

APPLICATION OF PUBLIC RELATIONS THEORIES IN THE PRACTICE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN NATIONAL GOVERNMENT MINISTRIES

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Abstract

Public relations practice that incorporates academic theory to inform practice elevates the profession to a managerial function. This study sought to determine the application of academic theory in the practice of public relations in ministries of the Government of Kenya. Descriptive survey research design was used. Results indicate that PROs in government ministries agree that academic theory has an important role to play in the practice of PR. The application of theory according to the study is influenced by functions of the PROs in a given government ministry and their understanding of the theories ($P=0.05$). Perception of PROs towards academic theories was also found to be a key factor influencing the application of academic theory in PR practice. According to this study, it emerges that although the application of theory in public relations is a crucial element of public relations practice, practitioners are yet to use theory to inform practice.

Key words: public relations, theory, government, ministries, practice

1. Introduction

Public relations in government ministries aim at achieving mutual understanding between their agencies and publics by following a strategic public relations process. According to Butterick (2011) PR is essentially an incredibly dynamic, fast moving industry. Modern public relations practitioners are facing more difficulties and challenges as information speed and globalization alter the pace and landscape of the profession. Hence, academic theory is vital in modern PR because its aim is to assist practitioners in the practice of PR, making them better and more effective despite the dynamic nature of the industry.

Moncur (2006) believes that a body of theoretical knowledge is central both to the delineation of public relations and to its maturation as a separate profession and academic discipline. Public relations practitioners, armed with output from academia, actively engage with dominant coalitions in a range of organizations to position public relations as a strategic management discipline and to contribute positively to the achievement of organizational goals while being sensitive to the aspirations of relevant publics. Rawlins (2003) also believed that the presence of theory in public

relations informs an organization what to do and how to do it, identifies principles that can be applied to many different situations and is not limited to one specific situation which elevates the public relations to a management function. Therefore, application of public relations in theory is vital in order to move public relations from operational level to managerial level in an organization. Pavlik and Toth (2000) 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. Cheney and Christensen (2006), however, suggested that theory will never be well-received until it tackles practical problems that relate its usefulness to practitioners. Toth (2002) took the same position when she suggested that although theories are valuable for their perspectives and attention to philosophy, they must also have “cash value” for the industry.

The same academics also felt that practitioners are too worried about practical problems and how to get things done rather than establishing a sound theoretical background for handling those problems (Becker, 2007).

The existing literature on practitioner perspectives on the place of academic theory in PR practice shows that theory has generally not been well received by many practitioners. It is considered to be impractical, inaccessible, and too intensive (Becker, 2007).

The largest criticism of theory by practitioners is that academic work is inapplicable in the professional world whether it be because it is too abstract, unrealistic, or difficult to use (Becker, 2007), incomprehensible to practitioners (Lindemann, 2001), time consuming (Fawkes & Tench, 2005). Practitioners argue that academic theories are not specific enough to be applied to their daily problems and thus, they cannot take the time to make a broad theory specific enough. The lack of interest in theoretical knowledge cuts across most countries. Van Ruler (2000) found out that in the Netherlands, practitioners are well educated, but that most have not been educated from within the field. Because of this, the practitioners generally have little PR theoretical background and have learned everything they know about public relations on the job. Similarly, Van Ruler, Vercic, Butschi, and Flodin (2004) found that although European public relations practitioners said that they recognized the importance of a theory-based field, less than half of those surveyed actually prioritized this knowledge as an important element of the industry. Tikolo (2011) in her study of the status of PR practice in Kenya found out that top-rated competencies sought at organization level for PR practitioners are; writing skills, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, good attitude, the ability to communicate publicly and initiative. This supports Becker's (2007) observation that PR practitioners are more concerned with the technical aspect of their jobs. As a result they disregard theory and fail to base their action on a theoretical framework. This however does not suggest that all practitioners are against academic knowledge—some give open praise for academic theory. Rawlins (2003), a public relations educator, suggests a valid theory could predict the behavior and responses of people, thus saving time and money by not experimenting with procedures that do not work. He asserts that the presence of theory in public relations informs an organization what to do and how to do it, which elevates the public relations to a management function.

