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## Original Article

# Interactive Role of Organizational Learning and Informal Norms in Accountability and Job Performance in 2014

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(Received: 26 May 2015      Accepted: 19 Aug 2015)

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Although the contribution of organizational learning to employee organizational performance is well documented, the mechanisms that explain such relationship remain unclear. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the interactional role of organizational learning and informal norms in accountability and job performance of the staff in a medical department.

**Methods:** The research method of the study is descriptive-correlational type. The statistical population of this study included all staff (N=315) of the Medical Department in Oshnavieh Hospital in 2014. For data gathering in this study, a sample comprising of 180 staff was selected using stratified random sampling. The data were collected through standard questionnaires of Neefe for organizational learning, informal norms of Hall, job performance of Paterson, and the questionnaire of individual accountability of Hochwarter. Pearson and moderated multiple regression analysis were used to test hypotheses.

**Results:** Results showed that organizational learning has a positive and significant correlation with job performance and individual accountability. The results, also, showed a positive and significant correlation between informal norms, personal accountability, and job performance. Regression results showed the interactive role of learning structure dimensions, strategy, and shared vision with informal norms, predicting individual accountability of the staff. Also, interactive role of organizational learning and informal norms was confirmed in predicting job performance of the medical staff.

**Conclusion:** The result of this study hold out that organizational learning directly and with interaction of informal norms improves staffs' performance and accountability. As a result of improved informal norms in a medical setting, we will have staff's strong accountability and performance.

**Keywords:** Organizational learning, Informal norms, Accountability, Job performance

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Citation: Ghasemzadeh A, Parsa Sh, Radmanesh M. Interactive role of organizational learning and informal norms in accountability and job performance in 2014. Educ Res Med Sci. 2015; 4(2): 52-59.

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## Introduction

Medical departments are the foundations of the health system in each country. Therefore, reforming health system without addressing these issues and enhancing the performance of these centers will not be possible (1). In all countries, regardless of their size or wealth, people's health and the ways of offering health care are important issues to be considered. Then, health care providers are working to offer the highest level of service quality with available resources. Thus, evaluating performance, faultless service offer, performance based accountability and accountability standards are necessary in this section (2).

Nowadays, accountability is regarded as the modern buzzword. Scientists have not neglected the importance of accountability and have found it important for the organization; hence, they assume it as the backbone of the organizational science (3). Since common functions of any social system require accountability for appropriate and inappropriate individual behaviors (4); accountability is a core element at work place. The principle of accountability is being responsive towards the decisions and actions one makes and does. Without being accountable, people can do what they like, that will lead to chaos and failure of the organization (5). In other words, if the clerk of a general section does not have enough knowledge and skills in a job, neither can he do it favorably, nor can he be accountable for that (6). Accountability is one of the most important issues in various fields such as law, politics, health care, psychology, organizational behavior and education, attracting increasing attention (7). As Adams and Christ (1999) suggested, accountability is a launching pad for service improvement for many organizational reformists. In addition to the need for organizational accountability in public institutions, especially in hospitals, the importance of personal responsibility for maintaining social systems has been recognized since a long time ago (5).

While accountability is regarded as an individual variable by the specialists, research on accountability as an individual construct is at the early stages of discussion development, especially in business organizations of Western Europe and America. Careful monitoring systems, authority control, and preventing from abuses are inevitable requirements of an efficient system and effective tools to improve services (8).

Many factors (e. g. organizational learning and informal norms) can affect the accountability and performance of public staff, who do service works in places like hospitals. Therefore, this study examines the role of these variables on the accountability and performance of healthcare staff.

