



Making Social Science Matter?: Case Studies from Community Development and Empowerment Education Research in Rural Ghana and Aboriginal Australia

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A National Health & Medical Research Council Population Health Research Career Development Award supported the writing of this paper.

Abstract

Despite potential opportunities offered by exceptional advances in science and technology, we are increasingly polarised from each other. Social inequalities, poverty and deprivation are only a few of the challenges facing most societies. By combining the theoretical perspective of Bent Flyvbjerg's *Making Social Science Matter* (2001) and related Perestroika discourse with insights from community development and empowerment research in rural Ghana and Aboriginal Australia, this paper demonstrates a strengths-based approach to social science that builds social capital through enhancing the capacity of individuals and communities to routinely consider ethical questions; where they are going; what can be done to make things better. Focus is on Flyvbjerg's challenge to social scientists to undertake research relevant to challenges and opportunities facing contemporary society. Highlighted is a need for researchers to reflect more explicitly about ways they seek to make their work relevant to people with whom they work. Strengths-based approaches, grounded in relevant ethical values, norms and local histories and traditions, offer one avenue for making social research relevant.

Keywords: Phronetic social science, Perestroika, Community development, Empowerment, Strength-based, Values and norms, Rural Ghana, Aboriginal Australia, Research relevance, Social capital

1. Introduction

On 14 October 2000, an anonymous email under the pseudonym of 'Mr Perestroika', addressed to the Editors of *Politics and Society* and *American Political Science Review*, was circulated within the academic discipline of political science in the United States of America. The email criticised the elitism and domination of the scientific framework in American political science which, it argued, unduly emphasised scientific causal modelling to the exclusion of other valid, non-statistical methodological approaches. In an eleven-point manifesto, the letter called for openness and methodological pluralism that employs diverse approaches, depending on the subject-matter. This, it argued, should allow the discipline to move beyond its current state of sterile scientism and become more relevant to the needs and challenges of contemporary society. Mr Perestroika's clarion call quickly spread like wild fire. It triggered, among other things, what David Laitin later described as a mass mobilisation within the discipline of political science against the practices of the disciplinary leadership (Laitin, 2006). A Perestroika movement, determined to change the organisational and intellectual basis of political science, was thus born in America.

Whether by coincidence or design, in the following year across the Atlantic in Denmark, Bent Flyvbjerg (2001) released a thought-provoking book entitled *Making Social Science Matter*. Flyvbjerg challenged social scientists to do away with any pretensions that they can emulate the natural sciences by providing general causal explanations for why people do what they do. Instead, he advocated that social scientists must re-think the types of research that they, by the very nature of their subject-matter, are best placed to undertake, that is, the study of society. He called for a need to bring back the

Aristotelian notion of *phronesis*, or situational ethics and practical wisdom, to the core of social science praxis.

Making Social Science Matter immediately provided a rallying point for the emerging Perestroika movement. By 2006, the efforts of the Perestroika movement had resulted in, among other things, the release of an edited collection of essays entitled *Making Political Science Matter* (Schram & Caterino, 2006). The objective, according to its editors, was to bring together a diverse set of scholars interested in promoting a methodologically pluralistic discipline that encourages problem-driven research, promotes civic-minded scholarship, challenges power and changes society for the better. As Schram, co-editor and self-confessed Perestroikan, further explained, social scientists must strive to use multiple methods in addressing problems in ways that can inform and empower the people being studied (Schram & Caterino, 2006).

Controversy over what is regarded as valid knowledge, the most reliable ways of knowing and the basis upon which some types of knowledge are accorded respectability and positions of influence more than others, in the process of deciding what is 'good' and 'bad' for society, is nothing new (Pitman & Berman, 2009; Snow, 1965; Wilson, 2008). Debate about whether the social sciences and humanities can be scientific in the same way as the physical sciences has also persisted for some time. Since Descartes, and subsequently Kant, western philosophical thought has been increasingly seduced with the dream of attaining universal rationality as the highest form of knowledge and the basis for truth (Schram & Caterino, 2006). The politics of knowledge production in the academy is full of, often bizarre, anecdotes concerning the way in which many scholars, irrespective of their disciplinary backgrounds, go to great lengths in order to seek this dream of universal rationality.

