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Recognizing health communication as a crisis discipline: Taking health communication inquiry seriously

Sağlık iletişimini bir kriz disiplini olarak ele almak: Sağlık iletişimi sorgulamalarını önemsemek



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Abstract This commentary article describes the crucial role of health communication research and education for improving the delivery of care and the promotion of health. While health communication research programs and publications have continued to grow rapidly over the past 50 years, this important work may not always be well designed and directed to be optimally useful for improving health outcomes. In this article I argue forcefully that future health communication inquiry should be intentionally conducted to examine and help resolve serious emergent societal challenges to effective health communication that are needed to guide evidence-based refinements in health care services to enable the best possible informed health decisions to achieve desired health outcomes. The engaged communication research approach recommended here is based upon the thesis presented in an important article by Cox (2007) describing how the field of environmental communication should develop as a “crisis discipline” to help solve serious challenges to environmental communication. I borrow and apply this insightful ‘crisis discipline’ phrase to describe the dire need to conduct health communication research purposefully and strategically to help improve health outcomes by refining health communication programs, policies, practices, and technologies. Ultimately, this article proposes that health communication scholars need to identify major current challenges to effective health communication, carefully study these issues, and use the relevant data collected in these studies to guide development, implementation, and evaluation of evidence-based interventions to help address and resolve the communication problems examined. In this way, health communication scholars can make important contributions to promoting public health and wellbeing.

Öz Bu yorum makalesi, bakım hizmetlerinin sunumunu iyileştirmek ve sağlığı geliştirmek adına sağlık iletişimi araştırmalarının ve eğitiminin üstlendiği kritik rolü ele almaktadır. Bu makalede; gelecekteki sağlık iletişimi sorgulamalarının, arzu edilen sağlık çıktılarına ulaşmak adına mümkün olan bilinçli sağlık kararlarının alınabilmesini sağlamak ve sağlık hizmetlerinde kanıt dayalı iyileştirmelere rehberlik etmek için, sağlık iletişimine karşı ortaya çıkan ciddi toplumsal zorlukları incelemek ve bunların çözümüne yardımcı olmak amacıyla kasıtlı bir şekilde yürütülmesi gerektiğini savunuyorum. Burada önerilen katılımcı iletişim araştırma yaklaşımı, Cox (2007) tarafından yazılan bir makalede sunulan teze dayanmaktadır. Bu makalede, çevre iletişimi alanının, çevre iletişimi ile ilgili sorunların çözümüne yardımcı olmak için bir ‘kriz disiplini’ olarak nasıl gelişmesi gerektiği anlatılmaktadır. Burada önerilen katılımcı iletişim araştırması yaklaşımı, bu ufuk açıcı ‘kriz disiplini’ ifadesini; sağlık iletişimi programlarını, politikalarını, uygulamalarını ve teknolojilerini rafine ederek yardımcı olmak adına, sağlık iletişimi araştırmalarının amaçlı ve stratejik bir şekilde yürütülmesine duyulan elzem ihtiyacı tanımlamak için ödünç alıyorum ve uyguluyorum. Nihayetinde bu makale, sağlık iletişimi akademisyenlerinin sağlık iletişimine yönelik başlıca zorlukları tespit etmelerini, bu sorunları dikkatlice incelemelerini ve bu çalışmalarda toplanan ilgili verileri, incelenen iletişim sorunlarını ele almaya ve çözmeye yardımcı olacak kanıt dayalı müdahalelerin geliştirilmesi, uygulanması ve



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değerlendirilmesine rehberlik etmek için önerilmektedir. Bu sayede, sağlık iletişimi akademisyenleri halk sağlığının ve refahının geliştirilmesine katkılarda bulunabilirler.

Keywords Health communication · crisis discipline · engaged communication research · transdisciplinary translational research · evidence-based interventions

Anahtar Kelimeler Sağlık iletişimi · kriz disiplini · katılımcı iletişim araştırması · disiplinlerötesi translasyonel araştırma · kanıta dayalı müdahaleler

Recognizing health communication as a crisis discipline: Taking health communication inquiry seriously

The evolution of health communication as a crucial field of study

Health communication research, education, and applications have grown rapidly over the past five decades as a major transdisciplinary area of research, education, and outreach (Kreps, 2020a; 2017; 2012a). Health communication is an inherently applied area of inquiry that regularly examines serious concerns about the quality of healthcare delivery and health promotion (Kreps, 2020a; 2012b). However, it may not be enough to just examine relevant health communication issues that arise in modern life without also using the research data collected in these studies to help address and resolve serious problems to improve important health outcomes (Kreps, 2012b). Therefore, in this commentary article I argue for the need to recognize and act upon the field of communication as a crisis discipline, which actively strives to improve health communication policies, practices, programs, and technologies (Cox, 2007; Kreps 2023, 2020b).