Organizational learning is a process through which organizations develop their knowledge along with the experiences of ordinary people to improve the potential to improve individual behavior and organizational capabilities (9). The primary objective of organizational learning is increasing the quantity and quality of performance, allowing the company to improve and increase the amount of sales, to gain more support and maintain or develop new customers. In addition, organizations that learn faster, develop and strengthen strategic capabilities, enabling the company to get competitive advantages and improve the results. These attitudes, behaviors and strategies of organizational learning provide guidelines for superior long-term performance of the organizations (10). Jerez-Gomez et al. examined organizational learning from knowledge acquisition view (11). They defined three core processes of organizational learning including knowledge creation or acquisition, knowledge transfer, and knowledge integration. Accordingly, these organizational processes have been conceptualized as the ability of an organization to process knowledge. In other words, organizational learning is defined as the ability to create, acquire, transfer and integrate knowledge and modify organizational behavior to reflect new situations with a view of improving organizational performance. While communicating with others, these values are easily used. In fact, organizations such as hospitals are continuously learning in interaction with the surrounding environment, creating new knowledge, and integrating it with the communication networks to let the others use these values. In fact, the life of organizations such as hospitals rests on continuous learning and in this way it can be improved as an open and purposeful system (12). Dimensions of organizational learning from the perspective of Peter Senge are: vision, personal mastery, mental models, team learning and systems thinking. But the newest dimensions of organizational learning include shared vision, organizational culture, team work and learning, sharing knowledge, systematic thinking, cooperative leadership, and development of staff competencies (13). Successful organizational learning process as well as innovative and lasting relationships with customers and entrepreneurship in general can have a significant correlation with improving organizational performance. However, environmental factors inside and outside the organization may also affect the relationship between organizational learning and organizational performance, showing that a high level of organizational learning can lead to high organizational performance (14). In addition to organizational learning affecting accountability and high- organizational performance in hospitals, organizational norms, and informal norms in

particular can have a positive impact on achieving this status. Norms are usually unwritten and informal expectations that only occur under a layer of experience, directly affecting the behavior (15). The concept of norm is significant with respect to its usage in research. According to Giddens, norms are certain principles that people are expected to consider. Norms represent the do's and don'ts of organizational life (16). Work group norms are forces impacting the organizational environment (17). Norm is the behavior, rule or trait that most members of a group or society accept or act upon, and failure to comply with it leads to some (informal) penalty or reprimand. The norms, whether inherently valuable or worthless, are valuable to the majority of community or organizational members, which then turn into social values (18). Each group identifies its own set of organizational norms. Such norms can have a severe impact on the performance of employees. When a group accepts some norms, they will be used as authority tools; therefore, external pushes are not required anymore. Group norms make the person do a particular job. If some people violate these norms, they have to wait for a group response (19).

Research shows that individuals' attitudes result from the attitudes, behaviors and communications of coworkers through a social processing framework (20). The concept of social diffusion refers to the thoughts and feelings about a subject that can be transmitted from one person to another and resides in the whole group at the end (21). When these attitudes are spread in the organization, they can have important effects on personal attitudes and behaviors. Literally, the concept of social contagion is related to social information processing perspective. However, accountability studies have ignored informal mechanisms of responsiveness. This gap in the literature is highlighted when most studies on individual accountability are laboratory studies where participants have no information about the history of other participants. However, Frink and Klimoski suggested that these informal mechanisms affect accountability (22). In particular, they emphasized that such informal mechanisms may include organizational culture, organizational values, and organizational norms. Theoretical literature suggests that these mechanisms affect staff behavior and attitudes. Especially, when strong corporate culture exists, main values are strongly maintained by the staff (23).

Herrera and David concluded that it is possible to design job duties in a way that understanding learning results and organizational empowerment become possible (24). Furthermore, these results indicated that continuous learning had the most significant effect on organizational performance.

Yang et al. stated that organizational learning enhances the performance of groups and individuals, and then knowledge transfer to the system will improve the organizational performance (25). Hajipour and Kord demonstrated that organizational learning and innovation have a direct impact on corporate financial performance (26). They found that one reliable external resource for learning and innovation is strategic alliance since it improves the relations among organizational learning, innovation and financial performance (27). Results showed a significant relationship between organizational learning and organizational performance. Abbasi and Saadat found a positive correlation between the components of organizational learning and organizational performance (28). Asadi et al. showed a significant and positive correlation of continuous learning at individual level and organizational performance of the expert (29). Other dimensions of learning and organizational performance also had a positive and significant correlation.

The basic question raised in the present study is that: "Do the dimensions of organizational learning and informal norms play an interactive role in predicting accountability and job performance of medical staff?"

## Methods

This descriptive research of correlation and prediction aimed to survey the interactive role of organizational learning and informal norms in accountability and job performance among staff in the Medical Department in Oshnavieh Hospital in 2014.

For collecting the data related to this study, we distributed a paper-based questionnaire to a convenience sample of 180 staff from the Medical Department. Informed consent was processed according to all ethical standards. In each section, participants received a survey packet including the questionnaire, a cover letter explaining the purposes of the study, and a consent form stressing that participation was confidential and voluntary. All scales were translated from English to Persian using a standard translation-back-translation procedure. Any discrepancy between English and Persian versions of the items was solved through a brief discussion among the translators.

