Toward an Understanding of the Use of Academic Theories in Public Relations Practice

Joep P. Cornelissen

ABSTRACT: This article discusses a focal issue in the field of public relations: the way that practitioners use academic theories. The possible modes of use are discussed and a new perspective on science use—the translation model—is outlined. The premise of this model is that scientific knowledge is seldom used in an unaltered form in practice. Scientific notions are interpreted, re-framed, and adapted to existing visions and presuppositions of practitioners. The article closes by identifying future research directions.

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One of the major issues in the field of public relations is the insight into the extent to which thoughts and activities of practitioners are founded on or at least influenced by academic knowledge and research. It has been suggested that in the field of public relations an accurate understanding of the relation between its academic theories and research on the one hand, and the knowledge and tools a practitioner actually needs on the other hand, has been lacking. A good deal of public relations work appears to have been based on intuitive or experiential learning rather than grounded in or drawing on academic knowledge. Public relations scholars, such as Pavlik and Salmon and Toth, have argued that
this absence of a strong academic foundation to guide the work of many practitioners directly affects a further “professionalization” of the discipline. This article attempts to explore the possible relationships between the academic and professional worlds of public relations. Drawing on theories of science use discussed in the sociology of knowledge, this article seeks to illuminate the ways in which academic knowledge might be used in public relations practice.

By way of background to this article, it is necessary to clarify that here I am concerned with the question of how academic theories developed through academic research are, or can be, used in common daily practice. As such, I need to make a clear distinction between academic research undertaken for academic or scientific understanding and applied organizational research, which is initiated by companies for the specific purpose of policy making and public relations practice. Although the importance of applied organizational research is apparent, directly affecting public relations’ role in management decision making, as well as the quality of basic planning, implementation, and evaluation of public relations program, the focus of this article is specifically on the relationship between academic research and practice.

Academic research is primarily initiated for academic understanding and is concerned with building theories. As such, from a practitioner perspective, academic knowledge can often be considered as rather abstract and conceptual in nature. At the same time, however, authors such as Pavlik and Toth have argued that the knowledge captured in academic theories can provide a framework for practitioners to dwell on when coping with their day-to-day situations. Despite this contention, a discussion of the specific ways in which this prescriptive relation between academic theories and practice is constituted, is lacking. The main questions addressed in this article are to what extent, and in what way, academic knowledge and insights are being used within concrete fields of practice, and what the consequences of such use are. Here, a number of important questions concerning the utility of academic theory for public relations practice emerge: how academic knowledge is, if at all, disseminated in practice, and what factors influence the extent to which practitioners attend to, and make use of, academic theories.

A number of models for applying academic theories and research in practical situations have been advanced in the sociology of knowledge. These include the instrumental, conceptual, and translation models of science use for practical purposes. The models are quite distinct in their underlying philosophy, which is based on different perspectives of the role of science in our daily working environment. The models are, however, not mutually exclusive, but rather complement each other in terms of offering a cumulative understanding of the complex relationship between academic theory and practice. Effectively, the common feature of these models is the use of academic theories involving both diffusion and an active use of scientific notions, knowledge, and attitudes in nonscientific, practical situations.
The instrumental model

The first model concerned with explaining the use of theory in practice is the instrumental approach. The “instrumental model” is closely associated with the ideas of rational intervention, social engineering, and the classical image of science. From this perspective, science is regarded as an essential rational activity, as a value-free search for an objective “truth.” As a consequence, a strict distinction is made between scientific and common sense knowledge. Scientific knowledge, it is assumed, provides a better insight into practical problems over and beyond mere intuition and experiences because it adheres to the rules of the scientific method. In providing concrete, “matching” solutions to practical problems, the instrumental model has also been referred to as the “problem solving model,” which has been considered as the “prevailing imagery of research utilization.”

