The point of observation ... is contextual

“It’s all in the eyes of the beholder” has become a sentence frequently used, whenever we want to stress that there is more than one view to a subject. This is the case not only in everyday usage, but has also become the raison d’être of constructivist research in the social sciences.

A basic constructivist point forms the opening argument of this paper. Reality is not a given thing, to be observed and perceived as a passive retrieval of data, but it is constructed and hence cannot be communicated without selection of information and interpretation. So asked what he meant by that and the passenger showed him a photograph: “This is my wife”, he said. While turning the photograph Picasso replied: “Is this your wife? She looks a bit small and flat to me”.

The point is that not even the best-exposed, most colourful detailed and precise photo can give a complete 1:1 description of the world it is said to represent – it has to leave out information. We do well in remembering that the same goes for concepts, which we have to break open for valuation and interpretation.

Thus, we can never come up with exhaustive, precise descriptions of the world, nor when dealing with competence in organizations.

What has struck me most, by looking at the subject of competence, is that although there are many diverse and sometimes contradictory definitions and conceptualisations of competence, people (practitioners, scholars and students) very often assume that despite totally different starting points they know what they

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are talking about when saying ‘competence’ and, more surprisingly, that they are all talking about the same thing!

Contradictions in context and assumptions about how we engage with the world and each other have adverse implications for both teaching and training practice of competence. If we base our practice on understanding we very easily risk “missing” the point or talking at cross-purposes due to our internal interpretations and assumptions about reality – just to mention one. Therefore, the point of departure for the discussions on competence and its contextuality in this paper is not one of understanding (in the sense complete comprehension), but one of connectedness or “attachability” (in the sense ability to follow a line of argument). I do not insist that the reader should understand and agree in every aspect, but ask him instead to see if he can ‘give a nod of recognition’ to the situations described and the points made.

Although I cannot deny that this paper was written in the faint hope of bringing some reflexivity and clarification into the discussion on competence (if not to others, then at least in my own mind). I do not intend to bring about one single, universal competence definition or understanding. In fact, ever since competence really came to form discussions and talks on organization and management from the 1980’s and onwards, a true profusion of interpretations and explanations have been offered. However, let us not despair of this lack of consensus, but instead accept the multiplicity of competence explanations and focus on the opportunities it offers.

What we can (and ought to) do is be aware of our basic assumptions about the world and our relations to it whenever we judge, observe or claim competence to be this or that. By being aware of our point of observation we can act out analytical precision and consciousness of choice in perspective when competencies are put into practice. But this reflexiveness requires a precise notion of context.

In this paper, I shall do two things: First I shall critically discuss the current treatment of the context of competence in the HRM literature and outline some of the underlying positions and problems in this debate. I wish to argue that in spite of the present interest in competence as a contextual concept it has not been made clear that context and the way to study it varies with the way the individual and the social (organization) is being set in relation to each other.

Secondly, I shall use the variations in the individual-social relation to sort out and propose three modes of contextual competence thinking (prescriptive, descriptive and analytical). By pointing to the distinct differences of each mode I intend to show their analytical strengths and weaknesses. As a result of this threefold competence framework I shall argue in favour of the third – the analytical mode practising a second order observation strategy.

But let us first take a look at how competence is being treated in the current HRM debate in order to “connect to” the practice and the context we are dealing with, when studying “competence”.

**Competence – a multifaceted and inescapable concept**

Within organizational and management debate in general and HRM in particular, competence has become a fundamental category from which we try to understand the terms of individuals, organizations and society in general (Hermann 2003). It looks as if competence has become the self-evident answer to the question from managers in all sectors of how to get a grip on the so-called knowledge society. However, this axiomatic approach adds very little in terms of conceptual clarification or consciousness of choice in perspective for that
matter, so let’s take a closer look at some concept(s) of competence.

The concept of competence is central to, and emerges from the HRM tradition in its modern use. The many ramifications of this tradition (psychology, economics, anthropology, political science, etc.) perhaps explain why concepts of competence include so many different meanings and assumptions. In a not so distant past competence was said to denote matters of law or fact, a form of authorisation. But today it has also become a quasi-economic concept (a resource), but also a key concept to psychology and pedagogy (Hermann 2003:30). Simultaneously it signifies a personal level of development of identity and a competitive advantage for communities in organizations. In this sense competence is said to entail and combine what is good (in an ethical sense) and what is needed (in a market orient-ed sense) (Hermann 2003:14).

Although competence is no doubt a significant concept in modern society, its diverse use includes a whole range or complex of problems. It has been argued that the concept of competence has become what William E. Con-nolly has called ‘essentially contested’, a concept without a definite core but subject to an ongoing battle of its content, meaning and limitations (Connolly, 1993 in Hermann, 2003:11). However, this does not mean that the concept is not important and should be rejected. On the contrary a critical treatment and discussion is needed, which is what will be done in this paper by juxtaposing different conceptualisations of competence and their contextuality.

Within the HRM tradition, the concept of competence has to a large extent been treated as if it was bound to the individual, conceptualised as skills, abilities, mastery, proficiency, know-how, etc. (Boyatsis 1982, Spencer & Spencer 1993, Woodruffe 1990, Nordhaug et al. 1998). Along with this understanding human beings have been seen as a strategic resource, which organizations must explore (and exploit) in order to build organizational capabilities and attain competitive advantage in a highly competitive economic context (Kamoche, 1996, Sanchez 2002, Saá-Pérez & García-Falcón 2002). But recently theoreticians have argued this view as being insufficient and have expressed a need for including competence seen as an inter-subjective, social and relational phenomenon (Wenger 2000, Jensen & Prahl 2000, Gringer 2002). This approach claims to pay attention to the context and the specific conditions under which humans and organizations are constructed. Humans are not resources, but socially formed identities (Steyaert 1998:5). Yet another, still emerging, competence practice is one investigating competence from a second order observation strategy perspective (Danelund & Jørgensen 2002, Bramming & Frandsen, 2003 and to some extent Andersen & Born 2001). This implies that competence is abandoned as having an a priori essence. The object of observation is not competence per se (individual or social) but the way competence is communicated in concrete practice. And what is developed is not generic skills or abilities, but what we may call the competency to develop competencies (Danelund & Jørgensen 2002). These movements are indeed overlapping and diverse but nevertheless important to pay attention to.

