

Knowledge, Competencies And Self-Awareness In Public Affairs:

A UK Pilot Study and Methodological Approach

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1. Purpose

This paper presents a UK pilot study connecting scholarship from the fields of competencies and knowledge with the theory and practice of public affairs (PA). It suggests an improved understanding of competencies could provide a practical mechanism to improve PA practice at the micro (individual self-aware), meso (organisational) and macro (societal) level.

The study provides a basis for in-depth research that explores the knowledge, skills and competencies for effective and transparent PA practice with the view to create a knowledge and competency framework. It addresses three key questions:

- What do PA practitioners need to know?
- What do PA practitioners need to do?
- How do PA practitioners need to behave?

Although the concept of self-awareness is not overtly mentioned in these questions, it is tied to the debate around competencies and the need for higher levels of self-efficacy in order for individuals to evaluate their own behaviours, values and worldviews to improve effectiveness. It is the mechanism of competencies that is appealing as a way of embedding and improving self-awareness and ultimately improving PA practice.

This research is relevant from four perspectives. Firstly, it is important to the reputation of PA practice. The discipline engenders extreme of views as to whether it is moral, ethical and healthy for democracy, or whether it hinders and corrupts the democratic process. The research builds on the views of scholars such as Fitzpatrick and Bronstein (2006) and Berg

(2012) that advocacy plays a valuable role. Individuals with better self-awareness understand how their behaviours contribute to the reputation of practice.

Secondly, it addresses the need for a better understanding of practice and the environment in which it operates. In the UK a new style of coalition government and a significant number of new MPs in 2010 has impacted on the delivery of PA. Also the complexity and interconnectedness of the modern world, the economic crisis and the growing importance of societal issues has changed the nature of governance and business. As Schepers (2010) states there are now new ways of business-government cooperation and new skills are needed to operate in this new environment. McGrath, Moss and Harris (2010) argues PA practitioners need to be able to analyze, interpret and anticipate trends and developments and to provide strategic counsel. Self-efficacy describes the way people see the world and behave – what role does this play in this new breed of practitioner?

Thirdly, there have been concerns amplified by the UK media surrounding financial misconduct of MPs and poor behaviour of PA practitioners. In order to address these the government tightened up the regulatory framework under which MPs operate and introduced new lobbying regulation. A practice that better understands itself and its responsibilities is more likely to evoke confidence and shape a regulatory environment that is workable rather than have further restrictions imposed on it.

Finally, the study addresses a gap in the PA body of knowledge by synthesizing scholarship from complementary fields of study to provide fresh conceptual and practical value.

2. Literature – theoretical foundations and insights: a systematic literature review

2.1. Defining Public Affairs and its environment

There are many definitions of PA (Paluszek, 1995; Schuler, 2002; Hillman, 2002; Fleisher 2002, 2007; Toth, 2006) but common to all is the understanding that public affairs is about building relationships with those who shape public policy. Within it lies the concept of lobbying persuading policy makers to act in the interests of the organisation (Moloney, 1997).

As such it is part of Public Relations (PR) – the discipline that builds relationships between organisations and their publics.

Some argue it is corporate interest groups who mainly influence policy through their economic power (Berger, 2001) reinforcing the negative views of PA. Others like Grunig and Jaatiinen (1998) argue most political systems fall between pluralism (pure advocacy with private interest competing for access and government resources) and corporatism (pure collaboration and collective action). They put forward societal corporatism that incorporates pressure politics, negotiation and collaborative interests. This perhaps portrays a more accurate worldview of the complexity of government and the macro environment in which it operates including the expectations and values of the society in which governance takes place.

The importance of the macro environment to PA is mirrored by the evolving nature of PA research. Griffin (2005) reflected and analysed US PA empirical studies, associated developments and literature between 1965 and 2004 and suggests there have been three overlapping research “waves” moving from understanding the foundations of PA to the blurred boundaries of modern-day practice that often goes beyond government relations to incorporate ideas around the firm and its network of stakeholders and how this impacts on the political arena.

This is illustrated by the likes of Post (1982) who talks of PA being a window-in and a window-out for the organisation and Mezner and Nigh (1995) who suggest an interfacing role as a buffer or a bridge helping organisations to manage any attacks on it by reaching out to stakeholders. Interestingly, Hillman and Hilt (1999) start to distinguish between the long and short-term goals of PA looking at relational (long-term relationship building with government) and transactional approaches (short-term engagement and lobbying). More recently van Schendelen (2012) talks of political alignment with the focus on facilitating and building relationships and interactions with the actors in the socio-political environment. Commentators like McGrath et al (2010) have taken this further stating PA is now one of co-creation of policy that leads to a blurring of not just organisation-stakeholder boundaries but that of organisation-government boundaries. So PA is becoming a more complex discipline with the growing tension perhaps between advocacy and relationships.

