

Change Research: Narrating Social Change from the Bottom-Up

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Abstract This essay provides a review of Bent Flyvbjerg's critique of conventional social science research, including its limitations in applied fields such as social work, followed by a specification of his alternative for a "phronetic social science." I detail how I with two colleagues practiced phronetic social science in our collaboration with Philadelphia housing activists, including most especially the role of interpretive narrative analysis as part of our case study research. In conclusion, I discuss the somewhat ironic challenges of trying to increase the legitimacy of such activist research in applied fields like social work where an obsession with being seen as scientific is prevalent as a means to improve prestige of applied research. I discuss how we need less top-down research which focuses on a "what works" agenda that serves the management of subordinate populations and more research that provides bottom-up understandings of a "what's right" agenda tailored to empowering people in particular settings. Real social science research needs to listen to how people on the bottom experience their own subordination so that we can help them overcome their subjugation. Good social science includes taking the perspective of the oppressed in the name of helping them achieve social justice. In the end, there are a number of tension points between the model of conventional social science and phronetic social science that starkly highlight how we need to change research in order do research that promotes positive social change.

Keywords Phronesis · Social science methodology · Social change research

When Bent Flyvbjerg (2001) began publishing his critiques of mainstream social science, there were people ready to join in helping to develop an alternative approach to social science research that better connected social science to social action (Schram and Caterino 2006; Flyvbjerg et al. 2012). Flyvbjerg's powerful critique was centered on the idea that social science had failed in its quest to emulate the natural sciences. It would be much better if it pursued its own path to producing social knowledge. A critical problem was the asymmetry of the natural and social sciences that stemmed most profoundly from their having very different subject matters. Social life was by no means inert; understanding the actions and interactions of conscious human beings was never going to be reducible to predictive causal models or other ways of explaining the physical world. Instead, social scientists keen to produce meaningful social knowledge would have to rely at least to some extent on the very people they were studying if they were ever to understand what their social behavior meant to them. While it was distinctly possible that people were not always conscious as to why they did what they did, people acted as if they were. Regardless of whether they were mistaken, the issue of consciousness and what social relations meant to people had to be front and center in any serious social analysis. There was a causal circuitry the causal models had failed to examine: the ways people narrated their lives were constitutive of those very same lives and the ways they made meaning of their lived experiences influenced what lived experiences people ended up experiencing.

From this perspective, social research should be primarily about helping people better understand the issues that

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troubled their consciousness (even if unconsciously), what was preventing them from realizing what was in their best interests and what needed to be done about that in order to better realize those best interests. Flyvbjerg's critique, therefore, included a positive program designed to help make social science better connected not just to understanding social life but helping the people being studied to live better. Social research should be designed to help improve the ability of the people being studied to become even more conscious of what was happening in ways that enabled them to do something about it. For Flyvbjerg, using the classic Aristotelian distinction, while natural science was better at producing *episteme* (i.e., universal truth in the form of abstract rationality), social science would best be directed at contributing to *phronesis* (i.e., practical wisdom that came from situated reasoning) (see Toulmin 2003). Flyvbjerg's program for what he called a "phronetic social science," would better connect social science to ongoing social struggle to address the issues people were confronting. For that to happen, we would have to change how we did research so that it could better be the change research that helped people change things for the better (Shdaimah et al. 2011).

For Flyvbjerg, social science was best suited to contribute to the practical wisdom that came from situated reasoning by conducting research in specific social contexts. It would therefore eschew the quest for generic causal models that could explain social behavior by virtue of offering trans-contextual, universal generalizations. Instead, it would offer greater understanding of what was happening and what it meant in specific contexts so that people could engage in better situated reasoning in those particular settings. This meant that we had to invert the conventional pyramid of knowledge that put trans-contextual generalizable causal explanations at the top and case-specific narratives near the bottom (see Fig. 1).

In fact, Flyvbjerg (2006) would eventually go on to defend case studies as a legitimate form of social research.

