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The interpersonal communication process of social workers in fostering independence among the visually impaired: a case study of Panti Sosial Bina Netra (PSBN) Tuah Sakato Padang

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ABSTRACT

Visual impairment presents complex challenges in fostering independence, influenced by physical limitations, environmental barriers, and social perceptions. This study aims to analyze the process of interpersonal communication between social workers and visually impaired residents at Panti Sosial Bina Netra Tuah Sakato Padang in supporting their independence. Using a qualitative case study approach within a constructivist paradigm, data were collected through indepth interviews, participant observation, and documentation, with source and method triangulation applied to ensure validity. The findings reveal that the communication process develops gradually through four stages: introduction to establish a sense of safety, exploratory information exchange, emotional engagement through empathy and support, and the establishment of stable trust. These stages align with Altman and Taylor's Social Penetration Theory and DeVito's five dimensions of effective interpersonal communication: openness, empathy, positivity, respect, and equality. Consistent and adaptive communication was found to enhance the self confidence and motivation of visually impaired individuals in developing independent living skills. The results underscore interpersonal communication as a fundamental component in the success of social rehabilitation for people with visual disabilities.



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Introduction

Independence is a fundamental aspiration for every individual, including those who are visually impaired. However, achieving independence often presents a complex challenge shaped by multiple factors such as physical limitations, environmental barriers, and social perceptions. Globally, visual impairment is a significant public health issue. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2023), Indonesia ranks third in the world in terms of blindness prevalence, reflecting the urgent need for targeted interventions to improve the quality of life and social participation of individuals with visual disabilities. In the national context, Ansori (2023) highlights that many visually impaired individuals continue to face limited access to inclusive education, decent employment opportunities, and adequate social support systems.

In Indonesia, the constitutional mandate under Article 27(2) of the 1945 Constitution guarantees every citizen the right to work and to live with dignity. This principle should extend equally to persons with

disabilities. However, in practice, they are often treated differently and perceived as dependent or incapable, limiting their opportunities to exercise equal rights. In response to these systemic challenges, local governments have established specialized agencies, such as the Panti Sosial Bina Netra (PSBN) Tuah Sakato in West Sumatra, which operates under the provincial social affairs department. This institution provides rehabilitation and empowerment programs for the visually impaired, including skills training, mobility orientation, and psychosocial support (Aulia & Apsari, 2020).

Interpersonal communication is central to the success of such rehabilitation efforts. DeVito (2022) defines interpersonal communication as an interactive process that fosters openness, empathy, positivity, respect, and equality. In the context of social work, this involves both verbal and nonverbal strategies that create trust, emotional safety, and motivation for clients (Sari & Ariyanto, 2019). The visually impaired population, due to their sensory limitations, requires adaptive communication approaches that address not only informational needs but also emotional and social integration.

Previous studies in Indonesia have underscored the importance of adaptive interpersonal communication in disability rehabilitation. For example, Astawa and Wijastuti (2023) demonstrated that effective interpersonal strategies contribute to self-concept development among visually impaired students, while Khotijah (2023) found that integrating verbal and non-verbal communication helps reduce misunderstandings and enhances participation. Internationally, research has also addressed this intersection between communication and empowerment. The Academic (2023) examined the communication abilities of visually impaired adults, emphasizing adaptation and assistive tools. Hansen and Lund (2023) explored interpersonal relationships in rehabilitation from the perspective of service users, while Liu and Smith (2022) highlighted the role of voice recognition training in improving social function and reducing anxiety. Putri and Santoso (2023) identified the critical role of social workers in low-vision rehabilitation services, particularly in facilitating inclusive and client centered communication.