As argued from the beginning of the paper, context and especially the way it is interpreted is of central importance when we want to pay attention to the many competing conceptualisations of competence that exist in everyday practice. By being aware of how context is being interpreted one can make explicit on what conditions this conceptualisation of competence should be valued and what points of critique can be raised meaningfully. On a more pragmatic scale the context of competence is important as to provide nuanced descriptions
of competence in everyday practice comprehensible to the people you engage with (employees, colleagues, students, etc.). Furthermore it raises the possibility of connecting when communication is practiced (instead of producing noise or having the feeling that one talks at cross-purposes).

The movements in the concepts of competence hinted at above will be further explored in the following sections. First I will show how different ways of expressing the individual-social relation have consequences for the concepts of competence. Then I will move on to the three suggested modes of contextualised competence thinking (prescriptive, descriptive and analytical). What will be concluded is firstly that the relation between the individual and the social is not to be seen as a dichotomy when we want to develop the concept of competence and secondly that the analytical mode does provide the best possibilities of innovating the context, making competence an “open” concept.

**Overcoming the individual-social dichotomy**

This paragraph explores the movements in the concepts of competence indicated above and shows that the perception of individual and organization and the way they are set in relation to one another sets the framework for what the context of competence may become.

As already suggested in this paper, concepts of competence have often been ascribed to individuals. An example is the debate on competencies versus qualifications (e.g. Jensen & Prahl 2000; Hermann 2003, Bramming & Larsen 1995). This debate centres on qualifications as being reserved for denoting professional skills, something you have and can attain – while competencies in addition is said to include the personal level something you are (Hermann 2003; Gringer 2002).

Building this dichotomy (between qualifications and competencies) adds little to the content of competence but sets certain decisive limits for the context of competence central to the reasoning behind seeing competencies (and human beings) as resources. This discussion is important not least due to the fact that competence in many cases is being practised as a replacement for and an alternative to qualifications, which gathered speed with the rise of Human Resource Management in the 1980’ties and 90’ties (Legge 1995:286, Gringer 2002:70). Traditionally, qualifications valued the individual human being in objective and purely professional terms, common in taylorised studies of industrial sociology (Hermann 2003:33, see also Taylor 2001 [1916]). But while qualifications today are to some extent seen as an ‘altmodish’ concept bound to a firm belief in the usefulness of describing the performance of work, competencies take up a broader agenda. Thus, studies on competence include and combine market research with different notions of the human and the knowledge forms of psychology, sociology and educational theory and practice (e.g. White 1959, Bramming & Larsen 1995).

The underlying assumption, within this view, seems to be that competencies refer to the individual / the workforce as being in possession of certain bodies of knowledge and strategies of action that should match the demands given by job descriptions / the labour market. Competencies are closely connected to the performance of work and when someone wants to investigate which competencies are needed the obvious way to do this is through a gap-analysis. The following calculation formulated by Gringer, (2002:16) nicely sums up the logic of the gap-analysis:

\[
\text{What we are supposed to do (minus) What we can do / are capable of doing equals What we are missing}
\]
It is on the basis of such calculation (or line of thought) that the gap between the current competence situation of the individual and the future organizational needs for development is typically being “filled” by investing in education and training. This makes the relationship between individual and organization one of external character andfixes the context. On the one hand the individual employee may have certain possibilities of acting competently but has to adapt and adhere to the organizational needs (given from outside market demands) in order to stay current and functional. On the other hand, the purpose of the organization (in relation to competence development) is continuously to offer employees training and learning possibilities to ensure that it has a competent and motivated workforce, geared to meet the new technological and organizational changes (Rogachewskaw et al. 1999:61). This relation between individual and organization makes competence a question of finding the right match — securing both internal employability (individuals displaying competencies for the good of the company) and external employability (individuals building competencies useful on the labour market in general) (Saá-Pérez & García-Falcón 2002:124).

As will be explored in the next section, this kind of analysis is still very influential among researchers and HR practitioners. Nevertheless, there is a growing tendency to regard the gap method as being too simple and too reduc- tive towards the complexity of the everyday practice of organizations (Bramming & Larsen 2000, Gringer 2002). While just a few years ago the gap method and the attribution of competencies as an individual phenomenon was the predominant perspective, recent research advocates competing and more diverse views:

“A movement in the research on competence development can be identified: going in the direction of a more contextualised approach trying to take into account the relation between individual and organization and the importance of consciousness of choice of perspective in development.” (Bramming and Larsen 2000: 78).

The critique of the gap method and what is being called “contemporary thoughts demonstrated in the educational system, management practice and mainstream literature on organiz- ation” is rampant and diverse (Jensen & Prahl 2000:8; see also Bramming & Frandsen 2003 and Gringer 2002).

First of all, it is stated that the gap method does not take into account the views of the participants, but relies on the decision-makers, the gap analyst’s view of the need for training, competencies, etc. In emphasising ‘gaps’, ‘needs’ and ‘missing competencies’ this line of thought calls for someone to decide what is a gap, who has the need and what competencies is one individual short of (though it is often not stated this way, but hidden beneath test results, analysis reports, etc.). Another point of critique raised is that ‘gap thinkers’ seem to have the capability to foresee and describe all qualifications and competencies needed to perform work; if not, how were they to decide what actions needed to be taken. Thirdly, competencies are to be found, developed and measured in individuals in generic terms without taking mutual interaction into account (Spencer & Spencer 1993, Woodruffe 1990), thereby leaving the context out of the question.

