



UCD School of Medicine
Scoil an Leighis UCD

Professional Masters in Systemic Psychotherapy



EFTA RESEARCH CAFÉ
October 8th, 2026

Chair: Matthias Ochs

Assessing Competencies in Systemic Family Therapy

Navigating the tension between
complexity and *standardisation*

Marina Everri & Mattia Messina



UCD School of Medicine
Scoil an Leighis UCD

Who are we?



Dr Marina Everri



Dr Mattia Messina



OUTLINE

- I. Background - Our Experience
- II. Epistemological Dilemmas
- III. Review of Conceptual Frameworks
and Available Instruments
- IV. New Tool and Pilot Study
- V. Future Directions and Q&A



Background History

- The professional training programme entitled the 'Family Therapy Training Programme' commenced in the Mater Hospital (Child Guidance Clinic) in **1981**.
- It evolved into a M.Sc. programme awarded by **UCD in 1988**.
- It is a four-year programme since **2010**.
- The four-year programme moved from the UCD Mater/HSE CAMHS situated in James Joyce Street, Dublin 1 to UCD in **Sept 2018**
- Became a Professional Masters, 180 ECTS, in **Sept 2023**



Background

Our experience

Our training in Systemic Psychotherapy is based at the **University College Dublin**, School of Medicine

UCD SPP is accredited by the **Family Therapy Association of Ireland (FTAI)** and **European Association of Psychotherapy**



Background

Background

Our experience

For the alignment of systemic training to university structures at different levels, e.g. teaching and assessment, curriculum development - modular structure, staffing, etc.



How to assess psychotherapeutic competencies?

Relevance of Psychotherapeutic Competencies in Ireland for recent reform on State professional regulation (CORU) and in Europe (EFTA Task Force on Training Standards)



Background

Core Epistemological Dilemmas

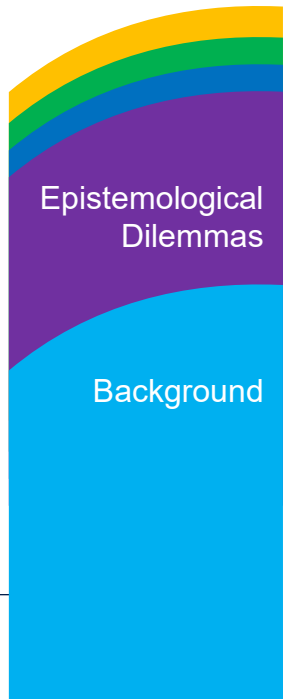
Reductionism vs. Holism

Can systemic competencies be decomposed into discrete, observable behaviours?

Behaviourism vs. Reflexivity

Professionalism vs. Epistemic Integrity

Universalism vs. Context-Specificity



Epistemological
Dilemmas

Background

Core Epistemological Dilemmas

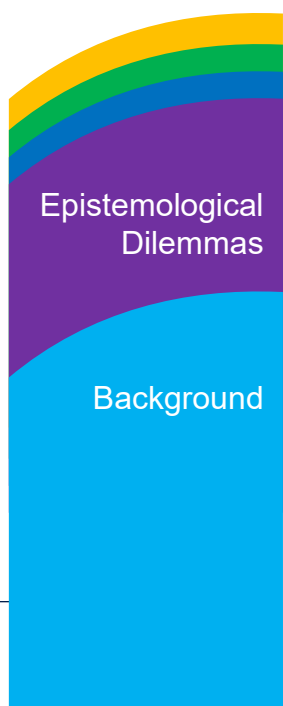
Reductionism vs. Holism

Behaviourism vs. Reflexivity

Can focus on observable behaviours capture a therapist's reflective process?

Professionalism vs. Epistemic Integrity

Universalism vs. Context-Specificity



Epistemological
Dilemmas

Background

Core Epistemological Dilemmas

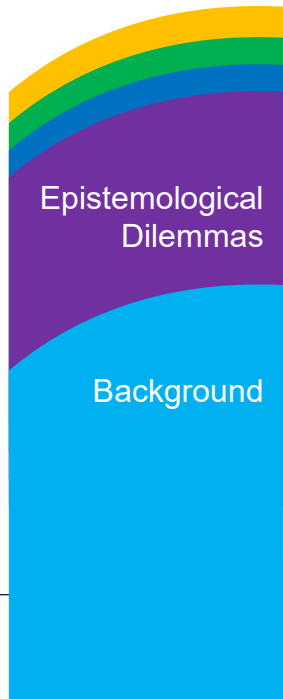
Reductionism vs. Holism

Behaviourism vs. Reflexivity

Professionalism vs. Epistemic Integrity

How can the systemic approach meet institutional regulatory demands without losing its distinctiveness?