2.2. Contemporary critique and debates on a PA Body of Knowledge (PA-BoK)

As Fleisher (2007) argues a PA-BoK is necessary for professional PA practice. There are two broad views to the shape a PA-BoK should take. Schuler (2002) suggests a grand unification theory to underpin practice, whilst others like Hillman (2002) argue that PA requires a multi-eclectic method of inquiry and a pluralistic approach to theory building.

Scholars (Getz, 2001; Vining, Shapiro and Borges, 2005; Windsor, 2005; Toth, 2006; Oberman, 2008; Dahan, 2009; and McGrath et al 2010) have all reflected on political involvement, why firms engage in the political arena and the type of knowledge and processes necessary for effective action. Interestingly, Vining et al (2005) argue lobbying strategy requires effective planning, management and communication skills against an understanding of the political environment. They cite Michael Porter's Five forces (1980) arguing that government can often dominate and impact on the other industry forces so a commercial understanding in this wider policy context is essential. In many respects this connects to the ideas of Oberman (2008) who sees PA as a resource management function turning socio-political resources into operational ones.

Windsor (2005) conducted one of the first summaries of what constitutes theories of PA. He looked across previous studies and connected to additional scholarship from the arenas of issues and stakeholder management and suggests PA draws on a variety of theoretical roots including business and management, communication, ecology and organisational psychology. As Shaffer and Hillman (2000) state PA sits at the interface of multiple activities within an organisation.

Toth (2006) continues a communications perspective suggesting there is little direct PA theory but there is PR and communication theories that support PA practice. According to McGrath et al (2010) the scope of the discipline has evolved substantially over the last 10 years with a particular focus on managing the public issues life-cycle. As Boddewyn (2012) suggests the concept of issue identification is a rightful focus but the profession should also look into the role of PA through resource-dependency theory and the position of PA in wider society. Also scholars like van Schendelen (2012) look at how trends in the European Union are impacting on PA delivery.

Also of relevance is the work of de Lange and Linders (2006) who suggest that at its heart PA is reality construction and cites the work of cultural theorists Berger and Luckmann (1975)

who argue that there is a meaningless world and reality is created by sense-giving observers. PA through discourse and narrative creates reality and meaning. They do not suggest constructionist theory can equate to Schuler's (2002) grand unification theory but it might be helpful lens enabling practitioners to deepen their understanding of their role. Here Moloney (2000) is interesting given his reflections on the political public sphere drawing in social theory from Habermas (1984) for deeper understanding of the PR discipline more generally.

Based on an analysis of the work of previous scholars, it is suggested PA knowledge roots can be broadly categorised into five main strands – political science, culture, economics, communication and the organisation. The table below captures the type of concepts explored by the scholars above. However, given the rise of the media-ization of politics (Louw, 2010), and the impact of social media on the wider political arena (Castells, 2000; 2013) new areas for inclusion are worthy of exploration and are included below. Ethical theory too is included as it reflects the debate around whether lobbying is an ethical function.

Knowledge Roots	Conceptual components
Political Science	Interest Group Theory Political systems
Culture and Society	Social constructivism Public Sphere Media Theory and media-zation of politics Social media and the socio-political arena
Communications	Situational Theory of Publics Excellence Theory in PR Issues Management Theories Crisis Management Theories Stakeholder Theories Social Capital Theories Persuasion Theories Communitarianism
Organisation	Systems Theory

	Corporate Social Responsibility Business ethics Resource Dependency Theory Competitive positioning and theories of the market
Economics	Collective Action Theory Public Choice Theory Transaction cost economics

Table 1: Conceptual Components of PA knowledge roots

So there is reflection on what a PA-BoK must contain, but Fleisher (2007) believes that a BoK must reflect the specialised knowledge that is unique to PA. It can't list everything PA practitioners should know but it should identify what is central.

PA is clearly multidisciplinary (Windsor, 2005) but he alludes to the differences between theoretical roots (the conceptualisation of PA) and practical theory (that support the day-to-day delivery of PA practice). This blurring between the two concepts is seen in the grid above. The distinction between the two, however, is relevant and is supported by Meznar (2002) who suggests that there is large and disorganised literature on PA and political strategy which lacks coherence and consensus.

By building on this duality it may be possible to develop an integrated PA schema that connects the theoretical basis of the discipline to the practical theories and skills that drive effectiveness and produce an interdisciplinary model with more integrative synthesis.

The ethical dimension of lobbying cannot be ignored but it is not as well developed as other aspects of PA scholarship (Berg, 2012). She suggests that political scientists have reflected on its legitimate uses as part of the democratic process but little attention has been paid to it by PR scholarship. One of the few to investigate this area is Edgett (2002) who suggests an ethical framework for advocacy arguing that advocacy is a central function of PR.

But what is ethical? Ethics is a body of knowledge in its own right, but put simply it relates to a framework of decision-making that enables right and wrong to be reasoned allowing for

consistent behaviour as suggested by Trevino and Nelson (2004). There are different ethical traditions which means there is no one approach but there are commonalities which link to ideas of honesty and minimising harm but above all it is about a clear and visible process.

