Original Research

A Qualitative Study of the Process of Knowledge Utilization in the Social Sciences

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Abstract

This research aimed to propose a model of knowledge utilization in social sciences based on the analysis of the views of Iranian academics. This research was conducted based on a qualitative approach using grounded theory. The structured interview method was used to obtain the opinions of the experts. The research population consisted of academic members of Social Sciences in Iranian universities. Due to the extensive statistical population, sequential theoretical sampling was employed. We selected 25 academics with the highest number of both publications and citations (h-index) as the interviewees to determine the reliability and validity of this research. The evaluative criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba were adopted. Moreover, to analyze the collected data and reach a theory, Theoretical Coding was applied. After coding, classifying, and analyzing data, the research findings led to a model derived from the ideas of Social Sciences experts in four areas as Knowledge Production, Knowledge Transfer, Knowledge Sharing, and Knowledge Utilization. According to the results achieved from analyzing the ideas of Social Sciences experts, knowledge utilization was determined as the central core of the model.

Introduction

Nowadays, to succeed in competitive knowledge-based environments, one needs to obtain the required knowledge more effectively than others (Brink & Van Belle, 2003). Moreover, with the world's orientation toward a knowledge-based economy, knowledge is considered a more critical component, thus, letting the development of organizations depend on the efficient

provision, application, and management of knowledge (Jain, Sandhu & Sidhu, 2007). In other words, to survive in this world's turmoil, one needs to tackle some challenges for which proper knowledge management can provide suitable responses. Furthermore, as the shining value of knowing and knowledge was appreciated, new terms have appeared in this realm, including knowledge transfer, knowledge sharing, knowledge utilization, etc. Each covers broad scopes of knowledge and opens new insights into analyzing the knowledge cycle process.

Knowledge utilization is a new but rapidly emerging concept redressing the gap between 'what is known' from research and 'what gets done' in practice (Greenberg, McClellan & Avard, 2012). It is a process for communicating the value of conceptual discoveries (Lane, 2012). Knowledge utilization is developed to recognize the historical gap between research findings and the translation of such results into practice (Spyridonidis, Hendy & Barlow, 2015). Many different phases of research, including well-timed and pertinent research questions, the applied methods, the interpretation of acquired information, which would be used in real-life settings, are influenced by knowledge utilization (Colley, Brownrigg & Tremblay, 2012). Change of habits cannot be ensured by just providing educational courses. Instead, knowledge utilization helps turn the new knowledge into practice (Livingston et al., 2014). Knowledge utilization involves a variety of activities that can convey the message of the research appropriately to the target group (Tajedini, Azami & Sadatmoosavi 2017)

Although it has been profoundly emphasized to translate knowledge obtained from research into practice, specific research conducted in Australia and the USA has indicated that many (medical) practices do not accord with research findings (Brook, Liversidge, D Wilson, Harvey, Marshall & Kitson, 2016). However, many researchers have found that knowledge utilization is paramount, particularly in the contemporary era when organizations need to turn knowledge into practice using the research results to remain competitive. Thus, practitioners need knowledge utilization in their contextual settings (Jones, Procter & Younie, 2015). The predictors of the uptake of research results by organizations include users' adaptation of research subject, users' acquisition efforts, links between researchers and users, and decision makers' organizational contexts (Bahji, Hawken, Cabrera, 2019). At this time, the scholars of social sciences who relied more on the uptake of researches in their policies gradually focused on decision-making processes. Nowadays, knowledge utilization can be defined as exchanging, synthesizing, and applying research findings in a complicated system consisting of a network of interactions among knowledge users and researchers.

As a fundamental source of education and research, universities are appropriate for transferring knowledge and developing knowledge utilization culture. As universities are in a competitive environment, it is necessary to ensure that knowledge is created and transferred in such environments, and the research results could be practically utilized. It is the responsibility of universities to discover, preserve, evolve, transfer and apply the knowledge that can be fulfilled by bridging the gap between research and its application, i.e., knowledge utilization. Historically, knowledge utilization has been more of the concern of medical sciences (Jones et al., 2015), and there are numerous knowledge utilization models and theories in medical sciences. Nilsen's (2015) taxonomy considers the theories of knowledge utilization to recognize or describe different dimensions of implementation known as the mechanism of change. Nevertheless, gaining knowledge about the phenomena and events relevant to humans and society as scientific facts is the purpose of many scholar's social sciences.

