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Developing Simulation-Based Learning for Forensic Social Work

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Simulation-based learning is emerging as a pedagogy to teach and assess specialist competencies in social work education. At present, the use of simulation-based learning in forensic social work education is unexplored in published literature. Forensic social workers regularly engage with a range of vulnerable and high-risk client groups and in scenarios fraught with hostility and difficult conversations. Utilising simulation-based education, educators can control the exposure and learning specifics to support emerging practitioners. This article explores the design process for creating a simulation activity representing a social work interview with a justice-involved client. This includes the creation of an outcome measure framework using holistic competency measures and metrics/indicators as structured benchmarks to determine and set educational expectations for both learners and educators. The findings suggest that simulation-based learning can be integrated to enhance student competence within forensic social work education.

Keywords: *Forensic social work; Simulation-based learning; Pedagogy; De-escalation; Criminal justice*

Forensic social work has traditionally been defined as the intersection of social work and the criminal justice system (Maschi & Killian, 2011). But contemporary definitions surround the application of social work skills, knowledge, values, and ethics within a forensic environment or with justice-involved people, coupled with specialist knowledge of the law, criminality, recidivism, mental health, the law, and justice disparity (Lattas & Davis, 2024; Lattas et al., 2023). Forensic social workers are employed in forensic mental health services, correctional services, probation or parole, children or youth justice, court-related roles, victim services or justice-related policy work (Lattas & Davis, 2024). Forensic social work often involves high-risk or crisis-driven situations, including welfare checks, psychological and mental wellbeing assessments, restrictive and seclusion practices, and suicidal assessments (Reamer, 2023; Turner, 2022). Forensic social workers support clients and their families in navigating the complex justice systems while upholding social justice, human rights, self-determination, and client dignity (Dodds et al., 2023).

Forensic social work is a challenging field of practice due to the regular exposure to injustices, human rights violations, and ethical dilemmas (Natale et al., 2024). In Australia and the United States, ethical tensions and challenges have been highlighted in the misalignment of criminal justice organisation and social work practitioner values (Schaffer, 2021) and personal values, and interpersonally with managing the complexities and vulnerabilities in this population (Reamer, 2023). Structurally marginalised communities, including First Nations, homeless, trauma-impacted, and improvised persons, have increased surveillance and police intervention, resulting in a higher rate of criminal justice intervention (Jarldorn, 2020). As such, forensic populations have an over-representation of persons with a disability, trauma/adverse childhood maltreatment, substance misuse issues, mental health diagnoses, and lower cognitive ability and educational attainment (Lattas & Davis, 2024). Disadvantaged populations often face significant barriers that increase their vulnerability to criminal justice involvement and often receive harsher penal outcomes (Jarldorn, 2020).

Forensic social work supports vulnerable populations in the justice system whilst highlighting systemic issues, including intersectionality, structural inequity, and social determinants of crime. Australian forensic social workers have advocated for legal and policy reforms to protect vulnerable populations (Lattas & Davis, 2024; Sheehan, 2012, 2016). Forensic social work reports and court documentation can give a voice to childhood adversity, trauma, and psychosocial vulnerabilities experienced by criminalised persons (Ratliff & Beyer, 2019). A recent example of Australian forensic social work advocacy is the Digital Bytes project at Forensicare (Lambert et al., 2023; Turner, 2022). Forensic social work students and practitioners supported clients to co-create their digital stories as a method to counteract dominant negative narratives in the media and forensic institutions (Lambert et al., 2023). These counter-narratives can challenge stigmas which exacerbate exclusion and structural inequities.

Forensic social work can be emotionally, physically, and morally confronting (Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011; O'Donahoo & Simmonds, 2016). Practitioners require the skills and knowledge to manage their own personal biases while simultaneously managing challenging scenarios, including aggressive or hostile client interactions, such as witnessing self-harm or engaging with restrictive practice, and morally confronting positions, such as supporting someone with homicidal or paedophilic ideation (Natale et al., 2024). Forensic social work practitioners have conflictual allegiances to professional boundaries, personal safety and relational practice needed to build rapport and therapeutic alliance (O'Donahoo & Simmonds, 2016; Sheehan, 2012). Practitioners oscillate between treatment and security demands, juggling clients' wellbeing/health, institutional objectives, and public safety.