This study investigated the contributions of theory in public relations practice in Kenyan government ministries. It sought to find out what difference it makes to apply theory in a communication campaign as opposed to relying on intuition and experiential knowledge.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The study used a descriptive survey design to investigate the research problem. Descriptive research survey design is the most appropriate when the purpose of study is to provide a detailed description

of a phenomenon (Gall, Borg & Gall, 2006). The purpose of descriptive survey research is to explore and describe the characteristics of a phenomenon (Mugenda&Mugenda 1999).

2.2 Study Location

The study was conducted in government ministries in Nairobi County. This county was chosen for the study because it is the headquarters of government ministries in Kenya. Public relations departments of government ministries are stationed at the ministry headquarters.

2.3 Population of the Study

The target population for this study was all public relations officers in government ministries in Nairobi County. The population of public relations officers (PROs) in government ministries is 93 (PRSK, 2012).

2.4 Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

The sampling unit is Nairobi County. The sampling frame included all the 93 public relations officers in government ministries in Nairobi County. Simple random sampling technique and purposive sampling was used to select samples for the study. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (1999), random sampling is the key to obtaining a representative sample because it allows generalizability to a larger population with a margin of error that is statistically determinable. To obtain the desired sample size of the public relations officers in government ministries, the researcher used a table for determining the needed size of a randomly chosen sample from a given finite proportion suggested by Kathuri and Pals (1993). For a finite population of 93 PROs in government ministries, the given sample size from the table is 76 PROs.

The researcher obtained a list of all public relations officers in government ministries from random table numbers are only used when lists are available and items are readily numbered.

2.5 Study Instruments

Data was collected using questionnaires and interviews. According to Kothari (2004) questionnaires have considerable merits in administration as they present an even stimulus to large numbers of people simultaneously. The questionnaires consisted of both structured and unstructured questions. The questionnaires were personally administered using the drop and pick method. The use of interviews provided the researcher with in-depth information about the individual take on public relations theories. The interviews were conducted to the heads of public relations departments in the 18 government ministries.

2.6 Data Collection Procedure

Data was collected using two research tools namely; questionnaires and interviews which were administered to the respective respondents. The researcher took notes during the interviews to ensure that the information provided by respondents was readily available for data analysis. Each respondent was encouraged to respond individually and enough time was given to all respondents for accuracy purposes.

2.7 Data Processing and Analysis

The completed questionnaires were collected for data coding and analysis. Categories of responses were identified and classified on a prepared sheet as per objectives of the study. The data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. In descriptive analysis, means, standard deviations, frequencies and percentages were used. Linear regression was used to establish the extent to which the dependent factors under study affect the applicability of academic theory in

public relation ministries in national government ministries. The statistical test was at significance level of 0.05.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

The researcher ensured confidentiality and privacy through measures such as keeping data in a safe place and making sure that no unauthorized person handled the data. The researcher also ensured that respondents participated in the study through voluntary consent. This was achieved by disclosing the true purpose of the study. The researcher ensured authorization to conduct research. A letter from the Board of Postgraduate Studies was sought and used to obtain a research permit from the National Commission for Science Technology and Innovation. This permit was used for authorization of data collection from the national government ministries in Nairobi County

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Factors Influencing the Use of Academic Theory by PROs

3.1.1 Role of PROs as a Factor Influencing Application of Academic Theory in PR Practice

To determine factors that influence PROs attendance, respondents were asked to respond to the item on the role they play in government ministries by rating each response on a five point scale and were scored as follows; strongly agree (5), agree (4) not sure (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1). The roles provided were decision making, technician function, publicity and crisis communication. A high score indicated higher frequency of playing the given role in the government ministry while a low score indicated lower frequency of playing that given role. The benchmarks presented in table 1.2 were used as interpretation of the means indicating the variations in roles played by PROs