In this approach, Weiss suggests that research will provide empirical evidence and/or conclusions that will help solve a policy problem. The model is a linear one. A problem exists; information or understanding is lacking either to generate a solution to a problem or to select among alternative solutions; [academic] research provides the missing knowledge; a solution is reached.

One of the first public relations scholars who followed the tenets of the instrumental model was Robinson, who advocated the use of scientifically derived knowledge (the “best available evidence”) as the basis for problem solving in practice. Robinson maintained that individualistic, particularistic knowledge was less systematic, subjective, and more biased than its scientific counterpart. Based on this distinction, Robinson set out a “problem solving continuum,” ranging from the individualistic stage to the scientifically derived knowledge stage (see Table 1).

There is a tendency in the instrumental approach to devalue practical experiences and common-sense knowledge in preference for academic knowledge, which is seen as more sophisticated and rational. Because academic knowledge adheres to the scientific method, it is often seen as a unique and superior form of knowledge because it offers a set of rules for inquiry that emphasizes precision and overcomes systematic bias and human error. Moreover, there is a solid faith here

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TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individualistic stage</th>
<th>Scientifically derived knowledge stage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Fly-by-the-seat-of-the-pants” school</td>
<td>“Best available evidence” school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective, intuitive, personal, little use of theory or social and behavioural sciences</td>
<td>Objective, rigorous, application of empirical knowledge, reliance on academic theory</td>
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about the capability of social science research to improve the wisdom of decisions in practice. As Oh commented, “Use is good; more use is better; and increasing the use of social research means improving the quality of decisions” (p. 3).12

The view embodied in the instrumental model that academic research is able to provide rational solutions for any possible problem in a direct and instrumental way has been subject to criticism within the sociology of knowledge literature. First, the assumption of the instrumental model that a perfect, objective solution can be found by academic researchers might not hold true in light of the complex problems that practitioners are often faced with in practice. Second, an implicit assumption in the instrumental model is that real-world problems are manifest and clear for everyone to see. However, problem definitions are not objective facts, but rather social constructions. As Schön argued, “in real-world practice, problems do not present themselves to the practitioner as givens. They must be constructed from the materials of problematic situations which are puzzling, troubling and uncertain.”13 Third, there is an assumption in the instrumental model that there is a consensus on objectives. As Weiss comments:

“Implicit in this model is a sense that there is a consensus on goals. It is assumed that policy-makers and researchers tend to agree on what the desired end-state shall be. The main contribution of social science research is to help identify and select appropriate means to reach the goal.” (p. 33)14

In practice, however, uncertainty and dissensus on the nature of policy problems and objectives are more often the case. Fourth, as has already been mentioned, through its emphasis on scientific information and analytical rationality the instrumental model depreciates and negates other sources of problem solving, such as intuitive knowledge and experience, which can be considered as equally valuable avenues to an adequate problem solution. Last, we might question whether in a general scientific context striving for nomothetic knowledge can be fully practical and useful. According to Schön,15 real-world situations are characterized by uncertainty, instability, and unique cases that require a different kind of knowledge in identifying appropriate courses of action. Here it is stressed that there is no need for knowledge to exhibit universal properties and general principles, rather what is often required is “suitable” knowledge to enable an understanding of singular cases. Schön calls for “reflective practitioners” who are capable of translating general scientific insights into concrete practical solutions. With this notion of “reflective practitioners” who not only apply existing knowledge in their actions, but who also actively engage with academic knowledge and insights, Schön was already anticipating what was to be called the “translation model” of science use.

Hence, science and academic research seem unable to be direct providers of concrete answers, that is, knowledge for all kinds of problems in practice. More specifically, given the need for “particularistic” knowledge for practical, daily problems, as opposed to striving for nomothetic, generalized knowledge in science, a direct match between practical problems and scientific knowledge
seems problematic if not elusive. In fact, as academic theories are often simplified representations of reality, they are rarely capable of capturing reality in concrete terms. As a result, practitioners often find these theories unintelligible and irrelevant to the problems typically on their agendas. Empirical variation is often reduced to models, types, and categorizations, which (when used) must be considered in relation to the situation at hand and the purpose of the theory’s use. So, it might be that the academic world provides not so much concrete solutions to public relations problems, but rather more general visions and frameworks within academic theories.

