

# Paid to lobby but up for debate: role conceptions and client selection of public affairs consultants

Public affairs  
consultants

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Received 28 December 2022

Revised 15 March 2023

27 April 2023

Accepted 28 April 2023

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This article addresses recent calls in the literature for advancing our understanding of public affairs consultants and their role conceptions. By testing and further exploring self-perceptions of public affairs consultants the study aims to offer new insight into how consultants define and view their occupational role.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study draws on a nationwide survey with public affairs consultants in Sweden.

**Findings** – Four main role conceptions were identified (advocate, do-gooder, expert and intermediary). Further, the study tests how personal and professional characteristics correlate with different role conceptions, by viewing professional experience and consultants' selection of clients. Data also suggest that consultants' background in politics does not promote any specific role perception. Finally, the findings also show that how consultants choose clients is a divider in the industry, where some act as passive intermediaries while other take a more active role in their choice of clients.

**Originality/value** – The findings enhance our understanding of public affairs as a field, and specifically about the modelling of professional roles amongst consultants. The empirical results in this study show how contemporary role typologies needs to be extended to better capture the specificities of consultants' roles in public affairs. By addressing the issue of how consultants choose clients the study engages with the complex debate of whether consultants ought to act as objective or subjective agents and hence join the conversation on ethics in public affairs.

**Keywords** Ethics, Public relations, Lobbying, Public affairs

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Scholars have long contemplated the nature of public affairs and lobbying (McGrath *et al.*, 2010; Milbrath, 1963). Much attention in research has been given to the contentious role of this field. On the one hand, public affairs is an essential component of democratic society. The opportunity for different actors to participate in public debate and provide politicians with relevant information is an important part of the policy process (Davidson, 2017; Ihlen *et al.*, 2021). On the other hand, numerous studies reveal a widespread mistrust in public affairs and a concern that public affairs might skew democracy by allowing certain resourceful groups to enjoy privileged access to policymaking (Davidson, 2017; Larsson, 2007). Considerably less attention has been given to how public affairs professionals themselves view their role in society as a professional group (Koch and Schulz-Knappe, 2021; von den Driesch and van der Wurff, 2016). Yet, understanding

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*Conflicts of interest:* There are no conflicts of interest.



Journal of Communication

Management

Vol. 27 No. 4, 2023

pp. 617-632

Emerald Publishing Limited

1363-254X

DOI 10.1108/JCOM-12-2022-0147

of how professionals themselves interpret and enact their role can give important insight into the functioning of public affairs in democracy and the conditions for public affairs work (Barron and Skountridaki, 2020; Koch and Schulz-Knappe, 2021). To address this gap, recent research has started to explore and test role conceptions in public affairs. Establishing a first typology of different role conceptions, this research sheds light on various values, attitudes and conceptualisations in the practice (von den Driesch and van der Wurff, 2016).

Public affairs professionals are not a homogeneous group, however (Boucher and Cooper, 2019). On the contrary, there are important differences among public affairs professionals (e.g. regarding competences, relationships with stakeholders, prerequisites for work, etc.), depending on whether they work as in-house lobbyists or as external consultants (Boucher and Cooper, 2019). Moreover, scholars have proposed that studying how organisational (von den Driesch and van der Wurff, 2016), structural and cultural factors (Koch and Schulz-Knappe, 2021) influence roles makes an interesting avenue to extend the research on role conception in the field.

In view of this, the current study focuses on a controversial group of public affairs professionals, namely public affairs consultants. The intersection between public affairs and consultancy work has generated a call to advance the debate on how commercial consulting fits into democracy (Ihlen *et al.*, 2021; Steiner and Jarren, 2009). In contrast to an in-house lobbyist, who is an employee of the interest they represent, consultants work in a commercial setting and represent a variety of clients on a contractual basis (Boucher and Cooper, 2019; Hoffmann *et al.*, 2011). A large proportion of public affairs consultants have passed through the so-called revolving door between government and the lobbying profession (LaPira and Thomas, 2014; Tyllström and Murray, 2021), an issue that raises questions about how political skills can be sold and provide undue influence on certain interests (LaPira and Thomas, 2014). Concern that consultants prioritise profit-making over contributing to the policy debate (LaPira and Thomas, 2014) has made the selection of clients and which clients merit representation a point of debate (Edgett, 2002).

Against this background this article responds to the call for more research on public affairs consultants and the study of role conceptions. Based on a nation-wide survey amongst active public affairs consultant ( $n = 91$ ) in Sweden I test and further explore the self-perception of consultants. Moreover, the study tests how personal and professional characteristics correlate with different role conceptions and shows how professional experience and client choice differ amongst consultants. I identify and discuss four main role conceptions for public affairs consultants (the *advocate*, the *do-gooder*, the *expert*, the *intermediary*) which extend earlier work (von den Driesch and van der Wurff, 2016) and, moreover, form the basis of my inquiry into the critical issue of “revolving door” consultants. Here, results suggest that a background in politics does not promote any specific role perception. The findings also show that how consultants choose clients is a divider in the industry, where some act as passive intermediaries while other take a more active role in their choice of clients.

