



Academics and practitioners: the challenge of collaboration an example from social work and social services in Israel

International Review of
Administrative Sciences
2019, Vol. 85(1) 173–190

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DOI: 10.1177/0020852316676543

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Abstract

Although the need to integrate research into the practice world has always been a desire of researchers and practitioners alike, recently there has been growing interest in this collaboration. While studies have explored various aspects of this connection, few have investigated the ‘black box’ of social relations between academics and practitioners. Based on a qualitative study, the current article examines how practitioners and academics perceive this connection. Using Foucault’s perspective and the causes typology of Stone, the findings reveal three meta themes: the descriptive, emotional and functional stories, and identify more nuanced features of the connection between academics and practitioners.

Points for practitioners

- Managers should be aware that the connection between academics and practitioners involves functional, descriptive and emotional perceptions.
- Managers can diminish the relationship between power and knowledge by promoting formal mechanisms that acknowledge the common interests of academics and practitioners.
- Boundary spanners can be used to create more equal and productive relationships.

Keywords

academia, connection, Foucault, practice, qualitative

Introduction

Knowledge has value in itself, but the desire of social science researchers to affect policy processes and decision-making has always been significant. Lindblom and

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Cohen (1979) indicated that the disappointment that arises from the lack of usefulness of social research in contributing to policy is due to misperceptions. Due to its individualistic nature and limitations in terms of resources and time, it is unreasonable to assume that it can have a direct influence on resolving social problems. Therefore, they suggest conducting professional social inquiry which integrates practitioners' experience with social research.

Most commentators have noted the importance of the connection between academia and practitioners, but acknowledged the difficulties of creating and preserving these connections as well. While the literature generally focuses on the institutional difficulties and differences between academics and practitioners to explain the challenge of maintaining these connections, I argue that these explanations are insufficient for understanding the barriers between the two groups. Therefore, I provide a complementary explanation that relies on the social construction and perceptions of the relationships between the two groups.

The connection between research and practice is not new (Bushouse et al., 2011; Perry, 2015; Weiss, 1979), but recently there has been greater awareness of the importance of this collaboration (Flinders, 2013a; Mead, 2015; Newman et al., 2016; Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006). Many studies deal with the connection between academics and practitioners, but few discuss the transformation and development of knowledge as a social process (Rogers, 1995, in Rynes et al., 2001: 349). De Leeuw et al. (2008: 16) indicate the need to explore the complexity of the relationship further, not just as a technical or structural matter. Thus, I examine the social interaction between academics and practitioners based on their subjective perceptions. Although there are some researchers who embrace the distinctions between research, policy and practice (De Leeuw et al., 2008), due to my interest in the social interaction between these two groups, I use a dichotomous categorization and focus on the question of how practitioners and academics in social work and social services perceive the connection between them. My approach consists of a qualitative analysis that integrates narrative analysis with grounded theory (Eikenaar et al., 2016) and is based on semi-open interviews with seven managers from the social services and seven academics in social work departments in higher education in Israel. This connection in this field has received little attention (Kromer-Nevo and Lavie-Ajayi, 2009).

Literature review

The connection between academia and practice

The connection between academia and practice has become increasingly important for several reasons. First, the complexity of social problems has led to growing interest in integrating research in policy design (Bourgon, 2007). Second, there is growing demand for outcomes that are both efficient and effective. Therefore, questions about what works are more pressing than ever before (Rynes et al., 2001). Furthermore, voices are calling for research that will benefit society and demonstrate the impact of studies on it (Bushouse et al., 2011; Flinders, 2013a;

Mead, 2015; Sotirakou, 2004). Finally, both sides should find new sources of funding (Flinders, 2013a).

Although the desire to integrate research into the practical world is not new (Howlett and Ramesh, 2003: 3), it is not an easy goal to achieve (Mead, 2015; Radin, 2015; Richardson, 2013). In health care, management, nursing and education, researchers have observed a gap between research and practice (Jansen et al., 2010; Kennedy, 1997; Peek et al., 2014).

