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Quick Response Code:

Website: www.jehp.net
DOI: 10.4103/jehp.jehp_931_21

Strategies to increase social capital and interaction of faculty members of medical universities

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Abstract:

BACKGROUND: Social participation and group interaction are the basic and expected indicators of serving in the job of the faculty. Some improvements are needed for universities and professors in this area, which they can be better identified by studying the main beneficiaries. In this regard, this study was aimed to identify strategies to increase social capital and interaction of medical universities' faculty members.

MATERIALS AND METHODS: This qualitative study which was a qualitative content analysis type was performed on 22 faculty members of Isfahan, Mashhad, Tabriz, Iran, Army, Shahrekord, Sabzevar, Arak, and Khomein universities through semi-structured interviews and purposive sampling. Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

RESULTS: According to finding, in order to improve the social interactions of medical universities' faculty members, there were 2 factors and 8 main categories including organizational factors ("organizational dynamics," "organizational security," "standardization of selection and evaluation," "value creation," and "establishing a compensation system") and individual social factors ("education and social programs," "personal skills and beliefs promotion," and "personality and learning").

CONCLUSIONS: The obtained strategies in this study to improve social capital and group interactions and group participation of medical universities' faculty members can be planned and implemented by managers and can be used for faculty members themselves.

Keywords:

Faculty members, group participation, medical sciences universities, social capital, social communication

Introduction

Social capital includes active interactions between individuals, i.e., trust, mutual understanding, behaviors, and common values, that connects human network members and groups together and facilitates collaborative activities in the workplace.^[1] The message of social capital is summed up in one simple sentence, "Relationships are important." That is, by connecting with each other and trying to maintain and continue it, humans will be able to cooperate and interact with each other and achieve goals

that, if worked alone, would either fail or cause problems.

The basic idea of social capital is that family, friends, and co-workers constitute a very important asset that an individual can benefited them in a crisis situation or use for material gain. Of course, this is truer for the group than for the individual.^[2] For example, university professors, as an expert group, are engaged in teaching science and specialized experiences, as well as conducting study and research, and play an effective and expected role in improving the society situation and promoting it in various dimensions. Therefore, it is very important that they play a role as a useful and efficient

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How to cite this article: Samouei R, Nazari-Kamal M, Golshiri P, Samouei S. Strategies to increase social capital and interaction of faculty members of medical universities. J Edu Health Promot 2022;11:300.

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Received: 25-06-2021
Accepted: 15-11-2021
Published: 28-09-2022

social capital for each other and the society, and also they have the opportunity to use social capital optimally in their society. In this regard, it is important to study the factors related to social capital and participation and the ways to increase it. In some studies, this issue has been addressed from a limited perspective. Here are some of them.

One study reported that faculty members at Payame Noor University typically have limited communication in their work environment, their sense of belonging to the university is low, they consider the cost of their missed opportunities to be high, and they are usually less motivated to participate in university activities.^[3] In a study entitled "Review of faculty members' opinions about motivational factors affecting educational performance," communication was introduced as one of the most important factors.^[4] According to the results of a study, there was a relationship between employees' social capital and some diseases and it was emphasized that social capital in the workplace should be considered as one of the main ways to promote health.^[5] According to the results of a study, there is a relationship between job motivation and social capital, as well as between organizational identity and social capital. Overall, social capital was able to predict job motivation of faculty members.^[6] Another study found that there is no significant difference between any of social capital dimensions of managers and staff of education development centers in medical universities in the country and social capital was introduced as one of the indicators of growth and development of society.^[7] The results of a study showed that social capital is a good predictor of quality of work life and employees' job satisfaction in the workplace.^[8] In a study, the existence of a significant relationship between social capital and emotional intelligence and professional self-efficacy of university professors was mentioned as one of the most important active and distinct systems in any society.^[9] In one study, it was reported that university professors, in addition to the need to change their social patterns by applying new technologies, had to adapt themselves to increasing traditional models of social interaction.^[10] Another study emphasized the long-term effects of social competency training and ethics-based behavior in order to achieve the quality of educators' teaching. This study introduced empathy, active listening, and emotion management as indicators (determinants/components) of interpersonal communication in educators.^[11] A study was examined the social dimensions affecting the teachers' relationships that included the acceptance feeling, the possibility of personal and professional growth, making opportunities and conditions for expressing worries, feelings and emotions, the existence of more opportunities for communication, and more opportunities for gathering.^[12] In other study, social

duty training in guest teachers was reviewed. The findings indicated that professors could maintain their position if they received training, frequent contact with other professors, and access to university resources and they will not succeed if the professors do not unite and do not feel mutual benefit.^[13] To achieve a deeper understanding of the social trust concept, a study addressed the use of conceptual resources and empirical insights of moral psychology. This study also suggested that key aspects of social trust may be related to moral reasoning and moral identity.^[14]

A review of studies shows that the issue of professors' social capital has been specifically addressed in a limited dimension and has shown more relationships between variables than improvement strategies. Regarding this study, a qualitative study was conducted to identify a set of strategies to increase social capital and the interaction of faculty members of medical universities.

