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Role conceptions of public affairs practitioners in The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Public affairs (PA) practitioners play an important role in political decision-making in modern democratic societies. This study gives a first insight in how these practitioners themselves perceive their role. Based on findings from previous empirical studies and normative democratic theories, three ideal type role conceptions are constructed: shared ways in which PA practitioners see and make normative sense of their profession. Next, these role conceptions are investigated with an online survey among 100 public affairs practitioners in The Netherlands. Findings confirm that the proposed *advocate*, *expert* and *mediator* roles indeed represent different ways in which PA practitioners conceptualize their jobs. The advocate and expert roles are relatively dominant among the sample, while female practitioners tend to subscribe more to the mediator role. The implications of these findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In 2013, a team of young Dutch TV journalists went undercover to explore “the world of lobby” (Rambam, 2013). They pretended to represent a commercial sperm bank that was looking for ways to lift the legal ban on sperm trade. A lobbyist recommended them to establish a foundation so they could hide their commercial interests while lobbying for their cause. In a few months, the team successfully got their topic on the political agenda and the responsible minister announced an investigation into the issue. But the Beroepsvereniging voor Public Affairs (BVPA), the professional organization of PA practitioners in The Netherlands, officially reprimanded the lobbyist for recommending a course of action (hiding the commercial interest of the company) that is prohibited by the organization’s charter (BVPA, 2013).

“Public affairs and lobbying”, as this documentary illustrates, “is a field of PR practice that generates high levels of both scholarly and public concern” (Davidson, 2014, p. 1). Important criticisms target the overrepresentation of corporate interests by PA professionals, the resulting imbalance in political representation between powerful and less powerful actors in society, and the perception that lobbyists exercise undue influence on policy makers (Davidson, 2014; Hamilton & Hoch, 1997; OECD, 2009; Smit, 2014).

To counter these criticisms, PA practitioners and their professional organizations, including the BVPA in The Netherlands, call for more professional transparency and accountability (BVPA, 2007; OECD, 2009). “Increasing the familiarity of public affairs to a broader audience” is one of the stated objectives of the BVPA (2014). From a scholarly perspective, however,

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relatively little is known about PA practitioners (Berg, 2012; Davidson, 2014; Terry, 2001), especially in relation to their prominent role in democratic decision-making. In The Netherlands, public affairs is even less researched than in other countries (Timmermans, 2014).

In this paper, we want to start filling this gap, and contribute to a better understanding of the role that PA practitioners play in society. We investigate how PA practitioners themselves see their role in democratic decision-making. For this, we borrow the notion of *role conceptions* from journalism studies. Role conceptions essentially describe how professionals understand their work and their function in society, in terms that reflect professional values and that are morally acceptable to both the profession and the public at large (Beam, Weaver, & Brownlee, 2009; Donsbach, 2008). Our research question is: *What are the role conceptions of Public Affairs practitioners in The Netherlands?*

After introducing the notion of role conceptions, we review previous research on PA practitioners and normative democratic theories, to construct a typology of three ideal type role conceptions. These propose to think of PA practitioners as *advocates* (representing the interests of their clients), *experts* (delivering quality information to politicians) and *mediators* (aiming to align private and public interests). A survey ($n=100$) shows that all three conceptions are recognized by Dutch PA practitioners, although the advocate and expert roles receive much more support than the mediator role. In the final section, the implications of these findings are discussed.

2. Literature review

2.1. Role conceptions

Role conceptions describe how professionals “understand their work and its social function” (Donsbach, 2008, p. 2605) and how they think “they ought to do their work” (Mellado & van Dalen, 2014, p. 861). Although these conceptions are held by individuals (Holsti, 1970), they are not individual constructs. They are shared by members of a profession (Donsbach, 2008; Janowitz, 1975). They reflect and express the professionalization of the job. Hence, they describe the institutional role of the profession in society (Hanitzsch, 2007; Mellado & van Dalen, 2014); they reflect “occupational values that influence [...] professional practices and decision-making” (Beam, Weaver, & Brownlee, 2009, p. 279; also Donsbach, 2008); and they express the public service that the profession arguably provides (see Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2000; Singer, 2003). A role conception thus is both a descriptive and normative concept. It describes “good practice” from a professional and social point of view: actually existing professional behavior that is considered appropriate (Turner, 1978) for professionals that want to play the role in society that is normatively expected from them.