I ended up taking Flyvbjerg's position quite seriously, not only collaborating with Flyvbjerg (Flyvbjerg et al. 2012) but then engaging with two of my doctoral students in a participatory-action research project where we collaborated with local activists as research partners to conduct mixed-methods research that helped the activists gain enactment of an affordable housing trust fund in the city of Philadelphia (Shdaimah et al. 2011).

In the essay that follows, I provide a review of Flyvbjerg's critique of conventional social science research, including its limitations in applied fields such as social work, followed by a specification of the phronetic model for social science. I then detail how we tried to practice a politically engaged form of phronetic social science in our collaboration with Philadelphia housing activists, including most especially the role of narrative analysis as part of our case study research. In conclusion, I discuss the somewhat

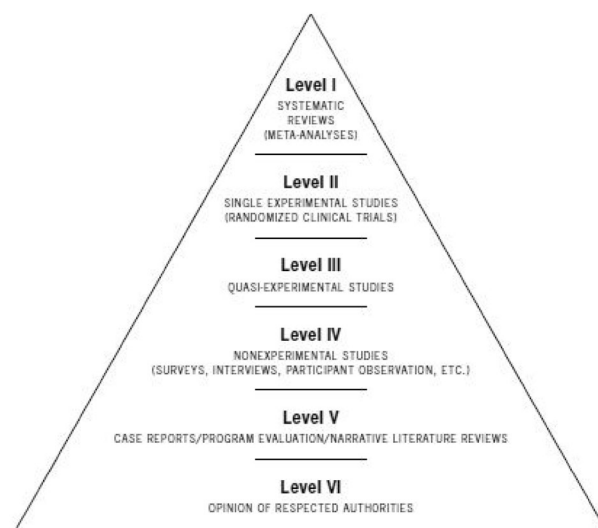


Fig. 1 The pyramid of research knowledge: ranking the quality of evidence. Adapted from Melnyck and Fineout-Overholt 2005; Stetler et al. 1998

ironic challenges of trying to increase the legitimacy of such activist research in applied fields like social work (where an obsession with being seen as scientific is prevalent as a means to improve prestige of applied research).

Social Science Needs to Go Its Own Way

The debate about what is good social science goes back a ways. A critical initial salvo was provided by Max Weber when he published his 1904 essay on "The 'Objectivity' of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy" in the newly created *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, which he collaborated in editing. Weber was involved in a struggle over whether social science should be partisan and include explicit positions based on value commitments. He argued for social science to be non-partisan and independent of value commitments but so it could establish itself as an authoritative source of knowledge that would be taken seriously by policymakers. Its political effectiveness depended on it being scrupulously independent of any political persuasion. In the process of negotiating this nuanced position, Weber staked out the major positions of what has become an enduring debate. He wanted social science to produce objective knowledge about the basic "facts of social life," but he wanted to promote understanding of what those facts meant to the very people who experienced them. He wanted social science to avoid partisanship but he also wanted it to contribute to improving "social policy." Last, as much as he hoped for a social science that was autonomous from politics and beyond political manipulation, he very much saw social science as a source of salvation from the worst forms of politics and that ideally it could contribute to the "training of

judgment in respect of *practical problems* arising from these social circumstances” (as quoted in Gunnell 2006).

Over time, it seems the increased specialization of social scientists has led them to side with one or another of Weber’s positions, but rarely all. For a long time, those social researchers who specialize in taking a more scientific approach have been dominant. This is where the pyramid of knowledge comes to the fore. That pyramid in Fig. 1 reflects the scientific bias that has been near hegemonic in recent decades. Scientific social science is from this perspective superior to more prosaic forms of social research. A generic model of social science in fact can be gleaned from the scientific partisans. They drew on the philosophy of science to provide a model of the logical structure of scientific explanation known variously as logical positivism or logical empiricism and now commonly referred to as just plain “positivism.” Positivism served to create a methodological foundation for social science as a science. Social scientists would be doing science if they structured their research projects consistently with the positivistic methodology. In other words, regardless of the specific methods of empirical observation or data collection used, research needed to be framed to support explanations consistent with the tenets of positivism. Research needed to produce the basis for testing causal theories that could explain why political phenomena, relationships, and processes were the way they were. Various inductive and deductive approaches to empirical research in social science eventually led to more a generalized understanding of how research was organized to contribute to the scientific discipline of political science. We can specify a consolidated model of this generic understanding to include the following hierarchy of assumptions:

1. Social science exists to help promote understanding of the truth about the “facts of social life;”
2. Social science research contributes to this quest by adding to the accumulation of an expanding base of objective knowledge about society;
3. Growth of this knowledge base is contingent upon the building of theory that offers explanations of social relations;
4. Building of theory is dependent on the development of universal generalizations regarding the behavior of social actors;
5. Development of a growing body of generalizations occurs by testing falsifiable, causal hypotheses that demonstrate their success in making predictions;
6. Accumulation of a growing body of predictions about social behavior comes from the study of variation in samples involving large numbers of cases; and
7. A growing body of objective, causal knowledge can be put in service of society, particularly by influencing public policy-makers and the stewards of the state.

Critics have long noted that this paradigm excludes much valuable research. For instance, it assumes that the study of a single case is unscientific, provides no basis for generalizing, does not build theory, cannot contribute to the growth of political knowledge, and, as a result, is not even to be considered for publication in the leading social science journals. Case studies are even to be discouraged as a legitimate doctoral dissertation project. This bias against case studies is quite surprising given that there have been many very powerful arguments offered in defense of case studies (see Eckstein 1975). Yet, even though there have always been dissenters across the social sciences there has been over time a noticeable drift toward “large-n” quantitative research in service of objective, decontextualized, and universally generalizable truth about the social world, there is a good case to be made that the dissenters were for a long time increasingly marginalized as the center of gravity of the social science drifted more and more toward reflecting these core assumptions about what constitutes good social science and how to get it.

The dissenting view for a long time has posed “interpretivism” as an alternative to “positivism.” The interpretive approach is also indebted to Weber. It emphasizes Weber’s concern for understanding what social relations subjectively mean to the people being studied as opposed to explaining objectively what caused those relations to be the way they are. This distinction revisits the debates that preoccupied Weber and his colleagues over whether social science ought to be more about *erklären* (explanation) or *verstehen* (understanding).

Today the interpretive approach is really a loose collection of many different approaches, including such disparate approaches as political ethnography, constructivism, discourse analysis, thick description, narrative analysis, and many others. What these approaches share in common is an emphasis on the interpretive dimensions of political analysis, stressing the importance of accounting for how political phenomena, relationships, and processes are not so much pre-existing objective facts of the social world as they are subjectively experienced and interpreted phenomena. While accounting for the material reality of social conditions, the interpretive approaches emphasize it is more important to try to arrive at understanding how the social world is subjectively experienced and interpreted by people than it is to provide an explanation of what caused social phenomena to happen. Understanding the effects of inequality, for instance, involves accounting for how people experience relative deprivation beyond the hardships they endure from absolute deprivation.

Most interpretive approaches therefore do not look to the natural sciences for a model of how to conduct social research even if they ironically include the assumption that

natural science research is also interpretive. Instead, they turn away from the naturalistic model because they see the asymmetry between social sciences and the natural sciences stemming from what Anthony Giddens (1976) and others have called the “double hermeneutic.” From this perspective, perspective, regardless of the material reality being examined, the natural sciences are interpretive in that natural science research is framed through interpretive lenses for constructing the facts that are observed whether they are quarks within atoms or the black holes in the cosmology; however, the social sciences are doubly hermeneutic in that research on social phenomena involves interpreting the interpretations social actors make of their experiences. Social science research is doubly hermeneutic because it involves researchers’ interpretations of other people’s interpretations.

The “interpretive turn,” as it came to be called in the social sciences, had many sources, including, perhaps most prominently, Clifford Geertz and his leadership in the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. Geertz, to be sure, saw interpretive approaches as providing important perspectives for understanding whatever was being studied and famously noted that thick description comprised “piled up inferences and implication” (see Geertz 2000). Yet, Geertz resisted the idea that researchers had to choose either an interpretive or positivist approach as a distinct logic of inquiry. Nonetheless over time, the main thrust of the interpretive turn has been to insist that interpretive social science implied a distinct logic of inquiry that prevented mixing methodologies.