THE CONCEPTUAL MODEL

In the second model of science use, the so-called “conceptual model,” abstract academic knowledge is applied to practical cases by more refined means of generalizations, concepts, and ideas. Hence, the conceptual model does not focus on discrete information and concrete solutions, but rather on the more general views, concepts, and frames of reference established within academic theories. In this approach, it is generally assumed that science offers ideas, problem definitions, and interpretative schemes as a set of intellectual tools available to the practitioner in understanding and anticipating real-world phenomena. Practitioners are seen as behaving differently as they take on board academic concepts and ideas and incorporate them into their dominant worldviews. Weiss and Bucuvalas argue that the use of scientific knowledge by practitioners indeed accords to such a view.

As the decision makers . . . reported, a much more common mode of research use is the diffuse and undirected infiltration of research ideas into their understanding of the world. . . . By and large, officials value research not only for the specific data it provides but more importantly for its ideas. It is the generalisations [sic] and concepts from the social sciences that they often find most useful in helping them construct their images of their mission.16

According to the conceptual model, the societal and practical value of science is not a matter of value-free expertise (as was assumed in the instrumental model), but an attempt to provide appropriate information in a process of linking problems and solutions. As such, scientific research is not so much used to provide direct recommendations, but rather indirect, long-term (and even partial) effects of scientific expertise. Utilization conform the conceptual model is more diffuse based on the belief that academic theories can influence such matters as which issues are placed on the policy agenda, and which kind of policy options are considered, as well as influencing practitioners’ orientations towards problems and the range of solutions that they canvas.

This use of theoretical concepts implies that results of scientific research have to be illuminating; thought provoking; or, at least, meaningful to practitioners to be
considered of any value. Referring to an old sociological ideal, the conceptual model embodies the idea of “enlightenment.” Bulmer cited the American sociologist Shills, who in the early 1960s was already of the opinion that sociology had to be more than just a provider of technical expertise: “The proper calling today of sociology is the illumination of opinion... Like the philosophers (of the Enlightenment), sociologists will be the commentators and the illuminators of the current scene.”

There has been some criticism of the validity of the “conceptual model” in terms of the implied presumption that science and academic research will necessarily enlighten practitioners. A further point of critique is that, like the instrumental model, the conceptual approach assumes a one-way relationship between science and practice. Bryant phrased this as “science speaks and practice listens,” where, “the sociologist brings light to the benighted—and the conceit—the sociologists announces and the world responds.” This assumed one-way relationship is arguably particularly flawed when considered from the perspective of the more knowledgeable and reflective practitioners in the public relations profession today, who actively use, as well as contribute to, knowledge from both academic and professional sources.

The differences between the instrumental and conceptual models of science use center around the question of what kind of information or knowledge serves the public relations profession best: concrete policy solutions or recommendations for practice, or alternatively, more general interpretations and ideas. Both these models have been described as science centrist in that they view the relation between science and practice as solely one-way; practice is regarded as a passive receiver of rationalized knowledge and expertise. Hence, in these models utilization has traditionally been conceptualized in terms of the “diffusion of knowledge,” and conventional use research has examined whether scientific information is used in practice and has attempted to identify the factors that conditioned this use. The question of how scientific information is used in practice has often not been examined. Here interesting questions, such as how practitioners deal with new academic information, how is such information understood in practice and transformed into actions, and what kind of transformation of knowledge occurs before it becomes practically applied, emerge.