Bridging the gap – what do we know?

Not all researchers agree with the assumption that we should strengthen the connection between academics and practitioners. Some talk about the fear of ‘the tyranny of relevance’ (in Flinders, 2013b) and the danger in creating recruit sciences (Rynes et al., 2001). Nevertheless, I maintain that this connection is important.

One of the reasons for the gap between academics and practitioners arises from the difficulties of translating knowledge from academia to the practical world. Shapiro et al. (2007) identified two kinds of difficulties that they called ‘lost in translation’ and ‘lost before translation’. The former deals with the difficulties in translating academic knowledge to the practical world. The second refers to the irrelevance of academic knowledge to the practical world.

Other reasons are structural and involve different timetables, different kinds of incentives, funding and resources (Newman et al., 2016; Rynes et al., 2001). Thus, for example, the academic world rests upon the need to publish academic papers in top journals with their unique rigorous methods and limited timetables, resources, and academic language that does not necessarily fit with the practical world, which has its own limitations. Furthermore, the framing of the problems that need to be investigated are different for academics and practitioners (Jansen et al., 2010; Kennedy, 1997; Mead, 2015; Rynes et al., 2001; Shapiro et al., 2007).

Other difficulties arise from a different world perspective. Language, norms and values create different communities that are not easy to connect. While academia seeks to contribute to the development of knowledge, practitioners emphasize helping people here and now (Jansen et al., 2010; Mead, 2015; Rynes et al., 2001). Most of the literature focuses on how to transform academic knowledge into the practice world, very few studies deal with the benefits that the world of practice has to offer academia (Rynes et al., 2001: 346; Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006).

Most research suggests various ways proposed to improve the connection between academics and practitioners including: creating mutual activities and teams of academics and practitioners, having practitioners participate in peer reviews of academic journals and conferences, promoting academic writing in a way that will be more attractive to practitioners (Bushouse et al., 2011; Shapiro et al., 2007), recruiting people who will mediate between academics and practitioners (Shapiro et al., 2007), promoting more relevant research (Peek et al., 2014),

adapting the educational process to the needs of practitioners (Bushouse et al., 2011; Mead, 2015) and creating more trusting relations (Baker et al., 1999).

De Leeuw et al. (2008) suggest three frameworks to improve the integration of research, policy and practice. The first, called 'changing the roles of the game', centers on the institutional design, and interactions between actors and policy networks. The second, entitled 'the structural interaction of actors and the role of evidence', focuses on the different interests, languages, values, demands and pressures of the two communities and seeks to bridge those differences by creating collaborative mechanisms and trust (De Leeuw et al., 2008: 9–13). The third, entitled 'the communication among the nexuses', focuses on how to communicate knowledge between the different communities (De Leeuw et al., 2008: 14–15). Although not all researchers agree that social relationships are an important element (Lindblom and Cohen, 1979: 2), or that we can refer to two distinct communities (Newman et al., 2016), exploring these relationships may improve our understanding of the gap between the academics and practitioners.

The Foucaultian perspective and social construction

Michel Foucault (1970 [2005b]) argues that knowledge is not a natural creation. Power and knowledge are structured and reconstructed in the context of social relationships. Knowledge creates power and is created by power; power creates knowledge and is created by knowledge (Motion and Leitch, 2007). Although the two terms are not parallels, power is based on knowledge, and knowledge presupposes power relations (Digeser, 1992: 986).

Foucault (1970 [2005b]: 32–34) claims that narratives create practices of belonging to different 'societies of narratives' (*sociétés de discours*) and define their boundaries. Individuals form narrative strategies to belong to, avoid or resist the power–knowledge relationship. These societies creates boundaries, rules and rituals that define who belongs to them.