Positivism and interpretivism became the oil and water of social science research. While researchers might be able to mix different methods of data collection, they increasingly were discouraged from mixing methodologies on the grounds that positivism and interpretivism implied those distinct logics of inquiry that could not be sensibly combined in the same analysis. Over time, the separate logic of inquiry argument has undoubtedly contributed to the idea that each of the social sciences is a fractured discipline where different researchers employing different approaches talk less and less to each other even though they study the same topics (Flyvbjerg 2001).

Yet, in recent years, the longstanding impasse between positivism and interpretivism has begun to come undone by researchers who pursue more problem-driven, mixed-methods research. There is growing interest in getting beyond the positivist/interpretivist divide in ways that include pursuing mixed-methods, problem-driven inquiry. In fact, a number of scholars have for some time selfconsciously and explicitly designed their work as mixed-methods research that is focused on real political problems (see Soss 1999). Recovering the insights of Weber, Geertz and other leaders of the interpretive turn of the last generation, a new generation of scholars has joined with others in conducting work

that takes a problem-driven approach and mixes methodologies in research projects that strive to study specific topics as fully and thoroughly as possible so as to better inform public deliberation on pressing social issues (see Cornish 2012; Smith 2002).

Phronetic Social Science Reconsidered

The issue about how to best conduct research in the social sciences is perhaps now finally moving beyond the debate between positivists who champion emulating the natural sciences and interpretivists who side with approaching the study of social relations along the lines of more humanistic forms of inquiry. Competing positivist and interpretivist epistemologies had spawned distinctive methodologies with separate logics of inquiry, varying preferences for different methods of data collection, and debates about a number of other issues including, most commonly, the value of quantitative versus qualitative data. Now the debates between positivists and interpretivists have been complicated by interventions by others who do not situate their investigations in either camp. This group has included a growing number of scholars who refuse to accept that they must limit their research to either a positivist or interpretivist methodology. Mixed-methods researchers have been joined by others who stress the importance of problem-driven over theory-driven research. These researchers want to focus on social problems and then use whatever different methods of study and forms of data collection necessary to study those topics as best they can. The debates about social research ultimately raise issues about the relationship of social science to social change.

Bent Flyvbjerg’s call for “phronetic social science” has been critical and has significantly contributed to what amounts to a “practical turn” in the social sciences. Calls for a more “public sociology” have been replicated across the social science disciplines in recent decades (see Burawoy 2005). The critical idea is to deemphasize contributing to theory or perfecting methods and to prioritize contributing to problem-solving in specific communities. Problem-driven research should be preferred over theory-driven or method-driven research (Schram 2015). Phronetic social science in fact promotes mixedmethods, problem-driven, contextualized studies that relate to specific issues political communities are struggling to address. Case studies that included narratives provided by the people being studied were at the core of this alternative social science. The bottom of the conventional social science pyramid was given new respect with the “practical turn” (see Fig. 1).

By drawing on the Aristotelian categorization of types of knowledge, he called his approach “phronetic social science.” For Aristotle, *episteme* was universal knowledge,

techne was essentially practical application of that knowledge in the form a technique, and *phronesis* was the practical wisdom that emerged from having an intimate familiarity of what would work in particular settings and circumstances. For Flyvbjerg, while the natural sciences studied a subject matter of the physical world that was amenable to universal models of causal laws and such, the social sciences could not produce such knowledge of the social world given its subject matter, that is, people whose subjective states of consciousness and shared understandings were not amenable to being modeled by transcontextual, universal causal models. Instead, the social sciences were better adapted to provide contextually specific knowledge that could help people address the major problems they confront in their lives in specific contexts that cannot be theorized ahead of time. Social science could conduct research that would enhance *phronesis*, the practical wisdom born of an intimate familiarity with a practice that could help people act effectively in particular situations. Flora Cornish (2012) notes:

Phronesis can be understood as part of a “turn to practice” in the social sciences. After the “linguistic” and “cultural” turns gave center-stage to symbols and meanings in human affairs, attention to practice is one way of returning materiality to social theory. Phronetic social researchers engage in detail in the complexities of the phenomena which they study, examining why things are the way they are, often uncovering undesirable workings of power, and asking how things could be improved. In so doing, they develop both practical wisdom and theoretical tools that provide lenses for problematizing and reconstructing practices in other settings. They explicitly do not strive to create general or universal theories of human behavior.

