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SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Oral communication capabilities of managers: The case of Iranian middle managers

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Abstract: Sharing of information through oral communication has increased in significance among different occupations specifically among managers. This has resulted in the need for an instrument to measure managers' oral communication capabilities. The main objectives of this paper are to identify the dimensions of the oral communication capability and to develop an instrument to measure this capability. To achieve these goals, a survey was conducted among 59 male and female middle managers in different companies through providing a modified Oral Communication Capability Self-test. The results indicate that the oral communication capability construct has a structure with three dimensions among Iranian managers: The Ability to Pass on Information, The Ability to Present Self Credibly, and The Ability to Communicate With Male Counterparts. This study also investigated the typology of middle managers based on their oral communication capabilities. Based on the cluster analysis procedure, a two-cluster solution with significant differences between all oral communications dimensions was obtained.

1. Introduction

Communication is neither transmission of message nor message itself. It is the mutual exchange of understanding and originating with the receiver. One of the critical issues in this area is communication

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The instrument developed in this paper is both informative and insightful for researchers. Researchers will gain a new measurement of oral communication capabilities and orientation for future research.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The current study aims at developing an instrument to analyze the main dimensions of the oral communication capabilities in the recruiting and selection process in public and private entities.

at workplace. According to Baugh (2011), when utterances are produced by a sender who also happens to be your employer, the importance of what is said may be more relevant to the power differential that exists between those who can hire or fire someone and those who can be hired or fired.

The ethnographic context that pertains to every communicative event will also encompass power dynamics between the corresponding parties, be it an adult speaking to a child or a judge sentencing a prisoner. Austin (1962) and Searle (1979) have provided outstanding illustrations of various speech acts throughout the world, which show how the power to use language corresponds directly to the official standing, or lack thereof, of the sender of the communicative event. Everyday conversations where "promises" or "threats" are delivered will reflect differences in the social power between the senders and receivers of such highly specialized speech acts. Of such situations is communication that occurs among managers at different levels (Baugh, 2011).

The basic functions of management (Planning, Organizing, Staffing, Directing, and Controlling) cannot be performed well without effective communication. Business communication involves constant flow of information along with feedback as an integral part of effective communication. Organizations these days are very large with great number of people. There exist various levels of hierarchy in an organization. The greater the number of levels, the more difficult is the job of managing the organization. Communication here plays a very important role in process of directing and controlling the people in any organization. Immediate feedback can be obtained and misunderstandings if any, can be avoided. There should be effective communication at all levels for the success and growth of an organization; as a result communication gaps should not occur in any organization.

Any business involves two types of communication: external communication that is directed to the actors in the business environment, and internal communication or organizational communication that is directed to employees. Communication is also sending and receiving of messages by means of symbols. In this context, organizational communication is a key element of organizational climate (Drenth, Thierry, & De Wolff, 1998).

Organizational communication is the process by which individuals stimulate meaning in the minds of other individuals by means of verbal or non-verbal messages (Richmond, McCroskey, & McCroskey, 2005). For efficient communication, it is necessary that the receiver understands the meaning of the message and indicates it to the sender through some expected reactions (Ivancevich & Matteson,

Figure 1. Types of organizational communication.
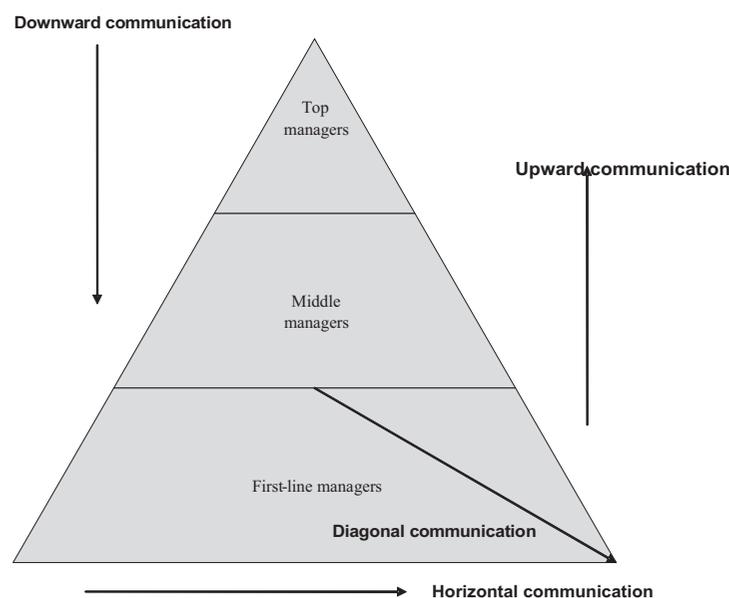
2002). Each organization must enable communication in several directions: downward communication, upward communication, horizontal communication, and diagonal communication, as illustrated by Figure 1. (Miljković & Rijavec, 2008).