The result of the study (table 1.0) indicate a statistically significant influence of decision making and strategy mapping on application of PR academic theory in PR practice ($t= 5.168$, $p=0.05$) with a strong Fit model ($R^2 = .298$) which implies that when PROs are given the role of making decisions and mapping a strategic direction for the ministry it contributes up to 29.8% of application of academic theory by those PROs in the work. The results indicate that decision making and strategy mapping is a positive determinant of the application of academic theory by the PROs in government ministries. For every 1 unit increase in the role, there is a subsequent increase of 1.601 units in application of theory. Despite of this role contributing more to utilization of the theory fewer PROs perform this role as shown by the means (table 1.1) which was interpreted as low (table 1.2).

The researcher therefore concluded that the role of decision making and mapping a strategic direction for the ministry contributes to the application of theory in PR practice. Decision making and coming up with strategic policy for an organization are managerial functions in an organization. This shows that the elevation of public relations to a managerial function encourages PR practitioners in government ministries to apply theory to PR work. However, this study showed that decision making and strategy mapping is not a main role of PR practitioners in government ministries.

Building a positive image, writing of speeches and dissemination of information are roles which are most of the PROs in the study indicated to perform (table 1.1). Although these roles are performed by most PROs there influence of the application of theory is not statistically significant (table 1.3, 1.4 and 1.5). They are therefore not significant ($P=0.05$) predictors of application of theory by PROs.

From table 1.1 the role of corporate social responsibility is performed by fewer PROs. However, according to this study, the role of corporate social responsibility (table 1.6) has a statistically significant influence on application of the academic theory ($t= 5.685$, $p=0.05$) with a strong Fit

model ($R^2 = .339$) which implies that when PROs are given the role of corporate social responsibility contributes up to 33.9% of application of academic theory by those PROs in the work. The results indicate that role corporate social responsibility is a positive determinant of the application of the academic theory by the PROs in the government ministries. For every 1 unit increase in role (i) there is as subsequent increase of 1.091 units in application of theory

The result of the model summary (table 1.8) indicates that the role played by the PROs is statistically significant determinant of the application of the academic theory by the PROs in the work. The model has a high fit with $R^2 = .436$ implying that the job description of the PROs in the government ministries contribute up to 43.6% of the application of the academic theory.

The researcher therefore concluded that the application of academic theory in PR practice highly depends on the job description of a PR practitioner. Jobs that are not technical in nature will require the practitioner to refer to academic theory.

3.1.2 Professional courses taken by PROs as a factor influencing the application of academic theories

The professional courses considered in this study were the practical and theoretical courses. The responses on professional courses taken by PROs were measured using various items and respondents were expected to score statements. Individual scores for each respondent were aggregated into a composite score. An interpretation table was developed to be used in interpreting the mean score level for the individual professional course.

3.1.2.1 Practical professional courses

To measure the practical courses, three items were considered. The responses were scored. The mean score was calculated and used to make interpretation on the frequency of taking professional courses using the table 1.9. The mean in the table (2.0) indicate that the PROs in the government ministries take practical courses frequently. To establish the influence of taking practical courses on the application of academic theory linear regression was used. The result presented in the table 4.18 indicates that taking practical course do not significantly influence the use of academic theory by the PROs in the government ministries.

