Yes we can! Doing phronesis

Donncha Kavanagh

review of


*Real social science: Applied phronesis* is an important book. Edited by Bent Flyvbjerg, Todd Landman and Sanford Schram, it is a valuable sequel to Flyvbjerg’s (2001) highly cited *Making social science matter* (MSSM). In that book, Flyvbjerg argued that social science should not model itself on the natural sciences, and that social scientists – since they study reflexive, conscious human subjects – should not seek to build generalizable, predictive models akin to those of the natural world, but should instead focus on not just what is true, but what is the right thing to do in particular settings. In developing his argument, Flyvbjerg drew heavily on Aristotle’s distinction between epistemé, techné and phronesis, a distinction that is foundational to understanding this current collection. Epistemé is abstract, universal, logically deduced knowledge of relations between objects that do not admit to change, such as the form of knowledge encapsulated in a trigonometric theorem based on geometrical axioms. Techné, or productive knowledge, is the know-how possessed by an expert who understands the principles underlying the production of an artefact or a state of affairs. In contrast, phronesis is the practical wisdom that develops through deep familiarity with the contingencies and uncertainties of different social practices. What Flyvbjerg adds to Aristotle’s concept of phronesis is a keen appreciation of power and reflexivity in producing situated knowledge to guide intelligent social action.
In large part, the present volume seeks to articulate and exemplify what this concept of phronesis means as a distinctive stream of social science research.

It achieves this objective quite well. While one might think from the introduction that the book is a collection of examples of phronetic research in practice, this is the case in only eight of the fourteen chapters. Chapter 2, written by one of the editors, Sanford Schram, but drawing heavily on Flyvbjerg’s MSSM, is an excellent introduction to, and history of, phronetic social science. Schram, who is Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at CUNY, mentions that MSSM became a ‘manifesto’ for the Perestroika movement to open the field of political science to alternative approaches, but – ironically, given that context matters so much to phronetic researchers – little is said about this Perestroika movement. In fact, the movement is named after an anonymous ‘Mr. Perestroika’ who, in 2000, emailed the editors of the American Political Science Review with a polemic criticizing the fact that almost all articles published in that journal were based on a positivist understanding of social science and that the journal privileged game theory, statistics and formal modelling. This context is important because readers of ephemera might consider this particular spat to be ‘oh so 1980s’. Indeed, parts of Schram’s chapter, and some of the more evangelical writing of the editors, will remind readers of Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) seminal book on paradigms of social inquiry and the subsequent ‘paradigm wars’ and debates about ‘paradigm incommensurability’ that engaged organizational scholars during the 1980s and early 1990s (Aldrich, 1988; Reed, 1990; Willmott, 1990). Schram poetically describes ‘positivism and interpretivism [as] the oil and water of social science research’ (22) – which is the incommensurability position – and his argument is that methods can and should be mixed. Perhaps this makes for interesting reading in political science, but given that John Hassard (1990) was doing this twenty-four years ago, it all seems a bit dated.

But perhaps not. Burrell and Morgan’s book was seminal, though maybe what’s most interesting about their work now is how their four-paradigm framework has morphed into a two-paradigm world view of positivism and interpretivism, both of which are located on the ‘order’ side of the change-order dimension of their taxonomy, while the two ‘radical’ paradigms (‘radical humanism’ and ‘radical structuralism’) have all but disappeared. In a way, then, the phronesis movement can be seen as a robust attempt to bring ‘change’ back in as a core part of theorizing and academic work. This alone makes it important, not least because research methodology textbooks used in doctoral education programmes routinely structure research around a continuum that goes from positivism (or quantitative research) to interpretivism (or qualitative research) at the other (see, for example Bryman and Bell, 2011). In particular, phronetic social science foregrounds the cui bono (who benefits?) question that tends to be sidelined in
methodology textbooks. And perhaps properly, we should think of three rather than four paradigms of inquiry: positivism, which seeks to develop epistemé or scientific knowledge; interpretivism, which is focused on describing how things come to be and how actors interpret the world; and phronesis, which is primarily concerned with what is right and ethical, and intervening to make things better in particular settings. Phronesis also provides a valuable counterpoint to the influential distinction between what are known as Mode 1 and Mode 2 understandings of knowledge production (Huff and Huff, 2001). If Mode 1 is concerned with discipline-based scientific practice and if Mode 2 is problem-centred, transdisciplinary and attendant to the needs of funding agencies, then phronetic research describes quite a different understanding of knowledge production. Elsewhere, I have introduced the idea of Mode Φ (Φ, phi, being the first letter of the Greek word for phronesis, φρόνησις) to distinguish its focus on ‘rectitude’ from Mode 1’s focus on ‘rigour’ and Mode 2’s focus on ‘relevance’ (Kavanagh, 2012).