Influential parts of the literature on competence stress the mutual interaction between the individual and its surroundings (Lave & Wenger, 1991, Wenger 1998, 2000; see also Weick 1995). Central to this approach is a view of competence focusing on the relation between individual and the organization, where:
“context, practice and the interplay with other individuals under specific joint organizational conditions, are decisive for both the exertion and development of ‘individual’ competencies situated in a cultural, political and historical setting.” (Gringer 2002:17f, my translation).

This approach emphasises the dynamic interplay between many actors at the same time and argues in favour of seeing competence as an inter-subjective process (Jensen & Prahl 2000). Words like inter-human relationships, social processes and dynamic, historical settings are keys to understanding how this notion of context comes about. The context of competence becomes one of reciprocal action. But yet, this view has also substantial implications for the way in which the context is being defined. Seen from the outside a critical point can be that by giving priority to the social and relational aspects of competence, the context tends to become the watchword in every situation and thus, risks becoming an analytical imprecise category since context denotes everything and nothing at the same time.

In recent years a growing critique (or rather another notion of the relation individual-organization) has been posed to the social and relational perception of competence. Within literature on HRM and competence this critique has been raised from ‘theoretical’ as well as more ‘practical’ points of departure (Danelund & Jørgensen 2002, Bramming & Frandsen 2003). However, it should be noted that theory and practice are not separable, on the contrary they are mutually interdependent. That there is no fixed place (theoretical or practical) outside the context stresses the need for a conception of reflection in action and a conceptualisation of competence as a second order phenomenon. The question of competence all boils down to the competency to develop competence. What competence is must always emerge as a result of a concrete valuation (Bramming 2001). In this approach the concept of competence may be connected to an individual, but is not given any meaning until it appears in a concrete context. The level of analysing competence is conceptual and communicational not ontological. It is in this sense that competence, as a practical concrete concept, is said to be “empty” (Bramming & Frandsen 2003:60). But again this view too, has its limitations. Firstly it should be noted that a theory of second order needs a first order practice to reflect upon, secondly it does not provide answers to what to do, but focus on how we can think otherwise.

To sum up, this paragraph has shown that the notion of context is not just context but different movements co-exist from an individualised over a social and relational view to a conceptualisation of competence as en ‘empty’ concept. I do not contend that these approaches are universal, although some might say that they are overlapping – that there are no hard-and-fast boundaries – but by exploring how the relation between individual and organization is structured one can identify different possibilities of developing the concept of competence. In short, declaring competence a concept that should be sought for in a specific context is not precise enough, since ‘context’ can have many different meanings depending on the context! Being aware of one’s notion of individual, organization and the relation between them is key when we want to analyse a person’s or a group of people’s view on competence but also on a more operational level if we want to change that view.

**Conceptualisations of competence and its contextuality**

Turning to contextualised theory on competence, this section will distil three different conceptualisations of competence, building on the previous learning points on the relation
between individual and organization. In doing so, this paragraph produces the opportunity of making a considered and reflective choice when engaging in discussions, theorisation and the practical and strategic handling of competence. The references that form the argumentation of the three modes are chosen in order to underline the differences between the three modes. Of course there are grey zones, and the authors mentioned, may also decline to be categorised this way. Nevertheless, the three-fold competence conceptualisation is to be seen as an invitation to strategic reflection when dealing with competence and to see if the advanced argumentation performs on the terms stated and thus makes sense.

A prescriptive approach

One conceptualisation of competence is what I will call *prescriptive* in the sense that this mode stresses the use and application of competencies (i.e. can be identified as mapping out the resources of the firm or masking out the need for competence development).

One such example is the “Human Resource Competency Study” conducted by researchers from University of Michigan Business School led by professors Wayne Brockbank and David Ulrich. In an article in the Institute of Management and Administration’s Human Resource Department Management Report called: “5 key competencies that HR managers must have to stay current” the professors ask:

“What separates HR in high-performing firms now is the ability to apply that knowledge – contributing to strategic decision making, developing competitive cultures, making change happen fast and creating market-driven connectivity” (IOMA’s HR Dept. Management Report, Aug. 2003: 3ff).

To make such goals achievable – becoming a high-performing firm and an updated, superior manager – you should be in possession of certain skills and abilities. But what does this tell us about the context of competence? By looking at the way the human is thematised and is set in relation to the organization we can gain a clearer view of the underlying assumptions about competencies and their context and how these assumptions rule our views and influence our actions.

Ontologically, the premises of the prescriptive conceptualisation of competence starts with a human being who is a bundle of motives (needs, sentiments, drives – the terms vary but mean approximately the same) inspired by pioneering organizational psychologists like McGregor and McClelland and applied to competence theory by e.g. Boyatis 1982, Woodruffe 1990 and Spencer & Spencer 1993. In the words of Boyatis competence is defined as:

“An underlying characteristic of a person. It could be a motive, trait, skill, aspect of one’s self-image or social role, or a body of knowledge which he or she uses.” (Boyatis 1982 in Woodruffe 1990:47, italics added).

In the view of Boyatis, competence is directly connected with effective or excellent performance. A competent person is simply a superior performer. Boyatis operates with a generic competency model that has been used extensively among big companies like IBM, Microsoft, etc. The model consists of 12 job
competencies associated with 5 managerial styles (Boyatsis 1982). The top performer is the one who possesses the highest number of competencies and is capable of controlling the five styles, when the time is right.17

The leading idea is, as within the ‘human resource competency study’, that the competencies of the individual are not adjusted to managerial and organizational imperatives. Discord sets in. Some operation must be performed in order to achieve harmony. The adjustment is one of attitudes, feelings, emotions, etc. and should result in ‘fitting’ individual needs to organizational goals. That the drive for competence is not at all new, was already shown by Viteles, who though writing in another tradition makes it very explicit:

... [A]mong the continuing needs of modern industry is a better understanding of the factors which underlie the will-to-work and of the conditions or devices which can most effectively arouse or release these inner forces which lead the employee to participate willingly, fully, and satisfyingly in furthering the production aims of industry. (Viteles 1953 in O’Connor 1999:237).