Many scholars have explored the ethics of persuasion (Baker and Martinson, 2002; Edgett, 2002; Fawkes, 2007). Perloff (2010) suggests there are three viewpoints. Some argue it is immoral as the communicator is often asking somebody to do something that is not necessarily in the interest of the individual concerned. Others say it is moral suggesting that individuals can accept or reject messages. He argues for a third-way that is closer to the truth. Persuasion can be used for good or bad purposes with ethical and unethical intentions perhaps mirroring the earlier view of Heath (2001). Ethical theory can inform our actions but ultimately one should return to the view that you are more effective if you are honest. Ethical persuaders advance arguments forcefully but do not coerce, encourage debates and the dignity of those involved, individuals are free and autonomous so that people can take the most thoughtful decisions possible.

Edgett (2002) taking the view that persuasion can be ethical and drawing on the traits of legal advocacy in the US has drawn up ten criteria for ethically desirable advocacy in PR.

Ethically desirable criterion	Definition
Evaluation	Detached or objective evaluation of the issue-client organization before determining whether it merits PR advocacy
Priority	Once the PR practitioner has assumed the role of advocate, the interests of the client or organization are value above those of others involved in the public debate
Sensitivity	Balancing of client priority on the one hand with social responsibility on the other
Confidentiality	Protection of the client’s or organization rights to confidentiality and secrecy on matters for which secrets are morally justified
Veracity	Full truthfulness in all matters; deception or evasion can be considered morally acceptable only under exceptional

	circumstances when all truthful possibilities have been ruled out; this implies trustworthiness
Reversibility	If the situation were reversed, the advocate-client-organisation would be satisfied that it had sufficient information to make an informed decision
Validity	All communications on behalf of the client or organization are defensible against attacks on their validity
Visibility	Clear identification of all communications on behalf of the client or organization as originating from that source
Respect	Regard for audiences as autonomous individuals with rights to make informed choices and to have informed participation in decisions that affect them; willingness to promote dialogue over monologue
Consent	Communication on behalf of the client or organisation is carried out only under conditions to which it can be assumed all parties consent

Table 2: 10 Criteria for Ethically Desirable Public Relations Advocacy (Edgett, 2002:20)

If ethics is rooted in consistent decision-making and a reflection of how those decisions impact others improved understanding of the self and individual values becomes integral.

2.3. Relating a PA BoK to skills and competencies

Fleisher (2007) usefully suggests a range of competencies and knowledge for effective PA practice and a PA BoK which provides a starting point for debate but his ideas are drawn from the US experience and focuses primarily on functional skills.

At the same time, the topicality of PA competencies is emerging in practice with two recent studies undertaken by UK-based recruitment consultants. The Changing Face of Public Affairs report (Watson Helsby, 2012) illustrates the growing complexity and evolutionary nature of PA as suggested by McGrath et al (2010). Here PA practitioners argued the need to understand corporate strategy, stakeholder proliferation and connectivity, the impact of globalisation, issues and crisis management techniques and the ability to respond to a more

informed, challenging and vocal consumer/electorate. The VMA study (2011) identified three important attributes highlighting the ability to communicate effectively the organisation's/client message, solve problems and network. Of note is the lower importance placed on having influential contacts that perhaps relates to the idea of Schepers (2010) who states there are now new ways of business-government cooperation.

Picking up on the idea of personal attributes, McGrath (2006) conducted a major qualitative study looking at lobbyists in Washington, London and Brussels. This study identified the importance of listening, observation and relationship building, as well as courtesy, honesty, integrity and credibility. In fact the study suggested that woman made better PA practitioners because of these traits.

What is common to the four investigations above is the generation of lists of attributes which are useful but appear disconnected from a wider knowledge base and the lack of clarity over terminology using knowledge, skills, attributes and behaviours almost interchangeably. There is also no linkage to competency scholarship. Only Fleisher (2007) referenced ethics explicitly though it can be argued words such as integrity have the ideas of ethics embedded within.

	Type of Study	Findings
McGrath (2006)	Qualitative US, UK and Brussels 60 practitioners	Identified personal qualities of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening • Observant • Relationship building • Courtesy • Honesty • Integrity • Credibility
Fleisher (2007)	Commentary Paper US-focused	Identified knowledge areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of intercultural competence • Impact of societal factors on PA such as nature of social networks, political ideologies, legal

		<p>system, nature of media and public communication channels for example</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding local public policy institutions • Nation-state specific applications of PA functions • Language skills • Understanding ethics in a global/international context • Managing international consultants, alliances and partners
VMA (2011)	<p>Quantitative UK-focused 393 practitioners from variety of levels</p>	<p>Top 10 most important skills/attributes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to effectively communicate organisation/client message • Problem solving ability • Networking ability • Knowledge of legislative framework • Campaigning skills • Commercial nous • Passion for politics • Experience of other communication sectors eg PR • Social media and awareness skills
Watson Helsby (2012)	<p>Qualitative UK-focused 30 senior practitioners</p>	<p>Top 6 core competencies of growing importance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Real understanding of how business works • Leadership and management skills • Campaigning skills • Issues radar and management • Political sophistication • Influencing upwards

