

## Abstract

This paper is about third-sector organisations (TSOs) and how they use knowledge. Drawing from the emerging field of knowledge mobilisation (KM), we argue that current policy and thinking about knowledge and TSOs too often employ a simplistic set of assumptions. We propose there are many benefits to be had from taking an approach that acknowledges complexity and engages TSOs more deeply in knowledge production and use.

## Keywords

Knowledge mobilisation; research use; knowledge transfer; engaged scholarship

## Background

This paper is about third-sector organisations (TSOs) and how they use knowledge. We draw on understandings from the emerging field of knowledge mobilisation (KM), which attempts to create, share, and apply knowledge in ways that (1) are useful and outwards-looking; (2) acknowledge complexity; and (3) prioritise engagement and involvement rather than being instrumental, inwards-looking, and dependent on simplistic and linear understandings. We argue that current policy and thinking about knowledge and TSOs are too often focused on the latter perspective (simplistic, linear) and that there are many benefits to be had from incorporating the former (acknowledging of complexity, engaged).

These issues increasingly matter to those TSOs that are moving away from established third-sector roles and activities and becoming providers of public services on a contractual basis as hybrid organisations (Billis 2010) or in some other form. For them there are, we posit, advantages to using and generating knowledge in engaged and involved ways and disadvantages to sticking to narrow, linear approaches. For that reason we present in this paper one means of moving forward in ways that benefit the sector and thus society more broadly.

In what follows we first describe different views of KM. We then identify three instances in which TSOs deal, or are presented as dealing, with knowledge: with knowledge as part of what is claimed to be distinctive about TSOs, with research on and about TSOs and the impact agenda, and with knowledge as a form of regulation through audit. We argue that in each instance the way knowledge is used emphasises linear processes and ignores more sophisticated and thoughtful perspectives on how organisations create and apply knowledge. We conclude with some proposals for how the third sector might engage with and use different forms of knowledge, particularly research-based knowledge, in new ways.

### *Knowledge mobilisation: from linear to complex*

Recent contributions to our understanding of knowledge mobilisation (KM) have focused on the messiness of the organisational situations in which people attempt to produce, communicate, and use knowledge. They draw attention to the ways in which the acceptance and use of knowledge differs according to the format and content of the knowledge concerned, to the relationships between knowledge ‘providers’ and ‘users’, and to perceived boundaries between organisations and interests. These views of knowledge and its mobilisation promote the importance of context, of relationships, and of a need for systems approaches; they contrast with views of KM as relatively simple, linear, and straightforward.

In one of the clearest accounts, Best and Holmes (2010) identify conceptual approaches to KM as belonging to one of three generations of models: linear, relationship, or systems. They describe *linear models* as those in which knowledge is seen as a product or package, in which the path from production to application moves through discrete and predictable stages, and in which communication occurs mainly in one direction, from research producer to research user. Best and Holmes' second type, *relationship models*, involve a development of linear models in which there is a clear commitment amongst those in the KM endeavour to close collaboration in knowledge creation and use such that the core processes are linkage and exchange, collaboration, and shared learning. In such models the focus is on *sharing* knowledge and on developing relationships, often in the form of networks or partnerships, between stakeholders with shared interests.

Finally, Best and Holmes describe *systems models* as recognising that processes of diffusion and dissemination are “shaped, embedded and organised through structures that mediate the types of interactions that occur among multiple agents with unique worldviews, priorities, languages, means of communication and expectations” (148). The assumptions underlying systems models are that the systems involved are dynamic and subject to constant change; that they are interdependent on other systems of greater or lesser complexity; that it is important to understand the motivation and actions of stakeholders and the ways these are informed by, and inform how, KM works within a system; and that elements of systems thinking such as feedback loops and the emergence of unanticipated outcomes must be considered. Although Best and Holmes state there is no one best model for every situation they suggest systems models ensure all key factors are taken into account when thinking about and doing KM.

Van de Ven and Johnson (2006; Van de Van 2007) present a similar typology and also describe three ways of framing the gap between theory and practice. First, as a knowledge transfer problem, based on a “trickle down” view of the knowledge-supply change in which academics research, produce, and test knowledge that is then taught to students, picked up and disseminated by consultants, and ultimately used by practitioners. In the second view, a distinction is made between the forms of knowledge produced by theory and by practice. This leads to exhortations that academics should “put their theories into practice [...and practitioners should] put their practices into theory” (2006:808). Van de Ven and Johnson suggest this may be misdirected because of failures to recognise that the differences between the two groups goes beyond their situation in different organisations: rather, they are distinct epistemological communities with internally shared knowledges that are partial and incomplete. When we recognise this, they argue, we can move beyond simple solutions and instead work towards pluralistic approaches to knowledge coproduction among scholars and practitioners.

