It is proposed that they also have a benefit for the employer, but can result in high-capacity associates' disloyal behavior during times of crisis.

These different approaches moving in the same construct zone can be distinguished by their amplitude as well as in regard to contents. Kanning suggests using the term 'social competencies' as a superordinate term whilst subordinating the other constructs [16, 18]. The term 'competence' has important advantages over the word 'intelligence': It not only regards cognitive potentials, but rather includes likewise the reflection and regulation of emotions without being restricted to those only. It also doesn't focus on certain types of interactions (e.g. close interpersonal relations) or settings (e.g. jobs). Furthermore, it allows for including both general and specific competencies on different levels of abstraction (from traits to very precise skills).

Theory

Even though social competencies have received much attention both in research and in practical fields, there are only few theoretical approaches and a systematic theoretical research has yet to be provided [37]. The approaches so far can be divided into two groups: structural models and process models. The first discuss which social competencies can be distinguished, whereas the latter describes the process of developing socially competent behavior.

Most *structural models* are limited to generating lists of social competencies, which are mostly plausible but could also be replenished by other similarly plausible concepts. This can best be seen when comparing different lists of

competencies. Buhrmester, Furman Wittenberg and Reis (1988) formulated a list of five competencies, while Faix and Laier (1991) have a list of 28. The competencies are on very different levels of abstraction. Three examples will illustrate this:

- Argyle (1969): gratification, dominance submission, extraversion and affiliation, composure, social anxiety, interaction skills, ability to change perspectives, sensitivity of perception.

- Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg and Reis (1988): initiating interactions, assertion, revealing personal information, emotional assistance, conflict management.

- Schuler and Barthelme (1995): communicative competence, cooperation and coordination skills, capacity for teamwork, ability to manage conflicts, interpersonal flexibility, role flexibility, assertion, empathy, sensibility.

Kanning (2009b) attempted to integrate those different lists of competencies. From more than 100 single competencies, a list of 17 primary competencies could be derived, which can further be assorted to four secondary factors (see table 1). Those four factors describe basic components in generating socially competent behavior (see table 2): People who show socially competent behavior have to be able to enforce their own interests (assertiveness) without neglecting the concerns of their social surroundings (social orientation). To adequately adjust their behavior, they also have to deal with themselves and their social environment (reflexibility). At last, a profound ability to control oneself is important for reaching goals (self-management).

Table 2

Factor-analytic deduction of four secondary factors of social competence [19]

second order factors	first order factors	Definition
social orientation	pro-sociability	positive attitude towards others and helpful behaviour
	adopting perspectives	
	pluralism	
	willingness to compromise	
	listening	
assertiveness	enforcing own interests	ability to come in contact with other people and to be engaged for one's own interests in social interaction
	readiness for conflict	
	extraversion	
	decisiveness	
self-management	self-control	ability to interact with others in a flexible, stable and goal-oriented way
	emotional stability	
	flexibility of action	
	self-efficacy	
reflexibility	impression management	ability and interest in reflecting one's own behaviour and that of other people
	direct self-awareness	
	indirect self-awareness	
	perception of others	

Process models of social competencies are about generating socially competent behavior and originate in very different traditions, although none of those models has been thoroughly researched.

Some of these models are rooted in communication psychology [11, 31] and center on exchanging information between sender and receiver. In this context, Riggio (1986) distinguishes between sending, receiving and controlling information, both on a verbal and a nonverbal level. Being successful in a social context therefore means a person's ability to express their own emotions on a nonverbal level, and also the ability to perceive the counterpart's emotions. They also have to be able to control their own emotions, for the sake of not showing their mood to everyone around. The same prevails for verbal information.

Most models are traditionally derived from cybernetics. They describe the genesis of socially competent behavior as a rational process following a control cycle [13]. Accordingly, the individual regulates their behavior by comparing the desired condition (target state) with the prevailing condition (current state), and thus selecting strategies to overcome possible discrepancies between those states. After executing a strategy, the individual evaluates if the gap was breached. If not, the control cycle begins anew until in the best-case scenario, they reach a satisfying state. Most of these models offer two problems [16]. For one, they are usually very general and could thus describe every controlled behavior, e.g. including driving a car. Specific social behavior falls by the wayside. Secondly, the fact that behavior in everyday life — and especially in familiar situations — is mainly determined by the use of heuristics and routines, rather than by rational behavior, is being ignored [see 2? 12]. Therefore, Kanning (2002, in preparation) differentiates between elaborated and automated processes of generating socially competent behavior. The first are modelled by the principle of control cycles, whereas the latter outline the use of unspecified decision heuristics, on which base everyday situations are analyzed and fitting behavior routines are selected. The process of elaborated genesis consists of several steps:

1. Analysis of the situation: The individual analyzes the social situation in regard to two aspects that result from the definition of socially competent behavior. The first is the own goals that are pursued in that situation, the second is the specific requirements of the social context.

2. Analysis of conduct options: The individual generates possible alternative behaviors which they could use in that specific situation, and assesses in how far these behaviors could lead them to their goals whilst doing justice to their social environment's demands. The alternative with best estimated results in both criteria will be chosen.