This ideal of creating congruity between the interest, needs and goals of the organization and the will, desires and needs of the individual is the central turning point in the prescriptive conceptualisation of competence. From this analysis we can conclude that the prescriptive notion of the individual-social relation is concerned with finding the right fit or match (similar to what previously in this paper was described as the gap method).

Visually, the individual-social relation, and movement from gap to match, can be put this way:

![Diagram](image)

But what does finding the right match mean? What implications for action in context does it have? So far, in this prescriptive approach, we have been able to describe competence in terms of a personal trait, motive or skill, bound to the individual. From an outside point of view this could give rise to certain problems, because how does one manage, direct or control the attitudes, feelings, and emotions of an employee without a specific (dynamic?) notion of the context? The quick and evident answer from the “inside” is that context should not be made dynamic but instead constant.

One influential theoretician (at least in northern Europe) who explicitly deals with these problems and still can be said to operate
within the prescriptive competence approach is Odd Nordhaug. Nordhaug defines competencies as *knowledge, skills and abilities that can be used to perform work* (Nordhaug et al. 1998:21). At first this definition seems to coincide with Boyatsis, Woodruffe, Spencer & Spencer and others as they too have mentioned skills, abilities and bodies of knowledge as characteristics of competence. And though there are similarities, Nordhaug states to have moved away from using the classical gap method (Nordhaug et al. 1998:25) by taking factors like internal mobility, employee turnover and demographic analysis in active career planning into account. Though this can be questioned, as has been done e.g. by Bramming (2001), it is more relevant for this paper to look at Nordhaug’s explicit notion of the relation between the individual and the organization and how this relation can be described and developed.

Nordhaug operates with a three-step relationship between the individual and organizational level. By dividing the conceptualisations of competence into three; an individual resource, how competencies enter the organizational system (the competence chain) and finally the relation between individual and organization (competence bases) the aim is to build up a complex (yet operational) conceptual framework of how to develop and build competencies — bridging the individual and the social (Nordhaug et al. 1998).

From the knowledge, skills and abilities that can be used to perform work, Nordhaug distinguishes between formal competence (proven education and experience) and real competence (used in the practice of work). This would mean that exams and formal qualifications and certificates are not sufficient to tell whether a person renders competent or not. Further, Nordhaug typologises competence according to specificity to the organization or the task as follows: Meta-competencies, operational standard competencies, intra-organizational competencies, and unique competencies (Nordhaug et al. 1998:44ff).

The organizational level is being described in terms of organizational skill, organizational knowledge, organizational memory and special competencies (Nordhaug et al. 1998:76ff). The idea is that the organization is an aggregated level comprised of individual skills plus collective synergy potential arising from human interaction. Although it is of great importance to Nordhaug it remains less detailed than the individual competence level.

In this sense Nordhaug may be said to be on the borderline between individual and more social conceptualisation of competence, but still shares the premises of the prescriptive mode, shown above:

- Competence is mainly an individual phenomenon, determined by market conditions.
- The organizational level is described only scarcely or not at all, giving substance to the context from an individual point of view.
- The relation between individual and organization is an external trade-off — individual needs should be fitted to organizational goals (even according to Nordhaug).

Overall, the prescriptive perspective seeks to explain the use and application of competence on an individual level and is pretty successful in doing so. However, the substantial point that is being left out of the question is how the individual becomes competent when interacting with other individuals in a specific organizational setting. This does not mean that the notion of context is being left out, but instead that context is described as a fixated and aggregated individual level.

A descriptive approach

Another contextual approach to competence is one that stresses the social aspects of compe-
tence (arisen from a theory of social learning). I have called this position descriptive, due to its extensive and well-developed use of concepts that gives the context richness unseen in the more prescriptive approaches. Thus, this conceptualisation takes another point of departure. Focus is on understanding and giving meaning to the (organizational) context of competence, not the exact application competencies and carrying out of competent action.

This is probably due to a different view on context (observable in theory on organizational knowledge), as Tsoukas states:

“Firms are faced with radical uncertainty; they do not, they cannot, know what they need to know.” Consequently “…a firm has no control over its members dispositions, which are derived from their past socialisations in contexts outside the firm”. “This influences the organization which are seen as: “being in constant flux, out of which the potential for the emergence of novel practices is never exhausted – human action is inherently creative. Organizational members do follow rules but how they do so is an inescapably contingent-cum-local matter.” (Tsoukas 1996:22).

Following this statement, the gap method cannot be the way of describing the individual-social relation, because we can never now in advance, what we need to know. But what we can do is try to come up with more detailed descriptions of practice, sensitive to the interactions between individual and organization and concentrate on how strategies of action are structured under locally determined conditions. This is exactly what Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998, 2000) have sought to do by developing the concept of communities of practice as such was a reaction to a dominant scholastic and cognitive approach to learning. The basic claim is that learning is not a distinct activity isolated within the walls of educational institutions, rather learning is seen as part of everyday activities, and, accordingly, learning is seen as participation in practice; i.e. learning describes a process of becoming a competent member of a community in an organization. In Wenger (2000) it is stated even more direct, linking knowledge and competence:

“Knowing, therefore, is a matter of displaying competencies defined in social communities”…”Socially defined competence is always in interplay with our experience” (Wenger 2000:226).

The assumption is that learning as participation in practice is a double process of both reproducing the community and developing identity. As stated, this particular social theory claims that the issues of social order and concerns about development of identity are two sides of the same coin. The individual and the social are understood at the same analytical level of negotiation of meaning.

In an attempt to become more precise about how individuals participate in social learning systems Wenger (2000) divides his theory on social learning into three ‘structuring elements’: Communities of practice, Boundaries processes between these communities and Identity, as shaped by our participation in these communities (Wenger 2000:226).