Forensic decision-making and interventions should be grounded in empirical data, evidence-based practice, and rights-based philosophies (Maschi et al., 2019). Often, complex situations have no simple or straightforward answers; practitioners must assess and respond to each situation differently. This requires competence in managing the dualism inherent in forensic social work: loyalty to professional values and obligations to organisational responsibility (Winters & Buser, 2022). Forensic social workers must understand their legal and organisational commitments, but this does not equate to adopting or conforming to compliance- and risk-dominated frameworks. Several studies have suggested that practitioners require specialist education to explore the complexities and nuances of social work practice in a forensic or criminal justice setting (Lattas & Davis, 2024; Lattas et al., 2023; Sheehan, 2016). How forensic social work is both taught and learned is still subject to much debate (Lattas et al., 2023; Maschi et al., 2019).

With the rise of neoliberalism, higher education is increasingly moving to instrumental learning, where comprehension is reduced to the ability to regurgitate technical skills, actions, and knowledge (Carpenter, 2011). Including an over-emphasis on micro-level practice, which neglects macro-level education (Drisko, 2015). Social work education has used critical pedagogies and signature pedagogies to push back against these principles, including authentic assessment principles like Bogo's objective structured clinical examination (OSCE) (Bogo et al., 2014; Egan et al., 2017). Clinical practice without a social critique presents clients in a decontextualised format and encourages an individualistic view of social issues. Correspondingly, researchers have developed a holistic competency model for social work education (Drisko, 2015; Kourgiantakis et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2022). Holistic competency is a teaching and learning method that focuses on both micro- and macro-level practice; it dually assesses higher-order thinking and clinical proficiency (Bogo et al., 2014). Holistic competency has been applied in clinical social work, mental health, and substance misuse programs but has not been applied to forensic social work education in published literature (Kourgiantakis & Lee, 2022). The authors propose the following framework for simulation-based learning as a pedagogy to teach and assess holistic competency in forensic social work.

Holistic Competency in Social Work Education

Competency is defined as the ability to perform duties or actions to completion (Drisko, 2015). Holistic competency is defined as a fluidity and mastery of knowledge; in social work, this refers to a learner's proficiency in using professional knowledge, skills, and ethics to inform clinical judgements across unique practice situations (Lee et al., 2022). It requires evidence-informed knowledge, critical and reflective thinking, empathy, and appropriate affective reactions. Holistic competency is concerned with assessing the learner's internal processes instead of solely assessing external performance (Roberson, 2020); it moves beyond a list of observable skills towards the relational core of social work practice (Regehr et al., 2023). With the use of authentic and meaningful assessment tasks, this model assesses meta-competencies and procedural competencies (Asakura et al., 2022). Procedural competencies refer to performance-related tasks, such as creating a therapeutic alliance, ethical decision-making, and conducting an assessment. Meta-competencies refer to higher-order conceptual and interpersonal abilities, such as self-awareness or critical thinking. Meta and procedural competencies are interlinked to form holistic competency.

Holistic competency has been heavily linked with simulation-based learning (Bogo et al., 2014; Drisko, 2015; Lee et al., 2022). Simulated exercises offer a new modality to observe and assess practice-based competencies in a classroom setting (Jefferies et al., 2022). Educators can structure student–client interactions and, thus ensure that learners encounter specific practice situations and client interactions (Kourgiantakis et al., 2022). There is an expectation that graduated social workers can engage with vulnerable clients, such as children, or handle high-risk situations, such as impromptu home visits. But their exposure to these situations in education is often fragmented or tokenistic (Asakura et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2020). Research in the United States and Australia has raised concerns about the training and competency of social work students for criminal justice and forensic practice (Lattas et al., 2023; Sheehan, 2016). Simulation-based learning presents a modality to expose students to the complex behavioural situations routinely encountered in forensic social work practice; these experiences can be contextualised, scaffolded and managed by educators to turn them from a potentially trauma-inducing situation to a method to assess professional competence with vulnerable populations.

Simulation in Forensic Social Work Education

Simulation-based learning refers to immersive or experiential activities that attempt to imitate or replicate real-world scenarios relevant to the professional community (Olcoń et al., 2023). In social work, this commonly involves situations related to clinical practice, such as client interviews, assessments, or home visits (Asakura, 2023; Jefferies et al., 2022). This can be achieved through live or videoed actors, computer-generated avatars, virtual technology, or artificial intelligence to recreate environmental, physical, or psychological portrayals of client interactions. Simulation-based activities have been used as a learning modality, assessment tool, and pedagogy in health and medical fields since the early 1960s (Lateef, 2020). It was initially developed for professions where malpractice can be life-threatening or injurious, including doctors, military, or aviation industries. It offers a way to mitigate risk through assessing cognitive, technical, environmental and teamwork skills.