1.1. Downward communication
Flows from top management to lower level managers and employees. This type of communication is characteristic for companies with an authoritative style of management.

1.2. Upward communication
Flows from employees and lower level managers to top management. The main task of this communication is to inform top management of the situation on the lower levels. It is the best way for top management to analyze the efficiency of downward communication and organizational communication in general (Miljković & Rijavec, 2008).

1.3. Horizontal communication
Flows between employees and departments, which are on the same organizational level. It enables coordination and integration of activities of departments, engaged in relatively independent tasks (Miljković & Rijavec, 2008).

1.4. Diagonal communication
Flows between people, which are not on the same organizational level and are not in a direct relationship in the organizational hierarchy. This type of communication is rarely used usually in situations when it supplements other types of communication (Miljković & Rijavec, 2008). Diagonal communication is used, when, for example, labor unions organize direct meetings between employees and top management, avoiding the first line and middle-level managers.

The focus of this article is on upward and downward communication, among mid-level managers. These managers need to communicate through a range of channels with different communication patterns. In this context, oral communication is considered as a highly important management skill area. A review of literature reveals several scales that measure oral communication capabilities (McCroskey, Beatty, Kearney, & Plax, 1985; Penley, Alexander, Jernigan, & Henwood, 1991; Rubin, 1985; Sypher & Sypher, 1983). However, the majority of them are designed to examine the capabilities of students. There exists little information regarding the capabilities of managers.

On the other hand, one of the other goals of this research aims at exploring if gender has any influences on oral communication at this level.

Academic research on communication differences across gender has shown that men and women differ in their communication characteristics and traits. Women tend to be more expressive, tentative, polite, social, while men are, on average, more assertive and dominant when it comes to communication style (Basow & Rubenfeld, 2003). Popular research has also shown gender differences in communication styles, from men being primarily goal-oriented and result-focused and women being relationship-oriented and placing a high value on closeness and intimacy in interactions with other people (Gray, 1992; Tannen, 1990).

Men and women not only differ in the way in which they communicate with one another but also in the way that they attempt to influence one another. However, these influence tactics differ from individual to individual in their effectiveness, as well as across gender (Merchant, 2012). Yukl and Chavez (2002), define nine main influence tactics in *Classification of Proactive Influence Tactics* in "Influence Tactics and Leadership Effectiveness": inspirational appeal, rational persuasion, consultation, ingratiation, personal appeals, exchange, coalition tactics, legitimating tactics, and pressure. A meta-analysis comparing research done on the intersection of influence tactics and gender found that male managers use personal appeal, consultation, assertiveness, and inspirational appeal more than female managers. The studies also proved that females used consultation, inspirational

appeal, and ingratiation more with other female employees and exchange tactics more with male employees (Carli, 1999; Carothers & Allen, 1999; Dubrin, 1991; Lamude, 1993; White, 1998). This implies that female managers are more likely to create and foster closer bonds with other female employees easily because of their similar communication styles, but not with other male employees, due to their conflicting styles of communication.

Barbuto, Scholl, Hickox, and Boulmetis (2001) divide influence tactics into two groups: "soft" and "hard" influence tactics in reference to the target person's level of resistance to the agent's behavior (Merchant, 2012). While hard tactics (including legitimating, exchange, pressure, and coalition) are characterized as being more forceful and hard to resist, soft tactics (including rationality, inspirational appeals, consultation, ingratiating, and personal appeals) relied on interpersonal relationships (Barry & Shapiro, 1992). Lamude (1993) found in his research that male supervisors are more likely to use soft tactics with male managers and hard tactics more with female managers. This implies that male managers rely on emotions and interpersonal relationships to influence other males, but rely more on influence tactics based on intimidation to influence members of the opposite sex. Lamude (1993) also found that female supervisors, on the other hand, used soft influence tactics with both male and female managers, which is representative of females' intimate communication styles and the high value they place on interpersonal relationships in the workplace (Merchant, 2012).