Chapter 3 is written by another political scientist and the book’s third editor, Todd Landman, who argues that narrative analysis is particularly suited to phronetic social science because it allows meaning and power relations to be uncovered in a way that other methods cannot. Curiously, given the chapter’s focus on marshalling evidence, this assertion is supported little by way of an evidential basis. The chapter discusses different types of – and approaches to – narrative analysis and briefly illustrates the method through a discussion of the work of truth commissions. However, the most useful and original part of the chapter is in the last page, where Landman poses a series of questions for anyone interested in using narratives as a primary method for establishing evidence in social science research. Many of the questions are relevant to researchers using methods other than narrative analysis.

The fourth chapter, by Arthur Frank, is a carefully crafted exploration of the relation between phronesis in doing social science and what Frank calls ‘everyday phronesis’. The latter idea has three aspects: it is content (a stock of experiential knowledge), a quality of persons (a capacity to acquire and use this knowledge appropriately) and a form of action (a practice in which the knowledge is used and gained). Frank reiterates the ever-present theme that ‘real social science is when studying the world has the effect of changing it’ (48; emphasis in original). Rather than trying to define phronesis, he instead illustrates it with a sketch of a central character in Tolstoy’s War and peace, Nikolay Rostov, who learns how to act appropriately through closely observing peasants at work. Through doing so, Rostov learns their way of speaking, the hidden meaning behind their words, and their notions of good and bad, all of which makes him a better manager in that particular setting. Translated into social science research, the basic principle of
the tale is that the social scientist should seek to learn from the participants, and to learn, through observation, how to identify those participants he should learn from. Frank’s interpretation of Rostov is that the latter would not be able to articulate what exactly he has learned, or be able to represent it as a text for others, and so perhaps it is no surprise that his intellectual soul-mates are Bourdieu and Foucault. He likes Bourdieu’s concept of habitus because it is embodied, durable, and habitual – though still allowing inventive improvisation in conditions of uncertainty – and while habitus does not determine action, it does predispose the actor to feel that some actions are right or even necessary. In many ways, a game is not just a metaphor for habitus; habitus is actually a game, and the implication that Frank takes for phronesis is that ‘practical wisdom is generally specific to a particular field’ (55), much like having a feel for the game of tennis is different from having a feel for the game of hurling. I’m not convinced of that, however. My own preference is Aristotle’s distinction between poiesis and praxis and his association of techné with the former and phronesis with the latter (techné and phronesis both being forms of knowledge). Poiesis describes an activity associated with making or fabricating something. Praxis, in contrast, is not structured around a separately identifiable outcome, but is instead a domain of activity where the end is realized in the very doing of the activity itself. Praxis, then, is not akin to a particular game, but is instead about habitual activities or virtues such as friendliness, honesty, truthfulness, and loyalty, which transcend any particular poiesis, any particular game. Seeing habitus as a form of game is important because games have stakes, winners and losers, trickery and cheating, while players must be willing to take risks, to take moves, to strategise, and to think of the short and long-term implications of a move in a play, both within and without the game. Importantly, the distinction between poiesis and praxis – and their associated forms of knowledge, techné and phronesis – is between productive and ethical activity, with the latter always being in the context of a power game. Frank asserts, not quite convincingly, that phronesis ‘is much like power as imagined by Foucault’ (64). The individual comes to be in the world through a series of confrontations where something significant is at stake, akin to moves in a game. As each of these confrontations is infused with power, phronesis is required.