THE TRANSLATION MODEL

In contrast to the two previous models, the “translation model,” which is based on the ideas of the German sociologists Beck and Bonß, treats the relation between theory and practice significantly different. Here science and practice are considered as intertwined mutually influential entities in the generation of knowledge. Seemingly in accord with this translation model, a number of public relations scholars (e.g., Grunig) have suggested that a focal role of the academic world is to provide the public relations practitioners with useful ideas that stand on an equal footing with intuitively or experientially derived ideas of these practitioners. Here it is recognized that practitioners possess practically gained
knowledge and expertise and are not merely dependent on the knowledge and expertise of academics.

The “translation model” is characterized by the recognition that scientific knowledge is hardly ever used unaltered in a practical setting. In other words, a process of transformation of knowledge is constantly in place. When scientific notions are used in practice, the notions themselves and their results change in their essential character. Science use is not a matter of a passive reception of knowledge for practical purposes, but rather an active process of interpretation and reframing by practitioners within the context of professional understanding. Beck and Bonbè contend that the most important use of sociological knowledge does not lie in the sphere of concrete solutions, but in general ideas that are consumed by means of active interpretation. Scientific ideas are in effect interpreted in practice, summarized, and adapted to existing visions—in short, a transformation or translation of science takes place. Moreover, the translation model assumes that practitioners deem “science” relevant when it approaches existing policy and ideas that practitioners already have.

In the main, the search by practitioners for knowledge is largely experiential; the product of localized search guided by a stable set of heuristics, know-how, and existing information. As Hultman and Hörberg suggest, practitioners are generally more influenced by existing frames of reference, personal needs, and practical problems than by formal academic research and knowledge. In the relationship between academic research and the professional practice, the initiative in the translation model shifts toward practitioners as they selectively decide which scientific insights are to be used and in what way. As mentioned earlier, Schön typified this kind of behavior in his concept of the “reflective practitioner.” Reflective practitioners have the capacity to transform scientific insights into information and solutions for concrete cases in practice (see Table 2). Arguably, the perspective of scientific knowledge use represented by the translation model corresponds more closely to the situation found in modern public relations practice than does the traditional view of a practitioner as an “applied social scientist” who draws discrete elements from the body of theoretical knowledge as has been suggested by the instrumental model. What appears to have emerged here is an image of practitioners actively shaping and framing knowledge derived from the academic world. In reality, as Grunig argues, for instance, public relations practitioners are more eager to develop theories specific to certain situations, “working theories,” based on intuition and experience, rather than relying solely on (scientific) research (p. 7).25

However, if as has been suggested, public relations practitioners actively shape the information derived from scientific research, and subjectively interpret it, there is an obvious danger of trivialization of original scientific ideas. Scientific ideas might lose their edge, compromising their original scientific conceptualization when they are translated into practitioner language and practice. In short, academic knowledge risks becoming “commodified” in practice.

The models discussed in this article show an evolution in thought about the
dissemination and use of scientific theories in a professional context. Traditionally, science was seen as a more objective form of knowledge than individual, subjectively acquired knowledge and thus, the argument goes, should be preferred. Here the idea was that this type of objective knowledge derived from, or based on, scientific empirical research, could be directly applied in practice. Subsequently, this view has been challenged by the conceptual and translation models, which stress other types of knowledge use processes refuting the linear problem-solving capacity of academic research within the instrumental model. In this article, I have argued that these latter models, the conceptual and translation models of academic research use, might resemble more closely the actual ways that academic knowledge is used within the current practice of public relations.

**DISCUSSION**

Understanding how theory is developed and how theory and research can be used in practice is clearly a question of prime interest to those working in the field of public relations. So far, there has been no empirical research into the ways that public relations practitioners actually use academic knowledge. However, resolving such questions will enable further progress toward the establishment of a more comprehensive body of knowledge of public relations.
A Research Agenda

This article has dealt with important issues regarding the use of academic theories in professional practice. Drawing on the sociology of knowledge, a variety of approaches to measure use, utility, influence, and impact can be considered.27 Three methods that might advance our understanding of the subject are considered here. First, survey methods (interviews, large-scale surveys, or a diary technique) can be used to identify (through self-reports) what information respondents acquire and use, as well as to explore the factors that account for use and nonuse of academic knowledge. The methodological stance taken here is one of a more or less deterministic view of how knowledge is disseminated and used, where respondents in empirical studies are perceived as being able to identify how discrete bits of information influence specific behavior, choices, or actions. The approach requires that the researcher is able to attribute (in a causal sense) an action to the dissemination and application of specific data or information.