Consequently, the article contributes with knowledge about public affairs as a field, and specifically about the modelling of professional roles amongst consultants. By addressing the issue of how consultants choose clients the study engages with the complex debate of whether consultants ought to act as objective or subjective agents and hence join the conversation on ethics in public affairs.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Perception of occupational roles

The notion of role conceptions provides a lens to explore different ways public affairs consultants construct their occupational role. Role conceptions entails both functional

descriptions and normative values and ideals (Mellado and Van Dalen, 2014; Van Dalen *et al.*, 2012; von den Driesch and van der Wurff, 2016). Professionals construct occupational roles during their work life through socialisation and their understanding of others' expectations of the role at hand (Koch and Schulz-Knappe, 2021). Beyond guiding practitioners in their everyday work, these values and ideals legitimise the work both internally in the occupational group and externally against a variety of stakeholder groups (Mellado and Van Dalen, 2014). Several, even incompatible, role conceptions may co-exist within an occupation. Furthermore, the conceptions are not individual professionals' constructs: rather, they are collectively negotiated and context dependent (Hinnant *et al.*, 2016). When professionals are met with a variety of expectations, they might experience role conflict or role ambiguity (Dozier and Broom, 2006). This can cause both stress and pressure on professionals, but also a flexibility for professionals to negotiate, select and construct an occupational role for themselves (Biddle, 1986; Dozier and Broom, 2006).

von den Driesch and van der Wurff (2016) were the first to bring the notion of role conceptions to public affairs research. In their study, the authors performed a large-scale exploration of role conceptions in the Netherlands and constructed a typology of roles based on which stakeholder the practitioners view as their main stakeholder, the overall perception of public affairs and its aim, and which values accentuate their work. The study also included self-descriptions, how public affairs contribute to democracy, and questions of responsibility and motivation (von den Driesch and van der Wurff, 2016). Three main role conceptions were distinguished. The first role, the advocate, emanates from a strong loyalty to the client as a stakeholder. Practitioners act as guides, educators and advocates, aiding clients in making their interest heard in a competitive political environment. The second role, the mediator, is centred on social responsibility and highlights the alignment of interest, the value of equality and dialogue (and hence closely connects to the normative or ideal models of related practices in public relations). Mediators feel a drive to make a beneficial contribution to society and, as such, the client and the society serve as the central stakeholders. The third role, the expert, stresses providing politicians with correct and transparent information to enable them to make informed and efficient decisions. For the expert, policymakers serve as the main stakeholders (von den Driesch and van der Wurff, 2016). Furthermore, following these explorations, a quantitative study showed that all roles in the typology were accounted for among public affairs professionals. The advocate role was most common while the mediator was less noticeable, and moreover that role conceptions can overlap (von den Driesch and van der Wurff, 2016). von den Driesch and van der Wurff (2016) encouraged further study of conception of the public affairs role to gain a better understanding of the occupation's professionalisation and investigate the usefulness of the proposed typology. Recently, Koch and Schulz-Knappe (2021) aimed to fill the gap by exploring role conceptions amongst German public affairs practitioners. The authors categorised four different roles: persuaders, advisors, coordinators and mediators. Different self-descriptions of roles were found and distinguished by, for example, the perception of whether clients' interests or societal interests should be put first. Moreover, in contrast to von den Driesch and van der Wurff's (2016) study, several similarities between the roles were identified. All roles stressed the importance of transparency, viewed convincing policymakers as the objective of their work, and saw the importance of aligning their work with ethical norms. In addition, professionals in the sample felt responsibility towards a larger number of stakeholders simultaneously, a situation that could generate role conflicts and ethical dilemmas (Koch and Schulz-Knappe, 2021). The elusive lines between roles and that practitioners present characteristics of different role conceptions simultaneously was further discussed by Falasca and Helgesson (2021). In their qualitative study the authors found that the distinction between the roles appeared contextual (Falasca and Helgesson, 2021), a result that results speaks to research on fluent nature of roles as they are continually negotiated (Mellado, 2021).

These extant studies have provided valuable insights into the modelling of roles. Both Koch and Schulz-Knappe (2021) and von den Driesch and van der Wurff (2016) used a strategic sample that included a variety of public affairs professionals such as consultancies, trade organisations, NGOs, companies and government. Studies of journalistic role conceptions have found that social and organisational factors influence roles (von den Driesch and van der Wurff, 2016). As such, von den Driesch and van der Wurff (2016) proposed that the same ought to hold for public affairs professionals. They tested for differences amongst practitioners working for a public affairs/public relations agency or as independent specialists, but found no significant results, elaborating that this could be due to limitations in the sample used and urging further studies on the topic. Hence, the current study will address this issue by concentrating on the specific group of public affairs consultants.