## Organizational learning

The questionnaire of organizational learning by Neefe with seven dimensions of shared vision, organizational culture, work and team learning, organizational structure, strategy, leadership, partnership, and competency development was used (30). It was implemented to compare the indicators of organizational learning in universities having conducted the project of improving

scientific quality (modern organizations) and organizations not implementing this project (traditional organizations). The questionnaire consisted of 31 items with a seven-point-Likert scale. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.75 was confirmed for this questionnaire.

### Job performance

The questionnaire of job performance of Paterson (1990), translated into Persian by Shokrkon and Arshadi (1990), was used. The questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree) was filled. Using Spearman-Brown formula, Manzari and Shokrkon (1996) found the consistency coefficient of 0.84. Amiri and Noori (1996) also reported the consistency coefficient of 0.70 for this questionnaire. While Sayahi and Shokrkon (1996) detected the consistency coefficient of 0.85 for it in their study, Khoshkam, Nisi, and Shokrkon (2007) found the consistency coefficient of 0.82 for this questionnaire (31).

### Informal norms

The questionnaire of informal norms of Hall (2005) uses a 7-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree). Consistency coefficient of this tool in Hall's study was achieved to be 0.71. This value was discovered to be 0.70 for internal consistency of the whole scale (32).

### Individual accountability

The questionnaire of individual accountability of Hochwarter et al. (2005) was used, implementing a 7-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 7= strongly agree). Scores of all 8 items were gathered and the sum was the score of each person. Cronbach's alpha value for

this questionnaire in studies carried out abroad (33-36) ranged from 0.73 to 0.91. Previous studies confirmed validity and unidimensionality of this structure as well (34).

### Data analysis

In this research, descriptive and inferential statistics to analyze collected data were used. Descriptive statistics included frequency values, and inferential statistics included: moderated multiple regression and correlation analysis. All data were analyzed using SPSS for windows version 13.

### Results

All variables had a mean score greater than three which implied that the respondents perceived variables at a moderate level (total mean score: organizational learning = 3.45, informal norms = 3.39, accountability = 3.65, job performance = 3.80).

Given the correlation variables in Table 1, several results can be derived. First, there is a significant and positive correlation between organizational learning, organizational performance, and organizational accountability. There is a significant and positive correlation between vision, team learning, collaborative leadership, competency development, and accountability ( $P=0.001$ ,  $P<0.05$ ). Also, the components of vision, culture, team learning, strategy, cooperative leadership, competency development, structure and organizational performance are positively and significantly correlated ( $P=0.001$ ,  $P<0.05$ ). In addition, the results showed that there is a significant and positive correlation between informal norms of accountability and organizational performance ( $P=0.001$ ,  $P<0.05$ ).

Table 1. Correlation coefficients between the original variables and secondary research

Variable	Job performance	Individual accountability	Organizational learning	Organization structure	Competence development	Leadership	Strategy	Work and team learning	Organization culture	Shared vision
Individual accountability	-	-	0.57**	0.81**	0.53**	0.29**	0.13	0.58**	0.05	0.76**
Job performance	-	0.71**	0.42**	0.66**	0.43**	0.27**	0.17*	0.43**	0.18*	0.58**
Informal norm	0.25**	0.16*	0.13*	0.12*	0.11*	0.05	0.11*	0.04	0.27*	0.04
	* $P<0.01$			** $P<0.05$			n=180			

There is a significant and positive correlation between organizational learning dimensions, except for culture, strategy, and accountability. The correlation between the dimensions of organizational learning and job performance was confirmed. The positive correlation between organizational learning, culture, and strategy and competency development was also observed. But, the correlation of informal norms, organizational learning, vision, team learning and leadership was not confirmed.

Table 2 shows moderated multiple regression results. The results show that the dimensions of organizational learning including structure, strategy, shared vision, and informal norms predict accountability. Other dimensions

of organizational learning because of the lack of significance were removed from the equation and were not shown in the table. Then, the interaction of organizational learning dimensions and informal norms was entered into the equation. This interaction was significant in case of organizational learning dimensions, structure, and shared vision. As seen in Table 3, determination coefficient of interaction effect increases from 0.72 to 0.78. Thus, the interaction of organizational learning dimensions and informal norms plays an important role in identifying accountability.