3.1.2.2 Theoretical courses

To measure the theoretical courses, three items were considered. Responses were scored. The highest expected score being 48 and the lowest 8. The mean score was calculated and used to make interpretation on the frequency of taking professional courses using the table 2.2. The results in the table 2.3 indicate that the PROs rarely take theory courses. The mean score is below 22.5 hence in the category of less frequency. Only a few of the PROs take the theoretical courses less frequently. The results presented in table 2.4 indicate that there is a statistically significant influence of taking theoretical courses by the PROs on application of the academic theory ($t = 5.202$, $p = 0.05$) with a strong Fit model ($R^2 = .300$). The model explains that taking of theoretical courses by the PROs can contribute to 30% application of academic theory by those PROs in the line of their duty. The results indicate that taking of theoretical courses is a positive determinant of the application of the academic theory by the PROs in the government ministries. For every 1 unit increase in taking of theoretical courses, there is as subsequent increase of .187 units in application of theory

3.1.3 Perception of academic theory by PROs as a factor influencing application of academic theories in PR practice

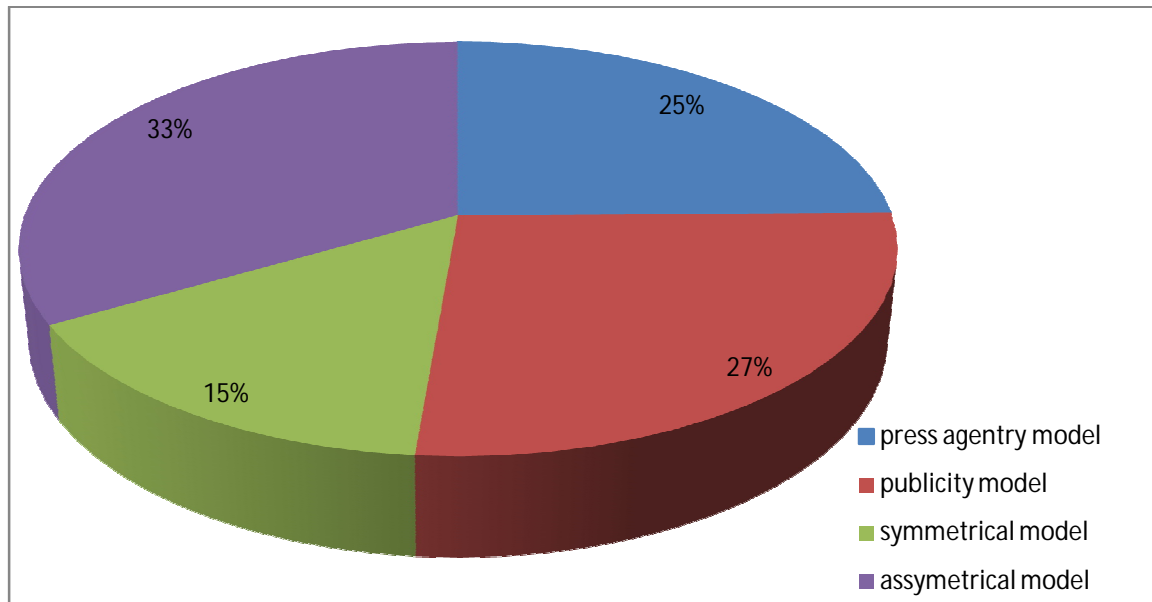
Perceptions of academic theory by PROs was measured using five items and respondents were expected to score statements using five point rating scale of; strongly agree (5), agree (4), not sure (3), disagree (2) and strongly disagree (1). The individual scores for each respondent were aggregated into a composite score with an expected maximum of 25 and a minimum of 5. The benchmarks (2.5) were used for interpretation of the perception of academic theory by PROs. The result of the table 2.6 shows that academic theory is perceived averagely by the PROs in government ministries. The results from the table 2.7 shows that perception is a statistically significant determinant of application of academic theory by PROs in government ministries ($t=4.994$, $P=0.05$) with a good model fit where $R^2=0.284$. This implies that perception contributes to 28.4% of the application of academic theory by PROs.