Social work is proudly a practice-based profession; its education philosophies have a long history of experiential, practice-based and hands-on teaching methods, including case studies, role-plays, and field education (Craig et al., 2017). Simulation-based learning is rapidly growing as a pedagogical approach in social work because it aligns with the philosophical movement towards student-centred teaching and learning (Jefferies et al., 2022). It is not a replacement for the didactical teaching method or field education but, rather, it is a method to reinforce theoretical knowledge or practice clinical skills in a low-stakes environment (Lee et al., 2020). It allows students to practise, investigate, and experiment with their clinical skills without posing an unnecessary risk to clients (Kourgiantakis et al., 2020).

The key outcome of forensic social work education is developing practice-ready students who can safely and professionally handle complex interpersonal and emotionally heightened situations. Practice-readiness requires translating classroom learning into professional knowledge for clinical practice (Waddell et al., 2018). In the absence of specialist forensic social work education in Australia (Lattas & Davis, 2024), a fundamental assumption is made that graduates will learn specialist skills in field education or on-the-job training. Jefferies and colleagues (2023) highlighted that it is problematic to assume students learn and store information well in field education and other client-facing practice environments. Using cognitive load theory, they reasoned that the student or new graduate's ability to retain and store knowledge could be impacted by the heightened mental and cognitive workload present in emotionally charged and stressful client interactions (Jefferies et al., 2023). There is a need to ensure that preparation for highly emotive and stressful client interactions occurs prior to the client engagement. Simulation-based learning allows the learner to have a scaffolded experience whereby the educator tailors the intensity, pressures, and risks associated with client-facing work to the needs of the learner. Educators can structure simulation activities to incrementally expose the learner to heightened cognitive load situations and scenarios, which helps to scaffold the learning to digestible segments and increase the emotional and cognitive awareness of the learner. This requires building spaces to reflect on the learner's emotional reactions, performance, and potential alternative actions throughout the course (Fey et al., 2022).

Given the sensitive and high-risk nature of forensic social work, client-facing forensic social workers routinely encounter high-cognitive load situations, including suicidality, hostility and even volatility. However, exposure to these sensitive or complex practice scenarios is not guaranteed in field education. Simulation-based learning can ensure that students are exposed to and are competent in high-risk forensic practice conditions. Simulation-based learning has been used in other social work speciality programs, including mental health, domestic and family violence and substance misuse (Kourgiantakis et al., 2020), and by other disciplines working with forensic populations (Bratina et al., 2023; Havig et al., 2020; McDermott & Dunlop-Witt, 2023). It is imperative that forensic social work education has methods to assess graduate competency and practice readiness, which ultimately serve to protect vulnerable clients (Munson, 2011).

Outcome Measures for Social Work Simulation

Measuring and assessing learner performance in simulation-based exercises is crucial to proving the usefulness and value of this pedagogy. Multiple pedagogies can be used to develop the same skill or competency; thus, it is the educator's duty to ensure that the teaching and assessment method is the most effective and appropriate for the intended outcome (Asakura, 2023). However, many social work education programs do not have clearly defined educational, program, or learner outcomes (Reith-Hall & Montgomery, 2022).

Educational program outcomes can be measured in six ways:

1. learner satisfaction or perception of the learning experience;
2. changes in worldview, attitudes, or perceptions;
3. the acquisition of skills and knowledge;
4. changes in behaviour;
5. changes in service delivery or organisational practice;
6. benefits to service users, carers, and families.

(Carpenter, 2011; Damianakis et al., 2019).

Carpenter (2011) suggested that program outcomes are evaluated by defining and measuring learning outcomes and specifics. Learning outcomes are cognitive skills, professional skills, affective or attitudinal outcomes, behavioural changes, or impact on service outcomes. Much of the literature on competency in simulation has used the learner's self-confidence and the assessor's perception of the learner's readiness for practice as the outcome measure (Onello & Regan, 2013). Learner self-efficacy and confidence are important factors, but there is a level of subjectivity in this as an outcome measure.

