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A study of communication skills in health care management students and its association with demographic characteristics

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Communication skills are one of the most important skills for health care managers and play an important role in their personal life and future occupation. The present study aimed to evaluate the students' communication skills as well as its relationship with the students' demographic characteristics.

Method: This descriptive-analytical study was performed on 153 university students majoring in healthcare management in 2014. A self-administered communication skills questionnaire and demographic information form were used to collect the data. Then, the data were analyzed by using SPSS software and appropriate statistical tests including T-Test and ANOVA.

Results: The results showed that the students on average got 77.60 out of possible 100 in communication skills. The relationship between communication skills and demographic characteristics, except age, was not statistically significant ($p<0.001$). The total Cronbach's alpha was estimated 0.7. There was a statistically significant difference between the communication skills scores of participants in terms of different age groups ($p<0.05$).

Conclusion: The present findings showed a moderate score in communicative skills in students of health care management. Although the communication skill levels in these students were not low, due to the importance of these skills in their future occupation, serious attention is needed to improve their communication skills.

Keywords: Communication, Social skills, Administrative personnel, Students, Universities, Medical

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Introduction

For educating the graduate students in different disciplines, universities focus not only on university achievements, but also on "general skills" or "soft skills" in order to provide market needs (1). General skills are important because today's jobs need flexibility and ability to accept different tasks. These days, employers look for individuals who have both special and general skills concerning such concepts as flexibility, costs reduction and productivity. General skills, combined with specialized ones, show their effect on the world of work (2).

In addition, today employers choose the employees regarding their general and characteristic skills. Because of this, from 2008 to present, universities specifically consider general abilities as a result of their educational programs (1). In addition to what was said, today subjects like how to communicate , cooperate and interact in similar working atmosphere are very important to employers (3). These kinds of capabilities are related to communication skills. Communication skills are a part of general skills that are a source of attention at the universities.

Effective and correct communications in the organization have always been one of the important elements in successful management. This kind of capabilities and competencies cross over communication skills. Existence of effective and correct communications in companies has always been a part of management success. Because of this, managers must know about the quality and quantity and the results and effective way of communication.

Paying attention to the importance and usefulness of human skills of the managers and grasping the benefits of the methods and different models can direct and help them to know the behavior of people better, predicting their future behavior, controlling, directing and making changes in the behavior of individuals who work with them (4). Communication skills are specifically important when a person is looking for a job. The graduates are examined

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for their communication in interviews, so universities and educational institutes should be sure about the students' clear and effective communication skills (1).

Among all these, communication skills in management students compared to other students are of great importance, because communication skills in all levels of management are considered a basic skill and can affect the manager's work. Thus, considering what was said, in this research the researchers have paid attention to communication skills and their factors at Shiraz school of management and informatics.

Method

This descriptive-analytical study was performed on university students majoring in healthcare management in 2014 in order to evaluate their communication skills through a self-administered questionnaire. The study population consisted of all the 153 university students majoring at different education levels of healthcare management at Shiraz University of Medical Sciences in 2014. The questionnaire was prepared in 2 parts:

Part one consisted of demographic information and had 9 questions on the following points:

Age , sex , education level , date of birth , parents' education, employment status, marital status , grade point average (GPA), and residence situation .

And the second part consisted of 24 items which were measured through a 5-point Likert scale ranging from never (1) to always (5).

To make sure that the items were not vague, the questionnaire was given to some experts including two associate professors and one assistant professor in healthcare management and one M.Sc. instructor of health education; then, the internal consistency of the questionnaire was confirmed by Cronbach's alpha=0.7, which showed an appropriate internal consistency between each item. After getting necessary permissions from university research vice president, with respect to professors' time and according to class timetables, researchers attended the students' classes and after explaining the goals and the importance of the research and only after acquiring the students' permission, they distributed the questionnaires among the students. To ensure the attention in completing the questionnaire, they collected them at the end of the class. They also called the students who were absent on that specific day and asked them to go to faculty education unit to get the questionnaire and complete it. By doing so, 132 completed questionnaires were collected (accountability rate = 3.86%)

The completed questionnaires were checked by the researchers and then registered in software SPSS version 16;descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and also analytical statistics (independent-sample T-test and ANOVA test) wereused to analyze the data. Normality test of the data was performed using One– Sample Kolmogorov–Simirnov test and it was assumed that data followed a normal distribution. After being sure about normality of inputs, they were analyzed.

Results

132 out of 153 students completed the questionnaires. The participants' mean age was 23.4 years old and 55% of them were 22 or less and only 5.1% were more than 35 years old. The other demographic findings showed that the most frequent birth were in the 1st and 3rd ranks, and the least rank was 7. As to job, most of them were unemployed (80.2%) and only 10.7 percent had governmental jobs, worked in private sectors or student jobs. As to the parents' education, most of them had a high school diploma or had not finished high school and the others had BS or higher levels of education. Table 1 shows demographic characteristics, mean, standard deviation and test results of the sample group. The results obtained by the comparison between the students' communication skills and demographic variables including sex, marital status, place of birth (urban or rural) and residency, using independent T-Test showed no significant difference.