Role conceptions have been frequently investigated in journalism studies.¹ A large body of literature shows how journalists, across time and countries, have subscribed to different and partly conflicting ideas about the role of the press in society and, in relation, to partly different professional values (e.g., Beam, Weaver, & Brownlee, 2009; Janowitz, 1975; Johnstone, Slawski, & Bowman, 1972; Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996). Additional studies have shown how these journalistic role conceptions are shaped by organizational and social factors, and in turn influence the day-to-day behavior and choices of journalists (Meyen and Riesmeyer, 2012; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; van Dalen, de Vreese, & Albaek, 2012).

In this paper, we intend to make a first step in identifying the role conceptions of PA practitioners in The Netherlands. These professionals are an integral part of the democratic political system (Karr, 2007). Hence, we define their role conceptions as their understanding how they (ought to) perform their function in a democratic society. To develop a tentative typology of role conceptions, we review previous empirical research and normative models of democracy. This enables us to identify the roles that PA practitioners defined themselves, as well as relevant ideas about the potential contribution of PA practitioners to society.

2.2. The roles of public affairs practitioners

Available empirical studies suggest distinguishing between three different role conceptions of PA practitioners. One important role described in previous research by practitioners themselves is advocating the clients' interests in the political arena (Berg, 2012; Lange, 2000; Terry, 2001). In this context, PA practitioners named coaching and educating clients, and also fighting on their clients' behalf in the political arena, as common activities (Terry, 2001). Some PA practitioners even use martial themes to describe this role. By comparing themselves to soldiers or gladiators, these PA practitioners adopt a strong competitive approach to their work (Terry, 2001). Others compare their work to that of lawyers, and describe their job in terms of advocacy (Berg, 2012; Terry, 2001). The overarching concept in all these studies is the high client orientation of practitioners. This means that practitioners feel obliged to serve first of all their clients. They consider their clients' interests as predominant in their work. Also in The Netherlands, research revealed a strong client orientation among practitioners (Lange, 2000).

¹ In research in PR, the same concept has been applied in a different way, with a more exclusive focus on the tasks that professionals perform within their organization. For example, Zerfass et al. (2014, p. 16) distinguish four PR roles, depending on whether professionals help to define the business strategy, and aim to support the business strategy with their communication activities.

A second role of PA practitioners frequently mentioned in the literature is the role of expert who provides valuable information to politicians (Berg, 2012; Lange, 2000; Patterson, 1963). By performing this role, PA practitioners can make policy-making more efficient and thereby exert a positive impact on democracy (Karr, 2007; van Schendelen, 2010)—if the provided information is accurate, truthful and transparent (Berg, 2012).² The underlying norms of truthfulness, accuracy and transparency tend to be emphasized by professional organizations, like the BVPA in The Netherlands and the American Association of Government Relations Professionals, in their codes of conduct (AGRP, 2010; BVPA, 2007) as basic norms that should guide the interaction with legislators (Berg, 2012).

A third role is that of mediator between the client and society, already proposed 30 years ago as an ideal model for PR by Grunig and Hunt (1984). More recently, McGrath, Moss, and Harris (2010) argue that the PA function should be operationalized as a company's non-market consciousness, and a sparring partner for the otherwise profit-driven motives. Others claim that, ideally, business lobbying should be a socially responsible activity that should benefit business as well as the public interests (Boddewyn, 2012; Hamilton & Hoch, 1997). The claim that a company should try to align its corporate interests with those of the public (Davidson, 2014; Fleisher, 2012), follows the same logic. This third role – more presented as ideal than emerging from research as actual orientation – thus highlights the social responsibility of PA practitioners. More support for democratic control of PA activities, as found by Lange (2000) among PA practitioners that were less strongly and exclusively focused on the interests of their clients, might be part of such a social responsible orientation.

In sum, looking at the literature, three orientations can be noted in which three different stakeholders play a predominant role. First, PA practitioners may see it as their main task to advocate or fight for their *client* in the political arena. A second approach is that of PA practitioners that primarily provide expertise and information to *policy-makers* to enable them to make informed decisions. A third role, more hypothetical, is that of practitioners who see themselves and the organization they represent as a socially responsible actor that needs to take not only their own, but also the interests of *society* into account.