### *2.2 Passive and active agents*

Consultants in public affairs are often accused of unethical behaviour (Steiner and Jarren, 2009) and portrayed as “hired guns” (Falasca and Helgesson, 2021) or corporate mouthpieces (Tyllström and Murray, 2021). One study found that consultants were perceived by the public as an alien intrusion in politics (Larsson, 2007), and concern has been raised that the mistrust in public affairs may, in turn, damage the trust in democratic politics (Davidson, 2017). At the same time, the growing presence of consultancies in democratic processes has made scholars speak of the development of a “consultocracy” and a “PR-itisiation” of politics (Kantola, 2016), claiming that consultants represent a new force of power in the political landscape and an emerging field of practice (Hoffmann *et al.*, 2011; Svallfors, 2016). The issues concerning the role of public affairs in democracy are rooted in debate on whose interests are being represented in democratic processes. In contrast to public affairs professionals who are employed to represent a specific interest, consultants provide services to a wide variety of clients who wish to influence political decision-making in a certain direction (Boucher and Cooper, 2019; Lounasmeri, 2018). The representation of organised special interest vs the elusive public interest, and how public affairs consultants ought to balance these stances when they are not compatible, is therefore in focus (Barron and Skountridaki, 2020; Davidson and Rowe, 2016). The idea of professionalism requires professionals to serve both the public interest and the client’s interest at the same time; however, individual public affairs professionals are expected to assess and handle the tension between these dual pressures (Barron and Skountridaki, 2020). As commercial entities, public affairs consultants’ work is conducted in the interest of themselves as a business as well as for clients; however, as stated by van Es (2002, p. 145), “we can only guess if their work is also in the interests of the public”. Fawkes (2012) addressed the pressures as an ethical tension that reflects competing ethical identities in the industry. The author depicts how the long-lasting debate on ethics in public relations can be captured using two opposing images of roles; a sinner and a saint. The sinner represents the advocacy role and an anti-ethics stance who abdicate moral responsibility in the name of the marketplace of ideas, whereas the saint portrays the idealized ethical guardian who is guided by a higher sense of serving the public good (Fawkes, 2012). The duality lays the foundation for larger debate on the role and practice of public relations in democracy, and the central considerations practitioners are faced with in their work as they legitimize their practice (Falasca and Helgesson, 2021; Kantola, 2016; Lounasmeri, 2018).

The fact that the consultancies in general not are affected by the policy outcome they are hired to influence on behalf of their clients (Huwyler, 2020) has been portrayed as a legitimacy gap (Larsson, 2006). However, the common view that consultants are passive vessels of the clients’ will and agenda has been challenged. Recent studies have illustrated that public affairs consultants do not always act as passive agents helping their clients to participate in

the political process (Barron and Skountridaki, 2020; Tyllström and Murray, 2021). In contrast, consultants take a more active role and let their own political agenda shape and adapt the client's agenda, hence pursuing lobbying projects based on their own beliefs (Tyllström and Murray, 2021). That consultants can have ideological agendas of their own highlights that these professionals are active and politically driven, posing further questions on both the role of consultants and the relationship between consultants and their clients (Tyllström and Murray, 2021). The previous concern that the existence of consultants might create an over-representation of wealthy special interests is accompanied by the argument of whether the selection of clients could in turn create an imbalance in representation, where clients who align with the consultant's personal agenda receive increased attention. Moreover, the study by Tyllström and Murray (2021) found that experience and personal attachments to political opinions influenced how active the consultants tended to be in their approach. The number of years working with public affairs showed that newer consultants take a more passive approach than consultants with many years' experience. In the same vein, consultants who have strong ideological attachments going into their work tend to have an active approach in relation to the client (Tyllström and Murray, 2021).

The question of which clients or issues merit representation has been visited frequently within public affairs. Edgett (2002) proposed that ethical advocacy can only occur when practitioners objectively evaluate and prioritise clients and issues before taking them on. However, whose judgements and which values ought to be the basis of the evaluation is still unclear. Disagreement has led scholars to explore different aspects of ethics and to establish terms such as "ethical" and "responsible" lobbying (Barron and Skountridaki, 2020). The subject of personal beliefs and ethics was also addressed by Berg and Gibson (2011), who rather than passive or active agents, described the two roles as "hired guns" vs "moral torpedoes". In Berg and Gibson's typology, the two roles are separated by their role morality: the hired gun isolates himself or herself from personal responsibility, whereas the moral torpedo lets his or her own personal morals guide the work without considering the wider consequences (Berg and Gibson, 2011). The typology highlights the clear link between role conceptions and practitioners' feeling of responsibility and accountability. This illustrates how roles are attributed different functional and moral obligations which the practitioners are expected to uphold (Bivins, 2006). In all, the different ways in which consultants accommodate the function of being an advocate relates to the controversy of whether consultants ought to be impartial advocates or act as a form of subjective political agents (van Es, 2002).

*2.2.1 "Revolving door" consultants.* In a complex political landscape, political skills are a valuable resource for those who want to influence politics successfully. A characteristic of public affairs consultants as a group is a high degree of political knowhow (Svallfors, 2016). Perhaps this is not surprising, as the most common background for a public affairs consultant is as either political staff or an elected politician (Boucher and Cooper, 2019; Tyllström and Murray, 2021). The inflow of political knowledge to the public affairs industry often comes through the so-called revolving door, referring to the movement between the political sphere and the corporate sphere (Svallfors, 2016). The existence of revolving-door consultants has raised questions of how skills obtained in the political sphere can be turned into a commodity. Beyond this, these individuals often have important contacts with policymakers and journalists (Vesa and Karimo, 2019). The relationship between lobbyists and politicians, and the use and misuse of these connections, has become an area of interest. The benevolent view is that revolving-door consultants, with their knowledge of the political system and what type of information politicians require, can contribute to effective policymaking (LaPira and Thomas, 2014). The less optimistic view underlines the risk of undue influence, acknowledging that these consultants are in a unique position to sell access and connections (Boucher and Cooper, 2019; LaPira and Thomas, 2014). However, it is difficult to

draw a line between when consultants are providing access or information, as personal connections and expertise tend to be intertwined (Boucher and Cooper, 2019). In particular, lobbyists who specialise in certain topics tend to build long-term relationships through continual contact with relevant actors (Boucher and Cooper, 2019).