Central to our intention of finding out what structures the individual-social relation when being competent, is Wenger’s notion of identity:

“An identity is not an abstract idea or a label, such as a title, an ethnic category, or a personality trait. It is lived experience of belonging (or not belonging).” (Wenger, 2000:239).
The difference from the prescriptive approach is clear. Here, not the static (gap followed by a match) is the centre of our attention but instead the dynamic two-way relationship between people and the social learning systems in which they participate (Wenger 2000:227). The notion of the individual-social relation in the descriptive mode can thus be visualised as this:

![Diagram of individual (Ind.) and organization (Org.) with a relation between them](relation_between_ind_and_org.png)

It should be noted that the relation is not a replacement for the ‘gap’, and not one relation only, but signifies instead multiple movements (fast or slow, many or few) between individuals and the context from which they operate. Wenger envisages the relation as one of combining personal transformation with the evolution of social structures (Wenger 2000:227).

With this notion of context in mind, what we now can come closer is a more precise description of what competence can be. Contrary to the prescriptive conceptualisation, which focuses primarily on the individual (and its knowledge, skills and abilities) the descriptive approach insists on including the social process of interaction. The basic premise is that competence becomes observable in the doing. Accordingly competencies have to be valued as something emerging from the practice of work, and this emerging process is socially constructed. In this view competence can only be regarded as competence in relation to something or in comparison to someone (Bramming & Larsen 2000; Jensen & Prahl 2000). When context matters it becomes even more important to highlight the social aspects of competence. Because work initially is being carried out with other people, competence cannot be isolated, but must be understood by humans who interact, interpret and give meaning to the ‘lifeworld’ they engage in (to borrow a notion from the old phenomenologist Alfred Schütz). The social reality is co-constituted by the subjective interpretation of individuals, and is a projection of the observable, especially external physical aspects of individual behaviour. (Schütz 1932 in Collin 2003:22).

But although the inter-subjective nature of competence is given priority, competence is still enacted by individuals. The descriptive conceptualisation of competence does not remove the individual as a participating actor, but pinpoints the enactment of many players acting simultaneously, thereby making the individual level incomplete in a descriptive conceptualisation of competence (Jensen & Prahl 2000:30).

The descriptive conceptualisation of competence bears the characteristics of:

- mutual interaction between individuals acting in a dynamic interplay with each other
- a constant flux of personal transformation and structural evolution.

The critique raised against this position can be summed up in the question: If context is the dynamic interplay of mutually interacting individuals what more precisely is context? Or to put it in another way, what is not context?

**An analytical approach to competence**

A third conceptualisation of competence is one that distinguishes itself by neither giving ontological priority to the individual or the organizational aspects of competence nor to the relation between individual and organization, defined as dynamic movements in the above mentioned sense. Instead this approach argues in favour of applying an analytical view, where individual and organization emerges in the communication about them, not as entities,
but as system and environment to one another (e.g. Luhmann, 1993).

In recent years a range of competence thinkers have taken up what we may call an analytical system’s approach (Andersen & Born 2001, Danelund & Jørgensen 2002, Bramming & Frandsen 2003). With inspiration from thinkers like Niklas Luhmann, Michel Foucault, Laclau & Mouffe and Pierre Bourdieu, this approach centres on communicative action and the use of concepts as the basis for analysis. I will not in this paper dig deeper into the epistemological and ontological challenges of putting these references under the same label, but limit myself to stating that it has been done by the above-mentioned writers on competence.

19 Denoting this approach, analytical stems from the fact that these approaches insist on making communication about individuals and organizations and not individuals, organizations etc. per se the analytical point of reference. Furthermore, on a more operational scale, it can be said to focus on how strategic reflection is being made possible in certain organizational contexts (Danelund & Jørgensen 2002). One of the main characteristics in prescriptive competence conceptualisation was the firm belief in an organization’s ability to foresee which competencies were needed in the future, thus bringing this “future need” into the present and acting in accordance with it.

The analytical approach abolishes the ability to make prophecies, as if we could foresee the future but this does not mean that we cannot act strategically against events that we expect to happen in the future, but we have to plan with the present as the starting point. It is expressed rather precisely by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger:

“The future is not later, than what has been (the past) and this is not earlier than the present” (Heidegger 1927, in Bramming & Frandsen 2003:235, my translation from German)

The analytical perspective does not deny the fact that competence development implies an idea of strategic planning related to future situations (Danelund & Jørgensen 2002). But following the quotation from Heidegger, what the observation of future competencies is about is how the individual and the organization are constructed as identities in the present. Pictures of the future and the past are nothing but constructions made in the present (Bramming & Frandsen 2003:235). This temporal view has decisive consequences, when competence is being used in organizations to promote scenarios of development, change and innovation (and also when we want to come closer to what the context, the organization can become). The statement by one of Shell Oil’s top scenario planners, Kees van der Heijden, is an interesting reminder:

“The traditional rationalistic approach to strategic management with its emphasis on the organization as a unitary actor is of limited help here. … Human beings and organizations do not act in response to reality but to an internally constructed version of reality.” (Van der Heijden 1996 in Danelund & Jørgensen 2002:228f, italics added)

Although v.d. Heijden writes with specific strategy scenario teams in mind the communicative constructivist view of the organization mentioned in the statement makes good sense and gives a direction towards where the analytical approach notion of context is heading. The organization cannot be envisaged as a unitary actor. This combined with the notion of making communication about individuals and not the individual in itself the point of reference enables us to state that individual and
organization must stand in an immanent or internal relation to each other. A visualisation of the analytical notion of the individual-social relation, as has been given with the two other conceptualisations, would look like this:

![Diagram of individual and organization mutually connected and emerging from practice](image1)

![Diagram of individual and organization observable as the marked and unmarked side of a difference](image2)

The individual and the organization are intertwined in the sense that mentioning one does give meaning without mentioning the other – they emerge from the same practice in which they are studied. When studied, though, the analytical process of observation makes a selection with the one side being the marked and the other being unmarked.

"Observation is nothing but making a distinction to indicate one side and not the other" (Luhmann, 1993:774).