2.3. Normative democratic theories

What still is missing from our argument, is a normative framework to place these ideas in; a framework that enables practitioners to see these orientations as normatively acceptable, if not desirable. Is it “good practice” to advocate only the interests of one's client? Is the incorporation of societal needs necessary for appropriate PA behavior? To address this issue, we look at normative models of democracy. Although highly theoretical, these models provide normative ideas against which the desirability of different types of roles in the political environment can be judged.

One important normative model, relevant to our argument, is the competitive model of democracy.³ This model proposes that competition between political elites is the most appropriate mechanism for political decision-making (Fishkin, 2009; Strömbäck, 2005). Such competition will ensure that, at the end of the day, the best ideas prevail (Strömbäck, 2005). The public should play a limited role in decision-making according to this model (Henneberg, Scammell, & O'Shaughnessy, 2009), as ordinary people are not considered capable of making qualified political decisions (Fishkin, 2009; Schumpeter, 2006). Besides, there is little room in this model for a notion of a common good that surpasses the competitive alignment of private interests.

The advocate role of PA, identified above, aligns very well with this normative model of competitive democracy. Both share a competitive approach to policy-making and a strong emphasis on the private interests of elite actors in society. Advocating the interest of an elite actor as best as possible, makes normative sense when one considers competition between private interests as the best route to optimal decision-making. *Loyalty* to the client emerges from this discourse as the most important norm for the PA practitioner that adopts an advocate role.

A second important model is the representative liberal model. Like the competitive model, this model emphasizes the role of elites in policy-making, too. Public participation is not considered desirable. Instead, this model emphasizes the value of expertise and *transparency* in decision-making. The key to optimal decision-making, in this view, is the civil and rational debate between politicians and their expert-advisors, without interference of the uninformed public or emotions (Ferree et al., 2002). This model nicely fits the expert role of PA practitioners, according to which practitioners (should) act as experts that provide information to politicians in a transparent and honest fashion.

The third model that is relevant to our argument is the deliberative model. This model accentuates equality among not only political but also social actors and stakeholders in society (Fishkin, 2009; Henneberg et al., 2009; Strömbäck, 2005). The best mechanism for decision-making, according to this approach, is dialogue (Fishkin, 2009; Strömbäck, 2005). It is believed that the best solution for society, the common good, can be reached through weighing of a range of different arguments in rational decision-making (Fishkin, 2009; Strömbäck, 2005). While in competitive democracy the emphasis is on survival of the fittest, the emphasis in the deliberative model lies on harmony and *equality*. This model best resonates with the mediator role of PA. This role reflects, as we discussed, the need to take not only elite but also a range of societal interests into consideration, and to contribute to the public good.

² The resulting positive contribution of PA practitioners tends to be undervalued in research, argues Berg (2012), while the negatively connoted persuasive aspects of PA are often overstated.

³ For a full review of the normative democratic models, including the ones discussed here, please consult Fishkin (2009) and Ferree et al. (2002).

Table 1
 Three PA role conceptions.

	Advocate	Expert	Mediator
Perception of PA	Advocating the client's interests as best as possible	Informing decision-makers accurately and transparently	Finding mutually acceptable solutions in the interest of society
Main stakeholder(s)	Client	Client and decision-makers	Client and stakeholders in society
Professional value	Loyalty	Transparency	Equality
Best mechanism for decision-making	Competition between ideas and interests	Rational decision-making based on expert information	Deliberation to reach agreement
Contribution to democracy	Making the interest of the client heard	Providing expert information	Aligning private and social interests

2.4. Three role conceptions

Reviewing both the empirical literature as well as normative democratic theories, three possible role conceptions for PA practitioners emerge. We label these the advocate, expert and mediator roles (see Table 1). The *advocate* is a PA practitioner who has a strong client orientation. The advocate feels primarily responsible to the client, and the main aim of this practitioner is to help the client to reach its goals. Loyalty to the client emerges as the most important normative value. From a normative democratic perspective, we assume the advocate to perceive the political arena as highly competitive, and to believe that competition between elite actors is the best mechanism for decision-making. Making sure that the interests of the client are not overlooked in the political arena, therefore, emerges as the main positive contribution of the advocate to democratic decision-making.