Social workers at Panti Sosial Bina Netra (PSBN) Tuah Sakato hold a pivotal role in facilitating the development of independence among individuals with visually impaired clients through the application of empathetic and supportive interpersonal communication. The roles of social workers is deeply intertwined with the process of interpersonal communication and in motivating clients to avoid reliance on others and perform tasks independently on their own (Hogan, 2019; Donovan, 2018)

This study adopts a constructivist paradigm, emphasizing that social reality, including communication behaviors and independence, constructed through social interactions and shared meaning, making between social workers and clients. This paradigm aligns with the research objective of uncovering how interpersonal communication is experienced and interpreted in fostering independence, rather than treating these phenomena as fixed or naturally given. Despite these contributions, a clear research gap remains. Much of the existing literature either focuses on technical skills training or general psychosocial support without thoroughly examining the step by step interpersonal communication process between social workers and visually impaired clients in fostering independence. This study addresses that gap by employing a qualitative case study approach to explore the structured stages of interpersonal communication at Panti Sosial Bina Netra (PSBN) Tuah Sakato and its role in building the independence of visually impaired clients. By clarifying these operational definitions and theoretical perspectives, the study provides a strong conceptual framework that guides the research design and analysis.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research design, adopting a case study approach within a constructivist paradigm. The constructivist paradigm emphasizes that social reality, including the interpersonal communication of social workers with the visually impaired at the Bina Netra Tuah Sakato Padang Social Institution, is formed through ongoing social construction rather than innate behavior. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on predetermined criteria, including social workers with a minimum of two years of experience, UPTD leaders, and four visually impaired children. Data were collected through in depth interviews (two to three sessions per informant), participatory observation over three months, and documentation. Data analysis followed Robert K. Yin's case study strategy, specifically pattern matching and explanation building. Pattern matching was used to align empirical findings with theoretical frameworks of interpersonal communication, while explanation building allowed iterative interpretation of data to construct a coherent narrative of the communication process. To ensure credibility and rigor, triangulation of sources and methods, as well as member checking, were employed.

Results and Discussions

The Process of Interpersonal Communication between Social Workers and the Visually Impaired in Fostering Independence

The study identifies three interrelated phases in the interpersonal communication process of social workers at Panti Sosial Bina Netra (PSBN) Tuah Sakato Padang in fostering independence among visually impaired individuals: relationship building, guided skill development, and encouraging autonomy. These phases not only reflect communication practices in the field but also demonstrate the operationalization of interpersonal communication competence as articulated by Adler et al. (2019), DeVito (2013), and Wood (2016).

The first phase, relationship building

The first stage centers on establishing trust, empathy, and a sense of belonging. Many visually impaired children enter PSBN with feelings of insecurity, social stigma, and dependency. Social workers acknowledged that their initial role is less about instruction and more about relational reassurance.

One social worker described: "When the children arrive, they often cry or refuse to interact. Before teaching them skills, I focus on being present, talking gently, and letting them know they are safe here." This reflects Wood's principle of appropriateness, where communication must be adapted to the emotional and cultural context. The use of dual perspective seeing the situation from the children's standpoint was evident across narratives. Another participant noted: "I try to understand their feelings by imagining myself in their position. They cannot see, but they can feel if someone is sincere or not."

From DeVito's framework, this corresponds to the skill of adapting communication to others and situations. The relational stage is not only affective but also foundational for later independence-building, as trust becomes the entry point for deeper learning. The process also resonates with social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), where relational closeness begins with superficial interactions (comfort, reassurance) before progressing to deeper levels of personal disclosure and cooperation.

Relationship building is characterized by establishment of trust, psychological safety, and emotional connectedness. Emphasizes trust and emotional security as the foundation of communication. Social workers consistently reported the need to "be present" for the visually impaired before attempting to impart skills, indicating that relational warmth and empathetic listening are prerequisites to effective communication. For example, one worker noted, "Before teaching independence, we need to let them feel safe and understood." From a theoretical perspective, this aligns with DeVito's (2013) proposition that relational dimensions of communication, such as confirmation, empathy, and immediacy, facilitate openness and message receptivity. It also resonates with Adler et al.'s (2019) framework of communication competence, particularly the dimension of adapting communicative behavior to the relational needs of the interlocutor. Here, relationship building is not ancillary to the training of independence but foundational to its success, as it reduces anxiety and fosters a willingness to engage in new experiences.