Universalism vs. Context-Specificity



Epistemological
Dilemmas

Background



Core Epistemological Dilemmas

Reductionism vs. Holism

Behaviourism vs. Reflexivity

Professionalism vs. Epistemic Integrity

Universalism vs. Context-Specificity

Can a single competency model apply across different systemic modalities?

Epistemological
Dilemmas

Background

What are the **frameworks** used to *conceptualise* systemic competencies?

- Preliminary analysis of the literature showed a ‘fragmentation’ of studies focussed on:
 - specific competencies, e.g. *therapeutic alliance* (Oropeza, 2016, Escudero et al., 2008) or *cultural competence* (Burnham, 2018; Fruggeri, 2009)
 - generic competencies, e.g. integrate theory and evidence-based practices in therapy (e.g. McKenzie et al., 2019), or American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) (Nelson et al., 2007) competencies

(Everri, Messina & O’Brien, 2025)

Literature
Review

Epistemological
Dilemmas

Background

What are the **frameworks** used to *conceptualise* systemic competencies?

- **Key theoretical frameworks** identified in a literature review include:
 - Systems Theory
 - Competency-based and Outcome-based Education
 - In particular, domain-based models from the Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE) and the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) training standards
 - Specific Therapy Models
 - Brief Strategic Therapy
 - Structural-Strategic Family Therapy
 - Emotionally Focused Therapy
 - Behavioural Couple Therapy

(Everri, Messina & O'Brien, 2025)

Literature
Review

Epistemological
Dilemmas

Background

A New Conceptual Framework

Psychotherapeutic Competencies as a Multi-Faceted Construct



- **Technical** Competency: dialogical, generative conversation
- **Relational** Competency: building and monitoring alliances
- **Epistemological** Competency: Reflecting on personal premises and changing viewpoints
- **Context Sensitivity**: Awareness of the broader social systems, power, and inter-professional collaboration

(Fruggeri, Balestra & Venturelli, 2022)

Literature
Review

Epistemological
Dilemmas

Background



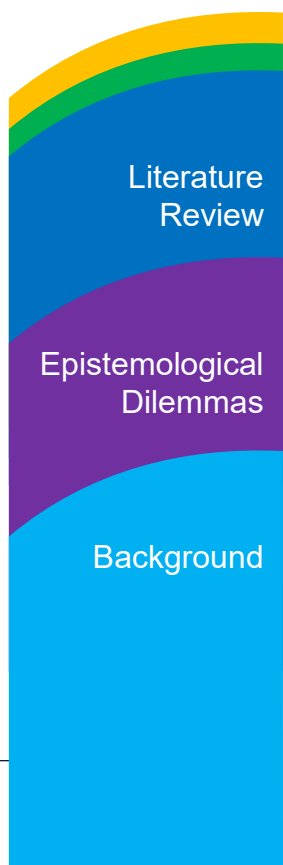
What are the implications for psychotherapeutic competencies **assessment?**

What are the **methods** used to evaluate systemic competencies?

A literature review identified 39 assessment instruments

The vast majority of the identified instruments (N=28) are quantitative, Likert-type questionnaires or checklists completed by supervisors or self-reported by trainees.

(Everri, Messina & O'Brien, 2025)

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Literature Review

Epistemological Dilemmas

Background

What are the **methods** used to evaluate systemic competencies?



Observational and Fidelity Scales

- Completed by supervisors
- Evaluate observable clinical skills and model adherence



Performance-Based and Simulated Tasks

- Completed by supervisors
- Evaluate the trainee's ability to show how they apply clinical skills in controlled settings

Literature
Review

Epistemological
Dilemmas

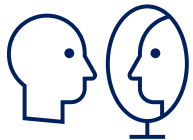
Background

What are the **methods** used to evaluate systemic competencies?