The Social Sciences are a set of disciplines and specialties whose central theme is "society"

in its general sense. The Social Sciences begin from the most fundamental, philosophical and intellectual foundations and extend to the most applied knowledge of society (Clark, Gambell, Mucha, MacLean, Rankin & Rowan, 2019). The importance of the Social Sciences in society relates to the importance of the human's mental, intellectual, psychological, and spiritual dimension. The more these dimensions of humanity and their related needs, the higher significance the Social Sciences is (Donovan and Gulbrandsen, 2018).

Achieving a profound understanding of the theoretical foundations and historical roots of modernity that has led to the emergence of modern science and technology (and subsequently leading to the formation of modern cultural, social, political, and economic structures) is one of the most essential prerequisites for the transformation and evolution of the Social Sciences (König 2016). Finally, it can be said that the Social Sciences refer to a category of sciences that focuses on issues such as society, culture, language, human behavior, and the psyche and mind of individuals.

In Iranian universities, the Social Sciences consisted of 5 subgroups covering 47 academic fields considered Social Sciences in this study (Tajedini, Azami & Sadatmoosavi 2017).

Like all other branches of science, Social Sciences need to be and get practically applicable to flourish in the knowledge cycle. However, among scientific disciplines at universities, the achievements in different fields of Social Sciences have had a significant role but not an acknowledged one (Tajedini, Azami & Sadatmoosavi 2018).

Knowledge utilization theories, models, and frameworks may increase the possibility of successful sustainability and implementation (Strifler et al., 2018). In this regard, through a qualitative method, the present research is intended to propose a model of knowledge utilization in Social Sciences based on the scientists' viewpoints of Social Sciences in Iran, hoping to open new insights into the future. Moreover, qualitative research methods sound perfectly suitable for advancing knowledge utilization and making sense of the complications of either fast or slow capture of knowledge (Bottorff, 2015).

Literature Review

Landry, Amara & Lamari (2001) investigated the utilization of social science research knowledge in 1229 Canadian scholars. Results indicated that nearly half of the research results lend to some use by practitioners, professionals, and decision-makers. Furthermore, comparisons of utilization means showed that the professional social sciences lend to higher utilization levels than the disciplinary social sciences. Overall, they uncovered that knowledge utilization depends much more heavily on factors regarding the behavior of the researchers' and users' context than on the attributes of the research products.

In a case study in knowledge utilization, Househ (2008) evaluated the role that information and communication technology could play in linkage and exchange processes among groups of distant drug policy in Canada. Liyanage, Elhag, Ballal, Li (2009) carried out research to propose a process model for transferring knowledge based on theories relevant to knowledge utilization and knowledge communication. This proposed model for knowledge transfer was believed to be an attempt to incorporate all the mentioned issues to develop a holistic framework.

To propose a model for knowledge exchange and utilization in emergency departments, Curran (2009) developed a "Model for Knowledge Exchange and Utilization in Emergency Practice". The model considered providing quality services and the significance of elements other than knowledge and researched utilizing research results. This model has also been

successful when applied to larger populations and different emergency departments. Tanna, Sood, Schiff, Schwartz & Naimark (2011) conducted experimental research entitled "Do e-mail alerts of new research increase knowledge translation?" They randomized 1683 subscribers of "Nephrology Now" into two different groups. Then e-mail alerts were sent to the experimental group but not to the control group. The research results demonstrated that due to Nephrology Now alerts, the familiarity increased. These e-mails, nonetheless, were not significant in improving knowledge translation.

Cherney, Head, Boreham, Povey & Ferguson (2013) used survey data from a study of university-based social science researchers in Australia to examine factors that influence perceptions of the policy uptake of social research. Results indicated that disciplinary and methodological context matters when understanding the translation, dissemination, and utilization of academic, social research.