An outcome-based perspective of simulation requires designing, assessing, and evaluating the exercise through an organised framework of learning goals and outcomes (Sawyer & Gray, 2016). When using simulation-based learning, both the educator and the learner should understand their role and responsibilities in achieving the learning outcomes (Fey et al., 2022). Outcomes can be measured by cognitive outcomes, such as critical thinking or clinical judgements; affective learning outcomes, such as self-efficacy; or psychomotor outcomes, such as behavioural performance (Cantrell et al., 2017). The simulated exercise must have learning outcomes that are appropriate to the learner cohort.

The definition and measurement of performance and outcomes are vastly different in social work than in medical and healthcare education. Bogo and colleagues (2014) suggested that the objective structured clinical examination (OSCE) healthcare model could be adapted as an outcome measure framework. The traditional OSCE format uses a dual performance and reflection structure, where students engage in dialogue about their performance. It is traditionally designed for assessing simulation-based learning with live actors. Jefferies and colleagues (2023) developed a key performance indicator (KPI) model for assessing field education competencies.

The KPIs were established through a consensus-finding Delphi process with key stakeholders. These KPIs were linked with the 2013 Australian Association of Social Work Practice Standards and included competencies related to professional skill outcomes, such as non-judgemental and person-centred practice; behaviours or action outcomes, such as working within a team and acting in accordance with agency policies; and cognitive outcomes, critical reflection in supervision (Jefferies et al., 2023).

The development of an outcome measure framework for forensic social work is complicated by the lack of forensic-specific professional and education standards. Professional standards outline the knowledge, skills and attitudes designated by the occupation's governing or regulating body and reflect a minimum level of expectation of the professional. Specialist forensic practice standards offer additional guidance for the nuances and complexities seen in forensic practice (Munson, 2011). The United States, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands have developed practice standards specific to their national context (Lattas et al., 2023). But forensic social work has struggled for recognition as a distinct practice speciality in Australia (Lattas & Davis, 2024). At present, no governing framework clearly outlines the expectations of practitioners working within a forensic context. As such, our activity must set the outcome measure expectation at the Australian forensic social work expectation, which is a graduate generalist social work competency. It sought to assess student knowledge of de-escalation, ethical decision making, and assessing protective and risk factors.

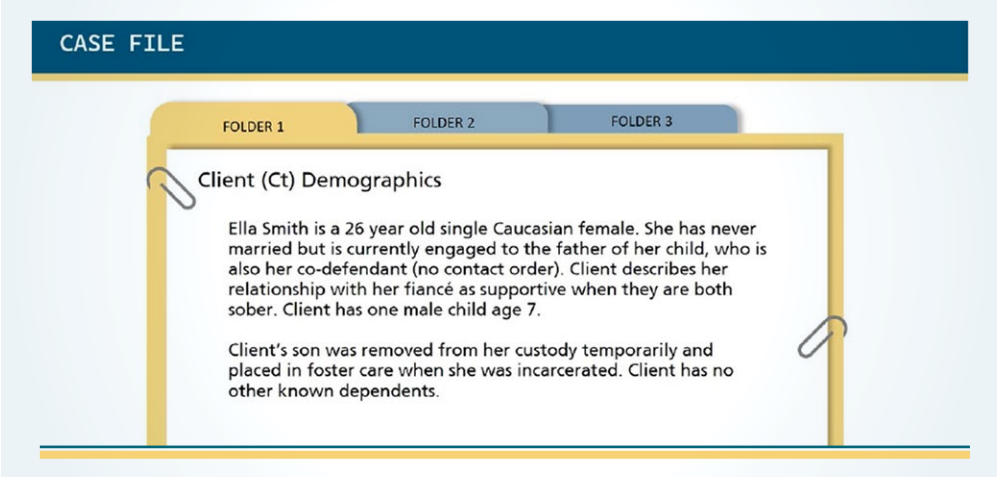
Forensic Simulation

This simulation was designed in partnership with the University of Tennessee, College of Social Work, as part of a wider project to develop four virtual simulations to increase the learner's confidence in implementing foundational social work skills and recognising unconscious biases when working with justice-involved clients. The exercise was a video-based simulation embedded in the student learning management system Canvas. The exercise was designed to be run both asynchronously and synchronously. It was run in Australia as a synchronous learning activity; the simulation was conducted in the tutorial for both online and face-to-face student cohorts. The exercise is structured to be completed over one tutorial session. It has six distinct stages:

- ***Prebriefing:*** The prebriefing stage has two main functions, to set clear expectations and contribute to a psychologically safe learning space. Given the heightened emotional content, the learner is pre-informed of the context, setting and their contribution: it is a simulated client interview at a correctional setting, they will be operating as a social worker. It is a formative exercise, and learners can explore forensic practice and make mistakes without it affecting their final grade. The tutorial staff note that simulation will be paused at specific intervals, and the learner will complete online short answer questions. This is an individual simulation exercise; questions should be completed by the learner, and group discussions are discouraged.