The focus on power continues in the next, rather long and somewhat rambling, chapter by Stewart Clegg and Tyrone Pitsis, both well-known scholars in the organization theory community. Lukes’ (1974/2006) three-dimensional view of power provides the intellectual basis for their analysis, especially his third dimension of power, which is centred on how the less powerful have an inability to recognize, much less realize, their own interests. This is an old idea, going back to Marx’s notion of false consciousness, but it continues to confront each new generation of social science researchers with a fresh version of an old
problem: how can theorists presume to know that they themselves are not manifesting false consciousness, especially if they avoid engaging with the material reality of those about whom they theorize? For Clegg and Pitsis, phronesis provides the best way of avoiding the trap that is the transcendental position, because it, at a minimum, recognises that power matters in the various relations that researchers develop and maintain as they do empirical research. After a rather long-winded discussion on power and value, they seek to illustrate the point through drawing on their study of a megaproject alliance charged with upgrading the sewerage system around Sydney. What began as a study on learning within the alliance changed to a study of alliance value-creation and sense-making – largely because new players seemed to be sceptical about academic research – and that question again changed as the constellation of actors shifted. One of the findings of their research – that politicians were using the alliance to sway voters in marginal electorates – shocked the professional practitioners being studying and was a ‘major blot on the cognitive landscape of the project professionals for whom pride in the project was paramount’ (85). The practitioners’ taken-for-granted assumptions about the world were disturbed as they came to see, with Clegg and Pitsis, that power determines what’s of value and what’s rational. While this may illustrate how phronetic research can help practitioners transcend their false consciousness, it is hardly to be expected, necessary or possible in all phronetic research. What is to be expected in phronetic research, however, are volatile research questions, given the role that practitioners are accorded in framing the research endeavour. In a project setting the network of stakeholders is constantly changing and so perhaps it is not surprising that the authors of this chapter became frustrated with the way their research question kept changing according to the whims of different practitioners. They were also uneasy at having to justify the value of academic research to practitioners, culminating in their lament that ‘Australian managers, when compared globally, are not as academically curious as their Danish, German or Swiss counterparts’ (86). Yet what Frank’s earlier chapter reminds us is that phronetic researchers can always learn from the researched, and should neither patronize nor proselytize practitioners who are likely to be suspicious of researchers with an overt (political) agenda and of practices they see as contrary to their understanding of ‘good’ research.

The next chapter, by Bent Flyvbjerg, is just as autobiographical – though more insightful – as Flyvbjerg discusses his own experiences negotiating another political nexus, namely the media. His key point is that if one wants to maximize the impact of research on public deliberation, policy and practice – and this is perhaps the defining feature of phronetic research – then one has to engage intelligently and skilfully with the media. This chapter is valuable because reflections on the relationship between social science research and the media are
relatively rare, as are explorations of why so many scholars are hyper-concerned with academic exposure and yet disinterested in public impact. If phronetic research is to gain traction, this is perhaps the most important chapter in the book, not least because the mass media is the so-called ‘fourth power’ of government (along with the legislature, the executive and the judicial). But getting academics to engage with the media is no small task given the deep-seated antipathy to such an endeavour that goes all the way back to ancient Greece where there was a profound conflict between the philosopher and the polis, which culminated in Socrates’ execution. The fact that Socrates could not persuade his judges of his innocence showed Plato that the city is unsafe for the philosopher and also led him to doubt the validity of persuasion, which the Greeks saw as the highest and truly political art. Hannah Arendt (1990: 75-6) has explored this in an insightful essay in which she explains how the sophos, the wise man as ruler, must be seen in opposition to the current ideal of the phronimos, the understanding man whose insights into the world of human affairs qualify him for leadership, though of course not to rule. Philosophy, the love of wisdom, was not thought to be the same at all as this insight, phronésis. The wise man alone is concerned with matters outside the polis.