Dagenais, Pinard, St-Pierre, Briand-Lamarche, Cantave, & Péladeau (2016) investigated the effectiveness of concept mapping to determine the key aspects that affect information derived from research via school practitioners such as school administrators and teachers educational counselors based on both quantitative and qualitative approaches. They showed that concept mapping is an appropriate method to create a competency framework to boost knowledge utilization. Using a mixed-methods approach, Jones et al. (2015) presented a model for international translational research in education. Through a case study within a health sciences faculty, Harvey, Marshall, Jordan & Kitson, (2015) investigated the hidden barriers in knowledge utilization. The results indicated that most interviewees could understand knowledge utilization is of an iterative and complicated nature. Many staffs consider knowledge utilization as adopted in an implicit and self-directed way, having people learn "on the job. It was demonstrated that certain concealed obstacles to interpreting, understanding, having the ability, and being committed to translating knowledge in academic communities must be considered. Furthermore, certain significant obstacles to knowledge utilization are evident, the most important of which are the observed silo ways of working, lack of incentives, and lack of confidence and skill.

Applying a qualitative approach, Collie, Zardo, McKenzie & Ellis (2016) explored the perspectives and views of 14 Australian academics towards knowledge translation in public health policy. Results indicated that academics' desire to engage in translation but noted numerous barriers within their institutions and their interaction with policymakers made such engagement difficult. Simeone, Secundo & Schiuma (2017) provided evidence on the function that design as a mechanism of knowledge translation can involve some stakeholders in a Research and Development project intended to leverage open innovation measures. Basaza, Kinegyere, Mutatina & Sewankambo (2018) explored the policies of enhancing the sustainability of policies and initiatives of knowledge translation in terms of their application and design in the health system of Uganda. According to Kitson et al. (2018), to improve knowledge creation and knowledge movement across systems requiring its utilization and development, the way we talk about knowledge translation and think of it needs to be changed. The knowledge translation process among researchers in Bushehr University of Medical Sciences in Iran was also investigated by Dakhesh, Ostovar, Yazdizadeh & Hamidi (2018). It was shown that the scores of the participants' performance in knowledge production were more significant than those of other fields, including promotion of evidence use, knowledge transfer, and research question transfer. They also revealed that university researchers' performance in

all the fields mentioned above and the whole knowledge translation process was acceptable. Moreover, Strifler et al. (2018) investigated 596 research that adopted 159 theories, frameworks, knowledge, and translation models. Most of these theories, frameworks, and models (87%) were applied in five or fewer researches, that 60% were applied only once.

Researching 369 knowledge workers in the IT sector in Pakistan, Shujahat, Sousa, Hussain, Nawaz, Wang & Umer (2019) revealed that knowledge-worker productivity mediates between knowledge utilization and knowledge creation as two knowledge management processes from one hand and innovation from the other. Schaillée, Spaaij, Jeanes & Theeboom, (2019) investigated the advancement and conceptualization of knowledge translation in sport management. They compared the analysis of research projects coproduced in Australia and Belgium. The results of this study indicated the necessity of recognizing and, if possible, resolving external, personal, and organizational constraints (Schaillee et al., 2019).

As can be inferred from the literature, an established and growing body of literature is concerned with understanding the relationship between research evidence and policy and practice. It has provided evidence on models to guide the translation of research findings to policy use (Collie et al., 2016). However, to date, most of the knowledge utilization models belong to medicine-related areas. Although there are more than a hundred theories, frameworks, and models for knowledge utilization (Strifler et al., 2018), few studies focused on humanities and social sciences.

Methods

In this research, a qualitative grounded theory approach was adopted. The grounded theory is a qualitative research strategy derived from data systematically collected and analyzed in the research process (Tajedini, Azami & Sadatmoosavi 2016). In this regard, instead of beginning the research with a predetermined theory, the researcher begins with knowledge utilization and allows the theory to rise from collected data. In this study, the tools for collecting information were structured interviews in two forms of face-to-face and email interviews. The face-to-face interviews were held in one session, but email interviews in two. A voice recorder was used to record the face-to-face interviews that were immediately implemented, coded, and analyzed. The researchers were constantly making field notes. Participants with whom the face-to-face interview could not be conducted were interviewed through electronic mail as an accepted method (Meho, 2006). The interview questions were posed to the research population based on knowledge utilization and the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research model. Several different models were available for knowledge utilization. This model was selected as the study's theoretical framework for comprehensiveness, explicitness, and simplicity.