3.2 Contribution of Utilization of PR Theory in PR Practice in Government Ministries

The study focused on five specific areas with an aim establishing specific contributions of academic theory to PR practice in those specific areas. The respondents were expected to rate the contribution of the theory. Each response was scored and the maximum expected score was 3 while the minimum was 1. Means were evaluated for the score in the individual areas. A high mean score indicated higher contribution of theory in PR practice in the government ministries in that specific thematic area, while a low mean score indicated low contribution of the theory. The benchmarks (table 2.8) were used for interpretation of the level of contribution of the theory based on means obtained. From the results (table 2.9), the contribution of academic theory is moderately important in the following areas; benchmarking practice (mean=1.75) where it is said to contribute in providing framework for bench marking and aligning of public relations to organization goals (mean=1.77). Academic theory has less important contribution in saving time when designing a communication program (mean=1.51)

3.3 Public Relation Models Applied in Government Ministries

To evaluate the models applied in government ministries the responses concerning the function and how the function is carried out were carefully scrutinized and grouped in to different fitting models. Each respondent scored according to level of agreement with the question asked. The response given by the respondent was scored accordingly. The maximum expected score was 5 while the minimum was 1. From the individual score a mean was evaluated and used to explain the level of use of a given model in PR practice in government ministries. The following scores were used for interpretation based on benchmarks in table 3.0. Responses indicated that the asymmetrical model is the most used theory with a mean of 5.80 as indicated in table 3.1. The maximum score was 10 and the minimum was 2. The following benchmarks were used for its interpretation.

Fig 1.0: Summary of the PR models used by PROs in the government ministries

The pie chart above indicates that asymmetrical model is the most preferred PR model (33%) by PROs in government ministries. Publicity model at 27% came second then press agency model come third (25%) and finally the symmetrical model (15%).

4. Conclusion

The objective of the research which was to determine the role of public relations theory in the practice of public relations in government ministries has been achieved by the study. It is evident that the academic theories play a crucial role in the PR sector in the government ministries. Application of the academic theories is greatly influenced by the role played by the PR practitioners and their academic background. Even though the study indicated an appreciation of the role played by the academic theory by the PR practitioners it was also established that a higher percentage of the PR practitioners do not embrace the use of the theory in discharging their mandate and during decision making. The PR practitioners use the academic theory mostly for bench marking and aligning of public relations to organization goals this despite of the fact that most of them thought that the use of academic theory increases time needed to discharge a given duty which may lead to time wasting.

From the study, it is evident that the academic theory harbors great potential of aiding the PRO in making informed decision and improves their efficiency in solving challenges in their line of duty but its adoption and use is still below average.

5. Recommendations

This study recommends that more focus should be directed by stakeholders towards the improvement of the use of academic theory in the government ministries. To attain this, the study proposes the facilitation of PROs to take regular theoretical courses as a means to demystify the position of academic theory aiding the PROs in their work.

Secondly, there should be an interaction between the scholars in the PR field and the PROs to help the PROs create a perception to enable the application of the academic theory.

Lastly, there should be recruitment of PROs who have PR as their academic background as this was noted to positively influence the application of academic theory to PR practice.

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Appendix

	Model	B	Std. Error	T	P value
1	(Constant)	1.303	.652	1.999	.050
	Decision making and mapping a strategic direction for the ministry	1.601	.310	5.168	.000

Table 1.0 Influence of decision making role on application of academic theory

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
1 Making and mapping a strategic direction for the ministry	1.88	.960	65
Dissemination of information	4.31	.769	65
Building of a positive image for the ministry	4.62	.490	65
writing of speeches for the minister	3.57	1.380	65
function to ensure Corporate social responsibility	2.66	1.503	65
Responsibility is crisis communication	3.92	1.229	65

Table 1.1 Means indicating the variations in roles played by PROs

PR role score range	Interpretation
>3.64	Higher frequency of playing the role
2.32- 3.64	Moderate frequency of playing the role
<2.32	Lower frequency of playing the role

Table 1.2: Benchmarks were used for interpretation means indicating the variations in roles played by PROs