Plato’s argument that the philosopher could and should be king was lost with the death of Socrates ‘who was the first philosopher to overstep the line drawn by the polis for the sophos, for the man who is concerned with eternal, nonhuman and nonpolitical things’ (Arendt, 1990: 77). This line is present in Flyvbjerg’s story about his own experiences with Danish and international media, especially in the attempts to intimidate him and stop him from criticizing overspending on public megaprojects. For instance, he tells one story where a high-ranking government official told him, over lunch, that if his research results reflected badly on the government then the official would ‘personally make sure [his] research funds dried up’ (99). But this just excited Flyvbjerg, who recognized that he had touched a ‘tension point’ in the network of power relations that is ‘fraught with dubious practices, contestable knowledge and potential conflict’ (100). The phronetic researcher’s job is to seek out such tension points, where they can effect most change by problematizing existing practices, even if this blurs the lines between social science and investigative journalism. Flyvbjerg’s contention is that working with mass media is crucial to doing phronetic social science and it can take a negligible amount of time compared to the vast number of hours that go into research. A key lesson is that the researcher’s priority should be to study things that matter to the communities in which we live in ways that matter, which is a slogan that should be posted throughout the methodology labyrinth that has engulfed tribes of social scientists. Flyvbjerg presents a compelling list of lessons learned from his engagements with mass media and the public sphere, though he suspects that few social scientists will follow his path, preferring
instead to live ‘according to the ancient Latin motto *bene vixi qui bene latuit* (they who live unnoticed live well)’ (118). It is a job of work to change this institutionalized practice, but one that is worth doing.

Questions about power and the relationship between the researcher and the researched are also the focus of the next chapter by Corey Shdaimah and Roland Stahl, in which they argue that collaborative research (CR) is immensely suited to Flyvbjerg’s theory of phronesis. A defining feature of CR is non-academic stakeholders participating in the planning, implementation and interpretation of a research project, and, perhaps more importantly, researchers participating in a larger social project. While CR has traditionally focused on consensus building within research projects, Shdaimah and Stahl emphasise that conflict should be the norm in any research question that matters (which are the only questions that matter for phronic researchers). To illustrate the power processes in a CR project they draw on a project in which they were hired by a non-profit organisation to conduct research on the organization’s advocacy work around the home repair needs of low-income homeowners in Philadelphia. Similar to Clegg and Pitsis, the researchers encountered resistance to the research, with funds spent on research being contrasted with resource limits elsewhere, and they also observed similar tensions between those who fund research, those who conduct research, and the so-called subjects of social science research. In this context, it is perhaps no surprise that the overall research question was contested, subject to change, and potentially at odds with the interests of stakeholders. The lessons from this chapter are that the researcher needs the ability to recognize and negotiate the conflicts that come with phronetic research, to willingly abdicate some normal privileges, and to participate in arenas where the researcher may have very little power.

Similar themes are explored in chapter 8, in which Leonie Sandercock and Giovanni Attili discuss their ongoing research into the conflicts embroiling two small First Nations communities in northern British Columbia, or what they describe as the ‘inconvenient truth of Canada’s apartheid’ (138). In this study, the *cui bono* question – which is one of the guiding questions of phronic research – is especially salient, as is articulating a clear research question, which, in this case, was about how relations between Native and non-Native Canadians could be improved in that specific time and place. Not unlike the way Flyvbjerg blurred the boundary between social science and investigative journalism, Sandercock and Attili use film as a mode of inquiry to maximize their impact on the public discourse. The authors are acutely aware of the politically charged nature of the phenomenon as well as the possibility that their research may ‘exacerbate the existing polarisation’ (147). Hence, choices must be made, and the researchers are reflexive and open about the political and ethical dilemmas they negotiated.
Their story reads well, ending with optimism and a whiff of suspense, which might display their knowledge of the crafts and craftiness of good story-telling.