Foucault was interested in the identification of relationships that characterize practices of narratives (Foucault, 1969 [2005a]). Pullen (2006: 282) provided an example of managers in organizations who can use their power to legitimate and restrict knowledge in their field of expertise and define what is appropriate, implementing practices that outline what kind of knowledge should be created or gathered. Based on these practices, individuals can be seen as compliant or as threats.

To understand the practice of narrative creation, Foucault notes the need to be aware of three main elements: (1) Who speaks? Who is authorized to use the language and why is it unique? (2) What is its institutional setting? (3) What are the perceptions of this subject in association with different groups or objects? (Foucault, 1969 [2005a]: 51–55).

Deborah Stone (2012) explains how we construct social problems using stories that involve symbols and numbers, and assign blame or absolve others from it. Although her writing deals with stories in the policy arena, it may help identify the social construction of the challenges of academics and practitioners as well.

Stone's typology of causes refers to the differences between actions (guided/unguided) and consequences (intended/unintended). She identifies different types of causes: mechanical causes (such as rigid bureaucratic routines), accidental causes (such as natural disasters and fate), intentional causes (such as harmful side effects that are known but ignored and 'blaming the victim') and inadvertent causes (such as the unanticipated harmful side effects of policies and avoidable ignorance). Stone (2012: 208) explains the fuzzy boundaries between these categories and demonstrates how the stories about the causes move from one category to another.

Does the Foucaultian perspective offer a new understanding of the relationship between academics and practitioners? Can we identify causal stories (Stone, 2012) in the perceptions of academics and practitioners?

Methodology

I use a qualitative research method involving an exploratory study (Yin, 2003), in accordance with Stake's (2010: 57) explanation that the goal of qualitative research is to focus on 'activities and contexts that provide opportunity to understand an interesting part of how things work'.

The context and interviewees

The study sample consists of seven Israeli interviewees from the world of practice and seven from the Israeli academic world. All of the interviewees were selected based on their engagement in social work and social services. Six of the interviewees from the world of practice are high-ranking managers in the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services, and one is the manager of a social services division in a local authority.

The Israeli social service has three layers: the national main office, the district office, and the local authority. Most services are delivered by the 256 social service divisions in the local authorities and by various sectors (Katan, 2007: 113). Funding comes largely from the central government at a ratio of 75 percent from the main office and 25 percent from the local government (Yanai et al., 2007).

The seven academics were all associated with schools of social work in different universities in Israel. I am familiar with both venues given my academic position and previous experience in the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services. This situation has benefits and disadvantages. On one hand, it allowed me to be more open with the interviewees. On the other hand, my familiarity might strengthen the social desirability effect. The interviewees were promised anonymity, thus hopefully reducing the social desirability effect.

Data collection

Between January and June 2015, I conducted face-to-face interviews with these 14 people. I explained my interest in the research and my personal experience as a former practitioner.

The interviewees were asked to share their experiences about the interaction between academia and practice in a semi-structured interview (Stake, 2010: 95). I suggested five questions: (1) How would they characterize the pattern of collaboration between academia and practice? (2) What are the difficulties in collaboration? (3) What are the motivations for collaboration? (4) What are the benefits or advantages of collaboration? (5) What might strengthen the collaboration? The interviewees could respond to the questions, but were encouraged to talk freely.

Data analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The shortest interview was 9 pages and the longest 35 pages. In total, I amassed 285 pages of interviews. Based on a combination of narrative analysis and elements of grounded theory, I used textual analysis to explore the central themes rising from the interviews (Creswell, 1998: 140–141; Stake, 2010; for a similar example see Eikenaar et al., 2016). Grounded theory is a well-known method for trying to enrich theory in the context of social relationships (Romzek et al., 2012). The work was conducted in several phases. First, although I asked five general questions, during the course of the interviews I used the knowledge that arose from previous interviews, along with my personal experience and the literature, to explore the connections between the academics and the practitioners (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). Second, I analyzed the text in a spiral pattern. After several readings of the interviews, I identified 26 categories and sub-categories reflecting the elements that emerged from them. Examples include ‘perceptions of academia’, ‘difficulties and challenges’, ‘my personal story’, ‘emotions’, ‘the conditions for collaboration’, and ‘trends of closeness/remoteness’. This analysis resulted in a 95-page file. In the third phase I aggregated the various categories into meta-categories resulting in three main stories: ‘the descriptive story’, ‘the functional story’, and ‘the emotional story’.