What stands is that many of the consultants in public affairs are more politically versed and connected than the clients who hire them (Tyllström and Murray, 2021). The knowledge asymmetry between clients and consultants results in consultants taking on the role of teacher rather than facilitator (Tyllström and Murray, 2021). This again poses questions as to how political experience might change the perception of the public affairs role and the enactment of consultants. Moreover, it engages in the issue of how the knowledge of the political game achieved from personal experience in the political sphere influences how consultants relate to other stakeholders such as politicians.

In sum, to continue the recent and important work on public affairs role conceptions started by Koch and Schulz-Knappe (2021) and von den Driesch and van der Wurff (2016), this study aims to test and further explore role conceptions in the specific group of public affairs consultants. Additionally, the study contributes to knowledge about consultants by testing how (a) previous experience and (b) consultants' being active or passive agents relate to different roles. The purpose of the article is addressed through the following research questions.

*RQ1.* What role conceptions do public affairs consultants hold?

*RQ2.* How does professional experience coincide with different role conceptions?

*RQ3.* How does active choice of clients/assignments coincide with different role conceptions?

### 3. Methods and materials

#### 3.1 Sample

Data were gathered through a nationwide anonymous online survey in Sweden. The Swedish public affairs industry has experienced a boom in recent decades as the political landscape has moved from corporativism to a more pluralistic character. Certain traits that are found in other small nations, such as a limited political sphere, influence the lobbying climate (Ihlen *et al.*, 2021). However, studies illustrate that the Swedish context shows similarities and can be comparable to other western European democracies (Bengtsson *et al.*, 2014). A challenge in studying public affairs in Sweden is an uncertainty about the volume and distinctiveness of this occupational group. As such, a strategic sampling method was applied. Consultants were located through several steps. In a first step, public affairs and public relations bureaus were located using different trade organisations' member lists and an Internet search using keywords relating to public affairs and public relations. In total, 105 bureaus were considered, ranging from large national to small local bureaus. The sample hence covered a large proportion of relevant actors. In a second step, all bureaus' official websites were visited and employees' job descriptions examined. All consultants whose job descriptions explicitly stated that they worked with public affairs were selected. Of the bureaus, 27 had consultants who fit the profile. Participation was then solicited from 208 public affairs consultants. The survey was fielded during October 2019. A total of 97 individuals answered the survey, yielding a response rate of 46.63%. As six respondents had missing data, they were excluded from further analysis, generating a value of  $N = 91$ . A majority of the respondents were male (71%). Respondents almost exclusively worked for private-sector clients (90%). The sample was characterised by respondents with good political knowledge and experience. A large proportion of consultants (37.8%) declared that they had worked for more than ten years in

public affairs. In addition, most of the respondents had passed through the revolving door, moving from a position in politics to the public affairs industry. A total of 63.3% of respondents had come from a previous career in politics, and of these, over 40% stated that they had more than ten years' experience in the political sphere before starting to work in public affairs.

### 3.2 Measures

Building on the approach and central characteristics of different role conceptions established by von den Driesch and van der Wurff (2016), the survey explored several aspects of occupational roles (22 items). Additional variables were included regarding professional experience, and if the consultants are active or passive in their approach to clients, based on the study by Tyllström and Murray (2021). All items were measured on a scale from 1 ("I do not agree") to 5 ("I agree completely"), except items relating to professional experience.

**3.2.1 Perception of public affairs work.** In order to measure their perception of public affairs (PA), respondents were asked to rate their agreement with seven items adopted from von den Driesch and van der Wurff's (2016) study: "PA is in my opinion about aligning interests", "PA is in my opinion about PA professionals and policymakers helping each other to achieve something", "PA is in my opinion about contributing so that the best solution possible for society is taken"; "PA is in my opinion about providing information to policymakers"; "PA is in my opinion about advancing the interest of my clients"; "PA is in my opinion about convincing policymakers of my clients' views"; "PA is in my opinion about winning conflicts of interest".

**3.2.2 Occupational self-descriptions.** To further analyse different interpretations of the PA role, the respondents rated their agreement with three items concerning self-descriptions of their occupational role: "As a PA consultant, I am a mediator between society and politics"; "As a PA consultant, I am a source of information for policymakers"; "As a PA consultant, I make sure that the best decision for my client is taken".

**3.2.3 Contribution to democratic society.** In line with von den Driesch and van der Wurff's (2016) study, the respondents were asked to rate their agreement with three items exploring the consultants' perceptions of their contribution to democracy: "I ease decision-making for policymakers"; "I ensure that my clients' interest are heard"; "I make sure to align the private interest of my client with the public interest".

**3.2.4 Perception of stakeholders.** To explore the consultants' perceptions of stakeholders, the three stakeholder groups identified by von den Driesch and van der Wurff (2016) were measured using several items. Three items measured the consultants' sense of responsibility towards stakeholders: "I am responsible to my client"; "I am responsible to the policymaker I am informing"; "I am responsible to society". To gain additional information, the respondents were asked about stakeholders and their motivation thought the following items: "In my work, I am driven by the interests of the policymaker I am informing"; "In my work, I am driven by the interests of society"; "In my work, I am driven by the interests of my client".