With this notion in place, let’s move on to a more precise conception of competence within the analytical mode. Though there are differences among the authors mentioned in this approach (as there are with every other conceptualisation), the concept of competence can be said to concern the individual but is not given any meaning until the way it appears in social relations is pointed out in the communication (Danelund & Jørgensen 2002:150).

An interesting point, which distinguishes the analytical approach from the prescriptive and descriptive perspectives is the fundamental firm belief that competence is not something to be introduced or implemented in the organization, it is already there, to be developed, managed and controlled observable at a communicational level (Bramming & Frandsen, 2003; Danelund & Jørgensen, 2002).

The appearance of competence in a specific act of communication calls for a communicative valuation of competence (Bramming & Frandsen 2003:282ff). Communication is always a selection of possible processes wherein information is one (Kneer & Nasehi 1997:86). Competence then, as a concept, is empty, without content, until it is given a specific meaning. This is a fundamentally different approach from large parts of the current HRM debate, in which one may observe a whole range of competence collocations: Communication competence, social competence, learning competence, cultural competence, innovative competence, and self-management competence. There is virtually no limit to the prefixes attached to the concept of competence. What the analytical notion suggests is
that competence should be kept open to be “filled” in the concrete context.

Let us take a brief example. If an organization and its members attach importance to external courses as the way of developing competence, competence becomes something distinct from the daily practice of work. The same organization may also value daily operations over and above external courses – e.g. that tasks are always finished within the time limit set beforehand. Imagine a situation where a management consultant finds out that the way to practice development in the department is by taking a different approach to the employee’s competencies (e.g. on-the-job-training). Given this, the communication makes a concrete selection and valuation of finishing tasks (operations) over competency development (external courses) and thus makes development impossible to carry out. It might have been possible, if competence were allowed to be given another concrete meaning by practising the analytical second order perspective.

From the above-mentioned presentation of the analytical approach it might appear that this second order mode of competence is the one and only thing. So why do we not just practise this way of thinking if it is so excellent? The point (of critique) is that to have a competence theory of second order you have to have a first order, it cannot be the one and only competence practice. In addition, the analytical approach to competence may be good for reflection and developing new ideas, but it is not good for direct action. A first order competence thinking entails in other words advantages of pace (Bramming & Frandsen, 2003:167). This is to say that other ways of contextual competence thinking (e.g. gap-analysis and rationalistic planning) can be practiced and should not be abandoned. But choosing these techniques should always include a conscious awareness of the disadvantages of doing so. Furthermore, the analytical mode in criticising other (e.g. more rationalistic) approaches has often assumed that the notion of context is based on the same premises (Bramming & Frandsen 2003:76ff). But as this paper has shown there are distinct ontological differences in the way the relation between individual and organization is practised, and this does not imply that seeing context as a fixed, or as a dynamic relationship for that matter does not exist. From the discussion on the analytical conceptualisation of competence and its context it follows that:

- competence is always empty (until it is given meaning)
- it is subject to concrete valuations and it is observable at a communicational level.
- The relation between individual and organization is seen as immanent and internal

This makes the context comprehensible as something that emerges in the “eyes of the beholder” – at the communicative level of second order observation. Though, as with the two other conceptualisations, there is also critique to be raised against this third competence mode.

**Discussion: Innovating the context?**

The description of the analytical competence conceptualisation rounds off the three modes of contextualised competence thinking. In this concluding section I will discuss the implications of taking one or the other perspective and thereby sum up how they contribute to the possibilities of being competent in an organizational context. By pinpointing the elements of critique, this discussion should make it clear to the reader the purposes and the analytical strengths of each of the modes. As mentioned earlier I will come to the conclusion that the analytical perspective provides the best opportunity of innovating context and raising possibilities of developing the concept of compe-
tence. But let us first take a look at what have been stated so far. The following is a schematic overview of the distinct characteristics of the three modes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Context, (relation between individual-organization)</th>
<th>Concepts of Competence</th>
<th>Output</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prescriptive</td>
<td>Bundle of motives, seen as a strategic resource</td>
<td>External, Economic trade-off</td>
<td>– Market-defined competitive advantage</td>
<td>Serve as implementable and applicable guidelines for actions, strategies etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>State of harmony</td>
<td>– Knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>Understood on social terms internalising norms and values. Is a result of “lived experience of belonging”</td>
<td>Dynamic interplay, Focus on relations</td>
<td>– Socially defined, – Interplay between personal transformation and structural change</td>
<td>Provide “thick” descriptions of practice sensitive to the social nature of human interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical</td>
<td>Is created on the discursive level, but outside point of analytical reference. A phenomenological embodied view is often practiced</td>
<td>Immanent, Internal State of differentiation</td>
<td>– Empty category, – Subject to concrete valuations in practice</td>
<td>Develop a conceptual framework for how competence can be thought and practiced as a strategic reflection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In a very condensed form, one might say that each of the three conceptualisations thematises competence differently in a certain way:

- The prescriptive mode – thematise competence as a individualised market metaphor
- The descriptive mode – thematise competence as a social role metaphor
- The analytical mode – thematise competence as an ‘empty’, emerging metaphor

The market metaphor in the prescriptive mode arises due to the perception of the organization operating on market terms, having the market decide demands for change and innovation, etc. The individual is in a state of mutual dependency and possesses competencies to function within an economic rationality. The optimum is a state of harmony, where the individual serves the needs of the organization and also fulfils its own drive for self-realisation. Seen from an organizational point of view competencies are the competitive advantages and humans are the resources of the firm (Saá-Pérez & García-Falcón 2002; Nordhaug et al. 1998).
In the descriptive mode the organization becomes the community in which competent action can take place, further it is the locus where individuals display their modes of belonging (Wenger 1998, 2000). Competence is understood in terms of the social role each individual plays. By giving life to these multiple different roles the context can be understood from a state of ambiguity having many individuals interacting and influencing each other at the same time.