Model	B	Std. Error	T	P value
(Constant)	1.138	1.978	.575	.567
Dissemination of information	of.736	.452	1.627	.109

Table 1.3: Influence of the dissemination of information role on application of theory in PR practice

Model	B	Std. Error	T	Sig.
(Constant)	2.900	3.355	.864	.391
Building of a positive image for the ministry	.305	.723	.422	.674

Table 1.4: Influence of building a positive image role on application of theory

Model	B	Std. Error	t	P value
(Constant)	3.558	.978	3.639	.001
writing of speeches for the minister	.210	.256	.821	.415

Table 1.5: Influence of ‘writing speeches for the minister’ function on application of theory

Model		B	Std. Error	T	P value
1	(Constant)	1.403	.586	2.395	.020
	Corporate responsibility	social1.091	.192	5.685	.000

Table 1.6: Influence of the role of corporate social responsibility on application of theory

Model		B	Std. Error	T	Sig.
1	(Constant)	2.377	1.159	2.051	.044
	responsibility is crisis communication	.492	.282	1.744	.086

Table 1.7: Influence of the role of crisis communication on application of theory

Model	R	R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	P value
1	.660	.436	2.223	.000

Table 1.8: Model Summary of PRO roles on the application of academic theory to PR practice

Practical courses score range	Interpretation
>7.62	take practical courses very frequently
2.31-7.62	take practical courses frequently
<2.31	take practical courses less frequently

Table 1.9: Scores used for interpreting frequency of taking practical courses

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
application of theory	4.31	2.817	65
Practical Courses	5.77	1.656	65

Table 2.0: Taking of practical courses by the PROs in the government ministries

Model		B	Std. Error	T	P value
1	(Constant)	3.104	1.276	2.433	.018
	PRACTICAL COURSES	.209	.213	.981	.330

Table 2.1: Influence of taking practical courses on application of academic theory

Theoretical courses score range	Interpretation
>37.04	take theoretical courses very frequently
22.52- 37.04	take theoretical courses frequently
<22.52	take theoretical courses less frequently

Table 2.2: Scores used for interpreting frequency of taking theory courses

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
application of theory	4.31	2.817	65
theory courses	20.46	8.244	65

Table 2.3 means indicating the frequency of taking theoretical courses by PROs

Model		B	Std. Error	T	P value
1	(Constant)	.475	.793	.599	.551
	theory courses	.187	.036	5.202	.000

2.4 The influence of taking theoretical courses on application of academic theory in PR practice

Perception score range	Interpretation
>18.2	Academic theory perceived highly
11.6- 18.2	Average perception of academic theory
<11.6	Low perception of academic theory

Table 2.5: Interpretation scores for perception of academic theory

	N	Mean	Std. Error	Std. Deviation
Theory perception	65	14.23	.816	6.576

Table 2.6: Mean scores for perception of theory

Model	B	Std. Error	T	P value
(Constant)	1.061	.715	1.484	.143
theory perception	.228	.046	4.994	.000

Table 2.7: Relationship between perception of academic theories and application

DECISION RANGE	LEVEL
>2.32	Highly important
1.66-2.32	Moderately important
<1.66	Lowly important

Table 2.8: Interpretation scores for specific contribution of academic theory

	N	Maximum	Mean
1. provides a framework for benchmarking practice	65	3	1.75
2. saves time when designing a communication program	65	3	1.51
3. Aid align public relations to organization goals	65	3	1.77

Table 2.9 Contribution of academic theories to thematic areas of PR practice.

DECISION RANGE	LEVEL
>3.64	Highly used
2.32-3.64	Moderately used
<2.32	Lowly used

Table 3.0: Decision tables for press agency, publicity and symmetrical models values

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Press agency model	65	4.31	.77
Symmetrical model	65	2.66	1.50
Publicity model	65	4.62	.490
Asymmetrical model	65	5.80	1.69

Table 3.1: PR models preference by the PROs