**3.2.5 Occupational values.** The respondents were asked to rate their agreement with three statements regarding occupational values from von den Driesch and van der Wurff's (2016) study. The professional value of transparency was measured using the item: "As a PA consultant, I have to be completely transparent about my client and their intentions". The value equality was measured through the item: "As a PA consultant, I must ensure the everyone can contribute equally". The occupational value of loyalty was measured using the item: "As a PA consultant, I would do anything to achieve the goals of my client".

**3.2.6 Passive or active consultants.** An item was developed to measure whether the respondents are active or passive agents. Whether the consultants let their own ethical views influence the choice of client/issues they choose to work with was used as an indicator of the

issue, drawing on the study by [Tyllström and Murray \(2021\)](#). As such, the respondents were asked to rate their agreement with the statement: “I let my personal ethics guide which clients/assignments I choose to work with”.

*3.2.7 Professional experience.* To analyse professional experience and a background in politics, the consultants were asked to pinpoint how long they had worked in public affairs. To approach the issue of a background in politics, the consultants were asked if they had a background in politics (yes/no), and for further information on how long they had worked in politics prior to their employment as a consultant.

### *3.3 Method of analysis*

In a first step descriptive data for individual items were examined. To find patterns and trends in the survey data that material was then analysed using a principal component analysis (PCA). The method provided opportunity to detect underlying clusters in the answers that represented various dimensions of public affairs role conceptions. To address the second and third research questions, the results from the PCA were further analysed in relation to professional experience and an active or passive approach. The results are presented in the next section.

## **4. Results**

### *4.1 Descriptive analysis of data*

The items in the survey aimed to mirror the role conceptions found in previous research ([von den Driesch and van der Wurff, 2016](#)). The variables are not mutually exclusive, rather they measure different dimensions of the role conceptions. Descriptive statistics for all items relating to role conceptions and active/passive approach, including means and standard deviation for the level of agreement with the statements are summarized in [Table 1](#).

The data illustrated that consultants in the sample rated high on several items relating to representing their client; “PA is in my opinion about advancing the interest of my clients” ( $M = 4.6$ ,  $SD = 0.8$ ); “As a PA consultant, I make sure that the best decision for my client is taken” ( $M = 4.5$ ,  $SD = 0.8$ ), indicating the centrality of the client as a stakeholder. Moreover, a strong agreement was found with all items measuring a sense of responsibility to different stakeholders; “I am responsible to my client” ( $M = 4.6$ ,  $SD = 0.6$ ), “I am responsible to the policymaker I am informing” ( $M = 4.4$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ), “I am responsible to society” ( $M = 4.3$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ). Two items measuring perception of public affairs work gained considerable support signalling that the statements; “PA is in my opinion about providing information to policymakers” ( $M = 4.6$ ,  $SD = 0.6$ ); “PA is in my opinion about contributing so that the best solution possible for society is taken” ( $M = 4.3$ ,  $SD = 0.8$ ) were in line with the consultants’ perceptions. Items measuring occupational values received the most disparate level of agreement, where the value of transparency had a high mean, “As a PA consultant, I have to be completely transparent about my client and their intentions” ( $M = 4.1$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ), whereas the values of loyalty and equality had low scores, “As a PA consultant, I must ensure the everyone can contribute equally” ( $M = 1.9$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ). “As a PA consultant, I would do anything to achieve the goals of my client” ( $M = 1.4$ ,  $SD = 0.5$ ).

### *4.2 Principal component analysis*

To further analyse the survey results and find patterns the data was subjected to a PCA. To make sure the dataset was appropriate for the method, the measure of sample adequacy (MSA) was explored using Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO). The KMO test revealed one item with low KMO. This item was excluded from further analysis (item: “As a PA consultant, I would do anything to reach the goals of my client”). The remaining items all had individual KMO

Survey statement	M	SD
V1 PA is in my opinion about aligning interests	2.9	1.2
V2 PA is in my opinion about PA professionals and policymakers helping each other to achieve something	4.0	1.0
V3 PA is in my opinion about contributing so that the best solution possible for society is taken	4.3	0.8
V4 PA is in my opinion about providing information to policymakers	4.6	0.6
V5 PA is in my opinion about advancing the interest of my clients	4.6	0.8
V6 PA is in my opinion about convincing policymakers of my clients' views	3.7	1.1
V7 PA is in my opinion about winning conflicts of interest	3.2	1.2
V8 As a PA consultant, I am a mediator between society and politics	3.5	1.4
V9 As a PA consultant, I am a source of information for policymakers	4.1	1.0
V10 As a PA consultant, I make sure that the best decision for my client is taken	4.5	0.8
V11 I ease decision-making for policymakers	4.0	0.9
V12 I ensure that my clients' interest are heard	4.3	0.9
V13 I make sure to align the private interest of my client with the public interest	3.2	1.2
V14 I am responsible to my client	4.6	0.6
V15 I am responsible to the policymaker I am informing	4.4	0.9
V16 I am responsible to society	4.3	0.9
V17 In my work, I am driven by the interests of the policymaker I am informing	3.1	1.2
V18 In my work, I am driven by the interests of society	3.9	1.1
V19 In my work, I am driven by the interests of my client	3.8	1.2
V20 As a PA consultant, I have to be completely transparent about my client and their intentions	4.1	1.2
V.21 As a PA consultant, I must ensure the everyone can contribute equally	1.9	1.1
V.22 As a PA consultant, I would do anything to achieve the goals of my client	1.4	0.5
V.23 I let my personal ethics guide which clients/assignments I choose to work with	3.9	1.2

**Note(s):** N-value = 91. Scale ranges from 1 = I do not agree, to 5 = I agree completely  
**Source(s):** Created by author

**Table 1.**  
Descriptive data of survey items

values over the recommended level of 0.5, and the overall dataset had a KMO of 0.743, which is well above the threshold. Moreover, the correlation index indicated several sizeable correlations over 0.3, indicating a good fit for factor analysis.