Results

Three stories and two paths

Two levels of interpretation emerged from the interviews. The first involves three stories, and another layer includes causal stories and interactions between power and knowledge (Foucault, 1970 [2005b]; Stone, 2012).

The descriptive story. In this story the interviewees described the features of the connections between the practice world and academia, identifying three patterns: (1) personal engagements, work teams, encounters via research, research groups, visiting lecturers and conferences; (2) training and academic education; and (3) the relevance of published academic papers to their practical expertise. Most comments fall into the first category. Interestingly, these types of relationship resemble Kurt Lewin’s (1946) methodology of action research that integrates the three aspects.

The interviewees indicated that there was some, but insufficient, connection between the two worlds.

A big part of the people that I respect in academia link to their field of practice . . . The collaboration between academia and practice is crucial but does not exist enough in social work. (a6)

Such statements reinforce the gap observed in the literature between research and practice (Mead, 2015; Shapiro et al., 2007) and the need to conduct professional inquiry based on mutual knowledge (Lindblom and Cohen, 1979; Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006).

Some of the interviewees claimed that the connections between academia and practice¹ are strengthening. Others observed no fundamental change and at some level a detachment between the two groups, noting that unlike previous generations of researchers, academics today do not have enough experience in the field.

Perceptions of academia and the practice world: As the literature indicates (Jansen et al., 2010; Rynes et al., 2001), the interviewees from academia saw their main role as promoting research and publishing (a2). Other goals included serving as educators, creating knowledge, framing concepts, catalyzing social problems and promoting the field of social work² and the benefits to the population served (a5). One of the observations addressed the diversity of academia. Scholars focus on various issues and engage with the practice world at different levels at different times on the personal and institutional level. Thus, not all academics endorse this connection (Flinders, 2013b; Rynes et al., 2001) or can be viewed as a unitary group (Newman et al., 2016). Practitioners see academics as being most interested in publishing, having limited time, working in much easier conditions, earning high salaries and operating in an ivory tower. Hence, some practitioners regard academics as a privileged group. For example, two of the practitioners estimated that 20–30 percent of the academics' interest in the field was due to their desire to promote the field, and the remaining 70–80 percent was based on self-promotion. This comment echoes Foucault's notion of using the knowledge gathered from the practice world to create power.

Furthermore, some regarded academics as outsiders, insufficiently connected to the field, and not up to date about the latest developments in it. An interviewee from academia explained, 'The field perceives us as overwhelmed, inaccessible . . . and not always attentive . . .' (a7). Thus, these perceptions reflect a story of intentional causes in which academics engage with the practice world for their own self-interests.

Another story evoked a different image of academics, indicating their intention to contribute to the practice world and learn from it. This story was based more on personal encounters. Some practitioners used terms such as 'amazing . . . but focused' and 'amazing and wise women . . .' (p1). One practitioner described his encounter with an academic and claimed that she was not living in an ivory tower. She listened and used his knowledge and experiences to learn (p7), viewing the

practice world as a source of knowledge and new ideas (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006: 809). An academic argued that those academics who engaged with the field were primarily interested in contributing to it. Only later on did other interests arise such as finding new funding opportunities (a2). In this story the academics engaged in guided actions to create the intended consequence (Stone, 2012) of improving the field of social work, a story that blurs the boundaries between the communities (Foucault, 1970 [2005b]; Newman et al., 2016).