The *expert*, in contrast, is a PA practitioner whose main aim is to deliver expert information on behalf of the client to policy-makers. That way, he enables politicians to make the best possible, rational decisions. In this context, the expert can be held responsible for the accuracy of the information that he provides. In line, transparency and truthfulness are important values for this practitioner. By providing accurate information in a transparent way, the expert contributes to the decision making process of politicians and thereby has a positive effect on the functioning of democracy.

The *mediator*, thirdly, is a PA practitioner who not only has a client but also a societal orientation. Ultimately, he feels responsible to both. The aim of the mediator is to balance and align the private interest of the client with the public interest. He sees the political arena not as competitive, but as a cooperative environment where political actors and members of society come together to find mutually acceptable solutions. Equality between actors is an important norm in this respect. Neither the interests of the client nor societal interests should be seen as inherently superior. Instead, deliberation between all actors is considered as preferred decision-making mechanism. By trying to find mutually acceptable solutions for issues that concern the client as well as the public, the mediator contributes to deliberative decision-making and strengthens democracy.

3. Method

To investigate the role conceptions of Dutch PA practitioners, we conducted an online survey ($n = 100$). Participants were asked to rate their agreement with 35 statements that reflected different dimensions of the three role conceptions developed above. Principal component analysis was used to analyze the data. This produced three factors that clearly represented the proposed role conceptions. Next, scales were constructed to assess the prevalence of these role conceptions among PA practitioners in The Netherlands. Finally, role conceptions were regressed on personal and professional characteristics, in an attempt to identify plausible relationships between these characteristics and professionals' ideas about the role of PA in society.

3.1. Sample

The target group for the survey were PA practitioners who are active in The Netherlands. Since a complete list of active PA practitioners in The Netherlands does not exist,⁴ a random sampling strategy was not feasible. Instead, a non-probability sampling method was applied, as this had the greatest potential for collecting a sufficient number of responses.

⁴ Since 2012, lobbyists have to register to access the Dutch Parliament and the registration list is publicly available (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2014). The list; however, contains only the people who actually hold an access-pass on behalf of the organisations they are working for. The last version of the list we consulted (updated at 16 December 2014) contained 88 registered lobbyists. This is only a fringe of the lobbyists who are actually active in The Netherlands. The BVPA counts about 600 members, which gives a better estimate of the number of people working in the PA field in The Netherlands (BVPA, 2014). But since an unknown number of PA practitioners is not member of the BVPA, the total number of PA practitioners in The Netherlands should be higher (Timmermans, 2014).

The non-probability sampling method applied was a mix of convenient and snowball-sampling techniques (Bryman, 2012). Potential participants were contacted through multiple online channels and at multiple times. First contact was made via a group thread in the BVPA LinkedIn-group (866 members, per 4 December 2014), later also through personal e-mail via LinkedIn and regular e-mail. E-mail addresses were obtained through a Google search for Dutch public affairs companies (search term: “Public Affairs” and “Netherlands”; “Public Affairs” and “Den Haag”). An appeal to forward the survey link to relevant contacts was included in personally sent invitations and additionally sent to personal contacts who work as or are acquainted with PA practitioners (snowball-sampling). Lastly the link to the survey was included in the January 2015 newsletter of the BVPA.

A total of $n = 100$ respondents filled in the survey of whom 74 were men and 26 women. The higher number of men in the sample can be seen as typical for the PA field (Berg, 2012; Lange, 2000; Patterson, 1963). Although not representative for all Dutch PA practitioners, we consider the sample adequate for our research.

3.2. Data collection

An anonymous self-completion online survey was fielded between December 4, 2014, and January 11, 2015. The survey was in Dutch and took less than 10 min to fill in. Respondents participated freely and were not rewarded for their participation.

Thirty five Likert-type items were developed to measure the dimensions of the role conceptions discussed in this paper: perception of PA (10 items), important stakeholders (7 items), professional values (6 items), preferred mechanism for decision-making (6 items), and PA's contribution to democracy (3 items). We added 3 items that explicitly describe the proposed roles, e.g., “I am a source of expert information for policy-makers”. The items were balanced across the different roles (12 items for the advocate role, 12 items for the expert role, and 11 for the mediator role). A complete set of items can be found in Table 2.