As a way of doing this Van de Ven and Johnson propose a third framing: “engaged scholarship”. This is based on novel ways for researchers and practitioners to work with and understand the communities in which they are located so that problems can be addressed through a broad, inclusive, and collaborative approach. For example, Van de Ven and Johnson suggest developing research projects through close discussion with the beneficiaries to ensure the research addresses real time problems or uncertainties. In this way it motivates

engagement and increases the likelihood that the findings of the work will be applicable to research users.

In what follows we describe three instances in which TSOs use knowledge, or are portrayed as using knowledge, and consider how these relate to this tripartite linear-relational-systems way of thinking about knowledge use.

*Instance 1: TSOs as (epistemologically) distinctive*

In descriptions of the third sector and third sector organisations a recurring assertion concerns their distinctiveness (Macmillan 2013). This is based on various claims: for example that TSOs are organised and run based on values (Alcock, 2010), that they provide an independent voice (Alcock 2013), or that they are in touch with the needs of those who use their services in a way that is implicitly special, perhaps even unique, and as such out of reach of other types of organisation (Miller 2013, Buckingham 2009).

Implicit in many of these assertions of distinctiveness is a claim to epistemological distinctiveness. Lots of the things claimed to be distinctive about TSOs are to do with knowledge: what TSOs know, how they know it, and the kinds of knowledge they use and produce. This epistemological distinctiveness is explicitly reflected in policy statements from (UK) central government as well as from within the sector.

For example, the UK Office of the Third Sector's 2006 Action Plan on involving the sector in public service delivery emphasised the value of the specialist knowledge of third sector organisations in a range of activities (Macmillan 2010) and proposed commissioners of public services should “develop an understanding of the needs of users and communities by ensuring that, alongside other consultees, they engage with third sector organisations as advocates to access their specialist knowledge” (OTS 2006:17). This theme has recurred under subsequent governments. For example, the NHS Operating Framework for 2011/12 stated that commissioners of health services in England should consider how third sector organisations can “through their expert knowledge, scope the sorts of services and outcomes that communities want and need” (Department of Health 2010a:19).

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), on the role of the voluntary sector in providing public services, talks about the need to embrace the “knowledge, ideas and experience” of the sector (NCVO 2016). Addressing a subsection of the third sector, the community sector, the Community Development Foundation (2014:1) states that “[t]he community sector is distinct because of a combination of traits common to community groups [...they can] harness first-hand experience leading to valuable expertise”. TSOs also act on and produce knowledge by assimilating and using user or community knowledge in giving voice (campaigning) and engaging in advocacy. In doing so they are able to promote and further the needs of those users and communities, and possibly also themselves, and campaigning and advocacy are recognisably core activities associated with TSO organisations (e.g. Dickinson et al. 2012, Curry et al. 2011)

These statements from government and the third sector highlight how the distinctiveness of TSOs is related to their knowledge of the communities they serve and the needs of those communities. Third sector organisations are posited as constituting an important source of local knowledge because of their “strong links with local people at a grass roots level”

(Improvement and Development Agency 2009). The corollary is that if this knowledge can be harnessed on behalf of public services then these services can be designed in ways that allow those needs to be met.

This depiction is primarily linear and presents TSOs as “information intermediaries” (Department of Health 2010b) that gather knowledge from users and communities, then collate and package this and make it available to other agencies, including the state. This emphasis ignores the knowledge sources TSOs have in common with other types of organisation, which may be internal (organisational knowledge and that of employees, board members, and so on) or external (from other TSOs, from popular and professional media, etc.), in favour of those that may be said to be distinctive. Nonetheless this characterisation of TSOs as engaging in a linear form of KM is repeatedly referred to in describing, justifying, and defending the contribution TSOs can make. For better or worse it shapes understandings and assumptions about what the third sector can and does achieve.

#### *Instance 2: Third-sector research and the impact agenda*

In the UK the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is the government-funded research funding body most closely aligned with research on voluntary sector activity. The ESRC lists TSOs among the organisations its funded research supports: “Our research makes a difference: it shapes public policies and makes businesses, voluntary bodies and other organisations more effective as well as shaping wider society” (ESRCa). Developing this point, the ESRC includes TSOs amongst the potential beneficiaries of the research it funds: “By ensuring that decisions on policy and practice are informed by secure evidence, research can help to [...] improve the effectiveness and sustainability of public, private and third sector organisations” (ESRCb).