- ***Stage One:*** The first stage begins with an interactive case file with a series of tabs (see Photo 1). The learner can use their mouse to click through the case file folders at their own pace The tutor gives the learners 30 minutes to read the case files and complete a series of short-answer questions.

Photo 1: ***Case file***



- ***Stage Two:*** After 30 minutes, the tutorial staff begin the video component of the simulation. The learner has a visual introduction to the actor. The interview is monologue style (see Photo 2). The interview is set in a community correctional program. The learner is operating as the social worker, and they are completing an intake interview. The tutor pauses the video when the students are posed with an ethical dilemma; the client asks for personal information from the practitioner.

Photo 2: ***Monologue style interview in correction setting***

- ***Stage Three:*** The tutor restarts the video, and it follows the practitioner reviewing the program rules and the conditions of court order. This includes scenes of the client escalating and raising their voice at the practitioner. The video is paused at the peak of escalation, and the learners are asked to write a file note about the escalation and identify actions which could be taken to de-escalate.

  Before restarting the video, the tutor advises the learner cohort to make a note of how a practitioner would proceed in this situation. After the learners complete these questions, they watch the practitioner de-escalate the client.

Photo 3: ***Client heightened and standing over worker***

- ***Stage Four:*** The video finishes with the client calming down and re-engaging with the interview. Learners need to identify the interventions and actions they observed the social worker using. This reinforces and connects specific skills and actions with this competency. The learner must assess the risk and protective factors for the client. There is an expectation that learners will incorporate information from the case file and video simulation in their assessment.

- ***Debriefing:*** The final stage is a group-based debrief. The tutor will facilitate a reflective discussion on the content, skills and theories used by the learners. This will include learner self-evaluation of performance, justification and reasoning behind their answers, confidence in handling heightened emotions, and perception of working in the criminal justice system.

Designing a Forensic Social Work Simulation Exercise

This exercise was designed as a formative assessment and did not contribute to final grades. As a formative assessment, it is an evaluation *for* learning. The results from formative assessments can used to inform the educational program, identify learner progress, and improve the learning and teaching outcome (Karahalil et al., 2023). The use of formative simulation exercises to develop clinical proficiency is increasing across higher education (Chernikova et al., 2020); learners need educational spaces to practise, and these can scaffold experiences as an approximation of practice.

The exercise was designed with the Miller pyramidal framework of competency, *knows, knows how, shows how,* and *does* (Al-Eraky & Marei, 2016). The Miller pyramid is a behaviourist model to assess clinical competency (Witheridge et al., 2019). It is an ascending model focused on using simulation to build foundational knowledge and observations prior to practice expectations (Roussin et al., 2020). Miller noted that observation of performance in simulation could be an indicator of performance in practice (Witheridge et al., 2019). Competency at each level of the pyramid should be measured. This can include embedding of simulation-based exercises across the curriculum to scaffold learning and set realistic learning benchmarks (Fey et al., 2022; Roussin et al., 2020). Educators should consider how different simulation modalities can support the learning journey from taught (know), showing how (know-how) toward show-how and eventually to proficient (do). In Australia, managing heightened emotions and de-escalation are not mandatory skills in the generalist social work curriculum and, as such, are not consistently taught (Broadley & Paterson, 2020). As such, many learners are missing the foundational theoretical knowledge behind de-escalation, nor have they observed a practitioner engaging in de-escalation. It would be unrealistic to expect proficiency from this learner cohort in a face-to-face de-escalation simulation. This simulation is set at the lower levels of Miller's pyramid, the start of the learning journey for this competency; it is a video-based interaction with observational learning included.