Twelve items were inspired by Berg (2012), Lange (2000) and Lange and Linders (2003), but were rephrased and/or translated into Dutch. The other items were self-drafted. All items were pilot-tested on comprehensibility by four people of whom two were familiar with the PA sector.

Respondents were asked to rank their agreement with these items on a 7-point Likert-scale ranging from “totally disagree” to “totally agree”, as recommended by Krosnick and Presser (2010). The items were presented in blocks of logically connected items, to ensure easy rating (Krosnick and Presser, 2010). Within the blocks the question order was randomized to prevent question order effects.

At the end of the survey, a few demographic questions were asked. These gauged respondents' gender, years of experience in PA, education, type and size of the organization the respondent was working for (including the option to identify oneself as independent PA consultant), and the geographic scope of the lobbying activities of the respondents or their organization.

4. Results

The aim of the study is to give insights into how PA practitioners see their own role in democracy. In order to do so respondents were asked to rate their (dis) agreement with a set of 35 items that arguably describe the three role conceptions developed in the literature review, namely the advocate, expert and mediator roles.

4.1. Participant profile

Who filled in the questionnaire? Seventy four respondents were men and 26 women ($n = 100$). The majority of respondents ($n = 63$) worked less than 10 years in the PA field, but some (5) were already active more than 25 years ago. All respondents were highly educated. Eighty nine of the participants held a university degree, 1 a postdoctoral degree, and 10 a diploma from School for Higher Professional Education. Most of the academic degrees were in political science ($n = 24$), followed by communication science, PR or journalism ($n = 16$) and law ($n = 15$). Thirty six respondents worked self-employed as PA specialists or worked for a PA consultancy. Five more worked for a media, communication or PR agency. The majority of respondents ($n = 59$), on the other hand, worked as PA practitioner for a non-PA organization, such as a company, an NGO, a trade organization or a governmental organization. Of these 59 respondents, worked for a not-for-profit organization, including government. Another 7 respondents represented exclusively not-for-profit actors. The remaining 61 respondents worked for or represented (at least some) for-profit companies. Finally, we note that 66 respondents (worked for organizations that) lobbied (also) at the international level, while 34 worked exclusively at the national or lower geographical levels.

4.2. Factor analysis

To see if the expected roles actually exist, a principle component analysis (PCA) with orthogonal (varimax) rotation was used. In a preliminary step, two items were detected with low ($< .5$) Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measures of sampling adequacy. These two items were excluded from the final analysis (see Table 2). The optimal number of factors to extract was subsequently determined using the scree plot due to the low sample size (Field, 2009; Zwick & Velicer, 1986). A PCA with

Table 2

Principle component analysis results.

