

Empathy and Communicative Competence of Customer Service Representative in Public and Private Telecom Sectors

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The present research investigated the relationship between empathy and communicative competence among customer service representatives serving in telecom companies of public and private sectors. It also compared the level of empathy and communicative competence of customer service representatives. This study employed cross-sectional survey method. Empathy of the participants was measured by Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980) and Communicative competence was assessed by the Communicative Competence Scale (Wiemann, 1977). Results of the Pearson correlation matrix indicated significant positive correlation between communicative competence and two dimensions of empathy (perspective-taking, empathic concern) and whereas personal distress had significant but low correlation with communicative competence. Results of independent sample *t*-tests revealed no significant difference in the level of empathy as well as communicative competence of customer service representatives working in public and private telecom sectors. The findings of this study have important implications for organizational psychologists and human resource managers to improve the work effectiveness of employees working in telecom companies.

Keywords: Empathy, communicative competence, sector, customer service representative

Customer service representative is a bridge between customers and service providers. A customer is person who buys products and services. A consumer is the one with whom a dealer or business individual has to deal with, generally on a regular basis. Moreover, a service is frequently seemed at as an input to the concern or welfare of others (Webster's II, 1999). Harris (2000, p. 32) states, "Customer service is everything for the customer we do that improves the customer understanding". Customer service representative is an employee answerable for keeping goodwill among a business organization and its clients by replying questions, solving problems, and giving guidance and support to make best use of the products or services of the organization (Barron's Marketing Dictionary).

Empathy has many different definitions. It cover a large field, starting from feeling an interest for other individuals that produce a wish to facilitate them, experiencing feelings that match another individual's feelings, recognizing what the other individual is believing and feeling, to shape the line connecting the self and other (Hodges, & Klein, 2001). Empathy refers to the capacity to recognize experiences and feelings along with their meanings from the viewpoint of another person (Rogers, 1961). It is a key factor of social cognition that contributes to one's capability to recognize and react accordingly to others, emotions, succeed in emotional communication, and encourage prosocial behavior (Spreng, McKinnon, Mar, & Levine, 2009).

Communication plays a key role in many professional contexts. "Communication is a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behaviour" (Webster, 1983). The term communicative competence consists of two words, the mixture of which means competence to communicate (Bagaric, & Djigunovic, 2007). Canale and Swain (1980) describe communicative competence is a mixture

of an underlying system of knowledge and skill required for communication.

Social communicative competence is key for effective work performance among many professionals. For instance, teachers, nurses, physicians, airhostesses and customer service representatives. Bakx, Sijtsma, Sanden and Taconis (2002) examined the multimedia assessment of social communicative competence. The development and acquisition of social communication competence is important in particular with regard to professional perspective in which communication is essential.

Riggio and Taylor (2000) examined the relationship of communicative competence and dimensions of empathy with performance among hospice nurses. The study indicated that communicative competence were positively correlated with the "positive" aspects of empathy (perspective taking and empathic concern), and negatively correlated with negative dimension of empathy (personal distress). These dimensions of empathy along with communication competence led to good prediction of job performance.

Garrett, Meyer and West (1996) evaluated the communication characteristics of low and high competent customer service representatives. The study revealed that there is a significant difference in the communication characteristics of more and less competent customer service representatives.

Another study by Bush, Rose, Gilbert and Ingram (2001) studied the relationship between intercultural communication competence and intercultural disposition. The study revealed that there is positive relationship of intercultural disposition with intercultural communication competence. An individual's intercultural disposition is an important input to the success of a culturally diverse interaction. This disposition can affect the perceived intercultural communication competence of person.

Beven, O'Brien-Malone, and Hall (2004) assessed both affective and cognitive aspects of empathy in violent offenders by using interpersonal reactivity. The findings indicated the offenders and non-offenders means shows that the scale is competent of discriminating among offenders and non-offender.