Witnessing or experiencing volatile client interactions can be emotionally unsettling or even traumatising for a practitioner (Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011). Learners come to the classroom with varying experiences, and planning psychological safety is important for this competency. Safety is not only a lack of threat and danger but also freedom and reflexivity to explore and challenge ideas and concepts specifically related to controversial topics (Bennett et al., 2022). Complete safety involves spatial, psychological/emotional, social, and cultural safety. Optimal learning outcomes will be achieved in simulations where the learner feels safe (Lateef, 2020; Turner & Harder, 2018). Simulation exercises can be psychologically safe by using a non-threatening environment, providing pre-briefing, holding the learner in positive regard, using structure to be transparent and manage expectations, preparing the learner and using formative assessment principles (Fey et al., 2022; Turner & Harder, 2018). This exercise was designed using these principles. The pre-briefing is a structured and transparent way to prepare the learner and manage expectations. The video-based design gives the learner time to consider their future actions and reflect on their emotional state without expectations of face-to-face performance.

The simulation provided an authentic experience for the learner. The client spoke directly to the camera as if speaking directly to the audience, and the practitioner was not viewable. This layout sought to increase the perception that the client was talking to the learner directly. The client was a 26-year-old female who had lengthy criminal justice involvement, including assault of an elderly person; the client profile included adverse childhood experiences and substance misuse, and the client is a mother to a 7-year-old. The character profile has the potential to be associated with several harmful stereotypes about female offenders (Binik & Verde, 2022). Critical reflection in the debriefing stage can help learners to identify and critically appraise their worldview and perception of the client. The simulation exercise sought to capture forensic populations' multidimensional vulnerabilities and risks. It included positive goals and several protective factors, but these were coupled with harsh conditions and a high risk of recidivism.

Forensic Social Work Outcome Measures

This outcome measure framework has three stages: define the *Learning Outcomes*, identify the *Holistic Competencies*, and develop the *Outcome Measures by Metrics/Indicators*. This structure places emphasis on defining learning in a tangible, attainable, and clearly documented framework. The authors defined six core learning outcomes in this simulation exercise (see Table 1). Each learning outcome is empirically informed by contemporary scholarship on forensic social work.

Table 1

Learning Outcomes

Learning Outcomes	Definition	Background Literature
Able to use Non-Judgemental and Professional Language	The use of language that aligns with social work values and is free from judgment. This includes being free from assumptions, stereotyping, stigmatising, and harmful myths.	The student's worldview and belief system will shape their learning experience. Anyone entering forensic social work education comes with a predetermined idea of crime, offender characteristics, and justice (Maschi et al., 2019). Their individual worldviews are built from media, political affiliations, lived experience and previous education (Baranauskas & Drakulich, 2018). While social workers are expected to engage forensic populations in a non-judgemental and rights-based approach (Levenson, 2016), research has suggested that stereotypes and prejudices can negatively influence practitioner decision-making (Markham, 2023).

Learning Outcomes	Definition	Background Literature
Identification of Key Issues	The ability to recognise the multifaceted and complex issues within a forensic scenario, including legal, psychological, structural, and social dimensions.	Forensic social workers support a diverse population with a wide range of vulnerabilities and needs. They require advanced assessment skills that recognise the multidimensional nature of social issues (Bradley & Dunn, 2017). Forensic assessments often cover multiple domains, including demographics, health, family history, intellectual functioning, social relationships, housing, and goals/ intervention plans. Practitioners must be able to listen to and synthesise information into a written document.
Recognition of Ethical Dilemmas in Forensic Context	The ability to identify ethical dilemmas, use ethical reasoning, and know how to work through an ethical dilemma within the context of forensic social work.	It is well documented that forensic social workers must have sound ethical decision-making skills (Reamer, 2023; Winters & Buser, 2022). The exercise allows the student to practise this skill within a relatively low-cognitive-load situation. The students have space to reflect and consider their response to the client without the obligations associated with face-to-face interaction, including with a live simulated actor. Practitioners must be able to use ethical reasoning and propose appropriate actions.
Identifies Trauma and Childhood Adversity	The identification, recognition, and understanding of trauma and childhood adversity in the lives of individuals within the forensic context.	Research has suggested that a relationship exists between trauma/adverse childhood experiences and offending, mental illness, and illicit substance misuse (Lattas & Davis, 2024; Levenson, 2016; Sheehan, 2016). Forensic social workers support vulnerable communities in the justice system and play an important role in promoting the recognition of the impact of trauma on this population.