Materials and Methods

Study design and setting

The research is qualitative and was conducted by content analysis method.

Study participants and sampling

This study was done in medical universities of the country including Isfahan, Mashhad, Tabriz, Iran, Army, Shahrekord, Sabzevar, Arak, and Khomein with the participation of faculty members in different specialties, positions, and degrees by purposeful sampling and heterogeneous with the maximum diversity to achieve different views. In order to achieve the minimum diversity in the participants, more universities and specialized fields were considered for cooperation. Four schools of Isfahan University of Medical Sciences were selected based on greater accessibility, and a professor was contacted in these schools. The same schools and specialized fields were considered in other universities, and among the number of individuals who were contacted, interviews were conducted with professors who announced their cooperation to participate in the interview. Given that in qualitative studies, the goal is not generalizability, the adequacy of the sample was announced through data saturation and during the implementation process when the information did not lead to further description of the new concept and no new class was created. No new data were obtained in the study after 19 interviews. However, 22 participants were interviewed.

To identify strategies, the interview form was developed in a semi-structured way. Two interviews were conducted to determine the appropriate sequence, adequacy, and suitable process of the

questions. Two examples of interview questions were what strategies do you suggest to increase the social trust of faculty members in medical universities. How to increase the participation and relationships of faculty members in interaction with colleagues and the work environment?

The interviewees were introduced to the researcher's request and the purpose of this study through the researcher's telephone communication and were invited to collaborate. In order to facilitate the participation of interviewees living in the city of Isfahan (researcher's place of residence) and increase their cooperation, face-to-face interview sessions were held in the interviewees' office, and due to the impossibility of travel and mission in the COVID-19 pandemic, the interview was coordinated and conducted virtually in other cities. At the beginning of the interview, the purpose of the study was explained more, and written consent and permission to record the interview were received. An agreement was reached on maintaining the information confidentiality and ethical principle observation and that several interview sessions may be required. Interviewees were told that they had the right to withdraw from the interview process at any time if they did not want to continue. Each interview lasted approximately 30 min. Each interview was implemented after completing.

Data collection tool and technique

The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using qualitative content analysis with an inductive approach for in-depth understanding and description of the data. In content analysis, the data extraction method is in the form of regular classification and coding, which by discovering a large amount of textual information, helps to reveal the trends and patterns of used words, their repetition, structure, and relationships between them and communication analysis.^[11] In this study, considering that the emphasis was on discovering the relationship between concepts, communication content analysis was considered.

Ethical consideration

The participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study. The results of the questionnaires were not exploited for personal goals, and the individual information of the respondents remained confidential. In addition, the process of recording information was performed without bias and judgment of the researcher to the extent possible.

Results

Table 1 shows the individual academic-occupational characteristics of participants. According to this table, it is obvious that in order to achieve different concepts in

response to the study question, in the selection of experts the greatest variety is considered.

Strategies for improving social capital (increasing social participation and cooperation) of medical universities' faculty members from experts' perspective are reported in Table 2.

According to the findings of Table 2, two main factors, including "organizational" and "individual social factors," were identified in improving the social capital of professors. Organizational factors were revealed by five main categories including "organizational dynamics," "organizational security," "standardization of selection and evaluation," "value creation," and "establishment of compensation system."

In the area of organizational dynamics, one of the faculty members pointed to match the professors' participation expectation with their characteristics and abilities and optimizing the organizational environment for group interactions in this way: "Participation and interaction largely depend on the knowledge of the organization and managers of the characteristics of individuals. For example, some people who aren't interested in teamwork at all shouldn't be pressured, some are willing to participate but don't have the ability. Here we have to take a step back and see how to empower the faculty. Sometimes a person is capable but in a certain area not all of them. Here the role of the manager is highlighted to see where and how to involve this person. People are also interested in interactions, but we put so much work on them, they don't have a chance... So we have to consider diversity and keep the environment active."