Academics saw practitioners as dedicated to the practical implementation of programs: 'They are judged for their doing... on budget spending... their promotion depends on outcomes...' (a2) and '...they are not educated to do academic writing and thinking' (a1), they do not have the time to do so (a7) and many of them do not read [academic research] (a4). They have to help people here and now (Jansen et al., 2010; Mead, 2015; Newman et al., 2016; Rynes et al., 2001). In addition, practitioners and academics alike agreed that the former work in a very complex environment with heavy burdens (Laughlin and Sher, 2010) and that the practice world is a place of innovation and research ideas (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006).

Power relationships: Some of the interviewees articulated the relationship between power and knowledge (Foucault, 1970 [2005b]). For example, one of them explained:

... Who nourishes who? Do I nourish them? I don't feel that they are taking from me, so I'm just taking from them. It is a matter of power relations. I expect to take academic knowledge and what do I give? Access to data for the research field? Budgets? I give a lot of my knowledge to research. But this is not reflected in the relationship. Because there is the one who is in need and the one who knows. When you talk about the relationship between academia and practice, why is academia first and practice second? Eventually the situation is reversed, I am the helper and they are in need... (p1)

The interviewee challenged the prevalent notion that the practice world is the one that needs the input of academia and is therefore dominant in the knowledge–power relationship. His claim underscored the shortage of studies dealing with the contribution of practice to academia (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006).

One interviewee described:

... we came from a very confident place... it is very clear to everyone who is leading the process and who is invited to participate. (p2)

... academia... in my opinion wants to connect to practice. We just do not connect with them enough. (p5)

Once again, these practitioners challenged the dominant place of academia in the connection between the two worlds by clarifying the boundaries and the rule of the game (Foucault, 1970 [2005b]; Pullen, 2006).

One practitioner explained that some professionals are not familiar enough with academic jargon, creating an unequal narrative. They cannot evaluate whether the research is good or not (p1). He provided a metaphor about the asymmetric relationship between doctors and patients to explain the boundaries created by the academics' jargon that define who belongs and does not belong to the particular 'society of narrative' (Foucault, 1970 [2005b]; Pullen, 2006). Others argued about the need to create more balance relations and a dialog between equals.

The emotional story. This story reflects the emotions of the interviewees. Recently, increased attention has been paid to the role of psychology and emotions in public organizations (Vigoda-Gadot and Meisler, 2010). Three central emotions were evident: fear, frustration/lack of respect and passion.

Fear: One of the unintended consequences that emerged was the fear of exposure.

It is very interesting; on one hand it [the connection to academia] is something that you are really attracted to; on the other hand there might be some fear that they will get too close... (p5)

Some academics acknowledged that point and explained that the practitioners are judged based on their success:

The research can expose that he did not succeed and this is a major obstacle. So why does he [the practitioner] need all those troubles? (a2)

One practitioner noted:

... People are afraid of exposure and ... academics are perceived as arrogant. How can a person from academia tell me things if he does not understand my limitations, my difficulties, and what happens in the field? (p3)

Thus, despite the good intentions, the practitioners were aware of possible harmful side effects as well (Stone, 2012). This fear accords with the basic fear of public officials who must account for their actions (Mulgan, 2000: 567), particularly in an atmosphere of attacks on public employees (a4) and the complex and challenging context of social care organizations that Laughlin and Sher (2010: 2) termed the 'management of anxiety'.

Frustration and lack of respect: Some interviewees expressed frustration with the unequal partnership between academics and practitioners. For example, one of the academics described his experience with a practitioner as a problematic one:

... I felt that doing a research and writing a paper with a practitioner was actually doing everything alone... He did not have writing skills or interest in publishing abroad... I felt that my partner was not really a partner. (a1)

This example reveals that the activity designed to create a productive connection included unintended and disappointing consequences due to differences in skills, interests and institutional context (De Leeuw et al., 2008; Foucault, 1969 [2005a]).