3. Implementation of behavior: The intended behavior is implemented by the use of skills.

4. Evaluation: The action possibly results in a changed situation, which now in turn is assessed concerning the achievement of own goals and social demands. If the situation was improved by the action, the process ends. If the situation is still dissatisfying, the individual will initiate a new behavior cycle.

Relevance

In light of these many studies we can only disclose a selective insight on the relevance of social competencies in a job-related context. For a wider view see the works of Gulotta, Bloom, Gulotta and Messina (2009), as well as Stough, Saklofske and Parker (2009b).

Social competencies have many *beneficial side effects* for the individual [19], e.g. a higher life satisfaction ($R = .45$ to $.52$, two samples), a more positive life orientation ($R = .67$), less physical ailments ($R = .48$) and a superior social integration ($R = .38$ to $.41$; two samples). If people have more pronounced social competencies, they also have wider social networks ($R = .28$), they are more satisfied as students are with their course situation ($R_{\text{business studies}} = .44$; $R_{\text{psychology}} = .33$), and they are less stressed by their studies ($R = .42$). Even though these findings are very positive, one has to be careful with generalizations, since the samples consisted mostly of university students and there are no meta-analyses yet to verify the results.

Many studies show the relevance of social competencies for *job-related success*. A meta-analysis conducted by O'Boyle, Humphrey, Pollack, Hawver and Story (2010) accounts for correlations between $.24$ and $.30$, whilst showing that social competencies have an incremental validity besides intelligence and the Big Five. Since social competencies facilitate the successful shaping of interactions in a job-related context, it is only fitting that individuals with more pronounced social competencies show higher ratings concerning job satisfaction ($R = .22$ to $.35$) and job performance ($R = .28$ to $.54$; six different samples) [19]. They also experience less job-related stress ($R = .21$ to $.52$; four different samples) [19].

It seems obvious that social competencies should be significant for *success in executive positions*, since classic and modern managing theories refer mostly to social behavior [32]. Several studies document the impact of social competencies on transformational leadership [14]. Studies that deal with the more specific construct of political skills (see above) prove the competencies' significance for employees' trust, job satisfaction and their job performance, as well as for the executives' efficiency, their reputation and the speed of their careers. In a field study by Walter and Kanning (2003), the job satisfaction of employees could be explained to more than 30 % ($R = .55$) by their executives' perceived social competencies. Two studies by Kanning (2014a) show slightly lower values ($R = .44$ and $.50$). Similar results can be found concerning the correlation between the executives' perceived social competencies and their employees' commitment ($R = .37$ to $.50$) [25]. Regarding the employees' self-perceived performance between 7 % and 50 % of the variance could be explained ($R = .27$ to $.71$) [25], depending on the operationalization. Meta-analyses have yet to be conducted.

Furthermore, service personnel's social competencies have positive effects for *clients*. A comparison of three lines of business (banking, retail, school) shows that the service personnel's social competencies — as perceived by the clients — were better able to predict the clients' overall satisfaction than the observed product quality, the personnel's expertise or the arrangement of

premises [24]. The explained variance amounted to 31 % (retail) and 48 % (banking).

Practice

The whole width of diagnostic measures can be used to *examine social competencies* [18, 27]. Tests for cognitive ability were already used in last century's twenties to measure social intelligence. Typical tasks were interpreting communicative symbols (e.g. the sign for victory) or arranging pictures of peoples' interactions in such an order of a coherent plot. The old methods' problem was the high correlation with general intelligence, which resulted in a very low incremental validity. Modern methods do not feature this weakness [3, 15].

Situational judgment tests are an especially innovative approach [6, 20]. Subjects are confronted with specific situations (written or video-based) that center on social behavior (e.g. customer complaints). The subjects then have to choose between different preset alternative behaviors, and they have to select the one with the best proposed outcome. Research focusses on methodical problems in construing items, for example rating vs. ranking of alternatives and finding a fitting solution key.

Alongside those tests, there are *questionnaires* which use the subjects' self-descriptions or perceptions by others. The latter allows for a comparison between one's own perception and that of others, which can be of interest in human resources development. Like with a 360-degree feedback, both an executive (self-perception) and related parties (e.g. line managers, employees, colleagues, clients; perception of others) fill in the questionnaire that is designed to describe the target subject's social behavior. Comparing the different results can lead to conclusions about potential impairments. Besides those specific instruments that measure only social competencies, there are also detached social components in each personality questionnaire [28].

Moreover, methods of *observing behavior* can be used to inspect social competencies. In a job-related context, this occurs for example by using behavior-based scales for performance evaluations in annual ratings or by conducting assessment centers [25]. An assessment center confronts the participant with exercises (role-plays, group discussions etc.) that simulate critical situations in everyday work life. The social behavior is rated by several independent observers. In contrast to tests and questionnaires — which usually were construed for various fields of work and occupational categories — performance evaluations and assessment centers are specifically designed for a requirements of an explicit job.

The diversity of methods also is very great concerning the field of *intervention* [17, 22].