In the area of organizational security, a participant emphasized the necessity of resilient and secure systems toward interact and relation. "If the group does not like something, they make trouble for the person, what a work team in an academic environment. Being an obsequious works; Even though the foundation of the work is wrong. The academic environment in interactions should be critical; it should be everyone's opinion place. Not that the answer to the questions is predetermined," and another participant had a critical view about the negative consequences of some interactions in this way: "If you say something in a team interaction that isn't in accordance with the wishes of the main manager and the person in the group, the higher authorities will reprimand you; in this way, can't participate or work as a team."

Regarding the standardization of selection and evaluation, one of the participants pointed out the contradiction in the requirements and evaluation criteria of the regulations: "The system must value teamwork,

Table 1: Some personal, academic, and occupational characteristics of medical universities' faculty members participating in the study

Gender	Major	Academic rank	Work experience	Medical university
Male	Medical library	Professor		Isfahan
Female	Health information management	Assistant professor	12	Isfahan
Male	Nursing education	Associate professor	25	Tabriz
Female	Medical library	Lecturer	5	Isfahan
Male	Health information management	Assistant professor	9	Tabriz
Female	Midwifery	Lecturer	11	Mashhad
Male	Health education and health promotion	Associate professor	14	Arak
Female	Health services management	Lecturer	29	Isfahan
Female	Health economic	Assistant professor	5	Isfahan
Female	Nursing	Lecturer	18	Khomein
Male	Tissue engineering	Assistant professor	3	Shahrekord
Female	Health emergencies and disaster	Assistant professor	30	Isfahan
Male	Nursing education	Associate professor	25	Tabriz
Female	Social medicine	Associate professor	15	Isfahan
Male	Health engineering	Assistant professor	24	Shahrekord
Female	Health information management	Professor	30	Isfahan
Male	Environmental health	Associate professor	25	Shahrekord
Female	Medical parasitology	Assistant professor	27	Tehran
Male	Medical-surgical nursing	Assistant professor		Artesh
Male	Nursing	Assistant professor		Artesh
Male	Occupational health engineering	Assistant professor	5	Iran
	Health emergencies and disaster	Assistant professor	11	Sabzevar

for example, all is encouraged to do teamwork verbally; but in regulations, especially research, the more authors there are, the lower the individual score; this means a contradiction in the words and behavior of stakeholders, officials and policymakers."

In the value creation area, a participant highlighted the role of the organization in giving dignity to the teacher for individuals and in different environments: "The organization should care about the people it hires as a faculty and make transparent the role of these people in society, first for itself, then for themselves and for society. When the system respects and values people, they also show valuable behaviors in such an environment, they interact properly because they believe in themselves."

Regarding the establishment of a compensation system, a participant noted the importance of the proper encouragement and reinforcement role in the interactions formation. "The situation is such that sometimes right and wrong aren't known. Behaviors are reinforced intentionally or unwillingly and wrongly that are very different from the goal of participation and teamwork. That the person sits in an isolated environment and has low use personal products he gets points for this. But someone who does practical executive work and interacts with a lot of people, he stays out of progress. Encouragement and points should be considered for what we expect to exist."

Individual and social factors were identified by three main categories including "education and social

programs," "personal skills and beliefs promotion," and "personality and learning."

In the area of education and social programs, one of the participants cited some professors' low skills as an obstacle to teamwork: "You can't throw an elephant into a river and then talk to it about swimming training method. Very low skill in group partnerships and interpersonal communication are the root of some nonparticipation, irresponsibility and incompetence of faculty members, which this issue puts them in isolation."

About promoting personal skills and beliefs, one of the participants explained that the individual interest is given priority to the collective interest in the community: "... The collective interest in our society is small. The fact that everyone paddles his own canoe is recognized and promoted as a value."

Regarding personality and learning, one of the participants mentioned the role of education and school-based learning in the competitive training of individuals in comparison with collective participation as follows: "The general weakness in partnerships and collaborations from the very beginning, when they started teaching us in elementary schools, was more about individual competition than team and social collaborations. An important root of the lack of cooperation and participation of professors is in our education from the beginning of elementary

Table 2: Strategies to increase social participation and cooperation of medical universities' faculty members