One practitioner noted:

On the other hand they [the academics] might be frustrated, because they think that we should do things in a different way and we don't do it. I think that they have to be attentive to us, because they need to educate future social workers to work in the field, not the other way around. (p1)

Another practitioner described waiting for 20 minutes for an appointment with people from academia:

They could stop the discussion, meet with us for half an hour, and let us go. But there is some arrogance that does not respect the other side. There should be respect for both sides. (p3)

These remarks include perceptions about what is right and who needs to listen to whom, reflecting the relationship between power and knowledge (Foucault, 1970 [2005b]).

Another practitioner described the disappointing experience of inviting people from academia to his organization, explaining that he felt that he was not attractive enough for the academics (p7). On the other side, one academic explained:

There are those [from academia] who really need the practitioners. They would even like to see themselves as some kind of mentor . . . but the practitioners do not find them interesting enough and then they are insulted. (a6)

Interviewees from academia were aware of the practitioners' sensitivity, noting the need to be modest and really believe in the importance of the knowledge created in the field (a4).

If someone from academia comes with an attitude of 'I know it all' . . . it will not work . . . the field is very sensitive to this . . . they feel it. The researcher needs to truly respect the practitioner, there is a lot of wisdom there. (a2)

Similarly, the interviewee noted that academics should acknowledge the practitioners' contribution to joint projects. It accords with the observation that studies generally deal with the transfer of knowledge from academia to practice, not the other way around (Rynes et al., 2001; Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006).

Passion: An interesting feature was the use of strong positive feelings that reflected the relationship between academia and practitioners. An interviewee from academia noted:

I think that the field is the most important thing for my creativity as a researcher . . . It is my fuel, half of what I write is based on the field. (a7)

This sentiment expresses Van de Ven and Johnson's (2006) call for regarding the practice world as a place for new ideas.

In every higher education institution, there are some 'lunatics' . . . like me, who decide to dedicate their academic life to the combination between the professional community and the general community and they do not see the conflict. (a7)

Practitioners emphasized their desire to have a connection with academia (p4).

I personally crave [the connection to academia] and there are other workers who feel the same . . . (p7)

I loved it [research], and for me till today, research is extremely important . . . (p6)

Some used terms that are more common in personal, loving relationships. A person from academia described his engagement with the field.

I have a romance; I call it a romance . . . With two organizations . . . It is inspiring. It is full of excitement and it is beautiful work . . . (a6)

When explaining the different needs of academia and practice, one of the interviewees stated: 'Someone once said that love is a function of time, place and circumstances. This statement reflects this connection . . .' (p1). 'It's like family there' (p7), explained another practitioner, reflecting on the attentive nature of the lecturer who guided a research group and the atmosphere there. Others noted that although working together can create conflict, it can also create strong bonds, contributions (a5/a7) and new knowledge (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006).

These emotions may be attributed to intellectual curiosity, the passion for learning or 'professional motivation' (Duff, 2004; Perry, 1997).

The functional story. This story assumes that we should deepen the connection between academia and practice. Many of the interviewees supported this idea and felt that steps should be taken to create a better connection. Thus, for example, a practitioner claimed: 'I think that all sides [practitioners and academics] are interested [in the connection] but we should find the way; there is something standing in the way' (p5), and 'you can't be part of the practice without academia, and

you cannot be part of academia without the practice' (p7), refuting the dichotomy categorization (Newman et al., 2016).

When asked why they need a connection to academia, the practitioners noted that it (1) raises their prestige, (2) helps them think about other ways to solve problems and identify the services they need to develop, (3) validates that they are moving in the right direction, creates a solid theoretical base and guidelines for actions, and provides a comparative perspective, (4) exposes academics to the experience of the field, which is important because they educate those who will work in it, and (5) stimulates burnt-out workers.

The academics noted the importance of creating useable and innovative knowledge that will strengthen the discipline of social work, the creativity that comes from the field, the ability of the world of practice to identify nuances and verify the research, and access to the limited research resources that exist.