The analytical mode claims the organization to be what emerges through a specific strategy of observation making organization the environment to the individual and vice versa. The context can then be understood as being in a state of differentiation, one has to specify which context and on what conditions this context exists. Competence then, in this view is empty in the sense that it is given substance and meaning in a concrete practice, where it is observable as valuations of actions (Bramming & Frandsen 2003).

What this paper has shown is that users and readers of competence theory should be aware of the consequences of choice in perspective. Each of the three modes of contextualised competence thinking described here has its purposes and strengths, but can also be criticised. While the prescriptive mode claims to be good at pointing out competencies needed to fill gaps through action programmes it also has an idea of the optimal organization as being in a state of harmony. This state brings about the need for adaptation between the individual and the organization (gap-analysis). The critique of the gap analysis is that it lacks recognition of the context. On the other hand one can also say that the prescriptive mode indeed takes the context seriously, to such an extent that it constantly seeks to make it fixable or ‘freezeable’.

The descriptive mode seems to provide an extensive formulation of the dynamics of competence development sensitive to the social aspects and processes of competence. By taking up notions like ‘communities of practice’, emphasising the social and relational aspects of learning processes, competence becomes understandable as something else than individualised knowledge, skills and abilities. The critique raised here is that it lacks precision and analytical categories for analysis.

Obviously the critique raised against the prescriptive and descriptive modes cannot be advanced from “inside” these modes, but must be stated from a position “outside”. This position I have called the analytical mode – the second order observation strategy. This mode offers an analytically precise communications approach knowing that it is contingent thus providing a conceptual framework needed for change of thought. By taking up the luhmannian notion of difference and second order observing, this mode insists on analytical precision on a conceptual level. Nevertheless this mode also seems to lack an explicit description of what context is and what it can do to the concrete valuations of practice that competence emerges in. Unfortunately the analytical conceptualisation has so far displayed a tendency to criticise other modes of competence by assuming that they too have the same notion of context (probably due to the need for positioning itself from other competence conceptualisations).

So what?! One sceptical reader might ask. Now we have been given three modes of contextual competence thinking, what to do? What’s next? Seen from the author’s point of view, the analytical second order mode should be explored further at the expense of the prescriptive and descriptive approaches as “the best alternative”. There are two reasons for this, in addition to those already mentioned (connectedness instead of understanding as conceptual demand, the individual-social relation as a mutual interdependent and emerging relation and the second order perspective mak-
Firstly, there is a growing tendency of viewing the world as changing faster and faster (new technological breakthroughs, the internationalisation of markets, new working procedures etc., etc.). And this tendency is supported by prescriptive competence thinking in expressing the belief of finding the right competencies for every situation (if we just keep looking).

The analytical competence mode takes as we have seen a totally different starting point. It takes up the view that change is the very foundation of and natural state of being in the world. Admittedly, this analytical way of thinking is not at all easy, because we are often not used to it. But as French philosopher Henri Bergson pointed out back in 1946 we have a challenge to overcome if we want to think and act change, and not just talk about it:

"The point is that usually we look at change but we don’t see it. We speak of change but we don’t think about it. We say that change exists, that everything changes, that change is the very law of things: Yes we say it and repeat it; but those are only words, and we reason and philosophise as though change did not exist. In order to think change and see it, there is a whole veil of prejudices to brush aside, some of them artificial, created by philosophical speculation, the others natural to common sense." (Bergson, 1946:131 in Tsoukas & Chia, 2002:567)

What Bergson points out here is that we are talking about change, change, change but we don’t act it out. As the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclit notes – there is nothing new in saying that things change but to say that changes (in the surrounding world) come about faster and faster makes us pretend that we are in a vacuum outside that change. Instead – with the analytical mode – I have argued in favour of seeing organizational change as constitutive for reality (Bramming & Frandsen 2003; Tsoukas & Chia 2002).

Secondly, in the same breath, individuals (and the development of them) are often viewed as obstacles:

“The development of business comes about faster and faster, while the human development processes remain sluggish” (Hein-Sørensen 2000:93, my translation from Danish).

This reasoning makes the human rate of development generically is slower than the organization ditto. Hein-Sørensen (and many others) even claims this to be the future challenge for management in the new economy to: Get Slow! (Hein-Sørensen 2000:93). This view makes change and human development the exception rather than the rule and leads to the (prescriptive) view that competencies must be imported from the outside and even worse that individuals are reluctant to change, incompetent and strained by former experiences. This view is definitely not the most fruitful starting point for development.

But individual human development is not slower than the social surroundings, in fact as the analytical notion of competence has pointed out, the social aspect, the organization consists of individual and emerging relations between them. The analytical mode of competence have set forward the possibility of competent action assuming that people already are competent and that change to be managed calls for precision in terms of concepts used (context, competence etc.) and reflexiveness in terms of point of observation. Only by practising analytical precision and reflexiveness, will one know what is being managed. These characteristics are key to the observation strategy of second order, practised in the analytical mode. The analytical conceptualisation of competence leads to consciousness of choice in perspective and gives the possibility of changing
that perspective. The challenge for the enactor of the analytical mode is not to fall into the role of criticising other contextual competence practitioners of not sharing the same assumptions.

The purpose of this paper has not been to come up with exhaustive descriptions, but rather to give some concrete and distinctive examples of how competence becomes something different when having different ontological assumptions about the context. The debate about competence and contextuality has finally revealed an underlying discourse of change. With the analytical perspective it has been argued that in order to think change in relation to competence, we have to stop giving ontological primacy to the individual (prescriptive) or the social (descriptive) and thus not create change, but promote and pilot processes of stabilisation in an ever changing world.

By suggesting the three modes of contextual competence thinking it is hoped that these categories will prove useful and will be taken further by researchers and practitioners of competence theory and practice and that the analytical contextualised competence thinking will prosper.

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Notes

I would like to thank Pia Bramming and Per Darmer for discussions of the topics treated in this paper.