The practical turn here involves more than what people in the allied helping professions are calling “implementation science” (Van Lieshout et al. 2016). It goes beyond the goal of implementation science to apply objective, generalizable causal analyses to specific applications in the field. It similarly privileges engagement with real world problems in specific settings and contexts over perfecting abstract theories and methods to explain things independent of contingent contexts. Yet the emphasis on context is given much greater weight. The result is that case studies become a preferred form of research. These case studies can involve a mixing of data collection methods where qualitative and quantitative information can help triangulate a more thorough understanding of the problem.

While Flyvbjerg himself does not necessarily require it, engaged, mixed-method case studies logically open the door to working with the people being studied as a form of participatory-action research (Shdaimah et al. 2011). This includes allowing the people being studied to be research

collaborators who get to narrate their stories from the bottom-up so that the research reflects how their experience the problem being studied and how they are trying to address it. This need not be the only perspective offered but it becomes now one that merits consideration. Research can be both top-down and bottom-up reflecting the views of both those who are trying to manage the problem and those who are being managed by those interventions.

For Flyvbjerg, phronetic social science need not be strictly a form of participatory action research but it should focus on the “tension points” that emerge between conflicting perspectives especially regarding the disjuncture between what is said and done (see Flyvbjerg et al. 2012). By focusing on tension points, phronetic social science can contribute addressing these conflicts in ways that lay the basis for creating positive social change. In this way, phronetic social science is engaged, problem-oriented, and invested in contributing to positive social change. This type of research can be conducted from the bottom-up as well as the top-down. When conducted from the bottom-up, it is often done working in alliance with the people who are directly affected by how those on top in social hierarchies are or are not addressing a problem. Top-down research often takes a managerial perspective that has a “what works agenda” focused on managing a problem so that it is less of a problem for the existing social order, even if it does not address the needs of the people directly affected. Yet, bottom-up research can contribute improving things according an explicit understanding of a “what’s right” agenda that stems from a focus on how helping the people being managed to realize what is in their own best interests (Schram 2015).

To be sure, there are then noteworthy differences between phronetic, bottom-up, participatory, and problem-driven research. These are not synonymous. Phronetic research is geared to making a difference in ongoing public issue contests but it need not necessarily be done from the bottom-up (see Flyvbjerg 2001, p. 192, n. 6). And even if done from the bottom-up, it might not be done in collaboration with people in the field of action that are engaging an issue from either the top or the bottom. Yet, it is best to see phronetic research as ineliminably problem-driven and geared specifically to addressing problems the people are seeking to address. Also, phronetic research does have a focus on attacking tension points by highlighting the power relations involved and that should prove useful for subordinated groups looking for ways to improve their situation. While phronetic research is not necessarily explicitly related to Marx’s idea of praxis, the approach I am proposing combines phronetic, bottom-up, participatory and problem-driven types of research. While this type of research could be seen as something most especially specific to the discipline of Political Science, that would be a mistake. It is research that all those interested in understanding and informing action in the social world ought to be interested in undertaking.

A Case Study of Case Study Research: The Value of Narratives from the Bottom-Up

With two collaborators (then doctoral students), I conducted a participatory-action research project consistent with Flyvberg's idea of "phronetic social science" (Shdaimah et al. 2011). Starting in 2004, we partnered with the Affordable Housing Coalition in Philadelphia to conduct research that would help create the Philadelphia Housing Trust Fund. Our focus was on the need for funding to address the unique circumstances of the Philadelphia low-income housing market where many poor families owned dilapidated homes. Philadelphia, like Detroit, but unlike most other big cities, had many poor families who did not rent but lived in run-down homes they owned but had trouble maintaining.