The second phase, guided skill development

After relational trust is established, communication shifts toward structured instruction and guided training. This reflects the communicative enactment of teaching strategies adapted to the unique needs of visually impaired individuals. Social workers employed repetition, modeling, tactile demonstrations, and step-by-step guidance as communication strategies.

One informant emphasized, "We don't just tell them what to do; we show, repeat, and guide until they gain confidence." This illustrates DeVito's skill of developing a range of communication strategies verbal, tactile, and experiential depending on the learner's needs.

Visually impaired participants confirmed this importance: "Sometimes I don't understand with words only. But when the staff lets me touch or practice, I can remember it better." This aligns with Adler et al.'s notion that competence is about performing skillfully using flexible methods rather than rigid scripts. It also reflects Spitzberg & Cupach's model, where competence requires motivation (desire to connect), knowledge (understanding how to communicate effectively), and skills (ability to enact strategies in practice).

Monitoring communication, another of DeVito's elements, was clearly evident. Social workers often paused to check comprehension, asking children to repeat or demonstrate tasks. As one worker shared: "If they cannot repeat what I showed them, I know I must change my explanation." This constant feedback loop illustrates circular communication, where meaning is co-constructed through interaction rather than one-way transmission.

This demonstrates what Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) describe as the integration of knowledge (understanding the learner's limitations and potentials), skill (the ability to design and execute appropriate instructional messages), and motivation (the willingness to persist through communicative challenges). Furthermore, it mirrors the principle of dual perspective emphasized by Wood (2016), wherein social workers simultaneously attend to their own instructional goals and to the subjective experiences of their visually impaired interlocutors. In this phase, competence is enacted through a balance of directive and supportive communication, ensuring that learners not only acquire technical skills but also internalize self-efficacy.

The third phase, encouraging autonomy

The third stage highlights the transition from guided dependence to independent action. Here, communication strategies shifted to motivational reinforcement, reduced assistance, and encouragement of problem solving.

Illustrates the transition from dependency to independence, wherein social workers gradually withdraw direct guidance to encourage self-reliance. One participant reflected, "We step back and let them try on their own; our role is to support, not to replace." This communicative stance exemplifies ethical appropriateness as defined by Wood (2016), in which the ultimate goal of competent communication is not to dominate interaction but to empower the other party. It also reflects the deeper layers of the Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), where increasing interpersonal closeness enables individuals to share vulnerabilities, experiment with autonomy, and expand their relational and functional capacities. In this sense, communication is not merely instrumental but transformative, enabling visually impaired individuals to reconstruct their identities as capable and autonomous members of society.

One social worker stated: "I tell them, 'You can try on your own, I will be here if you need me.' Slowly, they realize they are capable." Visually impaired participants confirmed the empowering effect of this communication: "At first I was afraid to walk alone, but the staff encouraged me. Even if I failed, they said it was okay. That gave me courage."

This reflects Wood's principle of effectiveness communication serving the broader goal of fostering independence. It also highlights the ethical dimension of competence, as workers avoided creating over-dependence and instead prioritized empowerment.

In DeVito's terms, this stage embodies commitment to ethical communication ensuring that the interaction contributes positively to the child's growth and agency. In relation to social penetration theory, this represents the deeper layers of relational depth, where trust and autonomy coexist within the supportive relationship.

Taken together, the findings reveal that interpersonal communication competence is not a static quality but a dynamic, staged process. Across the three phases, we see how DeVito's five aspects skill development, adaptation, dual perspective, monitoring, and ethical commitment are enacted in practice. Wood's dual emphasis on effectiveness (goal attainment) and appropriateness (sensitivity to context) provides a lens for understanding how workers continually balance task-oriented instruction with relational care. Adler et al.'s emphasis on skilled performance is evident in the flexible communication strategies deployed across phases, while Spitzberg & Cupach's triadic model of competence (motivation, knowledge, skills) helps explain the foundation of workers' communicative success.