Client-Reported Alliance and Outcome Measures

- Completed by clients
- Evaluate relationship quality and treatment progress



Trainee Self-Report and Knowledge Measures

- Completed by trainees
- Evaluate internal states, theoretical knowledge, or perceived self-efficacy

Literature
Review

Epistemological
Dilemmas

Background

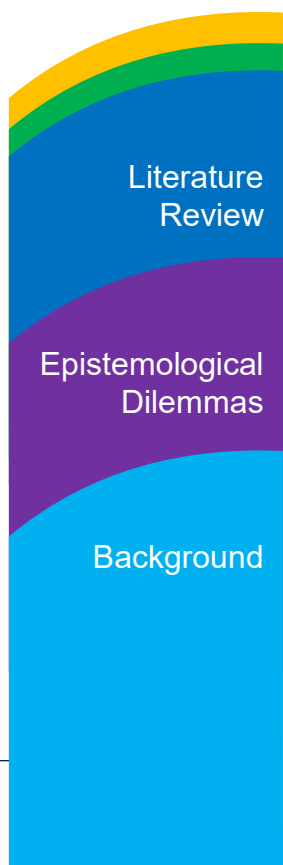
Limitations of Existing Instruments

Modality and Experiential Gaps

- Most validated tools are derived from individual modalities or behavioural couple therapy, underrepresenting complex systemic dynamics.
- There is little empirical data on how supervisors and trainees actually experience using these measures in practice

First-Order Orientation

- All conventional tools act as first-order instruments, evaluating the therapist executing techniques
- Traditional standardised tools fail to integrate the trainee's self-reflexivity and positioning into the assessment process



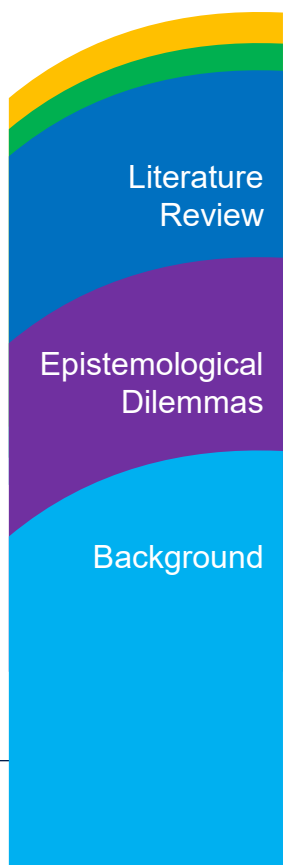
Literature
Review

Epistemological
Dilemmas

Background

Limitations of Existing Instruments

The assessment tools validated in the literature either are comprehensive of multiple domains yet offering a **linear assessment process** or involves a second-order process in the assessment (like the case of the SOFTA) but they are **focused on a specific type of competency**, lacking in comprehensiveness.

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Literature Review

Epistemological Dilemmas

Background



How can we develop comprehensive method for assessment which reflect the systemic epistemology?

Multi-faceted competencies approach and second-order assessment

A New Tool for the Assessment



Psychotherapeutic Competencies Questionnaire

Developed by the Centro Bolognese di Terapia Familiare (CBTF), Italy

Translated, adapted and piloted in an Irish training context by UCD School of Medicine



- **Core dimensions** based on Fruggeri, Balestra and Venturelli's model
- **Structure and Scoring:** 81 items phrased as ability statements scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale, along with a 'Not Observed' option
- **Parallel Structure:** Features parallel supervisor-observation and trainee self-evaluation versions to facilitate a reflexive second-order review



New Tool and
Pilot Study

Literature
Review

Epistemological
Dilemmas

Background



A New Tool for the Assessment

Pilot Study

Conducted from January to March 2026 at the UCD Masters in Systemic Psychotherapy

Method

Design: Mixed-method feasibility study

Participants: 6 experienced clinical supervisors (live & retro)

Procedure:

1. **Phase 1:** Tool's adaptation (supervisor version only)
2. **Phase 2:** Tool piloted using different modalities (i.e. live session, simulation/retrospective, both)
3. **Phase 3:** Feedback collection

New Tool and
Pilot Study

Literature
Review

Epistemological
Dilemmas

Background

A New Tool for the Assessment **Pilot Study**

Instrument: Feedback was collected through an online survey including:

- *Construct adequacy* on a rating scale from 0 to 10
- *Acceptability* and *Practicability* on a 5-point Likert-type items assessing instruction clarity, length appropriateness, wording and ease of integration into supervision
- Open-ended questions regarding the most useful aspects, operational challenges, and potential integration into formal training procedures

Data Analysis: descriptive statistics and content analysis

Ethical Safeguards: To maintain fairness across clinical teams, the pilot data was treated strictly as formative research data and kept separate from trainees' official summative assessment, which continued under standard university procedures.