Kirkeby 1994, ch. 1, gives a thorough discussion on the epistemological differences between an objectivistic realism and a constructivist phenomenology, for further discussions on constructivism see also Collin 2003.

With inspiration from Deleuze commenting on Foucault: “We must therefore break open words, phrases or propositions…” “As long as we stick to things and words we can believe that we are speaking of what we see, that we see what we are speaking of, and that the two are linked: in this way we remain on the level of an empirical exercise. But as soon as we open up words and things, as soon as we discover statements and visibilities, words and sight are raised to a higher exercise that is a priori…” (Deleuze 1988: 52; 65).

As I will return to later, the underlying assumption here is founded on constructivist reasoning, according to which it is not possible to give a representation of reality neither in painting or by using language (For further elaboration of this point see Knudsen 2003:138ff).

As will be further argued in this paper context is understood as the relation between the individual and the social (organization). This way of putting context resembles the actor/structure dichotomy – a fundamental category in classic as well as modern sociology – often used to explain how social interaction comes about (Harst & Mortensen 2000:195ff). Different views have given priority to the individual actor (e.g. Herbert Blumer) others to the structuring principles (e.g. Lévi-Strauss). Later influential sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu have attempted to develop a theory combining the individual and the social. According to Bourdieu individuals’ objective positions in society and their positioning (choices) are connected through the concept of habitus (e.g. Bourdieu 1996:111).
One of the theoreticians, within the field of HRM, who have critically examined the way the individual is being constructed as competent in the discourse of HRM is Barbara Townley 1999. She argues that competence is not only a positive word, but that it also can designate excellent actions, which we from an ethical point of view must reject (Townley 1995).

As pointed out by Andersen (1999) “heavy” and certainly diverse sociological theoreticians like Pierre Bourdieu, Niklas Luhmann, Michel Foucault, Ernesto Laclau has provided thoughts of second order. But since none of them has dealt explicitly with competence I stick to the above mentioned. This is not to say that Bourdieu, Luhmann etc. has nothing to say about competence. It is perhaps not surprising that they all form the philosophical basis of the competence theories suggested by Bramming & Frandsen, Danelund & Jørgensen and Andersen & Born.

By building on a constructivist view inspired by the Luhmannian notion of communication (e.g. Luhmann 2000) as the foundation of organizations the paper argues that communication processes connect to communication processes and that the individual as a subject is outside an analytical point of reference.

As early as in 1959 Robert W. White took up the concept of competence from a psychological view when he was ‘reconsidering motivation’. White defined competence in relational terms: “Competence will refer to an organism’s capacity to interact effectively with its environment” (White 1959:297).

Recent concrete examples of this analysis are provided by Frans Bévort in Radiometer Medical – a leading provider of blood gas analysis equipment (Bévort 2002:196), and by Brosolat & Thorup (2004:25f).

Townley 1995 analyses in an interesting study the discourse of needs making the point that needs constitute the modern sense of self and at the same time imply the hierarchical notion of ‘power over’ – someone has the power to decide who has the need and what should be done to satisfy it. (Townley 1995:297;282).

With this formulation I do not intend to separate, or dichotomise theory from practice, but instead to stress the different purposes of the contributors. While Danelund & Jørgensen sets out to develop a “competence bridge” directly implementable at a day care centre, Bramming & Frandsen pay more attention to the epistemological positions and challenges when constructing a second order observation strategy, what they call: “the practice of observation”.

“Practice is a set of relays from one theoretical point to another, and theory is a relay from one practice to another. No theory can develop without eventually encountering a wall, and practice is necessary for piercing this wall.” (Foucault 1977:206).

Other contributors could have been mentioned. Theory on organizational learning (e.g. Argyris & Schön 1978, Senge 1990) and organizational competence (e.g. Sanchez 2001) could have included, just to take an example. But since these approaches shares the basic assumption about context with the descriptive mode, for the sake of simplicity and clarification they are left out.

This formulation of strategic reflection is taken with inspiration from Danelund & Jørgensen 2002, in which they differentiate a constructivist strategy from other ways of strategy thinking and practice. The strategic element concerns making deliberate reflective choices about distinctive competencies and differences that make a difference (Danelund & Jørgensen 2002:253;257).

Ulrich is the author and editor of several books and articles e.g. 1997 bestseller ‘HR Champions’ and ‘HR scorecard’ from 2001 where the very popular ideas of making HR activities and competencies measurable were presented.

By building on Townley 1999, Lindved Madsen makes a concrete example of how focus on superior performers at IBM displaying outstanding managerial performance may lead to unintended consequences by intervening in the personal development of managers thereby judging them morally without paying attention to any kind of context or historicity (Lindved Madsen 2002:185).

I am aware of that by choosing Wenger / Lave & Wenger and their social learning theory as one of the main contributors in the descriptive mode I focus on one conceptualisation distinctly different from the analytical mode to be presented, thereby leaving other social constructivist, descriptive modes out e.g. Weick, Giddens or Dreyfus & Dreyfus that might prove relevant. Nevertheless Wenger / Lave & Wenger have been chosen as they were some of the first to succeed in formulating a social theory on competence, in addition they have been heavily cited among other theoreticians in the field.

See also Bojesen & Lyngsie 2003 for a concrete analysis of how Luhmann, Foucault and Bourdieu can complement each other.

According to Luhmann message and understanding are the two other selective elements in a successful communications process. Understanding according to Luhmann means a selection of the difference between information and message (Luhmann 2000).

It should be noted that both Bramming & Frandsen and Danelund & Jørgensen note that gap-analysis and rationalistic planning are tools that can be used, but nevertheless they do not explain why it may be so, making these options more or less artificial.

Especially Bramming & Frandsen (2003:34) make explicit references to the modern phenomenological tradition presented by Ole Fogh Kirkeby.

The Heraclitian dictum is said to be: Everything changes and nothing abides” (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002:569).

The descriptive approach agree in viewing context as social relations between individuals but is not able to conceptualise the second order perspective, practising analytical precision in concepts and reflectiveness in making distinctions.