To ensure the validity and reliability of this research, the evaluative criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which was equivalent to the validity and reliability of quantitative researches, were adopted. Based on this method, three criteria of credibility, transferability, and dependability were considered for evaluation. The following tasks were accomplished (Tajedini, Azami & Sadatmoosavi, 2018) to achieve each of these criteria,

The statistical population is comprised of all members of Social Sciences faculties in Iranian universities. Due to the extensive statistical population, the sampling technique was inevitably employed. Sampling in qualitative research is quite different from quantitative ones since its aim is not to generalize the findings but to understand the phenomena under

investigation. In quantitative research, the emphasis is on random selection, and the chance to be selected is equal for all members of the statistical population. In qualitative researchers, nevertheless, the samples, i.e., the participants, are selected or invited. Via purposive sampling (Bernard, 2017), which is mainly used in qualitative research, the number of interviewees depends on the theoretical saturation of the questions to be interrogated. As the researcher concludes that the provided answers or the conducted interviews with informed persons are so similar that the answers or interviews get repetitive and no new data can be derived, (s)he would deem the number of interviews adequate and stops the interview.

The sequential theoretical method was applied to select the sample for this study. In theoretical sampling, which is the dominant method in grounded theory, the samples are selected in such a way that they lead to generating a theory. Faculties of Social Sciences in Iran consist of 47 courses in 5 different subgroups. First, specific courses were selected through purposive random sampling. Then, for each course, based on the objective of this study, the research record was considered the primary index to select the interviewees. Indeed, knowledge utilization is mainly concerned with bridging the gap between research and its application. Thus, only those with the best research productivity and impact (having the highest h-index) based on the Scopus database can be indexed as the experts in each course. Sampling carried on until the researchers reached saturation, i.e., the results of interviews became considerably similar to those of the previous interviews. Sampling and interviewing continued till data analysis, and exploration processes came to theoretical saturation. In this regard, 25 experts from the faculties of Social Sciences were interviewed classified into three groups based on their academic rank.

To analyze the collected data and reach a theory, Theoretical Coding was applied. This method was considered appropriate for being inductive and exploratory. Furthermore, analyzing the text to precise components and concepts would make it possible to define a theory or a model. In this method, with a constant check with the grounded theory approach of Corbin and Strauss (2008), coding was done in three stages of open, axial, and selective coding. First, after copying and saving data, the appropriate codes were assigned to various data and classified as apparent categories via open coding. Then, axial coding was performed by considering different dimensions of these categories and detecting their relationship. Eventually, the core category was chosen and then related to the other categories in selective coding.

Findings

In the first stage, interview transcripts were classified and investigated, and open coding was done to fractionate the information. Then, the information categories related to knowledge utilization in Social Sciences were configured. After that, based on data gathered from interviews and technical notes (resulted from field operations), 69 conceptual statements were recognized. In the second stage (axial coding), the fractionated data during the coding process were again put together. Those categories being more related to this research were selected among the relevant codes and notes. Finally, in selective coding, the core category was determined, and other categories including causal conditions, strategies, underlying and intermediate conditions, consequences, and outputs were classified.
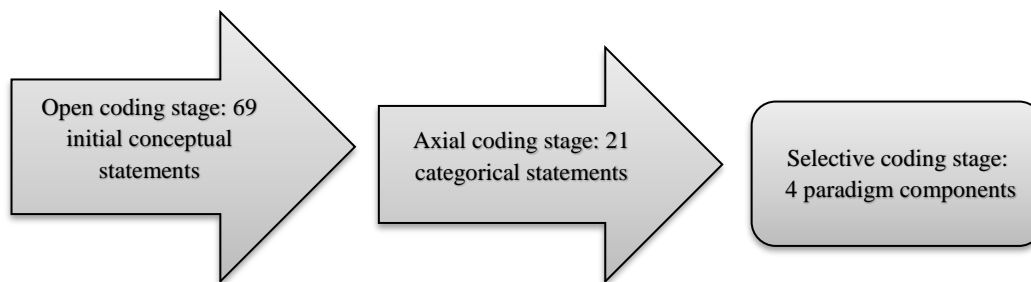
Figure. 1 The flow of data management and its transfer to the model through 3 coding stages