Learning Outcomes	Definition	Background Literature
Identifies Risk and Protective Factors in a Forensic Context	The identification of risk and protective factors within the forensic context. Professional opinion is balanced: adhere to safety issues but also acknowledge the strengths of the client.	Criminal justice case management requires practitioners to be able to conduct assessments and case formulations with both risk and protective factors (Serin et al., 2016. Practitioners must engage with their professional ability to assess risk without losing their strengths-based lens and critical thinking skills.
Identifies Appropriate Actions when the Client is in a Heightened Emotional State.	The identification of appropriate actions to manage and de-escalate clients, including being conscious of the safety of all relevant parties and reducing further risks.	Many statutory and forensic social workers will experience heightened emotions, hostility, and potential violence in their careers (Broadley & Paterson, 2020). De-escalation is physical and non-physical methods used to avoid or reduce aggression or violence (Goodman et al., 2020). De-escalation has been noted as a core competency required in forensic social work (O'Donahoo & Simmonds, 2016).

The six learning outcomes were analysed using the holistic competency model to define the associated meta and procedural competencies (See Table 2). Using this holistic competency framework encourages the expectation that learners will link macro-level and higher-order thinking with the tasks and clinical judgements asked for in the simulation (Drisko, 2015).

Table 2

Holistic Competencies

Learning Outcomes	Meta Competencies	Procedural Competencies
Able to use Non-Judgemental and Professional Language	**Non-Judgementalism:** Demonstrate the ability to make objective clinical observations about clients and professional judgements that are free from harmful social, cultural, and political narratives about offenders.	**Written Communication Skills:** Demonstrate proficiency in written communication, considering professional language and adherence to social work values.

Learning Outcomes	Meta Competencies	Procedural Competencies
Identification of Key Issues	**Evidence-informed Practice:** Demonstrate the ability to use professional, empirical, and theoretical knowledge to inform the analysis and understanding.	**Assessment Skills:** Recognise and assess key issues, including legal, emotional/psychological, structural, and social issues.
Recognition of Ethical Dilemmas in Forensic Context	**Ethical Reasoning:** Demonstrate ethical awareness and use appropriate ethical reasoning to justify decision-making.	**Ethical Decision-Making:** Able to identify ethical dilemmas within the context of forensic social work and demonstrate knowledge of how to navigate dilemmas appropriately.
Identifies Trauma and Childhood Adversity	**Empathy:** Leads with compassion and sensitivity to the impact of trauma/childhood adversity and antisocial or criminal behaviour.	**Trauma-Informed Practice:** Demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between trauma, childhood adversity and people engaged in the justice system.
Identifies Risk and Protective Factors in a Forensic Context	**Holistic and Critical Thinking:** Demonstrates ability to balance risk and protective factors in the professional judgement of client, uses professional, empirical, and theoretical knowledge to inform the analysis.	**Assessment Skills:** Identify a comprehensive list of risk and protective factors which are used to inform their professional judgements or future intervention.
Identifies Appropriate Actions when the Client is in a Heightened Emotional State.	**Emotional Intelligence:** Demonstrates an understanding of verbal and non-verbal skills appropriate to de-escalation, has appropriate affective reactions, and is reflective of their own emotional state.	**De-escalation Skills:** Demonstrates an understanding of verbal and non-verbal skills appropriate to de-escalation, shows appropriate affective reactions, and is reflective of their own emotional state.

In the final step, the procedural competencies from Table 2 were broken down using a metrics and indicators model. Metrics are the methods used to track and assess the learner's performance of the competency, and indicators serve as the markers of quality related to the competency. This approach uses structured benchmarks to determine and set educational expectations for both learners and educators (See Table 3).

Table 3

Outcome Measures

Competency	Measurements	Metric/Indicator
Able to use Non-Judgemental and Professional Language with a Forensic Client	**Use of Language:** This skill is measured in the level of communication used to describe the client.	**Metric:** Evaluation of documentation for adherence to non-judgmental and professional language.
		Indicator: Rated by the clarity and professionalism of written communication.
Identification of Key Forensic Issues	**Accuracy of Identification:** This skill is measured by the learner's accuracy and comprehensiveness in identifying key issues.	**Metric:** Number of key issues identified accurately in the simulation exercise
		Indicator: Comprehensiveness of answer, including the multifaceted nature of forensic issues.
Recognition of Ethical Dilemmas in Forensic Context	**Identification of Ethical Dilemmas:** This skill is measured by the identification of ethical dilemmas in the simulations.	**Metric:** Number of ethical dilemmas accurately identified in the simulated exercise.
		Indicator: Quality and comprehensiveness of ethical reasoning and awareness of complexity.
Identifies Trauma and Childhood Adversity	**Identification of Trauma:** This skill is measured by the identification of adverse childhood experiences in the simulated activity.	**Metric:** Number of adverse childhood experiences accurately identified in the simulated exercise.
		Indicator: Depth and comprehensiveness of the link between trauma and forensic issues.
	Use of Trauma-Informed Principles: The learner uses trauma-informed practices in their client assessment and intervention plan.	**Metric:** Integration of trauma-informed practices into client descriptions and plans.
		Indicator: Referral to appropriate services including use of trauma-informed language in planning