While I was an undergraduate student at the University of Ghana in the 1970s, a professor of history successfully convinced the university council to transfer the discipline of modern history from the arts faculty, which encompassed the classics, ancient history and languages, to the social studies faculty, with the effect that modern history would sit alongside such disciplines as sociology, economics, statistics and political science. Globally, this was at the height of science envy across the arts, humanities and social sciences, whereby many scholars from these disciplines were convinced that the only way to achieve academic respectability was to become increasingly epistemic in their research approaches. Within the discipline of history, the advent of *cleo-metrics*, or quantified history, premised on elegant statistical and mathematical models as the basis for making sense of the complex dynamics of historical causation, promised to revolutionise the entire philosophy and approach to historical research. The continuing dominance in academia of the scientific framework, and the push for all research (irrespective of subject-matter) to become progressively quantitative in character, was reinforced to me some three decades later when, as a practicing social scientist in a large public health school in Australia, I witnessed a professor, and head of the school, remark that all forms of qualitative research were 'dancing in the dark'.

While issues of methodological hegemony remain real challenges for many social scientists and scholars of the humanities globally, the purpose of this paper is not to defend qualitative research *vis-à-vis* quantitative, nor to engage in so-called science bashing. Rather, the purpose is to counter an unfortunate tendency within the Perestroika debate that confuses Flyvbjerg's notion of *phronesis* with the conventional qualitative versus quantitative mudslinging. I hope to refocus the debate back to what, in my view, is the most controversial and interesting aspect of Flyvbjerg's thesis, namely, the nature of social science and how to make it more relevant to the needs and challenges of contemporary society.

After an overview of Flyvbjerg's conceptualisation of phronetic social science and the critiques levelled against it within the Perestroika discourse, I draw upon my community development and empowerment research experience in rural Ghana and Aboriginal Australia to show that the need to make knowledge, especially modern academic knowledge, relevant to the day-to-day experiences of society is something that has been of major concern for many so-called third and fourth world indigenous populations on the margins of global divisions of knowledge, power and influence for a very long time (Bainbridge, 2009; Henry, Dunbar, Arnott, Scrimgeour, Murakami-Gold & Chamberlain, 2002; Mikhailovich, Morrison & Arabena, 2007; Thomas, 2004; Whiteside 2009; Wilson, 2008). A related aim is to motivate others to truly 'open up' the Perestroika discourse beyond its current Euro-North American centric by bringing perspectives from societies whose voices, despite rich knowledge traditions, hardly feature in dominant philosophical discourses.

2. Flyvbjerg and Perestroika

Why is social science losing out in the current Science Wars? Why is it becoming more and more marginalised in academia, evidence-based informed public policy and in society at large? How can social researchers guard against the production of the types of research outcomes that Mary Bailey (1992 cited in Flyvbjerg, 2001) calls "so what" (p. 132) results? That is, research results that may be interesting but of little value to the people who are the focus of the research. What can be done to make social science *matter* again?

Through *Making Social Science Matter*, Flyvbjerg (2001) formulates some answers to these provocative questions.

Flyvbjerg articulates how social scientists have become their own worst enemies because of their attempts to be something that they are not and will probably never be. He explains how they spend their precious energies and resources vainly mimicking the epistemic methods and approaches that natural scientists have so successfully employed in producing cumulative and predictive theories. The result, according to Flyvbjerg, is a vast accumulation of largely sterile and decontextualised social science knowledge that is becoming increasingly less relevant to the complexities of the real challenges facing humanity. Knowingly or unknowingly, social scientists accept terms of reference that are self-defeating; they allow both natural and social sciences to be judged in terms of their epistemic qualities, resulting in significant marginalisation for the latter. Hence, Flyvbjerg's view is the need to bring back the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* to the core of social science. For Aristotle, *phronesis*, the highest of the three classical intellectual virtues, essentially involves making judgments and decisions about what is good or bad for society based on values and interests and, as such, is quite distinct from *episteme* (analytical) and *techne* (technical) knowledge. The extent of the marginalisation of social science is reflected, for example, in the fact that the classical intellectual virtues *episteme* and *techne* are found respectively in the modern words 'epistemology' and 'technology' but there are no equivalent words for *phronesis*, the one virtue which Aristotle regarded as essential for social and political enquiry (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