Table 3: Summary of four leading PA competency investigations

It is also worth mentioning the work on competencies undertaken by PR scholars (Oughton, 2004; Gregory, 2008; Sha, 2011; Jeffrey and Brunton, 2011) but there are similar issues here in terms of use of terminology and quite broad statements. Though Gregory's (2008) exploration using the SHL universal competency framework has considerable merit it still provides a broad perspective and generates list-like characteristics. The current European Communication Professional Skills and Innovation Programme (ECOPSI) is also worth noting that aims to map and evaluate contemporary and future communication management skills of practitioners in Europe. It draws on some competency scholarship and brings this together in a useful summary (see below) but again perhaps the focus is rather list-like. The focus of the study is on competencies for social media, internal and crisis communications and those of communication directors. Public Affairs is omitted enabling this study to benefit from, as well as contribute to, this study.

Skills	Knowledge	Personal characteristics
Writing/oral communication	Business knowledge	Handling pressure
Project management	Current awareness	Leadership
Critical thinking	Theoretical knowledge	Integrity/honesty/ethical
Problem solving	Knowledge of PR history	Listening
Persuasion		Confidence/ambition
Strategic thinking		Team player
Mentoring and coaching		Energy/motivation
Communication skills		Discipline
IT skills including new media		Intelligence
Crisis management		Ability to get on with others/interpersonal skills
Research		Wide interests
Reading comprehension		Intellectual curiosity
Community relations		Creativity
Employee relations		Judgement and decision making

Professional service skills		Time management
Social responsibility		Respect for hierarchy
		Following organisational rules

Source: Pieczka (2002), Oughton (2004), Brown and Fall (2005), Goodman (2006), McCleneghan (2006), Gregory (2008), Jeffrey and Brunton (2011) and Sha (2011)

Table 4: ECOPSI Benchmarking Preliminary Report (2012: 120-121)

So, competency work exists in the fields of both PA and PR but it is suggested there is an opportunity to add granularity by linking in a more sophisticated way to scholars in the field of Human Resource Management (HRM). A review of some of this HRM scholarship below clearly demonstrates the opportunities to add greater depth and clarity to PA competency investigations and elucidate ideas around self-awareness, behaviours and skills more fully.

2.4. Understanding competence and competencies

Garavan and McGuire (2001) argue competence relates to a skill in a functional area and competency focuses on associated behaviours. Nordhaug (1998) suggest competencies operate at an organisational and individual level and equate to capabilities or distinctive strengths. At an organisational level, these are traditionally known as “core” as suggested by Hamel and Prahalad (1993) and give an organisation strategic competitive advantage. At an individual level these relate to concepts such as attributes, knowledge, skills, attitudes, traits and motives.

Over recent years a number of typographies and frameworks have been suggested (Boyatzis, 1982, Sparrow and Hiltrop, 1994, Nordhaug, 1998, Cheetham, 1996, 1998, Kuijpers, 2001 cited by Delamare Le Deist and Winterton, 2005). What appears to emerge from these models is the importance of linking individual transferable generic skills, the unique firm-specific (core) and then those made necessary by a specific job or profession. HRM has tended to focus on the generic and job specific, whilst organisations have focused on the firm-specific.

In addition, scholars (Rowe, 1995; New, 1996, Drejer, 2001 cited by Soderquist, Papalexandris, Ioannou and Prastacos, 2009) suggest that competencies can be viewed from three perspectives. Generic v organisation-specific competencies (ie competencies that relate to a specific job that is common to all individuals but which also may have specific requirements given the organisation in which the job takes place); managerial v operational (ie competencies relating to the managerial such as planning or operational referring to how a specific task is carried out); competencies as skills v competencies as behaviours. Soderquist et al (2009) takes this idea further suggesting that based on these three couples of competencies an eight-fold typography can be devised that allows a more comprehensive model that is more helpful in moving organisations from a task orientation to a competency-based approach.

Competency frameworks exist to help individuals and organisations improve performance by providing guidance and clarity as to the skills or outcomes required (Boyatzis, 1982; Goleman et al, 2002; Conger and Ready, 2004 cited by Mitchell and Boak, 2009). However as Boak (2001) posits, the effectiveness of a framework depends on its quality referring to accuracy (including the descriptors used), acceptability, accessibility and the manner in which it is implemented.

This is relevant for PA. Any competency model for PA needs to focus firmly on the individual generic skills and the professional in order to improve effectiveness, but be flexible enough to allow this to be integrated into existing organisational and firm-specific frameworks that may exist. It also needs to be acceptable by the PA profession itself.