In general, there are two contradicting views on the study of the intersection of influence tactics and gender: one side arguing that both men and women use the same influence tactics. The other side argues that influence tactics vary across gender. Those who do not believe that men and women implement different influence tactics attribute dissimilarities in influence tactics to situational circumstances such as an individual's setting, which is comprised of their status, followers, task, etc. The second school of thought implies that male managers are more assertive and authoritative when trying to influence others, while women tend to influence by means of consulting and inspiring (Merchant, 2012). Many conclusions have also been drawn on research on the interplay between the gender of the influencer and the gender of the target person that they are trying to influence. When trying to influence someone of their same gender, leaders tend to use "softer" influence tactics; on the others hand, leaders seem to use "harder" influence tactics when they are trying to influence someone of the opposite sex. Overall, these gender differences across influence tactics may help explain why gender differences in leadership styles exist, since one's ability to influence his/her followers is a primary goal of any leader.

The current study then aims at analyzing the main dimensions of the oral communication capability, develops an instrument to clarify this capability and provides a communicator typology of Iranian middle managers. The instrument developed in this paper is both informative and insightful for researchers and managers. Researchers will gain a new measurement of oral communication capability and orientation for further research. Managers will be able to utilize this instrument when taking oral communication competencies into consideration in the selection of staff and human resource development. The research also tries to find out if gender has any influences on oral communication at this level.

2. Methodology

2.1. Instrument
Measuring managers' competencies is one of the most important preconditions for efficient human resource development. The evaluation of individual communication capability gaps is necessary for the development of tailored communication training programs for managers. In comparison with that of communication assessments based on observations, the use of self-reports is a simple and less expensive method to detect employees with a significant need for communication improvement.

The research instrument used in this study is developed based on the works of Large and Gimenez (2006), Large, Gimenez, and McCarthy (2009) and Rubin (1985). The first phase of the instrument development included translation to Farsi, and the adaptation to the realities of the Iranian business environment.

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Table 1. Participants' profile		
Age	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
+40	18	30.5
31–40	29	49.2
25–30	11	18.6
Total	58	98.3
Sex	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Male	43	72.9
Female	16	27.1
Total	59	100.0
Major	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Engineering	37	62.8
Humanities	10	17
Basic sciences	8	11.9
Total	55	91.7)
Education	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Master	15	25.4
Bachelor	35	59.3
Two-year college degree	3	5.1
High school diploma	4	6.8
Total	57	96.6
Post	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Operational managers	23	39.0
Sectional managers	16	27.1
Technical managers	7	11.9
Financial managers	5	9.5
Others	3	5.1
Total	54	92.6
History	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
0–3	21	35.6
4–10	22	37.3
+10	12	20.3
Total	55	93.2

While the original version used by others included 19 questions, this study included 3 additional questions to examine whether or not there is a difference in communicating with male vs. female individuals. Therefore, the final version of the instrument is composed of 22 items, reflecting the skills associated with oral communication. In addition, six items, reflecting the personal characteristics of the respondents were included. For each item (skill) included in the research instrument, Iranian managers were asked to evaluate the item based on a five-point Likert-type scale, where 1 represented strongly disagree and 5 represented strongly agree.

2.2. Samples and data analysis

The research instrument was distributed by one of the co-authors to middle managers in three different industries in the province of Isfahan in Iran. The instrument was distributed among middle managers in, food manufacturing industry, electrical industry, and construction industry. The returned instruments were checked for completion. Both males and females were represented in the

sample. The managers were at different stages of their carriers with varying years of managerial duties at their respective industry. Table 1 presents the basic sample profile.

The data analysis was focused on investigating the existence of groups of managers with similar patterns of oral communication. In the first phase of the data analysis, an exploratory factor analysis procedure was used to extract the underlying oral communication dimensions (factors). In the second phase of the data analysis, a cluster analysis procedure was used to group managers with similar communication profiles. The cluster analysis utilized the hierarchical agglomerative technique (Wards's method). This technique is designed to recognize outliers, and to determine the appropriate number of clusters (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2009). As a result of applying this technique, the number of clusters was set to two. The non-hierarchical (K-means) cluster analysis was then used to identify the oral communication profiles of the different groups. The objective of this analysis was to identify the most effective group.

3. Results and discussions

3.1. Factor analysis results

To find the main dimensions of the oral communication capability, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were conducted. The exploratory factor analysis was performed with the 22 modified items. The principal component extraction method was used along with varimax rotation. Then, the solution was subject to purification, taking the factor loadings size and the crossloads into account. The three-factor solution was subject to purification taking the factor loadings size and the crossloads into account. The items with small factor loads and large crossloads were excluded. This purification led to a three-factor solution with 14 items (Table 2).

