The Dual Role of Interpersonal Communication about Organ Donation

Extended Abstract

In most countries there is a chronic shortage on donated tissues and organs even though the majority of populace is willing to donate (Eurobarometer 2007). This unfavorable gap is to a great extend a communication issue and there are two main strategies to address it: 1) increasing the share of written documentation (such as on a donor card), 2) encouraging people to share their will with their relatives. In recent years the focus of public health campaigns has shifted to the second strategy since empirical studies have revealed that in most instances the will of the relatives is requested and given priority even if there is a written document (Schirmer & de Agular Roza 2008; Schulz et al. 2012). In academic research the role of interpersonal communication is often reduced to the communication after a decision is made (Afifi et al. 2006; Morgan & Miller 2001; Smith et al. 2004). Yet little is known about discussions prior to decision making. Empirical studies show that sharing ones will with relatives depends on prior discussions and these discussions depend on perceived compliance of relatives’ opinion (Volz & Szucs 2011). Hence, the discussions prior decision making and the communication of a made decision seem to be linked.

Therefore, the goal of our research project is to include the dual roles of interpersonal communication in a model of interpersonal communication about organ donation and to identify the relevant factors that influence these two types of communication.

Our model includes the distinction between attitude, social norm, and perceived behavioral control from the theory of planed behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein 1980). While we do not differentiate between behavioral intention and behavior we extend the perspective by simultaneously including decision making and communicating/documenting ones will. The discussions prior to a decision are included as a mediating factor in the model illustrated in figure 1 (dual role of interpersonal communication highlighted in grey). Furthermore, the literature suggests to include information and information seeking in our model.
Methods
A stratified random sample of 2'031 persons was drawn from online-panel to participate in an online questionnaire. Attitude, social norm, and perceived behavioral control were measured by six point likert scales. Attitude was operationalized as a latent variable combining four ratings on how meaningful it is to decide, discuss with relatives, communicate a decision, and owning a donor card. Social norm and perceived behavioral control were measured by single items on the same six point scale (“majority of relatives is in favor of organ donation”; “organ donation is a subject to be talked about in an open manor among one relatives”). The other variables were measured as dichotomous variables.

Findings
The structural equation model (figure 2) fits the data according to the established criteria. It shows that a favorable attitude is the most important variable to support a decision for donating organs. Also social norm and perceived behavioral control exert a mediated influence via this variable on the subsequent aspects in the model (conversations, decision for donating, and information seeking). According to this finding a public communication campaign should bolster or support the perceived meaningfulness. With respect to the role of conversations we find a deviation from our hypothesized model. It is found that past discussions do not have a direct influence on decisions in favor of donating. However, past discussions have a substantial effect on the expression of will that is in most instances made via interpersonal communication. Hence, public communication campaign could encourage people to talk about this topic without interfering with the ethical ideal that the decision should finally be made by the individual and not the group.
References


Eurobarometer (2007): Europeans and organ donation. European Commission, Special Eurobarometer 272D.


Figure 1: Model of the dual role of interpersonal communication about organ donation
Figure 2: Structural equation model of the dual role of interpersonal communication about organ donation

\[ R^2 = .28 \]

It makes sense to...
- decide
- talk to relatives to come to a decision
- tell the decision to relatives
- own a donor card

N = 1977, CFI = .981, RMSEA = .052,