The ESRC refers to “the benefits of research” rather than the benefits of knowledge but it is the knowledge produced in the course of the research that is emphasized. A broader view might see the research process itself as part of what is important and underline the need to include potential research users and other interested parties at all stages of this process but the ESRC cleaves more closely to a view of knowledge as something created by researchers and then communicated or disseminated outwards. This is reflected in the guidance given to researchers about how to prepare impact strategies for their proposed projects, in which the emphasis is on delivering appropriate messages (“An effective strategy needs to have clear, succinct messages that summarise your research”)(ESRCc) to relevant audiences (“It is vital to know who your key audiences are”)(ESRCd) using optimal channels (“It is important to consider the most appropriate channels to reach your target audience – for example through press articles, workshops, bulletins or conferences. This will help you to frame the main activities of your impact plan, for example: “Why a regular newsletter rather than a more occasional briefing? Why a large national conference rather than a series of smaller regional seminars? Why an email bulletin rather than face-to-face contact?”)(ESRCe). The ESRC guidance explicitly states that “packages” of information are the products of research: “Think in advance about stories, case studies and 'packages' of information that will bring your project to life for key audiences.” (ESRCf)

On the ground, researchers can and do engage more deeply and productively with other groups and organisations and in fact the ESRC’s CASE Studentship scheme is set up to promote this: Hogg and colleagues (2014) have described what is necessary in such a

studentship to enable co-creation of knowledge, with emphasis on the time, energy, and flexibility demanded of all parties involved. Other bodies in the sector such as the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Intelligent Funding Forum, and Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund have also taken more reflective and thoughtful approaches to knowledge generation, retention, and sharing. Nonetheless, the official ESRC version of how research, including research pertinent to voluntary sector organisations, can be applied or achieve impact largely follows the “linear” perspective described above and does not seem to have moved on from the “market pull or technology push” linear model generally recognised as insufficient for knowledge transfer (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff 2000).

*Instance 3: Audit culture: “You need more than a picture of a smiley face”*

Since 2009 all providers of NHS services – which increasingly includes TSOs – have been expected to produce an annual public report on the quality of their services (Foot 2011) and are subject to the same scrutiny from central government and local government as other providers (Maybin et al. 2011). Some writers on the third sector have proposed that such pressures from the state (intended to enable governance and policing of the sector) as well as from within the sector (intended to increase TSOs’ capacity to compete for contracts) push TSOs towards more corporate or standardised structures and processes and that these pressures threaten to undermine the aims and values that may have motivated TSOs’ foundation. There is evidence that TSOs are feeling these pressures: Macmillan (2010) highlights the results of a 2008 survey conducted by the National Programme for Third Sector Commissioning in which more than one in three TSOs said they worried about losing their independence and more than 40% thought the delivery of public sector contracts would make it difficult for them to play an advocacy or campaigning role. Curry and colleagues (2011: 15) observe that reporting requirements are particularly problematic for TSOs that are small or largely volunteer-run and may compromise their ability to compete in the market.

When exerted by the state such pressures may be part of attempts to control and police TSOs. Carmel and Harlock (2008) describe moves by the UK state to use the category of “the third sector” to represent diverse voluntary and community sector organisations. They see this as an attempt to exert governance by making TSOs generic and shifting them towards market-like modes of delivery and organisation that give the third sector the appearance of being apolitical and asocial. Harlock elsewhere (2014) characterises this pressure as a direct threat to the distinctive organisational characteristics of TSOs through the imposition of orthodox public-sector contracting models, models which valorise competition, cheapness, and public-sector professional standards above all else. Ilcan and Basok (2004) identify similar pressures on the Canadian voluntary sector where transformations related to federal public service outsourcing, privatization, and contract governance schemes have turned the voluntary sector into a “community of service providers”. These changes, they suggest, have undermined the capacity of Canadian TSOs to work in the best interests of users and communities through advocacy and campaigning.

An important mechanism through which pressure has been applied to TSOs involves the imposition of organisational assessments of various forms, such as evaluation, target setting, audit, performance indicators, and cost-benefit analyses. Harlock (2014) describes the pressure felt by TSOs providing public services to produce data and evidence about the outcomes of their activities – in other words, to generate knowledge that directly reflects their own effectiveness – which both increases the amount of work they have to do and

creates anxieties about the risks (in terms of securing future funding) of having to report negative outcomes. As one of Arvidson and Lyon's (2013: 879) respondents reported in relation to increasing demands for evidence from TSOs, "now you need more than a picture of a smiley face."

In effect, these pressures on TSOs to participate in a variant of audit culture (Strathern 2000) are centred on issues of knowledge and its use. Demands that TSOs adhere to externally imposed regimes of reporting and accounting are, in effect, attempts to use surveillance to exercise governance – or from another perspective, to discipline through the creation of knowledge about the subject (Foucault 1991[1977]). The risk, as Carmel and Harlock frame it, is that these audit and reporting activities present alternative logics for voluntary sector activity that replace altruism with "the imperatives of targets, efficiency and cost-effectiveness" (2008: 164). Subverting or avoiding such demands requires alternative ways of thinking about, using, and presenting knowledge and as Strathern (2000: 284) observes, "what is creatively generated from 'within' can seem a kind of unwelcome complicity when it is elicited from 'without'".