Item		Factors		
		1	2	3
Perception of PA				
Public affairs is in my opinion about . . .				
... aligning different ideas as much as possible	(M)	*0.70	0.10	−0.03
... PA practitioners and policy-makers helping each other to achieve something	(E)	0.61	0.26	0.01
... contributing that the best possible solution for society is taken	(M)	*0.59	−0.27	0.45
... consulting with everyone on the basis of equality	(M)	0.51	0.07	0.25
... contributing that policy-makers make good decisions	(E)	0.48	0.10	0.47
... advancing the interests of my clients	(A)	−0.05	*0.70	−0.10
... contributing that the best possible decision for my client is taken	(A)	0.13	*0.66	−0.18
... convincing policy-makers of my clients' views	(A)	0.23	0.52	−0.20
... winning a conflict of interests	(A)	0.15	0.51	−0.11
... informing of policy-makers completely and accurately	(E)	0.22	−0.06	0.49
Main stakeholders				
I am responsible to . . .				
... my client	(A)	−0.05	*0.74	0.07
... the policy-maker I am informing	(E)	0.15	0.04	*0.74
... society	(M)	0.47	−0.05	*0.63
... the law	(E)	(excluded)		
In my work as PA-practitioner I am driven by the interest of . . .				
... the policy-maker I am informing	(E)	*0.60	0.09	0.32
... society	(M)	0.58	−0.11	0.47
... my client	(A)	0.00	*0.67	0.16
Professional value				
As PA practitioner . . .				
... I have to see to it that everyone can contribute equally	(M)	*0.66	−0.10	0.15
... my limits are passed when I have to act counter to social norms and values to serve my clients' interests	(M)	0.35	−0.27	0.24
... I need to ensure that the interest of my client is heard	(A)	−0.16	0.58	0.15
... I have to be completely transparent about my clients and their intentions	(E)	0.07	0.00	*0.77
... I can imagine situations in which I could bend the truth	(E−)	0.27	0.28	−0.47
... I believe I am permitted to do whatever is needed to reach my clients' goals	(A)	−0.07	0.27	−0.45
Mechanism for decision-making				
In my view, the best solution is to reach consensus	(M)	*0.69	−0.15	0.06
Good information for policy-makers contributes to good decision-making	(E)	0.17	0.42	0.22
Competition between different ideas contributes to good decision-making	(A)	0.38	0.41	−0.04
In my view, the best decision-making is based on expert information	(E)	0.40	0.04	*0.58
Public affairs is a zero-sum game	(A)	−0.10	−0.15	−0.57
Including as many different interests as possible in a debate contributes to good decision-making	(M)	(excluded)		
Contribution to democracy				
I am easing decision-making for policy-makers	(E)	0.48	0.32	0.17
I am aligning the private interest of my client with the public interest	(M)	0.40	0.20	0.07
I am taking care that my client's interest is heard in the political arena	(A)	−0.01	*0.74	0.16
Self-description				
I am a mediator between society and politics	(M)	0.52	0.22	0.19
I am an advocate of my client	(A)	0.14	0.60	−0.20
I am a source of expert information for policy-makers	(E)	0.31	0.23	*0.55

Notes: The table lists all items, organized per role conception dimension, as summarized in Table 1. Abbreviations between brackets indicate whether the item was originally considered part of the advocate (A), expert (E) or mediator (M) role, in one case in reverse (−). Bold numbers indicate the highest factor loading per item. * Indicates that the item is included in the role conception scale. Two items were excluded from the PCA because the KMO values were too low.

the remaining 33 items was run extracting the three factors suggested by the scree plot. The KMO = .754 was good according to Field (2009) and verified the sampling adequacy (Field, 2009; Kaiser, 1974). Bartlett's test of sphericity was furthermore significant indicating that correlations between items were large enough for PCA. The three extracted factors explained a combined 42.86% of the variance.

The first factor (13 factor loadings >.35, 15.26% of variance explained, Eigen value = 7.14) covers the proposed mediator role (see Table 2). It includes items that express the need for equality between actors and the search for consensus and the common good—ideas that were suggested as key normative characteristics of the mediator role conception in the previous section. The first factor also encompasses items that describe the role of PA practitioners as mediating between politics and society, bringing the client's interest in line with societal interests, and working in the interest of society. Thirdly, and perhaps more surprising, the first factor includes items that express PA in terms of cooperation with decision-makers—an orientation we rather expected as part of the expert role conception.

Table 3
 Mean scores for role conception scale per group of respondents.

Subscribes to ...	n	Advocate		Expert		Mediator	
No role conception	15	5.57	(0.27)	5.32	(0.55)	3.95	(0.93)
Advocate role conception only	27	6.45	(0.37)	5.13	(1.01)	3.72	(1.13)
Expert role conception only	12	5.45	(0.63)	6.33	(0.31)	4.73	(0.60)
Advocate and expert role	39	6.53	(0.35)	6.39	(0.32)	4.48	(0.99)
All three role conceptions	7	6.66	(0.34)	6.43	(0.39)	6.31	(0.25)
All respondents	100	6.24	(0.59)	5.88	(0.85)	4.35	(1.14)

Note: Respondents subscribing to a role conception are defined as respondents that score at least 6.0 on the relevant scale (indicated in bold). Cell entries are mean scores and (SDs) per scale for each subgroup.

The second factor (eleven factor loadings >.41, 14.38% of variance explained, Eigen value = 4.78) describes the advocate role conception of PA practitioners. Here, we find all items that emphasize, in different ways, the predominant role of the client and the client’s interests in PA. But this focus on the client does not lead, the analysis suggests, to Machiavellian behavior in which the ends justify the means. The advocate role conception is not associated with the idea that it might be justifiable, in some cases, to bend the truth or to do whatever is necessary to reach one’s goals. More in line with our theoretical expectations, we note that the second factor encompasses a competitive conception of democracy. Nevertheless, it is striking that the idea that competition is the best mechanism for decision-making, loads only a bit stronger on the second factor compared with the first factor.