Concept	Main category	Subcategory	Tributary subcategory
Organizational factors	Organizational dynamics	Providing the opportunity for professors' participation in the organization	Solve the problems of professors in the workplace
			Adjustment of multiple and lean tasks of professors
			Provide the possibility of executive participation for all professors
			Expect participation from professors appropriate to their working conditions
			Setting up a professor's center or guild association
		Group dynamics in the organization	Membership in specialized groups
			Organizing informal interactions
			Use appropriate architecture of collective space
			Proper design of teachers' office
			Setting up a sports and entertainment environment
	Provide organizational security	Organizational protection	Controlling the negative consequences of participation in the organization
			Building trust in the workplace
			Lack of political interpretation of interactions
		Professors financing	Reassurance in relationships
			Maintaining individuals privacy
			Provide financial investment
			Reduce faculty costs and their financial concerns
Standardize selection and evaluation	Consider relevant selection criteria	Paying attention to the initial selection criteria of professors	
	Formulation a comprehensive evaluation method and indicators	Psychological evaluation of members before hiring	
Value creation	Improving the managers and organizations' attitude toward participation	Lack of focus on evaluation indicators on education and research merely	
		Replace qualitative evaluation with quantitative	
		Less reception of managers toward group relationships	
	Focus on the professors' competencies	Lack of workplace criticism	
		Challenging nature of group activity compared to an individual in the organization	
		Strengthen the professors model role	
Establish a compensation system	Notice to reinforcement patterns in the organization	Value for the professional status of professors	
		Strengthen the appreciation culture	
		Using reinforcement and encouragement system	
	Strengthen the feedback system	Special points for participatory activities	
		Strengthen the participatory environment in the organization	
		Provide organizational feedback to professors	
Individual social factors	Education and social programs	Social empowerment	Consider the professors ' opinions toward the organization
			Awareness about the quality of the professors' social role
			Teaching communication quality skills
		Collective planning	Practice group and organizational partnerships
			Teaching professional ethics and collective ethics
			Holding individual-group counseling sessions
	Improving personal skills and beliefs	Individual empowerment	Holding socio-cultural ceremonies
			Planning friendly sessions
			Creating a happy and cheerfulness environment in the workplace
			Improving professors' attitudes toward participation
		Moderate misconceptions about progress	Strengthening the professors' altruistic contributions of
			Strengthen the self-participation of professors in society
			Strengthen the collective benefit culture in the workplace
Personality and learning	Personal characteristics of professors	Adjust the professors' scoring spirit	
		Promote loyalty to the organization	
		Detecting the difference between negative and positive competition	
	Improving environmental learning	Different personality traits of people	
		Individual preferences and desires	
		Individuals organizational expediencies in relationships	
		Competitive training by education system	
		Self-centered and self-superior training in the family	
		The prevailing individualism culture in society	
		Family centralization	

school to the entrance exam which all has been based on individualism. Now suddenly we want social cooperation at the university.”

Discussion

In response to the question of strategies to increase the participation and social cooperation of medical universities' faculty members, in the field of organizational factors, one of the axes was “organizational dynamics.” This result is consistent with the result of a study that emphasized providing more opportunities for professors to communicate and about providing faculty participation in the organization is consistent with the results of research that reported the necessity of providing the opportunity of faculty personal and professional development.^[12] In the field of group dynamics in the organization, the component of membership in specialized groups and the organizing of informal interactions is consistent with the results of research that has examined the relationship between organizational identity and social capital.^[6]

An organization can be considered dynamic that provides the basis for group dynamics and participation of professors in the organization. In this regard, the professors expected that the multiplicity of their tasks would be reduced and they would be given the opportunity to be equally involved in executive activities in order to provide the situation for group activities. In order to formalize and continue teamwork, membership in specialized groups and organizing informal interactions, as well as setting up a center and a guild association, can be useful. The suitability of the physical environment in terms of design and space also plays a role in having group dynamics. That there are spaces to get together or work together. For example, instead of being a one-person teacher's office, it can be designed for two or three individuals to enhance collective working conditions with a larger and more fresh space in an accessible environment. In general, the dynamism of the organization is the result of the member's desire and the favorable environment for it.

“Providing organizational security” was another way to improve social interactions, which addressed the issue of organizational protection and faculty funding. This result is consistent with the results of a study that had considered the role of job satisfaction in improving teachers' social capital and participation.^[8]

In workplaces, especially formal and large ones, employees expect to be assured of privacy and confidentiality and organization be a trusted one so that they can have a secure relationship. In fact, worrying about the negative consequences of group participation and personal and

different interpretations of behaviors reduces the motivation to participate. In addition, some individuals believe that addressing less critical issues will be sidelined if there are more important concerns and mental occupations such as financial deficiencies. Reducing the cost of professors and their financial concerns and providing welfare facilities and amenities are expected to affect the possibility of enjoying more quality life and interactions.

“Standardization of selection and evaluation” was another strategy to improve social interactions, which includes criteria for selecting professors and initial evaluations in employment time. Individuals' interest and views about relationships and interactions must be evaluated at the same time as their scientific assessments. Even, these evaluations should be ongoing over the years after their acceptance, in order to identify their strengths and weaknesses in social relationships and group participation. Conducting these assessment can provide more space for individuals who, at least initially and then continuously, have an interest or ability in group participation and interpersonal interactions.