Following Costello and Osborne (2005) the number of components retained was established using several tests. By reviewing eigenvalues as well as the graph of the eigenvalues, i.e. the scree plot, statistically significant components that reduce the complexity of the dataset while keeping the most of the original information was determined. To further establish the suitability to the dataset, different numbers of fixed component was tested manually to attain a solid solution (Costello and Osborne, 2005). Assuming that the components would be related a PCA using oblique rotation (direct oblmin), fitting as the method permits components to correlate, was run using the remaining 21 items. However, the component correlation index indicated low levels of correlation, implying that an orthogonal rotation that keep the factors unrelated could provide a cleaner structure. Hence, the rotation method was changed to orthogonal rotation (varimax). The analysis resulted in a four-component solution which explained 53.3% of the variance in the material. All components had three or more items with significant loadings and were considered solid in accordance with Costello and Osborne (2005).

The four components were named according to the different role conceptions they were considered to represent: the advocate, the do-gooder, the expert and the intermediary. The internal consistency of the components was tested using Cronbach's alpha. While generally a level of around 0.7 is recommended, a level of 0.5 is adequate in exploratory studies (Nunnally, 1978), especially when measuring psychological constructs, as the material will inevitably be

coloured by great diversity (Klein, 1999; cited in Field, 2018, p. 823). The components had Cronbach's alphas of between 0.583 and 0.878, which was considered satisfactory due to the exploratory nature of the study and as the components illustrated theoretically interesting constructs. A summary of the rotated analysis and Cronbach's alpha is presented in Table 2.

4.3 Occupational role conceptions

The PCA indicated the public affairs consultants' role conceptions could be grouped into four different components. The first and strongest component, explaining 23% of the variance, was labelled "the advocate". The role describes consultants with a strong client orientation.

Items Name	Factor			
	Advocate	Do-gooder	Expert	Intermediary
I ensure that my clients' interests are heard	<i>0.84</i>	-0.01	0.12	0.06
PA is in my opinion about advancing the interests of my client	<i>0.83</i>	-0.14	0.13	0.01
In my work, I am driven by the interests of my client	<i>0.81</i>	-0.07	-0.11	-0.08
As a PA consultant, I make sure that the best decision for my client is taken	<i>0.79</i>	-0.11	0.19	-0.06
I am responsible to my client	<i>0.78</i>	0.11	-0.00	-0.15
PA is in my opinion about convincing policymakers of my clients, views	<i>0.70</i>	-0.21	-0.05	0.12
PA is in my opinion about winning conflicts of interest	<i>0.65</i>	-0.16	-0.05	0.01
I am responsible to society	-0.17	<i>0.70</i>	0.26	-0.08
In my work I am driven by the interests of society	-0.32	<i>0.66</i>	-0.14	0.04
As a PA consultant, I have to be completely transparent about my client and their intentions	-0.01	<i>0.63</i>	-0.34	0.09
In my work, I am driven by the interests of the policymaker I am informing	-0.05	<i>0.58</i>	0.05	0.34
PA is in my opinion about contributing so that the best solution possible for society is taken	-0.19	<i>0.54</i>	0.38	0.02
I am responsible to the policymaker I am informing	0.15	<i>0.47</i>	0.35	0.14
As a PA consultant, I am a source of information for policymakers	0.17	-0.01	<i>0.71</i>	0.09
I ease decision-making for policymakers	0.03	-0.17	<i>0.71</i>	0.04
PA is in my opinion about providing information to policymakers	-0.03	-0.07	<i>0.55</i>	0.09
I make sure to align the private interests of my client with the public interest	0.09	-0.10	-0.01	<i>0.82</i>
PA is in my opinion about aligning interests	-0.10	0.15	0.13	<i>0.60</i>
As a PA consultant, I am a mediator between society and politics	-0.05	0.02	0.50	<i>0.55</i>
PA is in my opinion about PA professionals and policymakers helping each other to achieve something	0.06	0.28	0.25	<i>0.46</i>
As a PA consultant, I must ensure that everyone can contribute equally	-0.15	0.40	-0.13	<i>0.42</i>
As a PA consultant, I would do anything to achieve the goals of my client	Excluded	Excluded	Excluded	Excluded
Cronbach's a	0.878	0.691	0.583	0.612
Eigenvalues	4.85	3.15	1.75	1.44
% of variance	23.09	14.98	8.33	6.86

**Table 2.** Summary of PCA using varimax rotation of four factor solution on public affairs consultants' role conceptions

**Note(s):** Sorted according to size, with largest loading in italic  
**Source(s):** Created by author

The consultants clearly define their role as advancing the interests of their clients and are motivated by making sure that their clients' interests are heard in a competitive political environment. The role loaded high on the items of feeling responsible towards the client, convincing policymakers and winning conflicts of interest. As an advocate, the consultants express a clear focus on the client as a stakeholder.