The third factor (nine loadings >.45), 13.22% of variance explained, Eigen value = 4.36) is mainly about the expert role conception. It emphasizes the importance of transparency and honesty, the role of expert information in decision-making, and the responsibility of PA practitioners to decision-makers. Moreover, items that describe strategic behavior (bending the truth, doing whatever is necessary) are relatively strongly and negatively associated with the third factor, reinforcing the normative orientation of this factor. Thirdly, this last factor encompasses the idea that PA practitioners are responsible to society. Cooperation with policy-makers, on the other hand, does not load well on this third factor (but instead, as we have seen, on the first factor). This means that the first and third factor differ not so much in terms of the primary stakeholders to which the PA practitioner relates, but rather in terms of the type of the relationship that are developed with these stakeholders. Whereas the third factor describes the PA practitioner as *responsible* to policy-makers and society, the first factor presents the practitioner as *cooperating* with policymakers and society.

4.3. Scales

Following the outcome of the PCA, we created scales for the three role conceptions by estimating the averaged sum scores across items (DiStefano, Zhu, & Mindrila, 2009). The items that were selected for each scale are indicated in Table 2. These were selected in an iterative process where we aimed for an identical number of conceptually sound and well-fitting items per scale, applying (amongst others) a cut-off value of .512 for reliable factor loadings (as suggested by Stevens, 2009 for a sample size of N = 100). The five items that we eventually retained per scale describe, in our view, the role conceptions well and produce reliable scales (Cronbach’s alphas are .786 for the advocate, .817 for the expert, and .785 for the mediator scale).

4.4. Prevalence of role conceptions among respondents

The scales allow us to assess how strongly and frequently PA practitioners in The Netherlands subscribe to the established role conceptions. Average scores per role conception vary between M = 4.35 (SD = 1.14) for the mediator role, M = 5.88 (SD = .85) for the expert role, and M = 6.24 (SD = .59) for the advocate role, on the 7-point scales that we used (with 4 indicating a neutral position, 5 some agreement, and 6 agreement). The averages thus mean that the PA practitioners in our sample subscribe to the advocate role, agree to some extent with the expert role, and tend to stand relatively neutral towards the mediator role.

Next, we establish the number of respondents that agree with these role conceptions, using 6.0 (indicating agreement) as cut-off value. The results show that 7% subscribes to all three role conceptions (scale values >= 6.0). In addition, 39% subscribes to both the advocate and expert roles, 27% only to the advocate role, and 12% only to the expert role. Finally, 15% does not really subscribe to any role conception (scale values <6.0), but nevertheless shows some affinity with the advocate and expert roles (see again Table 3).

Finally, we regress the role conception scales on personal and professional characteristics (results not presented in detail). After considering the differences between respondents, we include dummies for gender (1 = female; 26% of respondents), for respondents working more than 10 years in the field (37%), working for a PA/PR agency or as independent specialist (41%), representing only not-for-profit interests (39%), working exclusively on national or lower geographical levels (34%), and having a professional rather than academic education (10%). Of these characteristics, only gender and education have some predictive value for role conceptions. Female respondents subscribe more strongly to the expert role (B = .367, p < .1) and the mediator role (B = .536; p < .05). Likewise, respondents with a professional rather than academic education feel more attracted to the mediator role (B = .674, p < .1), too. The other characteristics have no significant impact.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The aim of the study was giving insights into how PA practitioners see their own role in the democratic decision-making and the political system. The answers of 100 active PA practitioners in The Netherlands to our survey questions provide not a big, but still a sufficiently large sample to investigate the research question through the use of quantitative explorative research techniques.

5.1. Limitations

At this stage, we recall that our sample is a convenience rather than representative sample. If anything, we expect our sampling technique, as described in Section 3, to result in an overrepresentation of members of the Dutch professional organization of PA practitioners BVPA in our sample. This organization emphasizes the importance of transparency and accountability, and requires its members to oblige to an organizational code of conduct that reflects these values. An unknown, but sizable group of PR practitioners is not member of the BVPA. These practitioners might have partly different views and values. Hence, we should interpret the data with care and not attempt to generalize to PA practitioners in The Netherlands in general (let alone to practitioners in other countries with other democratic systems and traditions).