3.1.1. Factor one–ability to pass on information

This factor emphasized the importance of passing information to communication receptor. In this context, managers need to be able to obtain information, understand suggestions, direct accurate,

Table 2. Factor analysis results			
Factors	**F 1**	**F 2**	**F 3**
API–Ability to Pass on Information			
A8 Obtain information	−0.808		
A16 Understand suggestions	−0.696		
A19 Direct accurate	0.640		
A13 Recognize misunderstanding	0.598		
A18 Explain organized	−0.553		
A17 Distinguish fact from opinion	0.512		
APO–Ability to Persuade			
A11 Pronounce words correctly		0.700	
A6 Articulate clearly		−0.698	
A2 Answer questions		0.600	
A12 Speak credible/facial expression		0.576	
A4 Understand assignments		0.495	
ACM–Ability to Communicate with Male Counterparts			
A20 Express feelings to male counterparts			0.901
A21 Present ideas to male counterparts			0.874
A22 Discuss with male speakers			0.857
Eingvalues	3.84	2.23	1.67
Percent of total variance	25.59	14.90	11.17
Cumulative percent	25.59	40.50	51.68

recognize misunderstanding, explain organized, and distinguish fact from opinion. In this context, the perspective or point of reference is important in order to eliminate misunderstanding of intended oral communications.

3.1.2. Factor two–ability to persuade

This factor emphasized the importance of persuading the communication receiver. In this context, managers need to be able to pronounce words correctly, articulate clearly, answer questions, speak credible/facial expression, and understand assignments.

3.1.3. Factor three–ability to communicate with male counterparts

This factor comprised the ability of managers to express feelings, present ideas, and discuss with male counterparts. The extraction of this factor implies the key role of gender in oral communication issues at managerial levels.

In the first phase of the data analysis, managers' oral communication dimensions were identified. The existence of distinct oral communication profile of oral communication for different groups of managers based on the extracted dimensions was explored next. For this purpose cluster procedure was utilized. The observation for this analysis was based on the extracted factors. Using the survey data, an average of the variables included in each factor was calculated.

3.2. Cluster analysis results

Different people communicate in different ways, but probably in similar patterns. This means that it might be possible to identify a typology of communicators. To do this, cluster analysis was conducted taking the factors identified in the previous section into consideration: the ability to pass on information (API), the ability to persuade (APO) and the ability to communicate with male counterparts (ACM).

The main cluster analysis was performed using the Ward method and the squared Euclidean distance. The cluster technique required the selection of an appropriate number of clusters. The elbow criterion of the Ward method suggested a two-factor solution. Additionally, the variances within the groups also pointed to the use of two clusters (Table 3).

3.2.1. Group A

This group included 40 managers. Group A consists of respondents with excellent communication capabilities. They tend to have high API during the communication process (Table 4). Although their APO others is higher than other factors in this cluster, members of this group seem to be weaker in communicating with male counterparts. It is to be noted that the female managers represent 32% of this group. The findings are in accordance with what (Carli, 1999; Carothers & Allen, 1999; Dubrin, 1991; Lamude, 1993; White, 1998) suggest that female managers are more likely to create and foster closer bonds with other female counterparts easier because of their similar communication styles, but not with other male colleagues, due to their conflicting styles of communication.

Table 3. Cluster analysis results		
Final cluster centers		
	Cluster	
	1	2
Number of cases	40	19
FAC1	3.20	3.27
FAC2	3.40	1.79
FAC3	2.89	2.91

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Table 4. Profile for group A		
Age	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
+40	11	27.5
31–40	21	52.5
25–30	8	20.0
Total	40	100.0
Sex	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Male	27	67.5
Female	13	32.5
Total	40	100.0
Major	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Engineering	23	57.5
Humanities	7	17.5
Basic sciences	7	17.5
Total	37	92.5
Education	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Master	7	17.5
Bachelor	30	75.0
Two-year college degree	0	0
High school diploma	3	7.5
Total	40	100.0
Post	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Operational managers	15	37.5
Sectional managers	9	22.5
Technical managers	7	17.5
Financial managers	4	10.0
Others	2	5.0
Total	37	92.5
History (years)	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
4–10	17	42.5
+10	7	17.5
0–3	13	32.5
Total	37	92.5

3.2.2. Group B

This group included 19 managers. The results indicate that this group tends to assign higher scores to the first factor comparing with group A. In addition, most respondents in this group seem to be stronger than Group A in their ability to communicate with male speakers. However, they represent lower score in the APO. It is worth noting that male managers comprised nearly 84% of the group (Table 5). This can be possibly because women are more relationship-oriented and expressive in their communication styles than men. As a result, they may be more successful in influencing their counterparts comparing to their male colleagues.