New Tool and
Pilot Study

Literature
Review

Epistemological
Dilemmas

Background

A New Tool for the Assessment

Pilot Study

Results

1. High **Construct Adequacy** ($M=8.17$, ranging from 7 to 10), indicating a comprehensive and valid account of the core competencies
 - Appreciation of the *Context Sensitivity*
 - *Feedback on Skill Gaps*: While some supervisors felt no core competencies were missing, others suggested additions such as working collaboratively with therapeutic teams, ethical positioning, and the ability to use supervision effectively
 - One participant noted a difference between foundational and advanced competencies

New Tool and
Pilot Study

Literature
Review

Epistemological
Dilemmas

Background

A New Tool for the Assessment

Pilot Study

Results

2. **Acceptability** (clarity, wording and length)

- Supervisors expressed the highest level of agreement regarding the **clarity of the instructions**
- **Wording** was overall good with some suggestions for review
- The **length** of the tool (81 items) emerged as the single largest disadvantage

New Tool and
Pilot Study

Literature
Review

Epistemological
Dilemmas

Background

A New Tool for the Assessment **Pilot Study**

Results

3. **Practicability** (integration into assessment procedures and support for feedback)
 - 5 out of 6 supervisors agreed that the tool could be successfully integrated into formal university assessment strategies for live and retrospective (retro) supervision
 - All responding supervisors agreed (2 "probably yes", 3 "definitely yes") that the questionnaire provides a strong blueprint for delivering structured and comprehensive feedback to trainees
 - *Live vs. Retro Supervision Differences:* Supervisors noted that certain items can realistically be observed only during live supervision behind a one-way mirror, rather than during retrospective case presentations

New Tool and
Pilot Study

Literature
Review

Epistemological
Dilemmas

Background



A New Tool for the Assessment

Pilot Study

Results

To improve practical implementation, supervisors recommended streamlining and shortening the instrument, introducing developmental staging (separating foundational from advanced skills), and grouping items by observation modality (live vs. retro supervision)

New Tool and
Pilot Study

Literature
Review

Epistemological
Dilemmas

Background

Future Directions

1. Item-level refinement and condensation

- *Wording Clarity*: Revise specific terms and item formulations as flagged by pilot participants to enhance readability and conceptual clarity
- *Shortening the Tool*: Review and evaluate all 81 items to identify redundant or non-essential statements that can be removed, directly addressing supervisors' primary concern regarding the length and cognitive burden of the instrument

Future
Directions and
Q&A

New Tool and
Pilot Study

Literature
Review

Epistemological
Dilemmas

Background

Future Directions

2. Structural Enhancement

- *Developmental Staging*: Introduce a developmental sequence that separates foundational skills (appropriate for early-stage trainees) from advanced practitioner competencies
- *Modality-Based Categorisation*: Group items explicitly by observation setting, distinguishing skills that require live observation behind a one-way mirror from those assessed during retrospective (retro) case debriefs

Future
Directions and
Q&A

New Tool and
Pilot Study

Literature
Review

Epistemological
Dilemmas

Background

Future Directions

3. Methodological and Sample Expansion

- *Inclusion of Trainees (Second-Order Process)*: Pilot both the supervisor-observation version and the trainee self-evaluation version simultaneously, to fully operationalise the co-constructed, second-order assessment process
- *Larger, Diverse Samples*: Test the instrument across larger, more geographically diverse cohorts of supervisors and trainees
- *Cross-Context Generalisability*: Include Italian supervisors and trainees (since the original draft originated at the Bolognese Centre for Family Therapy / CBTF) to test the tool's cross-cultural and cross-context validity

Future
Directions and
Q&A

New Tool and
Pilot Study

Literature
Review

Epistemological
Dilemmas

Background

Future Directions

4. Curriculum and Professional Applications

- *Curriculum Blueprinting*: Conduct further research to validate the four-dimensional framework (Technical, Relational, Epistemological, and Context Sensitivity) as a scaffold for mapping and sequencing learning outcomes across multi-year training curricula.
- *Continuing Professional Development (CPD)*: Adapt condensed versions of the questionnaire as reflective self-assessment or peer-supervision tools for experienced practitioners

Future
Directions and
Q&A

New Tool and
Pilot Study

Literature
Review

Epistemological
Dilemmas

Background



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Thank You



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