The second role, explaining 15% of the variance, represents consultants who feel a strong sense of responsibility towards society and the public good. As such, it was given the name "the do-gooder". Being motivated by the societal interest, contributing to good decisions for society and the occupational value of transparency received high scores with the do-gooder role. However, consultants subscribing to the role also expressed that policymakers are key stakeholders and that they feel both a motivation and a responsibility to aid policymakers in their work. The do-gooder hence indicated two stakeholders as highly relevant in their work.

The third role, explaining 8% of the variance, was labelled "the expert". The role captures consultants who emphasise the importance of information and identify as enablers of a smooth decision-making process. The consultants view themselves as a source of information for policymakers.

The fourth role component extracted explained 7% of the variance and loaded high on items concerning alignment, compromise and equality. As such, the role was named "the intermediary". Consultants subscribing to the intermediary role collaborate with policymakers and aim to find compromises and align competing interests that might appear between the special interests of the client and the public interest. Acting as a negotiator and the occupational value of equality were connected to the role; however, both items only loaded slightly higher for the intermediary than for the do-gooder.

#### 4.4 Personal and professional characteristics

The four components extracted from the PCA were analysed using additional variables regarding professional experience and an active or passive approach in relation to choosing clients. The relationship between the role conceptions and a background in politics was measured using point-biserial correlational (due to the dichotomous design of the item). The result indicated no significant relationship between a background in politics and any of the roles (advocate:  $r_{pb} = -0.025$ ,  $p = 0.816$ ; do-gooder:  $r_{pb} = -0.043$ ,  $p = 0.683$ ; expert:  $r_{pb} = -0.040$ ,  $p = 0.708$ ; intermediary:  $r_{pb} = -0.114$ ,  $p = 0.281$ ). As such, the measure of how long the consultants had been active in politics prior to becoming PA consultants was deemed irrelevant and dropped from further analysis. The remaining items were measured using Spearman's rho. The analysis showed a modest correlation between time working in PA and the intermediary role conception, indicating that junior PA consultants subscribed more often to the intermediary role.

The results indicated that the choice of clients and an active/passive approach had a significant relationship with the two role conceptions of the advocate and the do-gooder. Consultants who identified with the advocate role did not let their own ethical attachment influence the choice of clients and hence were more passive. In contrast, consultants identifying with the do-gooder role let their own attachments influence the choice to a large extent, signalling an active approach. The results are summarised in [Table 3](#).

## 5. Discussion

The results indicate that the three general role conceptions established in [von den Driesch and van der Wurff's \(2016\)](#) typology (the advocate, the expert and the mediator) hold up but also unfold in a different manner in the particular population of public affairs consultants. Also, in line with previous studies ([Koch and Schulz-Knappe, 2021](#); [von den Driesch and van](#)

der Wurff, 2016), there are two prominent yet conflicting stances: a strong client orientation and a strong civic orientation. Moreover, the advocate was the most common role conception, a result that has been seen in other empirical studies (Terry, 2001; von den Driesch and van der Wurff, 2016). However, in the current study, the consultants exhibited four different dimensions of role conceptions rather than three, here labelled the advocate, the do-gooder, the expert and the intermediary. Two roles, the advocate and the expert, were similar to those described in von den Driesch and van der Wurff's (2016) original typology. However, the items belonging to the role these authors have described as a mediator was sorted into two separate roles in the current study: the intermediary and the do-gooder. All items concerning alignment and consensus-building ended up in the intermediary role, while receiving low scores in relation to the do-gooder. In contrast, the do-gooder role conception put forward a self-description as a representative of civic society. These consultants are driven and motivated by civic life and feel a strong responsibility towards society and towards policymakers. Based on this, the intermediary and the do-gooder have two very different ways to perceive their roles. Moreover, the intermediary made up a small proportion, whereas the do-gooder was the second strongest role in the population. This result indicates the need to divide and explore further roles within the previously stated mediator role to make room for more nuances within this conception. The different result from previous studies could be connected to the Swedish case, deriving from cultural and social factors such as the political context; however, findings could also be related to the commercial setting in which consultants are working. Aligning interests and advocating for a special interest at the same time is a potential challenge, and the mediator stance may hence fit poorly in the modelling of roles for consultants and consultancy work in general. As the study by von den Driesch and van der Wurff's (2016) found no difference of roles between independent specialists and consultants, this line of reasoning and whether or not organisational factors shape occupational role conception requires further study. Elaboration on the topic can give knowledge of the boundaries and opportunities consultants are confronted with, and provide pieces to the debate on how the intersection between commercial consulting and the idea of democracy are to be discussed (Steiner and Jarren, 2009). In addition, the study investigated whether previous professional experience correlates with different role conceptions to engage with the critical question of revolving-door consultants. Apart from a small yet significant correlation between consultants who had recently started their career in public affairs and the intermediary role conception, professional experience was not associated with any specific role. Tyllström and Murray (2021) found that experience can have an influence on role enactment and that junior consultants are more passive than their senior counterparts.