Another strategy to improve social interactions was “value creation.” This result was consistent with the results of research that pointed to the role of social competence and ethical behavior as well as the role of the relationship between professional self-efficacy and social capital.^[9,11] In this regard, it can be said that the attitude of managers and the organization toward the participation and how people interact with each other, has a great role and importance in shaping relationships and behaviors. The challenge of group activity compared to an individual in the workplace, lack of criticism, and less acceptance or lack of acceptance of some managers of group relationships, reduces the motivation for group participation. While focusing on members' competencies and appreciate what they do, increase their desire to be in the environment and interact with others. While focusing on members' competencies and valuing the job and work they do, increase their desire to interact with others.

“Establishing a compensation system” and paying attention to strengthening patterns in the organization were other strategies to improve social interactions. This result is consistent with the results of two studies that focused on the role of professors' job motivation in their social capital and participation.^[3,6]

Organization must strengthen the participatory environment and participatory activities be strengthened more than individual choices. Besides that it is recommended that system clarify the path of social interactions through the process of feedback and awareness about the social role of individuals and group activities.

In this way, members in a peaceful reinforcement atmosphere become more motivated to be together and participate socially.

“Education and social programs” was one of the strategies to improve social interactions. Social relationships and interactions can be formed in educational programs and collective activities. This result was consistent with the results of research that addressed the role of factors such as social duty training, continuous communication between teachers, providing opportunities to be together, and creating professional self-efficacy in improving participation and social capital.^[9,12,13]

Along with teaching communication skills, holding friendly sessions and in general creating a happy and dynamic environment in the workplace improves relationships and interactions between members.

“Improving personal skills and beliefs” was proposed as a another strategy to improve social interactions.

This result which is about mitigating misconceptions toward progress in the components of strengthening the culture of collective benefit and promoting loyalty to the organization, is consistent with the results of research that pointed to the necessity of mutual benefit for professors and a sense of belonging to the organization to improve social capital and participation.^[3,13]

Individual empowerment is beneficial by improving teachers’ attitudes toward collective participation and group activity, reinforcing altruistic behaviors, and taking advantage of self-participation opportunities in the workplace and community. In this regard, some misconceptions among individuals need to be corrected. Adjusting the professors’ scoring spirit, replacing positive competition instead of negative competition, focusing on collective profit in the workplace, and thus promoting loyalty to colleagues and the workplace are some examples of these misconceptions. It is one of the indicators of improving interpersonal and social relations.

“Personality and learning” were suggested as factors related to strategies to improve social interactions. This result is consistent with the results of research that addressed the role of factors such as emotional intelligence, emotion management, expression of emotions, and the possibility of personal growth of professors in their social participation and interaction.^[9,11,12]

In this regard, individuals’ personal characteristics including personality traits and individual tendencies, determine the individuals’ behavior in the social and work environment; however, the sensitivity of

formal work environments requires some individual expediencies in relationships in the workplace. In addition, environmental learning begins in the family and continues in education and social settings. In this regard, the competitive upbringing of children and the emphasis on individual development lead to self-centeredness and separation from the collective interest. It should be keep in mind that early environmental education and childhood learning have long-lasting effects that will take a lot of time and energy to adjust, change, or optimize later in adulthood.

Limitation and recommendation

The nature of faculty professors’ jobs for greater productivity is based on more effective interpersonal interactions and social partnerships. In order to express their feelings, beliefs and needs, faculty members are the most important beneficiaries in this matter. Therefore, conducting an applied topic in qualitative approach in form of interviews with professors and gaining their underlying views about social capital is one of the strengths of the study. The most important limitation of the study was how to conduct interviews during the Covid-19 pandemic. This led to some telephone interviews, which naturally had limitations compared to face-to-face interviews.

Accordingly, the extracted codes were sent to the participants and their corrections were considered.

Conclusions

The findings of this study reported the role of organizational and individual social factors in improving social interactions. Some items are related to improving the attitude and planning of managers and the work environment, and some depend on the individual and social abilities of the professors themselves, which can be taught and learned. The findings of this study can be planned and improved by faculty members, medical universities, and deputies of the Ministry of Health and Medical Education to plan and improve the social capital of professors and factors related in order to social participation and group interactions reported in the study.

Acknowledgment

We wish to thank all experts and faculty members who participated in the interviews and helped us in this study.

Financial support and sponsorship

This study is the result of a research proposal approved by the Isfahan University of Medical Sciences with approval code of 2400116 and ethical code of IR.MUI.NUREMA.REC.1400.116.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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