Revealing the relations between categories and determining the underlying factors, the studies indicated that knowledge utilization is connected to different categories. Therefore, influential factors and contexts of knowledge utilization were taken into consideration in this study. After conducting interviews and theoretical coding, the relations between categories were identified, and the conceptual components were determined. After that, by applying these components, the researchers proposed a model based on five components: Knowledge Production, Knowledge Transfer, Knowledge Sharing, and Knowledge Utilization. The reciprocal relationships in this model demonstrated that these categories affect other related categories and are affected by them. The resulted model is depicted in figure 2.
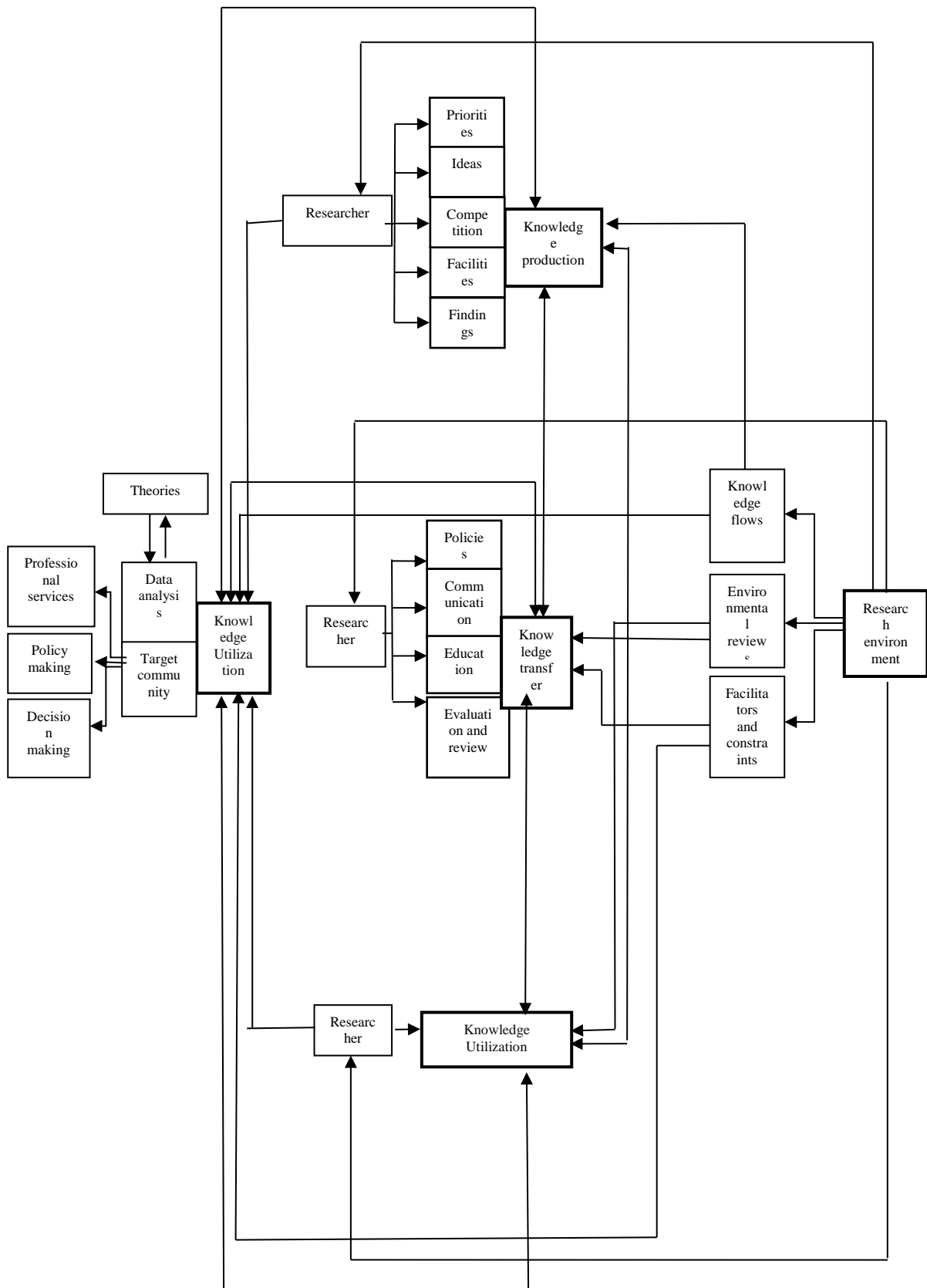
Figure. 2 The proposed model of knowledge utilization in social science

