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Health Professions Education **I** (**IIII**) **III**-**III** 



# Mastery of communication skills. Does intelligence matter?

Jeroen Kuntze<sup>a,\*</sup>, Henk T. van der Molen<sup>b</sup>, Marise Ph. Born<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Open University, The Netherlands <sup>b</sup>Faculty of Social Sciences, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands <sup>c</sup>Department of Psychology, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands Received 14 July 2016; accepted 1 August 2016

### Abstract

*Background:* Insight in the influence of intelligence on the mastery of communication skills is important for improving the microcounselling method, an effective training programme for acquiring these skills.

*Method:* Participants were 323 bachelor psychology students. The participants' level of verbal, spatial and numerical intelligence was determined. Participants followed either a course in basic skills or a course in advanced skills. Their level of mastery of these skills was assessed with a video test.

*Results:* Both training programmes proved to be effective in training communication skills. As expected, numerical and spatial intelligence were no significant predictors for the mastery of these skills. Verbal intelligence did matter for the mastery of basic communication skills, but only when students are not acquainted with the use of these skills.

Discussion: Students profit from training these skills, regardless of their intelligence level.

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Keywords: Communication skills; Assessment; Intelligence; Training; Education

## 1. Introduction

For many psychologists professional interviewing is one of the key components of their profession. Therefore psychology curricula offer their students training programmes in communication skills. Moreover, the mastery of these skills is one of the requirements to be considered for the diploma of a registered European psychologist.<sup>1</sup> A successful training method for the acquisition of these skills is microcounselling.<sup>2-5</sup> Several studies<sup>6-13</sup> and meta-analyses<sup>14-17</sup> found large overall effect sizes for this method. Improving this method, however, still remains important. For instance, the training method was adjusted to the use of new computer techniques.<sup>18-19</sup> In the context of improving this training method it is also important to gain insight into factors that might influence the acquisition of communication skills. One such a factor might be intelligence.

Nowadays there is reasonable consensus that intelligence is the best predictor of work performance, based on the outcomes of several longitudinal studies<sup>20-27</sup> and meta-analyses.<sup>28-30</sup> General intelligence predicts, apart from working performance, also training success.<sup>31</sup>

#### http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.hpe.2016.08.002

Please cite this article as: Kuntze J, et al. Mastery of communication skills. Does intelligence matter? *Health Professions Education* (2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.hpe.2016.08.002

<sup>\*</sup>Corresponding author. Postal address: Studiecentrum Utrecht, Vondellaan 202, 3521 GZ Utrecht, The Netherlands. Fax: +31 30 2518254.

E-mail address: jeroen.kuntze@ou.nl (J. Kuntze).

Peer review under responsibility of AMEEMR: The Association for Medical Education in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

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Students and soldiers scoring high on general intelligence tests learned more from the same training programme than persons scoring low on general intelligence. This finding was confirmed by other studies<sup>21,32</sup> and a meta-analysis.<sup>30</sup> Apart from being an unsurpassed predictor of work performance, general intelligence also is the best predictor of training success.

Therefore, one would expect intelligence also to predict success in communication skills training. However, studies investigating whether intelligence predicts success in communication skills training are scarce. Nonetheless, understanding the possible effect of intelligence on the mastery of these skills could help improve training programmes for the acquisition of these skills. Therefore, the focus of this study is on intelligence as predictor of the mastery of communication skills after a basic and advanced training in these skills.

After Spearman's distinction between general intelligence or the g-factor and specific intelligence or the sfactor,<sup>33,34</sup> intelligence research primarily has concentrated on tests for general intelligence, because this was thought to be the best indicator of someone's true intelligence.<sup>21</sup> However, since the second half of the 20th century researchers also attended to more specific abilities, for instance verbal intelligence or spatial intelligence. Specific job demands, e.g. bookkeeping, not only appeal to general intelligence, but also to specific abilities, e.g. numerical intelligence.<sup>21,24</sup> According to Lubinski<sup>24</sup> general intelligence can be divided into three more specific ability domains: verbal, numerical and spatial intelligence. The aggregation of these three separate abilities should give a good impression of someone's general intelligence. In this study we will maintain Lubinski's distinction and investigate verbal, numerical and spatial intelligence as predictors of the mastery of communication skills.

Only a few studies have investigated these relationships. These studies have concentrated mostly on the correlation of verbal intelligence with communication skills. For instance, verbal intelligence admission tests predicted medical students' mastery of communication skills.<sup>35</sup> Well-developed verbal intelligence at early age predicts well-developed communication and social skills later on in life.<sup>36</sup> Finally, found that students scoring high on verbal intelligence also scored higher on behavioural tests for communication skills.<sup>37</sup>

Students in this study followed a microcounselling training programme in communication skills, also known as microskills.<sup>2-5,38</sup> This means that the complex skill of professionally interviewing a client is

unravelled into small meaningful communication skills. Following Ivey and Authier<sup>4</sup> and Egan,<sup>39,40</sup> Lang and Van der Molen<sup>38</sup> distinguished seven basic communication skills, namely minimal encouragements, asking questions, paraphrasing, reflection of feeling, concreteness, summarizing and situation clarification and five advanced skills, namely advanced accurate empathy, confrontation, positive relabelling, examples of one's own and directness.

These skills fit within Egan's helping model<sup>39,40</sup> of three stages: (1) problem clarification, (2) gaining new insights and (3) strategies for treatment. The goal of the first stage is to clarify the problem of the client. In this stage helpers mainly use the basic communication skills. During the second stage, gaining new insights, helpers try to have clients gain new insights in their situation, predominantly using the five advanced communication skills. Finally, in the third stage, strategies for treatment, client and helper seek strategies to solve the client's problems.

The basic communication skills are often taught in the first or second bachelor year of a psychology curriculum and the advanced communication skills in consecutive years. Subjects of the present study were psychology students who in their first bachelor year followed a course in basic communication skills and in their second bachelor year a course in advanced communication skills. These courses were built up according to the Cumulative Microtraining (CMT) method.<sup>41</sup> In this method students first receive theoretical instruction about one communication skill (e.g. summarizing) and its function in a professional interview. Next, video clips show examples of inadequate and adequate performance of the skill to the students (modelling). Subsequently, students exercise the skill separately (like 'dry swimming'). For instance, with regard to the basic skill 'asking questions' students have to try to change a closed question ('Do you feel sad?') into an open question ('How do you feel?'), after which they practice the skill in a role-play with another student. Finally, fellow-students and the trainer give feedback on the student's performance in the role-play and the student formulates learning points according to this feedback. While students practice one or two new skills in each session, CMT's ultimate purpose is to integrate the communication skills that have been dealt with up to that moment in the training programme. Both courses aim at increasing the students' adequate application of the (basic or advanced) communication skills.

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