**Table 2. Results of regression analysis adjusted for predicted response**

	$\beta$	P value
<b>First step: Main effects</b>		
Structure	0.54**	0.001
Strategy	0.25**	0.001
Shared vision	0.34**	0.001
Informal norms	0.16**	0.04
<b>Second step: Interaction</b>		
Interaction of norm and structure	0.25*	0.03
Interaction of norm and strategy	0.07	0.12
Interaction of norm and shared vision	0.24*	0.04
Interaction of norm and culture	0.21**	0.003
*P<0.05      **P<0.001		n=180

**Table 3. Results of modified regression analysis to predict performance**

	R2 $\Delta$	$\beta$	P value
<b>First step: Main effects</b>			
<b>Organizational learning</b>	0.17**	0.43**	0.001
<b>Informal norms</b>	0.23**	0.28**	0.001
<b>Second step: Interaction</b>			
<b>Interaction of norm and organizational learning</b>	0.26*	0.14*	0.04
* P < 0.05      ** P < 0.01		n =180	

Table 3 shows that organizational learning and informal norms predict job performance. In the second step, the interaction of organizational learning and informal norms was entered into the equation. This interaction is significant at 0.05 level. As shown in the above table, determination coefficient of interaction effect increases from 0.17 to 0.26. The interaction of organizational learning dimensions and informal norms plays an important role in identifying performance.

## Discussion

Results of this study showed that the means of research variables are above average. There was a significant and positive correlation between organizational learning, organizational performance, and accountability. A significant and positive correlation among vision, team learning, collaborative leadership, competency development, structure, and performance was found. Results showed significant and positive correlation between informal norms and organizational accountability and performance; however, the correlation between informal

norms and organizational learning dimensions including vision, culture, team learning, and cooperative leadership was not confirmed. Also, the interactive role of organizational learning dimensions and informal norms in predicting accountability and performance was confirmed. This result agrees with previous studies (2, 9, 13, 24-29, 37, 38). Jiménez-Jiménez & Sanz-Valle found that innovation and organizational learning have a positive effect on organizational performance (9).

Herrera & David concluded that work duties of the staff should be designed in a way that they can increase understanding learning results and organizational empowerment (24). Also, continuous learning has maximum effect on organizational performance. Yang et al. suggest that organizational learning improves the performance of the groups and people, and knowledge transfer to system improves organizational performance (25). In a study on improving organizational performance by purposeful organizational oblivion, Moshbeki et al. concluded that purposeful oblivion and organizational learning affect organizational performance by increasing knowledge management capability (37). Yagoobi et al. found that to get organizational learning in the hospitals, it is necessary that specific attention be paid to its dimensions (13). Thus, hospital managers should consider the importance of learning and knowledge transfer in the hospital as optimum investment at all organizational levels. Hajipour & Kord showed that organizational learning and innovation have a direct effect on financial performance of the companies (26). Also, a reliable external source for foreign learning and innovation of companies is strategic alliance. Since it improves the correlation of organizational learning, innovation, and financial performance (27), Abbasi & Saadat showed a significant and positive correlation of organizational learning elements and performance in listed companies of Tehran Stock Exchange (28). Asadi et al. found a significant and positive correlation of continuous individual learning and organizational performance in experts (29). A significant and positive correlation between learning elements (team learning, empowerment, communication in system, and strategic leadership) and organizational performance of experts was also found. Tabibi et al. showed that evaluating hospital performance based on Baldrich pattern provides the possibility of continuous and systematic self-assessment and improving organizational learning (2).

Three limitations should be noted about the study. First, inferences of causality should be interpreted cautiously, given the correlational design of this study. Second, because the respondents were employees of a single organization, the generalizability of the results may be limited to employees of Oshnavieh Hospital. The findings

should be replicated in other job levels of employees and in different cities. Finally, although the measures of this study were reliable, they should be reexamined with different attributes in future research.

There are two major implications for human resource development practices. First, when planning any organizational learning program, planners should recognize the likelihood of informal norms and seek ways to accommodate its occurrence. Related to this is the intentional selection of training approaches that encourage learning in the context of doing, which in turn may promote organizational learning. Second, these findings suggest that organizational learning improves performance and individual accountability of employees. It is recommended that organizations and human resource development professionals consider creating a learning environment in which employees continuously learn. Creating a culture of systematic views and open learning space in hospitals improves accountability, trust, and responsibility among the employees of the hospitals and health care services that in return improves the performance. More attention to creating learning environment in the hospitals increases the work effectiveness and efficiency.

## Conclusion

Today, organizations need effective and efficient personnel to achieve their objectives for their growth and development. Overall, the efficiency and effectiveness of the organizations depend on the efficiency and effectiveness of human resources and personnel in those organizations. Knowledge creation and learning are the most important factors affecting the performance of employees. Hence, there is a need to seek effective methods to promote these components, one of which is moving toward learning organizations.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to appreciate all the participants of this study and the students who helped to conduct this study. There is no conflict of interest.

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