Discussion

In this research, "knowledge production" is about the origin of research information, which plays an essential and fundamental role in practically using the produced knowledge and creating new knowledge. Faculty members of Social Sciences believe that dissertations published in Iran lack practical application of science and are merely a copy with minor changes. They assert that there are few quality research papers, but there are excellent proper and strong translations. This is a warning to try to improve the quality of social science products in Iran. In his research, Fazli (2011) emphasizes the importance of evaluating references in applying the research results in library sciences and medical information. He makes a valid point but does not examine the quality of research resources in his field of work. Seidler-de Alwis, Hartmann & Gemünden (2004) consider the existing research resources appropriate for applying the research results but find the study and application of new resources insufficient. Majzadeh et al. (2009) also examine research resources as one of the significant factors in promoting the application of knowledge.

"Knowledge sharing," in this research, refers to how research information is disseminated to others. Social Sciences scholars in Iran consider it easy to access published works and have a positive attitude towards the electronic environment, access to scientific information, and transmission using new technologies. Although Tanna et al. (2011), in their study, do not deny the significant role of email alerts in promoting recognition and research in specialized topics, they find the role of email alerts insignificant in the application of knowledge. In a similar vein, Househ (2008) discusses the mutual interaction in the continuity process and the exchange of information and communication technologies in applying knowledge and calls these technologies an influential factor in exchanging and transferring knowledge. It is worth noting that according to Davenport and Prusak (1998), the most effective means of knowledge transfer in most organizations are not advanced technology or formal information exchange meetings; they instead find informal social interactions between individuals in small, intimate settings more critical.

What we mean by communication environment in this study is how to research information is shared. The exciting thing about the findings in this section is that although faculty members in Social Sciences do not find it easy to access published research, they have a positive attitude towards the electronic environment and access to scientific information through new technologies and systems. This indicates the virtual world's significant influence and the wealth of information available on the humanities and the minds of researchers in those areas. In this regard, Househ (2008) has discussed the mutual interaction in the continuity process and the exchange of information and communication technologies in applying knowledge. Studies were done by Yu, Yu & Yu (2013), Swart & Kinnie (2003), and Park, Chae & Choi (2017) show similar results.

"Knowledge utilization" completes the knowledge cycle in creating applied knowledge. It refers to the final synthesis and application of research findings in a complex system of communication between researchers and users of knowledge to accelerate scientific research results usage. Due to the essential role of social sciences in transforming people's minds, it is vital to pay special attention to applying social sciences in the intellectual development of individuals. This has been confirmed by studies done by Collie et al. (2016) and Cherney et al. (2013).

Conclusion

Although knowledge utilization seems to be a new topic, in effect, it has accompanied knowledge since the beginning of human knowledge production, and all scientists and scholars have attempted to produce knowledge to make it practically applicable. Knowledge utilization includes various activities through which the statements resulting from the research could be appropriately transferred to the target group. In most cases, the data source relevant to the status of knowledge utilization is the opinions of researchers themselves which form the basis of evaluating and planning knowledge utilization.

Knowledge production in Social Sciences is an attempt to establish new scientific foundations and spread the productive thoughts of researchers. Those involved in Social Sciences acknowledge that the "production of academic-scientific knowledge" is a social activity based on work and social interaction. Indeed, knowledge production is the scientific outcomes of the dynamic minds of researchers based on their ideas and intellectual requirements. The proposed model showed that creative ideas of mind lead to the most remarkable scientific productions. Other factors, including the research priorities of relevant organizations and institutions, obtaining organizational and social facilities and privileges, and the sense of competition among coworkers, are underlying factors and motivations for scientific productions (Figure 2). Undoubtedly, all these factors are compelling and worthy of consideration in production, provided they are used correctly. In knowledge production, thinking of conceptual and normative frameworks of the scientific society is so positive for developing the knowledge utilization cycle.

Only if being transferred and assessed can researchers gain scientific value and are worth being named scientific production. Researchers can learn the language of science to present their knowledge via various means such as journals, books, roundtables, conferences, newspapers, virtual space, and any other media (Figure 2). Evaluation and valuation of scientific products depend on their confirmation or rejection in reflected documents, their acceptance, and value in practice (Figure 2). However, it is also probable that some scientific societies confirm an idea, theory, or point of view. Still, some others reject the same ones, suggesting the difference in their scientific and ideological capacities. Anyway, knowledge transfer, based on scientific policies, is regarded as a turning point in educational fields and internal improvement of the humanities and social sciences (Figure 2). The relationship formed in the production-transfer process indicates the reliance on conceptual sources and the internal status of scientific societies, providing the context for this process. Transferred scientific products are appropriate sources for forthcoming innovative ideas and motivations.