The translational/transdisciplinary nature of health communication inquiry

Health communication scholarship is uniquely translational and transdisciplinary because it indelibly combines important expertise from the communication sciences (including the sub-fields of interpersonal, group, organizational, intercultural, family, political, strategic, and environmental communication, rhetorical studies, journalism, mass media, and computer-mediated communication inquiry), the social sciences (with disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, and political science), the physical sciences (with disciplines such as biology, pharmacology, and chemistry), and with professional fields of study (including Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Dentistry, Health Administration, Public Health, Public Policy, Epidemiology, and Health Informatics) to examine the powerful influences of communication on health and illness (Kreps, 2017). The transdisciplinary nature of health communication scholarship generates important opportunities for initiating relevant collaborations across different areas of study and health practice that can lead to rapidly developing, testing, and implementing needed evidence-based interventions to improve health outcomes (Kreps, 2020b). To illustrate this process, I have described in detail several important applications of transdisciplinary health communication research that have helped to improve cancer prevention, treatment, and outcomes (Kreps, 2023).

The study of health communication can fruitfully be organized into five major interrelated areas of study (as described in the five-volume “Benchmarks in Health Communication” reference book series) (Kreps, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d, 2010e), with each of the five areas bridging to multiple relevant scholarly and professional disciplines:

1. **Communication in the delivery of care**, connects health communication science with the communication sub-fields of interpersonal and group communication, intercultural communication, verbal and nonver-

bal communication, organizational communication, and natural and social sciences such as biology, health technologies, health psychology and medical sociology, as well as with health care professional fields such as medicine, nursing, pharmacy, dentistry, social work, clinical psychology; health administration, therapy disciplines (counseling, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and psycho-therapy) (Kreps, 2010a).

2. **Communication and health promotion**, connects health communication science with communication subfields such as mass communication, journalism, strategic communication, and campaign communication, along with natural and social sciences such as health psychology, social marketing, nutrition, exercise physiology, addiction sciences, and public policy, as well as with professional fields such as public health, health education, health promotion, counseling, social work, and epidemiology (Kreps, 2010b).
3. **Health risk communication**, connects health communication science with communication subfields such as environmental communication, public affairs, international communication, intercultural communication, journalism, strategic communication, and campaign communication, with natural and social sciences such as health psychology, social marketing, political science, risk analysis, and public policy, as well as with professional fields such as risk management, social work, counseling, international relations, public health, health education, and epidemiology (Kreps, 2010c).
4. **E-health communication**, connects health communication science with communication subfields such as computer-mediated communication, digital communication, information sciences, media studies, journalism, and strategic communication, with natural and social sciences such as computer science, technology studies, artificial intelligence, robotics, health psychology, and public policy, as well as with professional fields such as engineering, computer programming, risk management, medical records administration, international relations, public health, and health education (Kreps, 2010d).
5. **Communication in managing health care systems**, connects health communication science with communication subfields such as organizational communication, group communication, public relations, and strategic communication, with natural and social sciences such as industrial psychology, organizational sociology, political science, and public policy, as well as with professional fields such as public administration, health administration, medical records management, accounting, supervision, public health, health education, medicine, nursing, pharmacy, and other health educational fields of study (Kreps, 2010e).

Research in these five major areas of health communication inquiry has generated strong evidence that demonstrates that translational transdisciplinary health communication research can help guide reductions in health risk, incidence, morbidity and mortality, while also improving quality of life (Kreps, 2023, 2012b; 2012c).

Communication research to promote the health of vulnerable populations

One of the most important applied areas for health communication research focuses on promoting the health of vulnerable and at-risk populations by examining the powerful influences of key communication mechanisms and processes on health outcomes (Kreps & Neuhauser, 2015). This kind of health communication research includes studies that examine the role of communication in promoting relational coordination between interdependent health care providers and consumers in the delivery of care, identifying the best strategies for the effective dissemination of relevant health information to guide health decision making, and adapting evidence-based message strategies to meet the health literacy levels of different vulnerable

audiences to develop the best communication practices for promoting adoption of health behaviors and therapies and providing needed social support to those at-risk (Kreps & Neuhauser, 2015).

Large-scale health communication research programs, such as the Health Information National Trends Survey (HINTS) studies that have been conducted across multiple countries with the International Studies to Investigate Global Health Information Trends (INSIGHTS) track key communication practices and influences in society, examining issues such as health information access and utilization, public understanding of health issues, information gaps, channel utilization, and source preferences (Kreps, 2020c). Still other intervention-based health communication research studies test new communication programs, policies, tools, and technologies for disseminating relevant health information, influencing health behaviors, and enhancing health outcomes for at-risk populations (Kreps & Neuhauser, 2015).