While I had been a critic of the asset-building approach as an anti-poverty strategy (Schram 2006), I needed to adjust my thinking to the specific local context. I was suspicious of emphasizing home ownership among the poor as a way of acquiring assets accumulating wealth in order to get out of poverty since many low-income families ended up being saddled with debt for a home in a poor, often racially segregated neighborhood where it did not appreciate in value. Yet, the Philadelphia situation was different. These low-income homeowners already owned their homes and needed help being able to stay in them. We would not be emphasizing home ownership as an asset-building strategy as much as an anti-homelessness strategy to prevent people from being forced out of their dilapidated homes onto the streets with nowhere to go. The local context was distinctive and needed to be taken into account when dealing with the issue of low-income homeownership.

With the specific context in mind, we collected a variety of different types of census and other statistical data to document this unique problem of lack of support for home repair for the poor. Beyond the census data, we also surveyed the low-income homeowners and we also collected their personal stories that narrated their problems in getting assistance in maintaining their homes. We also interviewed government officials for contrast. Our case study narrated this relatively unique policy problem from the bottom-up in ways that highlighted tension points with the government's policy officials. Our analysis of these tension points was part of our version of what Nancy Naples (2003) calls "everyday world policy analysis" where we highlighted the contrast between how the government implemented its policy from the top-down and how ordinary people experienced it from the bottom-up.

We conducted a "walk-through" analysis of what it was like to walk through the process of trying to procure a home repair grant or loan. We were surprised by all the obstacles low-income homeowners confronted whether in the form of all the paperwork, the reams of documentation, the long

waiting periods, the inadequacy of the funding available, the miniscule size of the allotments that were distributed, the long work times for actually beginning repairs, the sub-par work of contractors, and even the need to have work redone. It was a real eye-opener to look at the implementation of policy from the perspective of the clients who experienced the effects of program limitations. Just conducting these kinds of bottom-up analyses created a treasure-trove of suggestions for improving how the policies in place could be revised to better serve low-income homeowners.

Yet, when we talk about tension points specific to a research collaboration between researchers such as ourselves and our advocate partners, it got personal. Throughout the entire collaboration there were tensions between our understanding of what we thought we could say and do and what our advocate partners wanted. This was true about what we should research, how we could present our findings in print or in person, where we could appear to make presentation, and finally what we could in good faith recommend on the basis of our research. Most especially, as researchers with scholarly reputations to protect, we were constantly concerned about being seen as compromising our standards for good research in the name of making advocacy claims. In particular, we were very reluctant to extrapolate from our research precise estimates as to how many low-income homeowners in Philadelphia had homes in disrepair that qualified for services under the existing programs. Our advocate partners wanted us to estimate a precise number that was easy for the public, the press and policymakers to remember and act on. Our data did not actually allow for this given the samples sizes we were working with, especially from the American Housing Survey. Estimates from these samples would come with large standard errors. The advocates worried that if we presented careful but circumspect research that specified the margin of error with our estimates there would be no hard and fast number people could latch onto for making proposals regarding funding increases. We however worried that if we tried to be precise beyond what our samples allowed we would be seen as incompetent researchers throwing numbers around just for political effect. We hashed this issue out over multiple sessions (some more intense than others). Nonetheless, we eventually found a way to make a reasonable estimate with qualifying statements attached and even agreed to it being used not just in a summary report but in flyers and posters. We made public presentations before relevant policymakers where we talked about the estimates of how many low-income stood to benefit from increased funding for home repair.

Trust was critical. Without it there cannot be a participatory research collaboration like ours. In our case, in spite of all the disagreements, we were able to move forward because there was trust between us (the researchers) and

them (our advocacy partners). We believed in the cause and trusted our advocacy partners to not misuse our research just to score political points. In the end we were able to build on trust that had developed over many sessions and then finally find a way to compromise without undermining the integrity of our research. Eventually, we were all on the same page when it counted. We testified before the City Council hearings on the Trust Fund and stood with our advocacy partners to vouch for our research. We joined with low-income homeowners as they testified to their stories about how they experienced the inadequacies of the City's limited home repair assistance programs. When the Fund was enacted we appreciated how the word Trust in the title had come to have a double meaning.