**Table 3.**  
Spearman's rho  
correlation between  
public affairs  
consultants' role  
conception, ethics and  
professional  
experience

		Advocate	Do-gooder	Expert	Intermediary
Active approach in choosing clients	Correlations	-0.295**	0.514**	0.013	0.108
	coefficient	0.005	0.001	0.899	0.310
Years working in PA	Correlations	0.024	-0.162	-0.100	-0.210*
	coefficient	0.818	0.125	0.344	0.046
Years working in politics prior to PA	Correlations	0.141	0.078	0.006	0.057
	coefficient	0.294	0.562	0.962	0.674

**Note(s):** \*\*Correlation is significant at the  $p < 0.01$  level

\*Correlation is significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level

**Source(s):** Created by author

In relation to this, the findings of this study suggest that junior consultants are not only more passive but are also inclined to align interests and perceive their role as mediators between stakeholders. Beyond this, experience showed limited relation to roles in the current study. That [Tyllström and Murray \(2021\)](#) studied role enactment and the current studied role perceptions could explain the difference in findings of professional experience. Moreover, it signals that the relationship and gap between role perception and actual performance merits more studies and can give knowledge of what public affairs consultants think they should do and what they do within a context, and what factors influence these considerations. Finally, the study engages in the issue of whether consultants are active or passive in their choice of clients and assignments by investigating if the consultants let their personal ethics guide their work. The do-gooder role stands out as pertaining to practitioners that to a large extent allow personal values to be present in their work, whereas the opposite can be seen in the advocate role. Using the words of [Berg and Gibson \(2011\)](#), this would indicate that the do-gooder acts as a “moral torpedo” guided by personal morals, while the advocate acts as a “hired gun”, who detaches himself or herself from the choice. When reflecting on the meaning of “hired gun” or “moral torpedo”, it should be noted that both stances can have positive or negative connotations depending on one’s viewpoint, expectations of the role and what is perceived as the correct conduct when it comes to how practitioners approach the issue. To reprise the work of [van Es \(2002\)](#), it relates to whether consultants should be impartial advocates or political agents. A hired gun, for example, might just be a consultant, hired for a job. Not choosing clients based on personal values can also imply a values-based choice, where practitioners stay true to the idea of the objective professional, aiding those who hire them without measuring their interests against personal values, similar to a lawyer. In contrast, the moral torpedo can choose clients whose cause they believe is beneficial for society at large. In that sense, they act as politicians, aiding certain agendas and interests based on their own belief of what constitutes the public good. However, the debate on ethics and morals is connected to debate of what constitutes “good democracy” and the elusive concept of the public interest ([Bitonti, 2017](#)), and relates to the complex debate on ethical and responsible lobbying ([Barron and Skountridaki, 2020](#); [Edgett, 2002](#); [Fawkes, 2012](#)). It comes back to the issue of how morals should be assessed, and whether this is a role that can or ought to be allocated to professionals. It connects to previous research which explore the way practitioner manage and justify their occupation in different contexts and in relation to different actors ([Falasca and Helgesson, 2021](#); [Kantola, 2016](#); [Lounasmeri, 2018](#)) A question that invites to further discussion on how the “sinner-saint” images ([Fawkes, 2012](#)) ought to be evaluated in the context of commercial consultants.

In the case of the current data, the fact that a large part of the sample do not let their personal ethics dictate who they work with might appear surprising, as it is expected that “revolvers” with a background in politics ought to have rather strong ideological attachments, especially as [Tyllström and Murray \(2021\)](#) found that strong ideological attachments often lead to a highly active approach.

There are limitations to the current study. Due to the lack of an official record of public affairs consultants in Sweden, the study is based on strategic sampling which impedes generalizability of results. Moreover, the generalizability is affected by the strong representation of men in the sample as well as respondents working for private-sector clients. As highlighted by [Koch and Schulz-Knappe \(2021\)](#), structural and cultural factors could potentially influence role conceptions. However, this issue is beyond the grasp of the study at hand, and the results may play out differently in other countries. One way to further develop the findings and the discussion in the study is to continue the work of [Tyllström and Murray \(2021\)](#) and explore how political affiliation or voting preference may influence role perception and views of the function on public affairs in democracy. Furthermore, there are limitations when studying self-perceptions, and further studies would need to explore if the role conceptions, in fact, translate

into role enactment. Moreover, the fluent nature and contextuality of roles (Falasca and Helgesson, 2021) call for further studies to test the role typologies, and what contextual factors and circumstances make a practitioner adhere to a specific role conception.

## 6. Conclusion

Consultants in public affairs present a controversial yet emerging field of practice. To answer the call for more research on the niche group of public affairs consultants (Ihlen *et al.*, 2021; Steiner and Jarren, 2009), this study tested and further explored how the consultants themselves conceptualise their occupational role, building on the research on role conceptions in public affairs. The study of professional roles has a relevant nomothetic purpose and can be useful for scholars, teacher and practitioners alike. The empirical results in this study illustrate the value and validity of the typology established by von den Driesch and van der Wurff (2016) but also show how the specific group of consultants deviates from public affairs professionals as a whole, and that the typology needs to be extended to better capture the specificities of consultants' roles in public affairs.

This study has shown that public affairs consultants are a fragmented group, with divergent perceptions of the role and function of public affairs. The different stances consultants take on choosing clients call for nuanced exploration of the client–consultant relationship. The reasoning and argument for how consultants choose assignments presents an interesting avenue for research. As important players in democratic societies, it is important for public affairs consultants to be the subject of continual critical exploration. A more detailed picture of the role of consultants, the values that guide their work, and their relationships with different stakeholders provides important clues that are useful for both professional work in public affairs and the study of interest representation.

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