A key challenge and one identified by Soderquist et al (2009) is blending both competence and competencies into a holistic framework. Earlier work by Hodkinson and Issitt (1995:149 cited by Delamare Le Deist and Winterton, 2005) suggest approaches that integrate knowledge, understanding, values and skills that sit within the practitioner. This has appeal when looking at professions and disciplines such as PA as the focus is on the individual rather than the organisation. Cheetham and Chivers (1998) purport to have done this by looking at five dimensions that look at cognitive (explicit and tacit knowledge), functional (skills), personal (behaviour), ethical (values) and meta (dealing with uncertainty, learning, reflection). This provides an interesting and significantly broad framework that could help

address the evolving nature of the PA profession and its socio-cultural inter-connectedness and explicitly draws out the idea of values, self-awareness and ethical approaches.

Building on this multi-dimension approach Delamare Le Deist and Winterton (2005) suggest a four-dimensional approach as outlined below. Of relevance is the concept of social competence that draws together behaviour and attitudes.

	Occupational	Personal
Conceptual	Cognitive competence	Meta competence
Operational	Functional competence	Social competence

Table 5: Typography of competence, Delamare Le Deist and Winterton (2005:39)

This model seems well-suited for development against the backdrop of PA allowing for knowledge to be constantly updated and refreshed as the policy world evolves, and for focus to be placed on social and meta competences that are of particular relevance given the complexity of the social world. It also enables connections to be made to current scholarly work on Emotional Intelligence and social effectiveness (Abraham, 2004; Carmeili and Josman, 2006; Cote and Miners, 2006 cited by Kunnanatt, 2008). At its heart PA is a social discipline rooted in stakeholder engagement and empathy to the wider policy environment and societal trends. It is also these meta and social competencies that directly link to self-awareness.

Short (2012) suggests that over the last ten years the concept of meta-competencies has become increasingly important, in particular for professions or domains where individuals have a high degree of autonomy in their own role. It is suggested that PA is such a domain.

Meta competencies relate primarily to higher order abilities associated with being able to learn, adapt, anticipate and create as suggested by Burgoyne (1989). Such meta-competencies are underpinned by self-awareness and self-efficacy. In this respect, self-efficacy can be taken to mean how people see the world and behave. Self-awareness is increasingly seen as a critical managerial and leadership competency and has a positive effect on performance (Fletcher and Bailey, 2003).

One of the criticisms of competency approaches is the focus on current or past behaviours (Iles, 2001). Any competency approach for PA must be forward thinking and flexible to evolve as the policy environment around it evolves to keep it contemporary. Work on looking at how to explore future competency requirements has been conducted by Robinson, Sparrow, Clegg and Birdi (2007). They categorised competencies into core, emerging (those that may or may not become core) and maturing enabling a reflexive approach to competency development.

2.5. Organisational v professional competence and competencies

Much competency literature has focused on the organisation primarily in terms of core competencies. In addition, there are numerous organisational specific studies that link to generic and job roles. Examples include the work Mitchell and Boak (2009) looking at competency frameworks in UK healthcare and Horton (2000) looking at competency management across the British civil service provide useful insights in terms of best practice. The work of Campion, Fink, Rugeberg, Carr, Phillips and Odman's (2011) stands out in terms of useability. They suggest 20 best practice requirements to competency modelling or frameworks. This is based on their academic expertise and review of other scholarship, as well as their managerial experiences working in HRM. Although US-focused it does provide useful structure.

	Analysing competency information (identifying competencies)
1	Considering organisational context
2	Linking competency models to organisational goals and objectives
3	Start at the top
4	Using rigorous job analysis methods to develop competencies
5	Considering future-orientated job requirements

6	Using additional unique methods
	Organising and presenting competency information
7	Defining the anatomy of a competency (the language of competency)
8	Defining levels of proficiency on competencies
9	Using organisational language
10	Including both fundamental (cross-job) and technical (job-specific) competencies
11	Using competency libraries
12	Achieving the proper level of granularity (number of competencies and amount of detail)
13	Using diagrams, pictures and heuristics to communicate competency models to employees
	Using competency information
14	Using organisational development techniques to ensure competency modelling acceptance and use
15	Using competencies to develop HR systems (hiring, appraisal, promotion, compensation)
16	Using competencies to align the HR system
17	Using competencies to develop a practical “theory” of effective job performance tailored to the organisation
18	Using information technology to enhance the usability of competency models
19	Maintaining the currency of competencies over time
20	Using competency modelling for legal defensibility (eg test validation)

Table 6: Best Practices in Competency Modelling, Campion et al (2011: 230)

The tri-partite division of analysing, organising and using competency information is a useful one. It also links to the work of Soderquist (2009) who identified the critical role of job analyses and focusing on the usability of competencies.

So there is depth in competency scholarship that could add real insight and practical value to discussions of PA.

2.6. Knowledge, effectiveness and professionalism

The discussion around a BoK, competencies and self-awareness is tied to the wider debate around professionalism. There is a significant body of literature here but whether defined from a philosophical (very defined framework such as Downie, 1990) or sociological (broad framework such as L'Etang, 2008), there is a necessity for defined specialised knowledge, collective responsibility (ethics and a sense of integrity) and importance of membership organisations. However, Windsor (2005) argues that PA is neither a unified discipline nor a profession as it can take many different forms depending on the cultural, political and organisational environment in which it operates. There is truth here but if one looks at professionalism as effectiveness then as Drucker (2006) states this is about doing the right things not just about doing things right and this links back to knowledge and competencies.