5.2. Three role conceptions

The analysis shows that the role conceptions that we derived from previous research and theoretical considerations, receive empirical support. Conceptually, we can distinguish between the advocate, expert and mediator role conceptions. In the advocate role conception, the interests of the client are predominant. In the expert and mediator roles, policy-makers and social actors are also considered important stakeholders.

These latter two roles differ from each other in the way in which PA practitioners are (supposed to) advance the interests of society and to relate to policy-makers. For the mediator, equality and consensus are crucial, and policy makers emerge as logical partners to cooperate with in an attempt to find the best solution for society. The interest of society and policy-makers are perceived as driving PA practitioners. The expert, in contrast, puts transparency and honesty first, and keeps the policy maker more at distance. Sure, the expert has a responsibility to decision-makers and society, but the expert is not driven by their interests as the mediator is.

Compared with these two 'socially responsible' role conceptions, we found the advocate role to be relatively straightforward. Normative considerations and values that, as we proposed in the literature review, may justify an exclusive client orientation (e.g., the idea that competition between ideas and interests is the best possible way to arrive at good solutions), did not turn out to a strong and integral part of the advocate role conception. This suggests that those subscribing to the advocate role, see no need to justify their role, or justify their role in a different way, than by emphasizing a competitive approach to democracy.

In this respect, it is significant that there is considerable overlap in the extent to which PA practitioners subscribe to what in conceptual terms are distinctive role conceptions. In line with previous studies (Berg, 2012; Terry, 2001), our study, too, shows that the advocate role conception is the predominant perspective in our sample. But actually only less than a third (27) subscribes exclusively to the advocate role; and for only 6 of them these other roles have not even some appeal (scale scores <5.0). In other words, most respondents subscribe to a combination of advocate and expert roles, and some of them have at least some appreciation for the mediator role as well.

The empirical overlap in role conceptions probably explains why personal and professional characteristics have but little impact on the affiliation of respondents with role conceptions. Only gender and education predict to some extent the role conceptions that PA practitioners adopt.

5.3. Future research

The actual distribution of role conceptions among PA practitioners in The Netherlands (and abroad), is one area where more research with more representative samples is needed. The same applies to research into personal and professional characteristics that potentially explain why particular practitioners feel inclined to adopt particular role conceptions. Research on *journalistic* role conceptions emphasizes the impact of organizational and social factors. Along these lines, we might expect different role conceptions between practitioners representing not-for-profit or profit interests, and practitioners working for a PA agency or a non-PA firm. In our study, these relationships could not be established. This might be due to the limitations of our sample, so more research is necessary. Another interesting avenue for research would be to explore in more qualitative terms to what extent these role conceptions – that in principle reflect diverging normative foundations – are considered as similar, compatible or yet contradicting by members of the profession themselves.

6. Conclusions

In sum, we conclude that the PA practitioners in our sample consider it as their main role to defend the ideas and interests of their clients in decision-making processes. A considerable group, but not all, believe that they should adopt the expert

role, too, meaning that they have a responsibility towards policy-makers and society to be transparent and help decision-making with appropriate information. The mediator role, less visible in practice but nevertheless recognized as separate role conception by the respondents, describes a more active contribution of PA practitioners to decision-making. In this conception, PA practitioners are expected to seek actively for equality and consensus among different stakeholders.

In this study, we attempted – as far as we know – for the first time, to investigate role conceptions of PA practitioners in a structured and quantitative manner. We hope our findings trigger more research in the future that further explores the usefulness of the proposed roles and scales to better understand the PA profession. For the time being, the recognition of the three proposed role conceptions – the advocate, expert and mediator roles – by PA practitioners, makes them in our view relevant and interesting concepts to be further explored, even though one of them – the mediator role – is not strongly present among the members of our sample. We hope that in PA research, like in journalism studies, research into role conceptions helps to document the on-going process of professionalization in the PA sector. These studies could encourage self-reflection in the profession, while increasing knowledge for and about the profession alike.

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