Knowledge-based trainings offer declarative and procedural knowledge about phenomena, situations or behavioral rules for specific social situations to participants, for example conflicts or interactions in intercultural contexts. Besides conventional lectures, computer-based methods have been used more frequently during the last years [34]. The systems differ as to whether they

provide structured knowledge, of whether they also enable a learning quiz, online discussions or video-based simulations [23].

Behavior-based trainings go further and confront participants with real-life interactions. The first goal is to reflect one's own behavior. The next step is to develop new skills or optimize existing capabilities. Behavior modelling [38] has been proven as most effective: After the trainer introduces the specific topic (e.g. conflict in customer service) and learning goals are determined, subjects watch video sequences of day-today situations, which offer both positive and negative behavior examples. Then the subjects discuss the positive behavior under the trainer's guidance. In a next step, the desired behavior is practiced in role-plays. Afterwards, a feedback is given by the trainer and the other subjects. Also, the participant watches a video recording of their own performance to see their own behavior from the customer's perspective. The next step is a recurrent role-play, in which the subject has the chance to implement newly learned behavior. By repeating exercise and feedback, the desired behavior can be assembled.

Counsel-oriented approaches usually use a small circle of people. Mostly it is just a client and a counselor. Both meet repeatedly over a period of time to reflect on current problematic situations in a job-related context. One can distinguish between coaching and mentoring. In typical coaching sessions, a trained counselor from outside of the organization works with different target groups — from junior executives to the highest managing positions [29]. Mentoring is about accomplished employees and executives who chaperone younger associates, sometimes over many years [9, 39].

Multiple overall effects of those different intervention techniques were found for knowledge-related, behavior-related and counsel-oriented methods [in summary: 23], although research was seldom conducted with a focus on social competencies. Behavior-oriented methods are the exception. A meta-analysis by Taylor et al [38] found strong effects concerning knowledge and skills ($d = 1.2$ and $d = 1.18$). Attitudes and workplace behavior are more difficult to change ($d = .33$ and $d = .27$). This mirrors an important basic insight of evaluation research: Effects reached in trainings are lost in large part whilst trying to transfer attained knowledge or acquired skills from the training situation to everyday work life [1].

Conclusion

In spite of the capacious attention the construct of social competencies has been receiving both in research and the practical field, it is far from being systematically investigated.

The first — and probably most important — task for future research would be to empirically deduce relevant competencies.

The second great deficit is the lack of an empirically founded theory. All existing approaches are merely based on plausibility. The focus of further research, therefore, should be the question of how social competent behavior is created, and which function individual social competencies (or their interaction) have in creating this behavior. The practical benefit

of such a theory would be an enhancement of analysis concerning the causes of social incompetent behavior, as well as a systematic deduction of interventions. The issue of automated processes in behavior regulation in social situations seems especially interesting in this context, since most interactions in everyday life are probably determined primarily by such processes. Identifying cues that lead to (dys-)functional behaviors is particularly of interest.

The third duty would certainly be to develop integrating measuring techniques. So far, a variety of scales exist, and all of them were derived from different concepts. Also, there are those scales that originate from general personality questionnaires. On the one hand, this diversity mirrors the construct's bandwidth in different fields of psychology appropriately. On the other hand, it complicates all efforts to integrate the research's findings. Systematic research always calls for suitable measures that can be used consistently in numerous diverse studies.

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**СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ КОМПЕТЕНТНОСТЬ — ОБЗОР СОВРЕМЕННЫХ
ИССЛЕДОВАНИЙ И ПРАКТИК**

Резюме

Концепция социальных компетенций является незаменимой в большинстве сфер деятельности, связанных с социально-психологической и коррекционной работой. Тысячи научных и практических публикаций рассматривают эту тему. Первой задачей этой статьи является определение модели (конструкта) социальных компетенций, различать похожие концепции и выявлять основные проблемы, связанные с широким использованием терминов. На втором этапе обсуждаются эмпирические результаты, а в третьей части рассматриваются возможности применения социальных компетенций. В завершении статьи приведен обзор перспективных исследовательских задач.

Ключевые слова: социальная компетентность, социально ответственное поведение, межличностные взаимопонимание, политическое мастерство.

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**СОЦІАЛЬНА КОМПЕТЕНТНІСТЬ — ОГЛЯД СУЧАСНИХ
ДОСЛІДЖЕНЬ І ПРАКТИК**

Резюме

Концепція соціальних компетенцій є незамінною у більшості сфер діяльності, що пов'язані з соціально-психологічною та корекційною роботою. Тисячі наукових і практичних публікацій розглядають цю тему. Першим завданням цієї статті є визначення моделі (конструкта) соціальних компетенцій, розрізнення схожих концепцій і виявлення основних проблем, пов'язаних з широким використанням термінів. На другому етапі обговорюються емпіричні результати, а в третій частині розглядаються можливості застосування соціальних компетенцій. На завершенні статтю, наведено огляд перспективних дослідницьких завдань.

Ключові слова: соціальна компетентність, соціально відповідальна поведінка, міжособистісні взаєморозуміння, політична майстерність.

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