In the end, our case study research helped highlight a disjuncture that needed to bring low-income people's concerns into the policy process. The Philadelphia Affordable Housing Coalition was able to join with others in getting the City's Housing Trust Fund created and in the process get millions of dollars annually to be devoted specifically for low-income home repair so poor families could stay housed in their owned homes. We ended up reporting on this in a book which provides a case study of how case study research can be central to realizing Flyvbjerg's vision of a more phronetic social science that better connects research with action to make the world a better place (Shdaimah et al. 2011). Social research can be best part of this process when it tailored to specific settings and it geared to helping inform what should be done in those specific settings. This is especially the case when researchers collaborate with those who are trying to change things in those situations. Helping inform their situated reasoning, rather than contribute to trans-contextual abstract rationality, is how social research can do the most good. When social research is structured consistent with this orientation then it can be part of the process of making the world a better place, case by case.

Real Social Science as Applied Science

We need to consider revising the dominant model of social research, especially if we want our work to be associated with contributing to positive social change. We need to change research in order to better conduct research that gets social change. The myth of "pure social science" informs the pyramid of knowledge and perpetuates the conceit that social science when conducted in a proper scientific way produces objective, universally generalizable, causal knowledge that contributes to increasing our understanding of the truth of the social world. The false objectivity that lies behind the pyramid of knowledge leads social science on a fool's errand to try to mimic dominant understandings of the natural sciences which cannot be relied on to produce meaningful

understanding of the social world. The problem is not just that social science research is ineliminably biased because it unavoidably is always conducted from a particular perspective, top-down, bottom-up, left, right, etc. Instead, the myth is compounded by the naturalistic fallacy that we can actually produce trans-contextual knowledge about social relations that is independent of how the social actors we study experience those social relations in specific settings. As Flyvbjerg has so effectively demonstrated, social science needs to give up the idea that it can successfully emulate the natural sciences. Instead it should heed his advice and begin to practice a more phronetic social science that is designed to help the people being studied in specific settings better enact a practical wisdom about the problems they are addressing. Social research can significantly contribute to enhancing that type of knowledge if it puts its collective mind to it. In this way, real social science is less the pure kind—detached, decontextualized and focused on perfecting abstract theories and depersonalized causal models. Instead, real social science is more the applied kind—engaged, problem-driven, and focused on helping the people being studied in any specific context get to do what's right. Applied research is therefore arguably the real social science not the compromised inferior form it is often made out to be. For social science to produce knowledge appropriate to its subject matter, it must invert the pyramid knowledge and privilege contextual understandings of social relations as experience in particular settings.

The irony here is not just that applied social science is actually more, rather than less, scientific according to the model of phronetic social science. Instead, the real irony is that for years the various allied helping professions—social work in particular—have been trying to emulate the pure social sciences (who have been trying to emulate the natural sciences). My own personal experience as a faculty member in a school of social work for many years has led me to acquire first-hand knowledge of this problem (see Schram 2013). I suspect it is because helping professions like social work have suffered mightily with an inferiority complex as a lesser academic or scholarly pursuit given their applied focus with educating students in how to practice their craft in the field as opposed to how to conduct studies of the field. As a result, over time there has been a concerted effort to upgrade that reputation by demonstrating that their practice in the field is grounded is the best social science research conventionally understood.

Yet, this quest for scientific legitimacy has perverted the relationship of theory to practice in fields like social work and undermined the need to account for the importance of context. Take the idea of "best practices," where practitioners learn on the basis of meta-analysis or other summative techniques aggregating disparate research efforts across cases to adopt treatments, interventions and specific practices in other settings and apply them in their own setting (Cornish 2012).