Kluszcz, Nowicka-Sauer, Trzeciak, Nowak and Sadowska (2006) measured the level of empathy in health care practitioners (including physicians, nurses, and students) by using Interpersonal Reactivity Index. The level of personal distress (PD) and perspective taking (PT) were significantly higher among nurses as compared to physicians and students. The results of this research revealed that the level of empathic concern (EC), personal distress (PD) and perspective taking (PT) was significantly higher in females as compared to males.

There was a need to conduct an indigenous study to investigate empathy and communication competence in telecom sector. The objective of the present study was to compare empathy and communicative competence of customer services representatives serving in public and private companies of telecom sector. The second objective was to find out the relationship between communicative competence and empathy among customer services representatives.

The following hypotheses were formulated:

- 1) Customer services representatives (CSRs) from a public telecom company will differ significantly from private telecom company on communicative competence.
- 2) The customer services representatives (CSRs) of a private telecom company would differ significantly on empathy from a public telecom company.
- 3) Perspective-taking and empathic concern (two dimensions of empathy) will be positively related with communicative competence of customer services representatives of telecom companies.
- 4) Personal distress (one dimension of empathy) will be negatively related with communicative competence of customer services representatives of telecom companies.

Method

Sample

The purposive sample of present study comprised 60 customer service representatives; 30 were taken from telecom companies of public sector (Pakistan Telecommunication Limited) and 30 from telecom companies of private sector (Warid, Mobilink, Zong, and Telenor). Sample was drawn from telecom companies of Lahore and Multan. Age range of the participants was from 20 to 45 years.

Instrument

The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), developed by Davis (1980), is a multidimensional measure of empathy for the general adult population. This scale has 28 items with five point Likert rating ranging from 1 (does not describe me well) to 5 (describes me very well). The internal consistency of IRI scale ranges from .70 to .78 (Davis, 1994). It consisted of four subscales; each having seven items which are: perspective taking ($\alpha = .74$), empathic concern ($\alpha = .76$), personal distress ($\alpha = .70$) and fantasy ($\alpha = .60$) (Christopher, Owens, & Stecker, 1993).

The Communicative Competence Scale (CCS), developed by Wiemann (1977) was used to measure communicative competence. The scale consists of 36 items with Likert type rating scale which is ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The CCS appears to be internally consistent. Wiemann (1977) reported high reliability i.e. coefficient alpha of .96.

Procedure

Before data collection, the researcher contacted public and private companies of telecom sector to seek formal permission from the respective heads. The researcher explained the aim and purpose of study to the participants. After seeking permission from telecom companies, the researcher approached customer services representatives of companies, those who fulfilled the inclusion criteria were requested to participate in the study and their informed consent was taken. The confidentiality and anonymity of the information was ensured. They were instructed to be honest while responding to the items of the scales. Data was collected both individually and in group

Results

The present study was conducted to compare the empathy and communicative competence of customer service representatives in public and private telecom sector. Initially reliability analysis of Interpersonal Reactivity Index and Communicative Competence Scale was computed. To see the differences in the empathy and communicative competence of customer service representatives in public and private telecom sector, independent sample t-test was computed.

Table 3.2 shows that reliability index of Interpersonal Reactivity Index is moderate while, the reliability index of Communicative Competence Scale is high

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 60)

Demographic Variables	Categories	f (%)		
Age			Age Range	M(SD)
			(20-45 years)	26.02(3.69)
Experience			Range	M(SD)
			(1-17 years)	3.67(3.00)
Education	BA/B.Sc	34(56.66)		
	B.Com/BBA	8 (13.33)		
	M.A /M.Sc	3 (5.0)		
	MBA	15 (25.0)		

Table 2
Reliability analysis of Interpersonal Reactivity Index and Communicative Competence Scale (N= 60)

Scales	<i>k</i>	<i>a</i>
Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI)	28	.65
Communicative Competence Scale (CCS)	36	.89

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 2
Correlation Matrix among communicative competence and subscales of empathy of CSRs (N = 60)

Variables	I	II	III	IV
I IRI-PT	-	.04	.16	.48**
II IRI-EC		-	.20	.42**
III IRI-PD			-	.27*
IV CCS				-

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 4
Empathy and Communicative Competence of CSRs (N = 60)

Variables	Groups	Public (<i>n</i> = 30)	Private (<i>n</i> = 30)	<i>t</i>
Empathy		<i>M</i> (SD) 89.20 (9.331)	<i>M</i> (SD) 90.97(9.967)	.70
Communicative Competence		138.87 (15.08)	139.17(14.83)	.07

$df = 58$, $p = ns$.