Commissioners of services expect to be provided with evidence of how efforts or outcomes related to original aims and objectives, but the act of having to make connections explicit and stating them in this way alters their role in the work (Strathern 2000: 283). At its heart this need for knowledge from TSOs, like all externally imposed demands for such knowledge, is a demand for linear knowledge transfer, one-way transfer of packaged information from producer to user.

#### *Conclusion and ways forward*

How can TSOs, and the organisations which fund and support them, move beyond linear uses of knowledge (and benefit from doing so)? Is there a space in which TSOs can retain their distinctiveness, epistemological or otherwise, while increasing and benefiting from their use of and engagement with other forms of knowledge? We propose two things they can do, one relating to how they use the knowledge they have and one to how they collaborate to produce useful new knowledge.

First, TSOs can recognise that although engaging in commissioning processes with state-funded organisations commits them to certain forms of knowledge production, this does not automatically turn them into passive participants in an externally governed audit culture. For instance, Arvidson and Lyon (2013) highlight how TSOs can use demands for data and evaluation in productive ways. As these authors describe, TSOs can strategically decouple what they are asked to do and what they are asked to report from what they actually do and report. What they formally *report* that they do and what they *actually* do may differ. Through this presentational sleight-of-hand they may not only resist the demands placed on them but subvert these and selectively use the knowledge they generate to further their own ends. Rather than passively becoming part of a "governable terrain" (Carmel and Harlock 2008), TSOs can take advantage of the value of the knowledge they create and possess. By using this knowledge TSOs may retain their political independence and identity within a high surveillance system, reiterating their distinctiveness through strategic sharing of parts of the knowledge they have, however these are constituted.

Second, we propose there is value in increased third sector engagement with research efforts; by which we mean knowledge of the products of research (reports, papers, conference presentations), as well as the activity of research. (Note that we write “engagement with” rather than “use of”.) There are particular obstacles to achieving this more widely. A scoping review by Hardwick and colleagues (2015) identified particular characteristics that can influence how TSOs deal with knowledge from different sources. They found the importance and value of experiential knowledge from clients, staff and similar organisations on ‘what works’ meant certain forms of knowledge, such as academic research, were sometimes seen as inappropriate because they were unsuited to the specific contexts of organisations or service users. In addition, people working in TSOs often felt they did not have the capacity (in terms of time, skill, and resources) to access research. Lacking the ability to understand “what the research says/means for practice” (Wilson et al., 2011a; Wilson et al., 2011b) they tended to privilege certain forms of evidence (e.g. client feedback) over “research” evidence (Wathen et al., 2011). These findings indicate that a different approach to knowledge mobilisation is needed.

The studies involved included in this scoping review tended to be grounded in the linear view of scientific discovery and research (in which clever scientist invents new thing, early adopters begin using it, other people notice and join in until the new thing is established practice). But as we described above, this view – although still popular in the public imagination and the popular press – has been challenged by more sophisticated understandings of how knowledge can gainfully and efficiently be created and put to use. These understandings recognise the need for research, as one form of knowledge production, to be conducted in an engaged and participatory manner rather than carried out remotely and parachuted in to unsuspecting (and often, unwilling) audiences. What is needed are approaches to increasing knowledge that are more collaborative and that understand the complexity of what knowledge is and how it can be used.

In these approaches, the voices of all those with an interest in the research and the knowledge it will produce are central to all stages of the research process: from identification of a research question (“what should we be researching and why?”) through research design (“how should we go about trying to answer this question?”) to dissemination and implementation of research findings (“to whom should we communicate our findings and how?” and “how can we ensure these findings change practice?”). As Davies and colleagues put it, “knowledge use is an elaborate and dynamic process involving complex social processing and unpredictable integration with pre-existing knowledge or expertise” and we need to see the process of using research “as an ongoing, creative and unfolding process rather than any clearly delineated event.”(2008: 189, 190)

The co-production agenda in public services represents an aspiration to make services more effective, efficient, and more responsive to the needs of those who use the services.(Boyle and Harris 2009) We see the need for a parallel agenda in relation to knowledge use, one which would involve TSOs moving beyond linear perspectives and instead engaging in the co-production of knowledge. Without this change, TSOs will be stuck with ways of creating and obtaining knowledge that do not meet their needs and do not help them to identify new ways of achieving their aims. Policy emphases such as that of the ESRC are attuned to outdated modes of research production and use but there exist promising ways of reconceptualising how research is conducted and used, such as Van de Ven and Johnson’s

(2006) model of engaged scholarship. The way is open for the third sector and for those who work in it, research it, and care about it to reflect on these new ways of thinking and to commit themselves to working together to produce and use knowledge in ways that are open, engaged, and forwards-looking.

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