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ScienceDirect

Research in Social and
Administrative Pharmacy 11 (2015) 265–279

RESEARCH IN SOCIAL &
ADMINISTRATIVE PHARMACY

Commentary

Researching pharmacist managerial capability: Philosophical perspectives and paradigms of inquiry

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Summary

In successful community pharmacy business enterprises suitably responsive actions to meet ever-increasing change require capable pharmacy managers who readily learn and adapt. Capability as a concept is generally understood to be the ability of a manager to identify and act to solve unfamiliar problems in unfamiliar situations. Capability is characterized by adaptability and flexibility. However, different understandings of the concept ‘capability’ and what it means to be ‘capable’ are indirect and incomplete. This paper aims to clarify current theories regarding the concept of ‘capability’ at the level of the individual, and through this to make more explicit what is known about the phenomenon, but more particularly, how we know what we know. The analysis includes the concept of ‘competence’ because explanations of capability include competence, and the two concepts are not clearly separated in the literature. By probing the epistemological origins of current theory concerning both concepts, the limiting taken for granted assumptions are revealed. Assumptions about context and time, and the psychological theory through which individuals are assumed to perceive, know and learn, are illuminated. The analysis, in connection with the literature, shows how the interpretive philosophic research approach may reveal a different and useful theoretical perspective for explaining capability as a dynamic performance. It is suggested that such a perspective may narrow the gap between the theory of capability and its practice. The interpretive perspective holds potential to reveal how capability, as performed by successful community pharmacy managers, might be further researched and strengthened. This paper supports the challenging suggestion that pharmacy social research needs to rebalance the dominance of purely empirical research by exploring interpretive methodologies to better understand human actions and relations in the context of pharmacy.

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Keywords: Managerial capability; Competence; Epistemology; Interpretive; Knowing; Learning; Pharmacy management

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Introduction

Australian community pharmacies are currently experiencing a range of major challenges affecting business viability. Influences such as government prescription pricing reform, a dramatically increasing competitive environment and generally negative national and world economic factors are affecting pharmacy commercial viability.¹ Some describe the coalescence of these changes as “the perfect storm.”^{2,3} Many Australian community pharmacies are struggling to adapt as evidenced through reports of pharmacy bankruptcies escalating to unprecedented levels.⁴ Similar industry pressures are evident in comparable nations. The need for constructive responses to ensure continued professional and commercial viability is present in New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Canada and the US.^{5–8} The recurring theme is centered on community pharmacy’s need to adapt to align with emerging health system needs and commercial circumstances.⁹

Rapid rates of change require pharmacy managers who can effectively navigate their enterprises through this complex environment. Effective action to meet changing environments requires capable managers.^{10–13} Financial pressure on the community pharmacy business model requires capable management toward solutions that benefit both profit as well as professional practice.¹⁴ Capability at the level of the individual is commonly but loosely understood to mean the ability to engage with emergent changes in environmental circumstances, and respond with changed but sensible actions, continuously over time.^{13,15–17} However, clearly understanding the concept ‘capability’ and what ‘capable’ means as ongoing action, or performance, is not straightforward. As Australian community pharmacy managers face daunting economic circumstances,¹ it is timely to review the phenomenon of capability, and how the phenomenon might be better understood in the community pharmacy management context.

The terms capability and capable bring with them the related but different concept, competence. Conceptualizations of capability at the level of the individual implicitly or explicitly include competence.^{15,18–20} For example, the National Competency Standards Framework for Pharmacists in Australia views capability as a demonstration of competence.²¹ Interest in capability and competence is hardly surprising because in their broadest sense, these concepts are concerned with explaining the relationship between knowledge and action.

This relationship goes to the heart of understanding how desired managerial performance outcomes might be achieved.^{15,16,20,22–25}

This paper aims to clarify current theories regarding the concept of capability at the level of the individual, and to make more explicit what is known about the phenomenon, but more particularly, how we know what we know. This has been achieved by critically probing the research paradigms which underpin the different literature based understandings of the phenomenon capability and the related phenomenon of competence. The clarification comes from considering important assumptions and implications that arise from the philosophical perspectives through which the concepts competence and capability are currently understood. Uncovering these assumptions illuminates how pharmacist managerial capability might be further researched and strengthened. Achieving better understanding of the linkage between human knowledge and action is crucial for better understanding capability in the context of pharmacy management and learning.

The paper is organized in the following manner. Two contrasting conceptualizations of competence are described and analyzed, followed by a review of two different conceptualizations of capability. Explanations of competence are dealt with first because theories of capability include competence and the two concepts are far from clearly separated in the literature.²⁶ To gain better conceptual clarity about capability begins with gaining better conceptual clarity about competence. A comparison of the concepts is brought together in [Table 1](#). In the discussion that follows, the merits and limitations of different philosophical approaches to researching capability are discussed. A particular philosophic approach and potential methodologies are suggested as likely to provide greater insight into capability as a dynamic human performance. The analysis supports the challenging suggestion that pharmacy social research needs to break from the dominance of purely empirical research to better understand human behavior and complexity in the context of pharmacy.²⁷

Conceptual analysis: competence and capability

‘Capable’ and ‘competent’ are often used interchangeably in the literature, and the terms ‘capability’ and ‘competence’ are often used to explain each other from differing philosophic perspectives.^{26,28,29} For the concept capability to become

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