Competency	Measurements	Metric/Indicator
Identifies Risk and Protective Factors in a Forensic Context	**Accuracy of Identification:** This skill is measured by the learner's ability to accurately identify and explain the relevant risk and protective factors.	**Metric:** Number of relevant and appropriate risk and protective factors accurately identified in case analyses or assessments.
		Indicator: Precision in explaining the relevance and impact of identified factors.
Identifies Appropriate Actions when the Client is in a Heightened Emotional State.	**Identification of De-escalation Methods:** This skill is measured by the learner's ability to identify the skills associated with managing heightened emotions and de-escalating the client.	**Metric:** Number of appropriate skills identified in questions surrounding de-escalation
		Indicator: Comprehensiveness of answer and relevance and impact of identified skills.

Discussion

Due to the organisational context and population demographic, forensic social workers have a higher risk of experiencing emotionally unsafe, confrontational, and even volatile client interactions (Butters & Vaughan-Eden, 2011; O'Donahoo & Simmonds, 2016). It is imperative that learners are conscious of the realities of practice and have the appropriate skills to handle these interactions. Simulation-based learning can offer a modality to safely teach and assess this. The proposed simulation exercise is the start of developing competence in managing heightened emotions and de-escalating. Under the Miller pyramid (Al-Eraky & Marei, 2016), the learner needs further observations and practice to move from novice to practice-ready. Simulation-based learning is ideally positioned to teach holistic forensic social work education competency. It offers a modality to structure learner experiences and incrementally expose learners to these complexities. Further research is needed to map the development of this competency over a longer period with more interactive or participatory simulations.

Simulation-based learning has been used as a pedagogy to teach and assess holistic competencies in several specialist social work education programs (Asakura, 2023; Lee et al., 2020). However, there is little published data on how simulation is used in forensic social work education. Opportunities exist to learn from other disciplines using simulation, including counselling, nursing, psychology, and child welfare. As an example, nursing has established the International Nursing Association for Clinical Simulation and Learning to provide best practice principles and competency frameworks for simulation-based learning (INACSL Standards Committee, 2021). Social work educators can use interprofessional research to support simulation within forensic social work curriculum structures. This could include best practice principles, competency checklists, outcome measure tools, or curriculum frameworks.

Several proposed benefits are highlighted in this article, specifically the connection between macro-level, theoretical, reflective, critical, and higher-order thinking and practical social work tasks. Extensive research has shown that statutory and forensic social work roles face increasing pressure to adopt compliance management ideologies with little professional autonomy and freedom (Jarldorn, 2020; Schaffer, 2021). Against this backdrop, educators and higher education institutions are pivotal in connecting forensic social work graduates with their social justice and social change origins. However, there is a need to ensure that educators are supported by higher education institutions with the technical knowledge and digital competency skills to create, facilitate and manage simulation processes (Asakura, 2023; Kourgiantakis et al., 2020). Further research must explore the transition and implementation of simulation-based learning within forensic social work education.

Conclusion

Forensic social work can be a challenging field of practice. Forensic social work practitioners support a complex population with a unique mixture of vulnerability and risk. Forensic social workers have a professional obligation to highlight inequity in the justice system, specifically related to intersectionality, structural disadvantage, and social determinants of crime. It is imperative that forensic social work education programs, both vocational and higher education, adequately prepare learners for the complexities found in the field and with a toolset to combat compliance-driven ideologies. Simulation-based learning and holistic competency can be used to map the learning journey for forensic specialist competencies. It offers a new modality to teach and assess advanced and technical skills associated with this practice speciality.

This simulation exercise engages learners in the complicated skill of managing strong emotions and de-escalation. It uses the Miller pyramid of competence to manage learner and educator expectations of competency. It is the first stage of learner comprehension, primarily using observational learning. Further research is needed to map this competency over a longer period and with additional simulation exercises. Despite de-escalation being an imperative skill for social work practice, there is little research on the education and teaching of this skill. Education providers have an obligation to ensure graduates can support clients experiencing heightened emotions, especially in vulnerable client contexts like forensic social work.

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