Chapter 9, by Steven Griggs and David Howarth, is a story about airport expansion in the United Kingdom, which is suited to the phronetic approach as it is certainly an important issue for many communities, citizens and corporations. Similar to the authors of the previous chapters that follow the interpretative tradition, Griggs and Howarth grapple with how to represent the actors’ points of view, how to explain the practices from which these points of view emerge, and also how to critically intervene in these practices. Helpfully, and similar to some of the other chapters, they begin by setting out how they engage in the practice of doing phronetic research. This involves problematizing a particular practice of interest, identifying what matters and why it is important, and then providing a compelling, power-centred explanation of the context’s underpinning logic (rather than laws) that goes beyond mere description. But this chapter is also a good illustration of the pitfalls into which the phronetic researcher can fall. First, their story becomes submerged in the ins and outs of the ‘wicked problem’ (Rittel and Webber, 1973) that is aviation policy, and too often the authors miss the sweet spot between giving the detail of the story and giving too much detail. Second, they undermine the legitimacy of their stance in the debate by continually referring to the government’s ‘fantasmatic narratives’ (the thesis that aviation expansion and environmental protection are compatible objectives). Emotive language, especially when it leverages neologisms, does not an argument help.

The next chapter, by Tricia Olsen, Leigh Payne and Andrew Reiter, is fascinating and an excellent example of phronetic research using quantitative data. Most importantly, their research question is interesting and relevant: what is the appropriate configuration of transitional justice mechanisms (trials, amnesties and truth commissions) in dealing with past atrocities, and how should we adjudicate on the particular actions taken in the case of Brazil? While Landman’s earlier chapter on truth commissions involved a detailed content analysis of submissions made to particular truth commissions, here the authors’ dataset is their own database of transitional justice mechanisms, extracted from Keesing’s World News Archive, which they then correlate with standard indices of human rights and democracy. What they find is that none of the mechanisms on their own has a positive correlation with changes in democracy and human rights measures; that truth commissions, on their own, have a statistically significant but negative relationship with human rights; and that two combinations – trials and amnesties, or trials, amnesties and truth commissions – are positively correlated with democracy and human rights measures. They then provide a
compelling explanation for these results that should be especially relevant to
those dealing with post-conflict situations. As I say, interesting.

Virgina Eubanks’ chapter explores the connection between phronetic research
and feminist epistemology. It is somewhat surprising that the links between the
two domains have been overlooked heretofore because both put power at the
centre of analysis, both insist on reflexivity, both are keen to integrate the
perspectives of the less powerful in situated settings, and both wish to produce
knowledge that is more true and more just. The argument is convincing, but the
unspoken implication is that phronetic research can become an easy umbrella to
cover what are already large fields of inquiry. For instance Eubank’s work, which
is presented in this book as an exemplar of phronetic research, is based on a
study done between 2001 and 2003, even though the term phronetic research
was only introduced in 2001 when MSSM was published. This study which was
originally focused on reducing the ‘digital divide’ for low-income women, shifted
in orientation as the women being studied articulated their own concerns, which
were centred on justice and citizenship rather than access to technology or
technical proficiency. Eubanks, like some other authors in this collection, had to
grapple with shifting research questions as well as the issue of whether and how
to integrate her civic engagement in a political struggle with her academic work
and identity. And similar to some of the other authors (and probably in response
to editorial direction) Eubanks itemises the learning highlights from her study,
which she labels as an example of ‘feminist phronesis’. Most of these are to be
expected, but they also surface some issues that I will return to later.