The central role of information in health care and health promotion

I often focus my health communication research projects on examining the central role of information in health promotion (Kreps, 2023; 2022). Health care providers, consumers, caregivers, and policymakers need relevant health information to make good decisions about disease prevention, care, and successful survivorship. Salient and motivating health information can have profound influences on health behaviors and improve health outcomes (Kreps, 2022). Relevant health information is needed to help reduce the many uncertainties regarding prevention, detection, diagnosis, and treatment of health problems, guiding informed decision making to enhance quality of life. Health communication research helps to manage the high equivocality of health care and health promotion (Kreps, 2022). Responding effectively to health problems is complex, with the need to address many different health risks, each with unique symptoms, causes, and treatments. We live in a rapidly changing health information environment, where new advances expand health knowledge, such as the need to keep abreast of new strategies for disease prevention, screening, diagnosis, and treatment. There are significant barriers to disseminating complex and changing health information to diverse audiences, especially for at-risk populations, who may suffer from limited levels of information access, health literacy, education, and social capital. I strongly encourage using translational health communication inquiry to increase access, understanding, and use of health information to help enhance health decision making and improve health outcomes.

Multi-method collaborative health communication research process

To conduct health communication research that can enhance health outcomes for vulnerable populations I encourage use of a four-phase research process (Kreps 2020b; 2012c) that includes:

1. **Assessment phase:** needs and audience analysis research are conducted, and community partners recruited with the use of surveys, interviews, focus-groups, observational research, as well as archival and textual analysis research to help make sense of the important health issues, concerns, and barriers faced by at-risk populations.
2. **Design phase:** formative evaluation data are translated into communication programs and interventions (health education programs, campaigns, technologies, etc.) with the use of message testing research, user-centered design, and usability studies) to develop strategies for addressing health communication problems.
3. **Implementation phase:** process evaluation research is conducted with message tracking, interviews, observations, and message testing to assess the effects of communication interventions on the targeted audiences' levels of exposure to, awareness of, and acceptance of new health information.

4. **Evaluation phase:** summative evaluation research is conducted with field experiments, surveys, interviews, and observations to assess the sustained influences of communication interventions on knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, costs, and health outcomes to guide institutionalization, community ownership, and policy development to address important health issues.

Health communication inquiry cuts across the continuum of care

Transdisciplinary health communication inquiry is a pervasive area of applied science that can help address a broad range of important health issues across the continuum of care (Kreps, 2017) in areas such as:

1. **Prevention:** health communication inquiry can examine how to enhance disease prevention for key audiences with the use of evidence-based strategic health communication campaigns, health education efforts, and behavior change intervention programs.
2. **Detection:** health communication inquiry can examine how to enhance early detection of health problems, with the promotion and design of disease screening programs, as well as by monitoring awareness, support, and use of relevant screening programs.
3. **Diagnosis:** health communication inquiry can examine how to enhance diagnoses of health problems by promoting effective communication strategies for gathering full diagnostic information, accurately interpreting diagnostic information, and delivering diagnoses meaningfully.
4. **Treatment:** health communication inquiry can examine the best communicate strategies for enhancing health care treatments through consumer/provider collaboration, informed treatment decision-making, and with treatment monitoring and follow-up.
5. **Survivorship:** health communication inquiry can examine how to meet the communication needs of survivors of serious health problems by helping them readjust to life after treatment, the provision of social support and therapeutic communication, and helping survivors learn how to live with uncertainty.
6. **End of life:** health communication inquiry can examine how to enhance end-of-life care through effective communication about transitions from active treatment to end-of-life care, the provision of palliative care and symptom management, and developing programs for providing needed social support.

The potential contributions of recognizing health communication as a crisis discipline

There is tremendous potential to use engaged health communication research to guide important refinements in the way we deliver health care and promote health (Kreps, 2020b) In response to this potential, major health care systems and government agencies have already developed specialized health communication administrative and research units to ensure that the best health care and health promotion communication practices are being used. For example, the US National Cancer Institute houses the important Health Communication and Informatics Research Branch as a major unit of their Behavioral Research Program that coordinates national health communication research programs, such as the US-based HINTS (Health Information National Trends Survey). In addition, the INSIGHTS research program is built upon the US-based HINTS research, expanding data collection from North America to many countries around the globe to guide health information dissemination efforts. Important new local, national, and international guidelines, legislation, and policies have been introduced to guide best health communication practices. More than ever before, there is growing awareness that all people engage in health communication in terms of the ways they access health information, talk about health with one another, and seek to influence others' health behaviors.

Future health communication scholarship should be designed to build upon basic research findings about relevant health communication processes and mechanisms (concerning issues such as relational develop-

ment, social influence, collaborative decision making, information dissemination, and social support) with surveillance research that tracks the ways that key publics (such as consumers, providers, and health care administrators) use communication to access relevant health information and make important health decisions, using this body of research findings to guide building and testing evidence-based and targeted health communication interventions that address important health issues. This is a critical knowledge synthesis process that can enable health communication as a crisis discipline to leverage health communication inquiry into the creation of evidence-based health communication programs, services, technologies, and policies that can enhance important health outcomes.



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