But the concept of knowledge is relevant. There are two types of knowledge explicit and tacit (Nonaka 1994; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Explicit is objective and codified, whereas tacit is subjective, experiential and difficult to formalise. According to Greenhaigh, Kyriakidou, Macfarlane and Peacock (2004) tacit knowledge does not exist in written form, it is based on the expertise of the individual and the meaning of knowledge is dependent on its context and ability to share. In PA little explicit knowledge is codified – there are no standard rulebooks, agreed training and qualifications. Often it is argued it is the tacit knowledge – the years of experience that enable practitioners to know how policy is made and what works and the players involved in the decision. Yet scholars such as Cowan, David and Foray (2000) believe too much knowledge is suggested as tacit where in fact it can be codified. This suggests more of what PA does can be taught and specified.

2.7. Literature Review Conclusion

There is clear scope to bring fresh insights. Themes can be bundled into three broad areas:

- The opportunity to synthesize scholarship from HRM involving competencies, meta-competencies, self-awareness and knowledge with PA practice and advocacy to elucidate new concepts and ideas – a gap in the literature clearly exists.
- The potential for competencies to provide a practical and tangible mechanism to embed self-awareness and reflective behaviours into practice. At the same time, competencies more broadly can be seen as a critical component in establishing

professional identity and driving professionalism and effectiveness. This has the potential to tackle the reputational issues suffered by the practice.

- The real possibility that a PA schema can be created that reflects the core and interdisciplinary nature of practice linking conceptual and practical knowledge. There is clear evidence that a competency framework for PA can have granularity and detail by engaging with the richness of competency scholarship and best practice approaches. The challenge is ensuring this is dynamic able to reflect the changes in the social world in which it operates. Other challenges include the integration of short-term (lobbying) and longer-term (relationship) building activities.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Philosophy

This research is in the tradition of interpretivism in part to reflect the complexity of work itself as suggested by Garavan and McGuire (2001) but also to mirror the complexity of the policy environment where definitive laws and generalisations may be difficult and where a true understanding requires greater insights into human interaction. An inductive approach allows the exploration of people as social actors in the world of policy formation capturing a richness of information.

The pilot study consists of six in-depth semi-structured interviews and content analysis of competency frameworks of four diverse bodies to provide a benchmark. This feeds into a full study involving 32 in-depth interviews with practitioners and policy makers and a quasi-ethnographic study. This involves spending two weeks observing practitioners one week with an in-house team and the other with agency team to draw out comparisons. The incorporation of ethnography is important. It builds on the suggestion of Everett and Johnson (2012) that such an approach is imperative to deepen understanding of PR generally. As policy formation and the social actors within it form part of a socially constructed world, ethnography helps to discover meaning and understand the perceptions of individuals in a social setting and collective to try to understand the context of their worldview. It goes beyond what people say to help understand the wider cultural forces at work. It can be argued PA is a culturally and socially bound discipline and any study must contain a social dimension.

That said, the study is being complimented by the use of deductive techniques. As outlined by Tashakkori and Teddie (2003) multiple methods can be useful if they provide better opportunities to answer the research question. So it falls more into a post-positivist approach where knowledge must be subject to wide critical examination to help expose the reality as closely as possible (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Therefore the full study will include a survey of PA practitioners to test themes emerging from the initial inductive stage and apply structural equation modelling to help elucidate fully the connections between knowledge, competency and practice.

From a post-positivist position, the philosophical concept of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1998) has value for this research as it focuses on the social world of human interaction. As suggested by Kilduff, Meha and Dunn (2011) there are unobservable forces and structures at work that exist independently of the mind but are real and are best investigated through observation rather than by quantitative methods. Often these structures encompass aspects of power and the new knowledge produced often challenges existing power structures in society, industry and government. This reinforces the need to include some aspects of ethnographic study to get inside contemporary practice. This study sits in the heart of power structures of influence and advocacy perhaps challenging aspects of contemporary PA practice.

3.2. Research Methods – Pilot Study

3.2.1. Mapping Competency Frameworks

Practical insights were gained from analysing existing competency frameworks. Four frameworks were chosen and analysed against Campion et al's (2011) best practice approach and competency scholarship generally. Of relevance is the new Government Communication Professional Competency Framework (April 2013) that although places communications in the context of the UK civil service, it does draw out specific functional and behaviour competencies necessary for effective communication practice. The diverse professional bodies of the Institute of Civil Engineers, the Royal Pharmaceutical Society and the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants were also chosen to provide contrasting application.