The findings collectively suggest that the interpersonal communication competence of social workers in this context is both relational and instrumental. Relationally, competence is demonstrated through empathetic listening, adaptation to the communicative needs of the visually impaired, and the cultivation of trust. Instrumentally, competence is realized through structured instructional strategies that are sensitive to context and individualized to each learner. This dual nature confirms Adler et al.'s (2019) claim that interpersonal communication competence requires both effectiveness (achieving communicative goals) and appropriateness (honoring relational and contextual demands). Importantly, the analysis indicates that competence is not a static trait but a dynamic process shaped by ongoing interaction, reflection, and adaptation.

However, the research also highlights asymmetries in competence. Not all social workers exhibited the same level of communicative adaptability or sensitivity. Some demonstrated a tendency toward over-directiveness, which risked fostering dependency rather than autonomy. This reflects a broader challenge identified in the literature on social work communication, where the tension between care and empowerment requires constant negotiation (Liliweri, 2015). Such findings underscore the need for continuous professional development in communication competence for social workers engaged with marginalized populations. From a methodological standpoint, it is necessary to acknowledge potential limitations in the interpretation of data. Although triangulation of sources and member checking were employed to ensure credibility, the reliance on qualitative techniques such as interviews and participant observation introduces the possibility of researcher

subjectivity. My own positionality as a researcher particularly the empathetic orientation toward the visually impaired may have shaped both the data collection and the interpretation. While this aligns with the constructivist paradigm adopted in the study, it is important to recognize that different researchers might have highlighted alternative dimensions of competence or prioritized other theoretical lenses. Future research could address this by incorporating quantitative measures of independence outcomes or by employing mixed-methods designs to strengthen generalizability and validity.

Overall, this study contributes to the field of communication by extending theories of interpersonal communication competence (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Adler et al., 2019; Wood, 2016) into the context of disability care. It demonstrates that competent interpersonal communication in social work is not only about relational sensitivity but also about structured and ethically responsible guidance that enables independence. In doing so, the study underscores the transformative potential of communication as both a relational and functional practice, offering implications for theory, practice, and policy in the empowerment of visually impaired populations. A key limitation of this study lies in the potential subjectivity of interpretation, given the researcher's immersion in the field. While triangulation of sources and member checking enhanced credibility, the absence of software-assisted coding (e.g., NVivo) may reduce transparency in the analytic process. Additionally, the context specific focus on PSBN Tuah Sakato limits generalizability to other institutions. Future research might incorporate cross-case analysis or mixed methods to provide broader perspectives.

Interpersonal Communication Barriers in Social Work Practice

While the study highlights the effectiveness of interpersonal communication in fostering the independence of the visually impaired, it also reveals a range of barriers that hinder the communication process. Interpersonal communication is rarely free of obstacles, and in social work practice these barriers often emerge from psychological, social, cultural, and environmental factors. According to DeVito's (2016) model, communication noise whether physical, psychological, semantic, or cultural can distort meaning and limit the effectiveness of interpersonal interaction. The findings of this study confirm that such barriers were experienced by social workers at PSBN Tuah Sakato Padang.

One of the major barriers identified is the difference in perception and lived experience between social workers and the visually impaired. The visually impaired residents often carry traumatic experiences or feelings of rejection, particularly those who lost their sight later in life, which reduces their openness to communication. Conversely, some social workers may unintentionally approach clients with assumptions or stereotypes, which can lead to misunderstanding or mistrust. As Wood (2016) notes, competence requires dual perspective seeing through the lens of both self and other which is often challenged by these perceptual gaps. Social worker MH explained: "Some clients are enthusiastic, especially those who have lived with disabilities since childhood. But those who became blind later in life often struggle psychologically and have not fully accepted their condition. This affects their daily activities and willingness to engage. As social workers, we must enter their world with empathy, avoiding judgment, and instead build trust through friendship."

