



## The relationship between work engagement and psychological distress of hospital nurses and the perceived communication behaviors of their nurse managers: A cross-sectional survey



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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Communication between nurse managers and nurses is important for mental health of hospital nurses.

**Objective:** The aim of the present study was to investigate the relationship between managers' communication behaviors toward nurses, and work engagement and psychological distress among hospital nurses using a multilevel model.

**Design:** The present study was a cross-sectional questionnaire survey.

**Settings:** The participants were nurses working at three hospitals in Japan.

**Participants:** A total of 906 nurses from 38 units participated in the present study. The units with small staff sizes and participants with missing entries in the questionnaire were excluded. The data for 789 nurses from 36 questionnaire survey units were analyzed.

**Method:** A survey using a self-administered questionnaire was conducted. The questionnaire asked staff nurses about communication behaviors of their immediate manager and their own levels of work engagement, psychological distress, and other covariates. Three types of manager communication behaviors (i.e., direction-giving, empathetic, and meaning-making language) were assessed using the Motivating Language scale; and the scores of the respondents were averaged for each unit to calculate unit-level scores. Work engagement and psychological distress were measured using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale and the K6 scale, respectively. The association of communication behaviors by unit-level managers with work engagement and psychological distress among nurses was analyzed using two-level hierarchical linear modeling.

**Results:** The unit-level scores for all three of the manager communication behaviors were significantly and positively associated with work engagement among nurses ( $p < 0.05$ ). This association was smaller and non-significant after adjusting for the psychosocial work environment. The individual levels of all three of the manager communication behaviors were also significantly and positively associated with work engagement ( $p < 0.05$ ). None of the three manager communication behaviors was significantly associated with psychological distress ( $p > 0.05$ ).

**Conclusion:** Motivating language by unit-level managers might be positively associated with work engagement among hospital nurses, which is mediated through the better psychosocial work environment of the unit.

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### What is already known about the topic?

- Leadership and management behaviors are associated with mental health among staff nurses.
- Good manager communication is related to job satisfaction.
- Research on the effects of specific communication behaviors of nurse managers is limited.

### What this paper adds

- The unit-level nurse managers' use of motivating language might be positively associated with work engagement among hospital nurses.
- At an individual level, manager communication behaviors might be positively associated with work engagement.

## 1. Introduction

Nurses' mental health has become an important topic in nursing management (Hayes et al., 2010), with a high prevalence of burnout, psychological distress, and low satisfaction reported among nurses in Japan and other countries (Aiken et al., 2013, 2011; Kanai-Pak et al., 2008). Poor mental health, such as depression and anxiety, has been associated with a high nurse turnover (Hayes et al., 2012), which is a critical issue due to the nursing shortage in Japan (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Japan., 2015) and other countries (Chan et al., 2013).

Good mental health, including positive psychological outcomes, has recently become a focus of occupational health psychology research (Bakker et al., 2008). For instance, work engagement, defined as "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption" (Schaufeli et al., 2002), is an important topic in nursing (Bargagliotti, 2012). Mental health of nurses is also related to patient outcomes and the quality of healthcare provided (Poghosyan et al., 2010; Simpson, 2009; Vahey et al., 2004), two aspects that are vital to the efficient operation of an organization and patient quality of care.

Leaders' behaviors and leadership styles are associated with both negative and positive psychological outcomes among employees (Skakon et al., 2010). To improve the mental health of nurses, the behaviors of nurse managers have been emphasized as an important factor (Chan et al., 2013; Duffield et al., 2011). Numerous studies have indicated that supervisor support, leadership, management behaviors, and leadership style can be associated with negative aspects of nurse mental health, such as psychological distress, including empathetic exhaustion and tension at work (Leiter and Laschinger, 2006; McVicar, 2003; Wang et al., 2015). However, although a nurse manager might impact various aspects of the professional lives of nurses because of continuous routine communication on a daily basis, the research on the effects of specific communication behaviors of managers remains limited.

Communication is a factor that can reduce stress among nurses (Sullivan and Decker, 2009). Previous studies of management in nursing organizations have reported that good manager communication with subordinates is associated with improved job satisfaction (Blegen, 1993; Wińska, 2010; Zangaro and Soeken, 2007), and as such, communication has come to be considered a core competency for nurse managers (Chase, 2012). Since transformational leadership includes communication behaviors like sharing vision and providing intellectual stimulation, some leadership styles contain specific communication behaviors (Robbins and Judge, 2015a). The impact of leadership styles, such as transformational leadership and authentic leadership, on staff psychological outcomes has already been demonstrated in research (Laschinger et al., 2013; Weberg, 2010), but these studies

focused primarily on general or inclusive qualities of communication. Research on the effects of specific nurse manager communication behaviors on the mental health of subordinate nurses is still limited.

In an organizational context, communication between managers and subordinates can be classified as downward or upward (Robbins and Judge, 2015b). Upward communication is communication from subordinates to their managers, while downward is the information going from manager to their subordinate. In particular, downward verbal communication includes managers conveying various information, indications, thoughts, and emotions to their subordinates (Robbins and Judge, 2015b). Motivating language theory (Sullivan, 1988) has been conceptualized as strategic communication from supervisors to subordinates based on communication behaviors that might affect job satisfaction, motivation, and performance among subordinate workers. This theory addresses three types of communication, based on the linguistic classification of speech acts: "direction-giving language," used to clarify goals, objectives, and tasks, and to provide information that reduces uncertainty; "empathetic language," used when a manager expresses consideration for workers and shows encouragement and praise for their efforts and performance; and "meaning-making language," expressed when a manager conveys and explains cultural norms, rules, and values to workers (Mayfield et al., 1995; Sullivan, 1988). In each nursing unit, nurse managers provide information, show encouragement, and explain rules in a motivating language on a daily basis, to manage personnel and other resources. As such, motivating language can be an important strategic communication tool in a nursing environment.

Previous studies have shown an association between the motivating language of supervisors and staff members' job satisfaction (Mayfield et al., 1998; Sharbrough, 2006), performance (Mayfield et al., 1998; Mayfield and Mayfield, 2012), communication satisfaction with supervisors (Sharbrough, 2006), intent to remain in current employment (Mayfield and Mayfield, 2007), and self-efficacy (Mayfield and Mayfield, 2012). However, among the few studies conducted on nurses (Mayfield et al., 1998; Mayfield and Mayfield, 2007), it is unclear which of the three types of communication defined in the Motivating Language Theory is most associated with job satisfaction. Thus, little is known about the relationship between specific communication behaviors of nurse managers and psychological distress among their subordinate nurses. Understanding the impact of specific communication behaviors could help nurse managers improve their management skills.

Job resources such as job control and supervisory support are associated with positive aspects of mental health, such as job satisfaction (Cummings et al., 2010; Lu et al., 2012; Utriainen and Kyngäs, 2009), and work engagement among nurses (Caesens et al., 2014; Othman and Nasuridin, 2013). Communication behaviors of nurse managers are positively associated with work engagement, along with supervisory support, performance feedback, and rewards (Bakker et al., 2008), which might affect work engagement among subordinate nurses. There are, however, no previous studies that have examined the association between specific communication behaviors of managers, such as using motivating language, and work engagement among nurses.

Job demand, job control, and social support are also important workplace psychosocial factors that affect both work engagement and psychological distress (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Inoue et al., 2013). Motivating language has the potential to decrease job demands and increase job control, because the motivating language used by managers can help subordinate clarify goals and priority tasks (Mayfield et al., 1995; Sullivan, 1988). Moreover, worksite support can be a mediator between organizational justice

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