3.2.2. Enquiry through interviews

The first part of this study falls firmly into an exploratory approach finding out “what is happening; to seek new insights; to ask questions and to assess phenomena in a new light” (Robson, 2002:59). Six in-depth semi-structured interviews took place. Five with practitioners followed a convenience sampling approach and one with Nick Helsby who commissioned the Watson Helsby report. This helped to clarify the research approach of the final study, issues affecting practice and garnered insights into how the value of competencies is being integrated and used in practice. Interviews were analysed using a thematic approach drawing on the work of Attride-Stirling (2001).

3.3. Validity, Reliability and Limitations

This is a small-scale pilot study using qualitative techniques that are subjective and value laden. Care has been taken to minimise bias by adopting reflexive approaches as suggested by Hegelund (2005) through checking data and evaluating it against whether new insights have been garnered. The limitations relate to its scope – a UK focus. The initial phase is inductive and it does not aspire to make generalisations about PA in other countries. Once the final study is complete a more accurate picture can be obtained due to the range of data sources being used enabling triangulation – using a range of data sources to check the data is telling you what you think the data is telling you. Though the final study will still be UK focused other scholars will be able to clearly see how the study was conducted and could replicate it in other settings. Further studies in different cultural and political settings also needs to be encouraged and perhaps longitudinal studies developed to look at the longer-term impact of whether a competency approach can lead to improved practice.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 From Interviews

A view that there is a split in practice between the desire to have more theoretical underpinning v those stuck in the same tactical approach

“There is a desire for PA to reach a state of maturity but PA practitioners fall into two camps – those that fall into the category of narcissism (self-admiration and belief) and those that want to approach practice with more academic context and professionalism” (Interviewee 1).

He went on to add that there are those that just see PA as “craft” function and it is difficult to unify the different sides. Some suggested there could be an age perspective here with older practitioners groomed in an age when PA was embryonic and perhaps more narrow, whereas now it is a maturing practice integrated into the organisation and communications more generally.

Some felt practitioners would be interested to know more about the roots of their practice *“the social context and theoretical framework ...how PA meets the need of society and the solid basis for it”* (Interviewee 2)

A belief that some of what PA does can be taught (some functional skills/competence) but key to effectiveness is personal attributes (behaviours/competency)

Practitioners interviewed were of the belief that more of what they do can be explicitly codified and taught but that the real skill of a PA practitioner lay in the ability to read situations and people that required a degree of emotional intelligence and maturity.

Interviewee 1 in particular stressed the importance of emotional intelligence in respect of showing empathy and knowing *“when to push on an argument and when to stop”*. The importance of certain types of behaviours necessary to do the PA role came across strongly.

Issues still persist around knowledge transfer and the “intellectual” capital of the PA function

Although the issue of emotional intelligence came up in all interviews, one practitioner in particular felt that knowledge is never truly transferred or shared in PA practice and perhaps can never be.

“PA knowledge is the insight and analysis that is the asset value of a good PA professional that are sold to their clients” (Interviewee 5), however this practitioner did admit that PA does have many theoretical and practical processes that are open and transparent and can be shared as they evolve through PA industry training and networks.

Affirmed difference between body of knowledge and practical “models and theory” that can be applied in daily practice

Some confusion over what was meant by body of knowledge, but when probed many practitioners talked of PA being linked to politics, economics, marketing, psychology, decision-making, behaviours, relationships, society

General feeling that PA needed some sort of knowledge base or “canon” – a term used by Interviewee 5

Idea of competencies appeared to resonate with all practitioners as did the idea of competencies being linked to professional practice

“they help break down the smoke and mirrors or mystery of early PA which relied heavily on address books and contacts (they can) demonstrate key skills and expertise as a marketing/PR discipline in its own right” (Interviewee 5)

Areas identified included reputation and relationships, engaging others in discussion and dialogue, persuasion and influence. Ability to write well, plan, good inter-personal skills and to think strategically were others that have common resonance.

Critical skill base involves *“understanding of political system and policy development”* according to Interviewee 2. This came up with all interviewees but there was general agreement that some of this could be taught though experience within the political system itself would be beneficial.

Key competence is business acumen and to connect policy environment to organisational return on investment and business goals

This point was stressed in particular by Nick Helsby who recruits into senior PA roles but other practitioners too felt the importance of being able to connect PA fully to the business.

For some practitioners this meant being able to discuss issues of reputational risk and brand enhancement. As interviewee 5 stated *“(also of importance) is brand awareness and audience segmentation – understanding the organisation or consumer groups being represented or impacting on decision-makers”*

Others saw the importance of being able to convince senior management of the relevance of PA “*we need to be transformational inside the organisation*” (Interviewee 1).

Ideas around competence (skills) clearly link to PA being interdisciplinary

Practitioners frequently referenced the need to understand business, media and digital communications, along with the traditional views of networking and negotiation. No practitioner mentioned their organisation having specific PA competencies, though some referenced almost in passing wider organisational competency frameworks.