Cultural and linguistic differences also present barriers to effective communication. In a socially and ethnically diverse environment, variations in language, dialect, and communicative style sometimes caused confusion or reluctance among clients. These findings resonate with Adler and Proctor's (2018) view that competence requires sensitivity to social and cultural context. If social workers rely on formal or technical language, clients may withdraw from interaction, perceiving the conversation as inaccessible. Similarly, environmental barriers such as noisy surroundings or lack of private space during counseling sessions reduced the quality of communication. This aligns with DeVito's recognition of environmental "noise" as a critical barrier to interpersonal effectiveness.

Finally, emotional barriers affect both clients and social workers. Clients experiencing trauma, stress, or depression often found it difficult to express their feelings, while social workers themselves sometimes faced emotional fatigue due to demanding caseloads. This condition reduces empathy and patience, directly affecting communication competence. Liliweri (2015) emphasizes that ethical principles such as non-judgmental attitudes and emotional regulation are critical to maintaining professional communication in such contexts.

Despite these challenges, the findings indicate that social workers at PSBN Tuah Sakato adopted strategies to overcome communication barriers, including active listening, empathy, cultural sensitivity, and the creation of safe communication environments. By adopting informal and flexible approaches, they were able to foster trust, reduce social distance, and encourage clients to be more open. These strategies underscore the importance of adapting communication to client needs and reaffirm the centrality of interpersonal competence in achieving the goals of social work practice.

This study, while providing valuable insights into the interpersonal communication of social workers in fostering independence among the visually impaired, has several limitations. First, the research is limited to a single institutional context PSBN Tuah Sakato Padang which restricts the generalizability of the findings to other rehabilitation or social work settings with different cultural, organizational, or demographic characteristics. Second, the analysis relied on qualitative methods with purposive sampling; although rich in depth, this design may introduce researcher subjectivity in interpreting the data. Although triangulation and member checking were employed to enhance validity, complete elimination of interpretive bias remains challenging. Third, the study was conducted over a three-month observation period, which may not fully capture the long-term dynamics of interpersonal communication and empowerment processes.

Future research should address these limitations by adopting multi site comparative studies, extending the observation period, and incorporating mixed method approaches, such as quantitative surveys or communication competence assessments, to complement qualitative findings. Additionally, further exploration of how digital communication tools or technology assisted interventions shape interpersonal communication in rehabilitation contexts would broaden the scope of this emerging research area.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that the interpersonal communication process of social workers at PSBN Tuah Sakato Padang is central to fostering independence among visually impaired beneficiaries. The staged progression from trust building introductions, to empathetic emotional support, to the development of confidence and life skills illustrates how interpersonal communication competence functions not merely as an interactional tool, but as the foundation of empowerment in social work practice. This confirms and extends interpersonal communication theory (e.g., DeVito, Adler et al.) by showing its application in a rehabilitation context where communication acts as both process and outcome. However, the study's focus on a single institutional context and its reliance on qualitative case study methods limit the generalizability of the findings. Although methodological rigor was pursued through triangulation and member checking, researcher subjectivity cannot be fully excluded. Future research should expand across multiple institutions, integrate longitudinal designs, and employ mixed-methods approaches to strengthen the robustness of findings. The practical implications are equally important. Social workers should be trained not only in technical service delivery but also in communication competence, empathy, and cultural sensitivity. Policymakers and institutions can use these insights to design training modules, supervision systems, and communication-based interventions tailored to the needs of people with visual impairments. By integrating communication theory with social work practice, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship at the intersection of interpersonal communication and health/social rehabilitation. It underscores that communication is not a peripheral skill, but a transformative process capable of shaping independence, agency, and dignity among vulnerable populations.

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