The purposeful sharing of knowledge in scientific groups would help improve individual and organizational learning, develop creativity, and lead to a good performance of individuals, organizations, and scientific groups. Knowledge sharing is a tool to detect the weaknesses and strengths of individual and organizational conceptual processes to alleviate deficiencies, develop opportunities, and present creative and innovative ideas (Figure 2). To Share the knowledge in different dimensions, whether production or application, leads to predicting appropriate strategies to establish optimal scientific communications, gain social prestige and realize scientific achievements (Figure 2). Nowadays, institutionalizing the policies and programs relevant to knowledge sharing in synch with facilitating the sharing process and with the aid of modern information technologies and revising the idea of individual and exclusive knowledge has guided the researchers into sharing their scientific treasures. The participant

number 12 remarked, "When a researcher leaves a group, whether a student or a professor, (s)he takes knowledge, skill and precious experiences away with him/her. Or even some people might be appointed to certain positions in which they never apply and transfer the knowledge they have acquired along years in a particular field. Knowledge sharing, nonetheless, can serve as a suitable way to utilize and represent the knowledge of those who are lost for any reason. In other words, other people would be able to enter that knowledge into knowledge utilization cycle by resorting to knowledge sharing and interaction".

The subsystem which forms the structure and framework of temporal and spatial factors effective in knowledge production and transfer is known as knowledge flow and is regarded as an essential factor in confirming research conditions (Figure 2). Moreover, participant number 5 believed, "It is the nature of research that makes some people known as researchers to produce, transfer and apply knowledge".

The resulting knowledge and ideas, regardless of the person(s) proposing them, are applied if valuable and appropriate. This chain takes combining knowledge with practice into consideration. The practical application of research results relies on predicators like users' adaptation of research subject, the connection between users and researchers, and sharing knowledge. Research encompasses scientific evidences which are resulted from data analysis (Figure 2). As fundamental knowledge playing a significant role in human development, the research outputs in the humanities and social sciences field consist of actual data that are functional and crucial. If not comprehended, applied, and performed, they bring about gaps within society. The research subject is given priority over the methods to make humanities and social sciences usable. Since the subjects are not selected from the heart of society, there will not be any feeling or relationship necessary to utilize the research results and turn data into evidence. One reason why the research results are not practically applicable is the low quality of the conducted research, which discourages the decision makers of the target community from using research results (Figure 2). Employing actual research results in decisions and policies leads to developing and promoting the spirit of epistemology in social sciences. Today, the system of scientific relationships in Social Sciences can be realized in the triangular relation of university-society-government, which serves as the uprising of intellectual compatibility of science and practice within society to alleviate social, psychological, and spiritual harm of today's life.

One of the new trends in the development of social sciences is the proximity of the fields of research and production of knowledge with its implementation and application. Since the emergence of the social sciences in the nineteenth century, several disciplines have been associated with political, social, and economic spheres in various ways. New knowledge and awareness have always emerged with a focus on social issues and needs. Politicians now recognize the capabilities of the social sciences in improving policy-making processes, and therefore utilize the scientific capacities, knowledge, and research facilities of academics and researchers.

Today, the production of social knowledge has been transferred to some extent from the academic field to the applied field. The production of knowledge from the beginning is focused on usefulness and application for the government and society. This knowledge is produced according to the interests of different actors and sometimes through continuous negotiation and dialogue.

Nowadays, knowledge production is more in line with external needs and demands, and

science suppliers also pay attention to the demand. For this reason, the sources of supply are becoming more and more diverse.

Associations and social science working groups try to bridge the gap between theoretical and executive fields and the proximity of the social sciences and politics. This approach will help improve policy-making and improve the quality of decision-making and help strengthen the empirical and even theoretical strength of social knowledge and deepen its realistic roots. Achieving this critical goal requires the active and comprehensive participation of the social science departments of universities. In addition, non-governmental organizations and researchers strengthen the practical aspects of social sciences, provide relevant results, moderate the attitude of elites, and change public perception to strengthen the applied dimensions of social sciences.

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