The result of ANOVA test showed that students of different ages are much different in communicative skills. According to Post Hoc LSD test, the youngest group of students, the students between the ages 18 and 20 had less communication skills than the older ones. This group of students did not have a lot of differences between the mean score of communication skills and demographic variables of the parents' education levels, students' GPA and level of education, using ANOVA.

The other results showed that the students on average got 77.60 out of possible 100 in communication skills. In other words, the mean score in communication skills was 3.88 and deviation of criteria was 0.37 which showed their moderate communication skill of compared with constant score 3($p<0.001$).

Discussion

The present findings showed a moderate score in communication skills in students of health care management ; also, the result of the research done on evaluating speaking , listening and feedback skills by Barati et al. (2011), among 400 students of medical sciences showed moderate scores in all the 3 dimensions(5). Salimi et al. (2012) also got the same result on the paramedical students of medical school (6). Maslak Pak et al. (2003) by the use of a self-administered questionnaire evaluated communication skills levels in nursing students and their patients and the results showed that 82.5% of the nurses participating in the research had an average communication skills with their patients(7). The authors believe that although the communication skill levels in these students have not been less than the others, according to the literature, it is clear that the importance of communication skills for the health care management students, who are supposed to be able to manage the healthcare units, is more than the other fields of studies. Thus, it is necessary to initially choose individuals with stronger communication skills for these fields; this is possible in two ways. One is to make changes in the method of the university entrance exam and choosing the students for this major. Second more attention should be paid to this skill in the curriculum planning of healthcare

Table 1. Demographic characteristics, mean, standard deviation and test results

Variables		Number	Mean	SD	Test Results
Gender	Female	95	3.85	0.37	T=-1.256 P=0.211
	Male	37	3.94	0.36	
Marital Status	Single	92	389	0.37	T=0.798 P=0.426
	Married	40	3.84	0.38	
Place of Birth	Urban	60	3.86	0.34	T=-0.415 P=0.679
	Rural	68	3.89	0.39	
Residency	Dormitory	80	3.83	0.39	T=-1.941 P=0.054
	Non dormitory	52	3.95	0.33	
Educational Level	B.s	85	3.86	0.36	F=1.028 P=0.361
	M.S	35	3.87	0.38	
	PhD	12	4.02	0.43	
Grade Point Average (GPA)	19-20	6	3.65	0.39	F=1.922 P=0.112
	18-19	26	3.99	0.33	
	17-18	24	3.77	0.41	
	16-17	37	3.92	0.33	
	<16	23	3.91	0.39	

management students.

Also, holding communication skills workshops in order to teach skills, especially before entering the practical areas (internship), can help eliminate this problem. The effect of learning on communication skills has been emphasized in many studies.(8, 9)

The other findings of the present study showed a relationship between the increase in students' age and their communication skills improvement. Study of Kuzu and Eker (2010) on nursing students showed that communication skills are not in direct relationship with the students' age. The other findings showed that there was a relationship between communication skills and other demographic variables in this research (10). As to the variables under the study, different studies have reported different results. Salimi et al. (2012) showed a relationship between the education year of the students and communication skills (6).

Javaher et al. (2013) also showed that there was a great deal of difference between the communication skills of the first and second year students with the third and fourth year ones in the external and internal coordination (p=0.002) and respecting the patients (p=0.004)(11).

Maslak Pak (2004) acknowledged that students in terms seven and eight had a good level of communication skills with their patients.

Unlike these results, the study of Lareen et al. (2014) on paramedical students indicated that this group of students have improved very little in variables under the study during 4 years (12).

The reason can be the sample size of this study and the difference between cultural and social contexts in the two societies.

Because communication skills can be both acquired and learnt, the time the students spend at the university can be one of the important and effective factors on their communication skills level. In other words, the students' educational experience can improve their communication skills (6).

Petrovich (2014) also emphasized education as an effective factor on the students' communication skills improvement; as the students move to a higher level of his studies, his benefit from training course also increases (13).

Barati et al. (2011) also found a lot of difference in the average scores of communication skills in relation to variables like sex, marital status, level of education and the field of studies (P<0.05). Also, he found that communication, listening and the feedback skills are strongly related to each other (5).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it seems that the health sector is a dynamic area and different intrapersonal skills are necessary for working in it. For individuals who are to work as a manager in different health sectors, having communication skills can be a great advantage which will be beneficial in their job success (3). Therefore, communication skills are needed to be developed in healthcare management students. Slipicevic (2012) believed that "relationship skills" was the most important skill for managers in health systems(14).

According to the present results and the other similar studies in medical science universities, serious attention is needed to improve communication skills, especially for health care management students. It can be performed through holding educational in-person and virtual courses, problem solving and role model groups as a prerequisite for graduation and getting their academic document.

Thus, it is suggested that the educational system authorities and our country's medical science universities should concentrate on specialized skills in each field as well as general skills. Moreover, the professor' ability in communication skills can affect the inclusion of these concepts in educational hidden curriculum. And finally in order to evaluate general skill levels, performing interviews in selecting specialized management in health

sectors can be helpful and besides the education role can help improve these students' communication skills levels.

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Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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