Comparing the results between these two groups, the findings suggest no significant difference between the first and the third factor in these two clusters. However, the results indicate a significant difference in the second factor between these two groups (Table 6).

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Table 5. Profile for group B

Age	Frequency	Percentage
+40	7	36.8
31–40	8	42.1
25–30	3	15.8
Total	18	94.7
Sex	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Male	16	84.2
Female	3	15.8
Total	19	100.0
Major	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Engineering	14	73.7
Humanities	3	15.8
Basic sciences	1	5.3
Total	18	94.7
Education	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Masters	8	42.1
Bachelor	5	26.3
Two-year college degree	3	15.8
High school diploma	1	5.3
Total	17	89.5
Post	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Operational managers	8	42.1
Sectional managers	7	36.8
Financial managers	1	5.3
Others	1	5.3
Total	17	89.5
History	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
+10	5	26.3
4–10	5	26.3
0–3	8	42.1
Total	18	94.7

Table 6. Cluster analysis comparing the factors in two groups

Group statistics

	Clusters	Number of cases	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean	t	p-value
FAC1	1	40	3.2000	.28793	.04553	−.865	.391
	2	19	3.2719	.32016	.07345		
FAC2	1	40	3.4000	.56083	.08867	9.713	.000
	2	19	1.7895	.61071	.14011		
FAC3	1	40	2.8900	.46619	.07371	−.121	.904
	2	19	2.9053	.42357	.09717		

The respondents in this group seem to be similar to group A in terms of " API (factor 1)" and " ACM (factor 3)." However, in terms of " APO (factor 2)" the participants in this group are significantly weaker than group A (see Table 6).

Comparing the profile of the two groups (Tables 4 and 6) show that group B includes significantly more " Male" (84% vs. 67.5%) and more " Engineers" (73.7% vs. 57.5%) than group A. This perhaps indicates that male and/or engineers are weaker in persuading others than female and non-engineers. The results are in line with the findings of (Basow & Rubenfeld, 2003) according to which women tend to be more expressive, tentative, polite, social, while men are, on average, more assertive and dominant when it comes to communication style.

4. Conclusion

This study sought to assess the dimensions and profiles and of oral communication skills among Iranian middle managers in different organizations. The research also aimed at finding if gender has any effects on oral communication among managers.

The study utilized 59 Iranian middle managers. Iran represented a unique setting for this study. In such business culture, traditions are being challenged by modern business practices. As such, the traditionally proven ways, such as effective oral communication might be compromised in favor of technologically based communication methods and channels.

Factor and cluster analysis procedures were used to analyze the collected data. Based on the results of this study, the following conclusions and implications are in order.

First, three distinct factors representing different oral communications competencies were extracted. Therefore, the oral communications construct appears to be multifaceted in nature. Three factors were extracted in this study, namely Ability to Pass on Information (API), Ability to Persuade Others (APO), and Ability to Communicate with Male Counterparts (ACM). As such, the majority of the managers appeared to lack some essential competencies of oral communication. These managers should be more exposed to such competencies through more training, testing, and practice. Meanwhile extracting the third factor, ACM, indicates that gender has an influential role in oral communication at this level among Iranian managers.

Second, the cluster analysis revealed that none of the two groups scored above the average in all dimensions of oral communication. Comparing the results between the two groups, the findings revealed no significant difference between the first and the third factor in these two clusters. However, the results indicated a significant difference in the second factor between these two groups. Comparing the two groups the participants in group B are significantly weaker than group A in terms of " APO (factor 2)." These results reinforce the fact that there is considerable opportunity for communication training and management development. In addition, concerning the profiles of the two groups, group B includes significantly more " Male" and more " Engineers" than group A. This may imply that male and/or engineers are weaker in persuading others than female and non-engineers.

The results support the fact that male managers are more assertive and authoritative when trying to influence others comparing to women who tend to influence by means of consulting and inspiring. As a result, women may use better influential tactics while persuading their counterparts. Considering the outcomes, it can be concluded that gender, level of education, and organizational level can have a great impact on Iranian middle managers' communication skills. Thus, it seems that specific communication courses should be implemented in order to improve the weak points resulted from these social issues among managers at their work place

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