At the pinnacle of this approach are randomized clinical trials which are seen as the best one can do in producing evidence of causality that then should be possible to rely on for proposing changes in policy, treatment or other interventions regardless of context. Yet, this kind of decontextualization is dangerous in mistaking the ability to isolate a causal factor for understanding the specific mechanisms that make something happen in a particular context (Marcellesi and Cartwright 2013). The need to know whether a specific context includes the mechanisms making something happen is an essential overlooked step when relying on clinical trials for developing causal knowledge. To study context is to learn what the contingent, context-specific causal mechanisms are and whether they are present in one or another situation or setting. Such in-depth causal understanding suggests the need to appreciate that what works in one setting needs at a minimum to be recalibrated to work in another distinctive setting that involves different causal mechanisms. Decontextualization can lead to a de-emphasis on the importance of setting and to the false idea that abstract, decontextualized models of sound practice can just be inserted in any context without attention to what is different. Without such tacit skills, knowledge from one context is not transferable to another context, making learning from even case studies impossible (Flyvbjerg 2006). This leads to theory dictating to practice in the most obtuse way possible.

The irony here is not just that applied social science is more sensitive to context and therefore should be seen as the model for pure social science, rather than the other way around. The irony is much deeper. The latest findings in fields associated with the natural sciences actually suggest this point. For instance, applied work in medicine has indicated that generic findings about the positive health effects of drinking coffee need to be tailored to how people's personal digestive systems consume coffee. Depending on your DNA and the bacteria in your stomach, drinking coffee may not have health benefits such as reducing the likelihood of developing various forms of cancer (Cha 2015). How ironic is this? Instead of applied social science aping pure social science which has desperately been trying to emulate the natural sciences, the natural sciences need to be modeled after applied social science. Good science of any kind that actually contributes to knowledge humans can use is practiced the other way around where it is imperative to have an applied mentality that includes sensitivity to specific contexts, the local political setting or the stomach included.

Social Workers in particular have a lot to gain by reconsidering the pyramid of knowledge, taking context seriously and practicing phronetic, bottom-up, participatory problem-driven research (see for instance Floersch 2002). Too often abstract research and theory disconnected from the frontlines of social work practice fails to improve practice because it does not fit the context in which it is applied. Too often relying on such research can lead social workers

away from considering the real world social, economic, cultural and political context in which interventions, programs, services and treatments are imposed. Too often the failure to consult with the community and the people being served further makes the application of research difficult and even counterproductive. Social workers need to consider more frequently inverting the pyramid of knowledge and engaging in phronetic, bottom-up, participatory, problem-driven research.

Recruiting more academic partners in this type of research however is today not automatic. The university today is increasingly neoliberal where market logic is ascendant and market actors dominant. Everything is increasingly put under the economic microscope and evaluated for its ability to enhance the financial efficiencies administrators must impose in order to make work with budgets that are increasingly starved of public funding (Schram 2016). Faculty are increasingly monitored by data systems that score their ability to get funding and conduct research that is published in the most cited journals. These "high-impact" journals are almost always the more scientific ones that present themselves as offering objective, trans-contextual, highly generalizable causal knowledge. Phronetic, bottom-up, participatory, problem-driven research gets pushed to the margins in the process. The incentive structures in universities today work against doing the type of research I am suggesting. It can be professionally and political risky. Yet, if we do not push back against the neoliberal pressures it is likely that more than this type of research will be jeopardized. Instead, academic freedom, critical thinking, politically challenging research and much more will also be at risk of elimination in the neoliberal university.

Will we ever give up the ghost of pure social science? Whether it is meta-analysis, "big data," or whatever the next fad is, sometimes it seems like never. We might never learn the lessons Flyvbjerg already taught us. Then again we just might. What is clear is that we need less theory-driven or method-driven research that prizes its scientific scrupulousness at the expense of practical relevance. Further, we need less top-down research that focuses on a "what works" agenda that serves the management of subordinate populations and more research that provides bottom-up understandings of a "what's right" agenda tailored to empowering people in particular settings. Real social science research needs to listen to how people on the bottom experience their own subordination so that we can help them overcome their subjugation. Good social science includes taking the perspective of the oppressed in the name of helping them achieve social justice. In the end, there are a number of tension points between the model of conventional social science and phronetic social science that starkly highlight how we need to change research in order do research that promotes positive social change. When we engage in phronetic,

bottom-up, participatory, problem-driven research, we get closer to a real social science that can make a difference for people struggling to address the problems confronting them.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

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