A second option may be discourse analysis or “social-framework analysis”28 to analyze how particular concepts from various academic schools of thought are used by public relations practitioners as particular ways of defining and analyzing problems and practicing public relations. Discourse analysis offers the potential to investigate the use of specific public relations vocabulary and terms used in conversations between professional practitioners on the one hand and their clients and organizational stakeholders on the other.29 A methodological problem here is to determine the origin of a specific term used in practice, whether the term has been derived from academic work or from the practice itself. Equally problematic here is that because the process by which practitioners absorb understandings of this sort are subtle and indirect (and might have a delayed and diffused impact), practitioners may not be able to identify specific public relations studies that influenced them, nor are observers likely to recognize them.30

A third option concerns experimental designs where use is assessed through the control of extraneous influences and the purposive manipulation of “treatments” to groups of respondents. With this research approach, factors (such as the intrinsic quality of the research, the “fit” to practical problems) and constraints, cognitive, organizational and political, that affect the use of academic knowledge in practice might be identified, although the result of such experimental methods have to be interpreted cautiously in relation to “real-life” cases.

With each of these methods of empirical research, it is clearly necessary for the modes of use investigated to be defined at the outset of the study. Here a clear distinction needs to be made between the process and outcome of knowledge use. One useful conceptualization here consists of information “pick up” (information received and read), information “processing” (interpretations together with some judgment of utility), and information “application” (influence on decisions or way of thinking about a problem and possible impact of information on concrete action).31 In addition, further studies might also explore the “channels” through which academic knowledge reaches practitioners, that is, journals, books, seminars, and educational programs.
CONCLUSION

This article has offered an exploration of the possible modes of use of academic or scientific theory in public relations practice. Although all three modes considered offer potentially valuable insight into the prescriptive relation between academic theory and practice, a particular emphasis has been given to the translation model, which appears to correspond closely to a current view of “reflective public relations practitioners” and highlights the value of experientially gathered knowledge and expertise of these practitioners. Here it was assumed that practitioners are eager to transform scientific insights into practical needs and interests. Consequently, the “push tendency” of the instrumental and conceptual model has been replaced by the “pull model” of the translation model. A push model centers on the diffusion of scientific knowledge in a nonscientific practice. In comparison, in a pull model the focus is on the selective need for and adoption of such knowledge in practice. The question is, then, not only whether scientific knowledge is used in practice, but also how that happens.

The solution of the dilemma between scientific logic and the strive for practical relevance arguably lies in a new, pragmatic epistemology, founded on a close relation between academic theory and practice. Here a correspondence to the translation model is favored, acknowledging that practitioners are not mere users of technical rational principles issued by the academic discipline, but knowledgeable individuals in their own right. It has been stressed in this article that public relations is above all a pragmatic professional occupation and that practitioners will adopt notions from the rich pool of academic theory when these entail practical relevance.

The debates within the social sciences on knowledge use are of particular relevance to the field of public relations in terms of understanding how academic and practical knowledge is established and how practitioners can be seen to attend to it. It is clear from this discussion that far more attention needs to be given to conceptualizing and measuring the process of “use.” This is essential if we want to gain an understanding of this fundamental aspect of the development of the public relations discipline, in particular in regard to the actual infiltration of academic theories and concepts in practice.

Notes


9. Ibid., p. 18.


15. D. A. Schön, op. cit., p. 11.


28. Ibid., p. 21; D. A. Schön, op. cit., p. 309.