The interviewees identified three major difficulties in the connection that are also evident in the literature (Mead, 2015; Newman et al., 2016; Rynes et al., 2001; Shapiro et al., 2007).

Organizational and institutional difficulties: Such obstacles include lack of time and different time frames, heavy workloads on both sides and a lack of budgets for investment in research. The academics explained that performing studies that are relevant to the field and engage with target populations are lengthy and expensive (a2). The interviewees also noted the complicated bureaucracy involved in paying the researchers. Human resource constraints were also a problem; in some cases, the curriculum is guided by the area of the researchers' expertise rather than by the field's needs, even though they aiming to change it (a1). Furthermore, practitioners do not have the time to devote to thinking and research. If they do so, it is usually in their own time (p5).

Different interests, expectations and languages: The issues that are of interest to the researcher are not always relevant to the field (p3). In addition, academic research is generally perceived as irrelevant because it does not consider the obstacles and limitations of the field or deal with current issues: 'Academia is 5 to 10 years behind the field; how does it help me?' (p1). It can take months or years to approve a research proposal or publish a paper (a2/a1), making it less relevant to the field. Mead (2015: 262) explains that while research is based on looking backwards, practitioners must understand what to do now and the consequences for the future. Although the world of practice is perceived as the innovative one, in some regards, academia is viewed as having the leading edge (a1/a4). Some academics indicated that practitioners had high and unrealistic expectations of them, sometimes expecting time-consuming contributions without understanding their limitations (a6/a7).

Some noted that there are difficulties arising from the different languages of academia and practice. 'Researchers talk in the "language of research" that the practitioners don't always understand and do not always appreciate', explained one of the academics (a5). Practitioners described the difficulties translating theory into practice (p4). Studies demonstrate the barriers created by the use of specialist

research terms and methods (Newman et al., 2016; Shapiro et al., 2007) and suggest producing more acceptable research summaries (Bushouse et al., 2011). However, some academics maintained that they use the same language when encountering people from the world of practice (a3/a4). It seems that experience in both worlds diminishes the narrative boundaries (Bushouse et al., 2011; Foucault, 1970 [2005b]).

Different sets of constraints: In academia, the need to ‘publish or perish’ is perceived as an obstacle in engaging with studies in the field (a1/a3/a6). This kind of research is long, costly, and complicated. The universities do not encourage the subject: ‘If people do it [engage with the practice], it is at the cost of hurting themselves [with regard to promotions] and there are many people who do it . . .’ (a2). There is no incentive to publish in Hebrew, so the audience of readers from the world of practice is quite limited (Levin and Hamama, 2013). The process of publishing is quite long and at odds with the immediate and pressing nature of practice.

Practitioners also indicated that they cannot implement the findings of the studies. One academic explained that the system they work in is much more complicated, and if there is not an understanding of this environment, making connections with the world of practice is much more difficult (a2). Mead (2015: 261) noted that although research may include recommendations, it is not explicit enough to explain how they can be implemented. One academic explained that if the work is not integrated at the field level, it will not affect practice (a5). Furthermore, Stone (2012: 217) described how complex systems as well as historical and institutional factors could serve as an excuse for inaction and place blame on other venues. Although these reasons are certainly important and valid (Newman et al., 2016), they may be stories about causes that validate the inability to put research into practice.

Conclusions and implications

Foucaultian perspectives and social construction (Stone, 2012) provide new insights into the interaction between academics and practitioners as a social process (Rogers, 1995 in Rynes et al., 2001: 349). Of the three stories that emerged from the findings – the descriptive story, the functional story and the emotional story – the last is less well known, but is significant in light of the growing interest in emotions in the context of public administration (Vigoda-Gadot and Meisler, 2010). The interviewees exemplify the differences between the groups, their boundaries and the language they use. The academics were perceived as the dominant group, and the interviewees were aware of the imbalance in their relationship. Some of the practitioners and academics tried to challenge these views; others tried to create a more balanced relationship by contesting the theory of two communities (Newman et al., 2016). Furthermore, positive, passionate feelings emerged when describing collaborative episodes that seemed to grow out of professional motivations (Perry, 1997). However, at the same time, both sides expressed their