4.2. Competency framework analysis

What is striking from looking at the four frameworks is that they all fail to reference any body of knowledge associated with that profession/occupation and none used any thinking from scholarship from scholars such as Soderquist et al 2009) and Le Deist and Winterton (2005). Key points for reflection:

- Little reference to the organisational context in which the professional frameworks would be used (links to issues around how individual/practice competencies can connect to the idea of core competencies which relate to the organisation)
- All organise and present competency information differently but all identify competency areas that contain more detailed information than lists
- They all identify different levels of competency relating to stages of a career – some with more detail than others perhaps reflecting some of the debate around entry level and management
- Only one provided very detailed information linked to practical examples of the competence in action which added extra detail and granularity enabling the terminology to be made real
- ICE provided the most detail in terms of three core areas (contextual, practice and behaviour) which was the framework which came the closest to linking competence, competency and some form of body of knowledge rather than practical “doing” knowledge which falls more broadly into skills
- All stated purpose of the framework was recruitment, performance management, training needs, personal development with only one adding a reference to linking to curriculum

- Only two looked at how to acquire relevant competencies through specified training and qualifications which seemed surprising
- Two had created online self-assessment tools to help practitioners identify skills gaps

4.3. Debate

From a practical perspective, there are useful competency frameworks available from which to draw inspiration but none demonstrate fully the best practice approaches as suggested by Campion et al (2011) and integrate the sophistication articulated by competency scholars such as Delamare Le Deist and Winterton, 2005; Soderquist et al 2009) that allow a real exploration across dimensions such as values (ethics), functional (skills), personal (behaviours) and the cognitive (knowledge).

Given the work already started by PA scholars such as Fleisher (2007) and PR scholars (Gregory, 2008; Oughton, 2004; Sha 2011) there is scope to build a PA schema that provides depth reflecting skills and behaviours but also allows the connection to the underpinning conceptual knowledge and practical theory for effective practice. This could integrate the PA BoK reflections from scholars such as Toth (2006).

Indications from interviews reveal an appetite for improved understanding of a PA knowledge base including the concept of explicit knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995) and codification (Cowan et al, 2004) as part of the maturing of practice. This connects to scholarship around professionalism (Downie, 1990; Fleisher, 2007; L'Etang, 2008) and the role of knowledge and skills in training and development. The concept of emotional intelligence clearly emerged as a key attribute supporting the ideas of Kunnanatt (2008) around social effectiveness and Delamare Le Deist and Winterton (2005) on social and competencies. An ability to delve deeper into this idea is appealing as it links directly to issues of self-awareness, trust, ethics and relationships. This is reinforced by the desire to understand how PA sits in a wider societal context Ethics is grounded in decision making about right and wrong (Trevino and Nelson, 2004) and this process can be embedded into a competency framework if that framework is sufficiently detailed and evidenced and ethics cannot be divorced from personal values.

A desire to understand the conceptual basis of PA is apparent demonstrating its role in

supporting society as purported by Fitzpatrick and Bronstein (2008) using it as a way to restore trust in the profession and that advocacy is a force for good.

The role of competencies resonated with practitioners as a way of being able to demonstrate the variety of skills necessary for the job and those referenced are in line with what is emerging from scholarship (Toth, 2006; Oberman, 2008; and McGrath et al, 2010) and recent practitioner surveys but there is tension here. Agency practitioners were concerned about the intellectual capital of PA being too widely available as this is what is sold, but in-house practitioners were less concerned. They saw this being an asset to demonstrate their value inside the organisation. This reflects the view of Windsor (2005) who argues that PA is not a unified discipline. There are different perspectives and a PA schema will need to incorporate this in particular the differences between agency and organizational PA activity. It may also reflect issues around PA operating in different business sectors.

Also the ideas of competencies cited such as dialogue, discussion, media, relationships, brand, persuasion, negotiation all embody both theoretical paradigms, as well as having best practice approaches for delivery. This mirrors practice what Meznar (2002) sees in scholarship in terms of a lack of coherence, consensus and often perhaps conflict. There is an opportunity here to bring clarity.

A chord that runs through the debate is self-awareness. An individual that better understands themselves, their role and how their practice fits into a wider societal framework has the potential to become more effective. This supports the view of Short (2012) who argues those with better self-awareness can evaluate their own behaviours and values, to learn and adapt when appropriate and reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses and what skills and behaviours are necessary in given situations.

5. Conclusion

The pilot study has enabled the research to progress into its full exploratory stage. The research when completed will provide conceptual and practical value by establishing a body of knowledge and competency framework that is at the heart of debates around PA

professionalism, self-awareness and effectiveness. It can be used by PA practice for educational, training and development purposes and has the scope to be integrated into wider organisational competency frameworks. It potentially addresses issues around PA transparency and the poor regard in which PA is often held. An improved understanding of practice could link directly to how future regulation may evolve.

In terms of originality, the study aims to fill the research gap between PA and competency scholarship that includes an ethical dimension. At the same time, most research into PA is North American focused. This paper adds value by looking at a UK and more broadly European perspective allowing for comparisons and shared learning.

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