One of these issues is brought centre-stage in the next chapter by William Paul
Simmons. To what extent, wonders Simmons, is Flyvbjerg ‘calling on social
scientists to get involved and do politics in lieu of merely studying politics’ (246;
emphasis in original). In answering this question, he turns to Aristotle who
clearly saw phronesis as not merely a form of knowing, but something that is
realized through action, and, at the pinnacle, it is realized through the art of
legislation. One consequence of Aristotle’s argument is that phronesis will be
ascribed only to a select few, with others being marginalised or, using Simmons’
language, ‘cauterized’. To counter this, he draws on Spivak’s writings on
representing marginalised voices and Dreyfus’s model of skill acquisition to
advocate an ‘anti-hegemonic phronetics’. He then presents a short case study of a
new Masters in Social Justice and Human Rights that sought to instantiate some
of these ideas through, in particular, a research methods course that evolved into
an action research course in which the students engage with community
stakeholders to address a current community problem. It is a good story about
how phronesis can be brought into the classroom.
The penultimate chapter, by Ranu Basu, seeks to bring space into phronesis. Basu’s interest is in the centrality of space in poverty management, social planning, neoliberal rationality, and geosurveillance, and she explores these issues through a case study of a redistributional funding model adopted by the Toronto District School Board. However, this chapter was one that seemed to lose its way somewhat and seemed unsure of its contribution, other than to show that phronetic research has an important, yet often forgotten, spatial dimension.

The book’s editors return in the final chapter which reiterates the themes running through the collection, especially the idea of problematizing tension points. Overall, this is a good read and a worthwhile contribution to the growing literature on phronetic social science. However, the book, and the field more broadly, has some rough edges, which I will now briefly consider. First, the book’s evangelical tone sometimes makes for uncomfortable reading. This is especially so when Flyvbjerg and his co-editors set phronesis against what is, at best, a caricature of the natural sciences and, at worst, a serious misrepresentation, given what we know about the highly socialised nature of scientific practice (Kuhn, 1962/1970) allied to the results of numerous laboratory studies which show that science is a socio-material, agonistic and messy practice (Latour and Woolgar, 1979; Knorr-Cetina, 1981). Second, Flyvbjerg and his supporters say very little about the overlap between phronetic research and ‘critical’ perspectives, which is an odd oversight given that at least 22 ‘critical’ journals commenced publication between 1969 and 2009 (Parker and Thomas, 2011). At the very least there seems to be some overlap, and presumably many of the articles published in journals like *ephemera* or *Organization* could comfortably wear the phronesis brand. Third, there is perhaps an excessive and unwarranted optimism in the degree to which individual academics can have a direct impact through doing phronetic research. Maybe the individual academic influences events over a longer time period, for instance, by using research to inform the teaching of undergraduates who may apply the knowledge many years later. Moreover, it hardly seems necessary to engage in practice as much as the advocates of phronesis would have us believe. After all, and the analogy may be unfortunate, but few would suggest that criminologists can only make a worthwhile contribution if they actually practice crime. Fourth, will Flyvbjerg’s interest in ‘minutiae and local micro-practices’ (234) rise above the every-present possibility that macro processes are operating behind actors’ backs? Fifth, will a piece of phronetic research become a series of wild goose chases as the research adjusts to the interests and desires of the researched, and, as Simmons would have it, the researcher must ‘constantly interrogate current conditions’ (253)? In short, are phronetic researchers destined to be frenetic researchers?
But we should end by highlighting the value of phronetic social science. Perhaps most importantly, it articulates a position that is a coherent alternative to both interpretivism and positivism, two poles around which so much social science inquiry has been framed. It also properly sidelines methodological questions – and debates about whether qualitative or quantitative data should be collected – by foregrounding the research question and emphasizing that the research question should matter. This is important as taught programmes on doctoral research in the social sciences spend considerable time teaching students how to conduct research and very little on how to formulate important research questions, which is where Flyvbjerg's idea of ‘tension points’ should be especially helpful. The literature on phronesis now includes, thanks to this book, quite detailed descriptions of how one should conduct phronetic research. We can only hope to see much more of this type of research in the future.

references


the author

Donncha Kavanagh is Professor of Information and Organisation at UCD Business School, University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland. His interests include the history of management thought, play and innovation. For further information, see http://donnchakavanagh.com
Email: donncha.kavanagh@ucd.ie