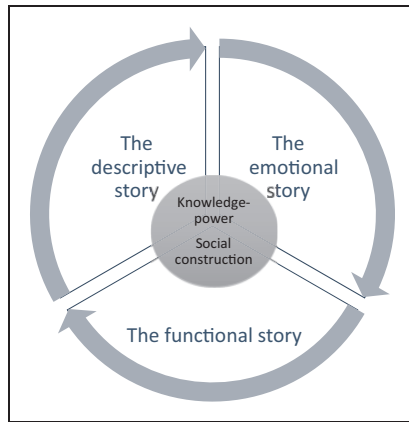


Figure 1. The two layers of the relations between academics and practitioners.

frustrations, recounting stories about inadvertent outcomes and side effects of the connection, using causal stories of ‘who or what is to blame’ and describing barriers arising from the complicated context in which they work. Thus, the theoretical contribution of this article is twofold. The semi-integrative diagram (Creswell, 1998) in Figure 1 presents a visual model of the theory.

There is a growing awareness in organizations for the need to create ‘epistemological pluralism’ that includes explicit and implicit knowledge on the individual and social levels (Spender, 1996). These trends echo Lindblom and Cohen’s (1979) calls for professional social inquiry and practices such as ‘action research’ and ‘engaged scholarship’ (Lewin, 1946; Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006).

Recently, Newman et al. (2016) advocated viewing the relationship between academia and practice as a range of interactions rather than two communities. Accepting the two communities thesis, or not, to improve the interactions between academia and practice we must understand how they see one another, because ‘the objective truth is not available to us’ (Stake, 2010: 165). Examining these voices through these new lenses hopefully contributes to our understanding of this relationship.

What can be done to strengthen this connection? First, the relationship needs to find more equal ground. Both sides should abandon the sense that one group is more privileged than the other, challenge the stories that blame the historical or institutional circumstances or the complex system, and try to minimize the fears of the side effects resulting from these connections. More commitment to equal participation at least part of the time and around specific subjects might enable true collaboration between academia and practice.

As the interviewees suggested:

One more thing is to talk at the same level, not with the arrogance that says I am better or you are better. We are not interested in the history. We don’t deal with this anymore. Don’t deal in past perceptions... (p2)

You have to determine the common interest and move from there together. When one understands that it is a win-win, we both have knowledge, and the two worlds of knowledge can work together, the sky is the limit. (a4)

Finally, it is important to note that there are continuous efforts on both sides to create collaboration between those who see themselves as boundary spanners (Newman et al., 2016; Williams, 2012). Such efforts can create a more equal relationship that acknowledges the complexities of this encounter.

Limitations

This study explored the attitudes of only 14 interviewees in a specific field in the Israeli context. Further investigation of the interactions between practitioners and academics in different fields, of various ranks, and in other countries can strengthen the exploratory findings presented here. Nevertheless, the article contributes to our understanding of the 'black box' of the relations between academics and practitioners. Hopefully, revealing that various aspects of these connections can promote better utilization of the knowledge accumulated by both academics and practitioners in a way that benefits society.

Acknowledgements

I would to thank every one of the interviewees personally for their patience and time that allowed me to conduct this study. I would to thank Yekoutiel Sabah for our early discussions on the matter and the reviewers of the *International Review of Administrative Sciences* for their illuminating remarks.

Conflict of interest

I am familiar with the interviewees given my academic position and previous experience (June 2013–December 2014) in the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services.

Notes

1. One interviewee objected to the division between academics and practitioners, arguing for differences between research, policy and practice. I explained my preference for using only two.
2. Some referred to social work as a profession. I will not elaborate on that point, due to the interest in the relations between academics and practitioners.

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