Table 3.4 shows significant positive relationship between perspective taking and communicative competence of CSR in public and private telecom sectors ($r = .48$, $p < .01$). There is also significant positive relationship between empathic concern and communicative competence ($r = .42$, $p < .01$). Table 3.4 shows that there is a significant positive relationship between personal distress and communicative competence of CSR in public and private telecom sectors ($r = .27$, $p < .05$).

Results of independent sample *t*- test revealed that employees serving in public and private sector did not differ significantly on empathy, $t(58) = .70$, $p = ns$ as well as communicative competence, $t(58) = .07$, $p = ns$.

Discussion

The purpose of study was to investigate the communicative competence and empathy of customer service representatives in public and private telecom sectors. The results of the present study indicate that there is no significant difference in communicative competence of CSRs in public and private telecom sectors. One of the reasons for this finding may be that the selection committee of both public and private telecom companies have made communicative competence as an essential eligibility criterion for CSRs. This finding is inconsistent with the previous research which was conducted by Garrett, Meyers, and West (1996) in which there

is significant difference in communication characteristics of low and high competence CSRs.

Customer service representatives serving in both public and private telecom sector did not have significance difference on empathy. It might be the case that organizational sector may not a relevant variable to find out the differences on empathy. Rather the nature of profession and gender would be more pertinent to investigate the differences on the level of empathy. This result is inconsistent with the previous research which was conducted by Kliszcz, Nowicka-Sauer, Trzeciak, Nowak and Sadowska (2006) who measured the level of empathy in health care practitioners (including physicians, nurses, and students) by using Interpersonal Reactivity Index. The level of personal distress (PD) and perspective taking (PT) were significantly higher in nurses as compared to physicians and students. The results of this research revealed that the level of empathic concern (EC), personal distress (PD) and perspective taking (PT) was significantly higher in females as compared to males. Like health care practitioners, customer service representatives require higher level of empathy to work effectively.

The third hypothesis of this research was supported i.e. perspective-taking and empathic concern (two dimensions of empathy) would positively relate with communicative competence of CSRs of public and private telecom companies. The finding shows that these two dimensions of empathy are highly related with communicative competence of CSRs. This finding is in accordance with the findings of Riggio and Taylor (2000) which indicated that perspective-taking and empathic concern had highly correlated with communicative competence of hospice nurses.

The last hypothesis of the research i.e. personal distress would negatively relate with communicative competence of CSRs. The result of the study indicates that the personal distress had low correlation with communicative competence of CSRs. This finding is consistent with the previous research which was conducted by Riggio and Taylor (2000) which indicated that the personal distress had negatively correlated with communicative competence of hospice nurses. This difference might be based on cultural difference.

It is concluded that the empathy and communicative competence are important characteristics of customer service representative. The study highlights the significance of these two factors and suggests highly considerable while inducting customer service representatives.

Limitations and Suggestions

The limitations of this research and suggestions for further researches are as follows:

1. The sample size was small and thus the sample size can be increased for further researches
2. The scales used to assess empathy and communicative competence was developed in the western culture. So it is suggested that adapted versions of these scales can be used in further researches.
3. The sample had under-representation of females and it is recommended that telecom companies should hire more females as CSRs.
4. This research implies quantitative method only, same research can be conducted through qualitative method.

Implication of the study

- 1) It will be beneficial for organizational psychologists and human resource managers.
- 2) They would recognize the significance of soft skills of management like empathy.
- 3) It would provide comparison of public and private sector in terms of empathy and communication competence.
- 4) It can be helpful for telecom companies to improve their work effectiveness.
- 5) These scales can be used for screening and selection of employees as CSRs for organizations.

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