To restore social science to its rightful place in contemporary society, Flyvbjerg challenges practitioners to go back to the classical traditions of social inquiry and re-orient their practice towards 'phronetic social science'. Both the natural and social sciences, he argues, have their strengths and weaknesses depending on the subject-matter in question. Thus, social scientists need to reflect further on these differences to capitalise, or build upon, their strengths rather than imitating their natural science counterparts. Flyvbjerg explains:

the social sciences are strongest where the natural sciences are weakest and vice versa; just as the social sciences have not contributed much to explanatory and predictive theory, neither have the natural sciences contributed to the reflexive analysis and discussion of values and interests, which is the prerequisite for an enlightened political, economic, and cultural development in any society, and which is at the core of *phronesis*. (2001, p. 3)

An emphasis on key phronetic attributes of reflexivity, values and interests should make social science more relevant to the needs and challenges of contemporary society by balancing instrumental rationality with value rationality, thereby helping to make a real difference in peoples' lives.

Phronetic research, focusing on values, places issues of power at the core of analysis. Flyvbjerg draws heavily on the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu to integrate *phronesis* with particular understandings of power that can best inform situated practice. He proposes a set of value-laden questions as a guide for practitioners of phronetic research including: 1) *Where are we going?* 2) *Who gains, and who loses, and by what mechanisms of power?* 3) *Is it desirable?* 4) *What should be done, and with what consequences?* Flyvbjerg distinguishes other characteristics of phronetic research including getting as close as possible to the reality being studied; placing emphasis upon concrete 'little things'; looking at practice before discourse and theory; having an emphasis on 'cases' and 'contexts'; having a deep sense of history including approaches to gathering historical information; using narrative or story-telling; joining agency with structure to overcome dualisms of actor/structure, hermeneutics/structuralism and voluntarism/determinism; and finally, dialoguing with a 'polyphone of voices'.

Phronetic research, practiced according to these guidelines, aims to unpack, through concrete examples and detailed narratives, ways in which power operates with particular consequences and how these may be altered. Quoting Richard Rorty, Flyvbjerg concludes that "as political situations become clear, they get clarified by detailed stories about who is doing what to whom" (2001, p. 140).

Flyvbjerg's concept of *phronesis* had a strong impact on a wide range of scholars within the Perestroika movement, evidenced by the frank, but largely constructive, criticisms enunciated by the contributors of *Making Political Science Matter*, which include the following arguments:

1. Social science has already largely abandoned the attempt to emulate natural science at least when the latter is understood as generators of predictive knowledge (Schatzki, 2006).
2. Flyvbjerg's definition of 'theory' in terms of prediction is too narrow and ignores other forms of theories such as typologies, models, ontologies, and conceptual frameworks which are all highly relevant to phronetic social science (Schatzki, 2006).
3. Flyvbjerg's conception of phronetic social science is too restrictive and conflates the legitimate need for social science to offer input into social dialogue and praxis on the one hand with the claim that social science should be practiced as *phronesis* for "[It] is society that must be phronetic with all the help social inquiry can offer it" (Schatzki, 2006, p. 128).
4. The critical challenge facing social scientists is not how to make the discipline matter as it already matters to many constituencies but rather how to assist researchers to "develop sophistication about our knowledge production,

heightened awareness of ideological bias, normative presuppositions and the political consequences of our research” (Hawkesworth, 2006, p. 168).

By far the most vociferous and, in my view, the least helpful of these criticisms are those produced by David Laitin who labels Flyvbjerg and the entire Perestroika enterprise as “Luddites” arguing that their “abhorrence of all things mathematical [...] reveals a fear of the modern” (2006, p. 33). Laitin’s attack on Flyvbjerg is centred on the following grounds:

1. The premise that natural scientists hold epistemic social scientists in ridicule is wrong as the argument is based on flimsy and weak case examples.
2. Flyvbjerg’s criteria for epistemic science are artificial and unrealistically high, and that these are criteria that no physical scientists will claim for themselves.
3. Flyvbjerg’s own research on urban planning in Aalborg Denmark, cited in *Making Social Science Matter*, as a case study in phronetic social science and other narrative forms of qualitative research (which Laitin equates with phronesis) can benefit more from what Laitin calls the tripartite method of comparative research that integrates narrative (which he again equates to phronesis), statistics and formal modelling.

Criticisms that Flyvbjerg’s definition of theory is too narrow, and the notion that the conceptualisation of phronetic research is limited in scope, have enriched and opened up new possibilities in the Perestroika discourse. However, I find the general thrust of David Laitin’s attack unhelpful. To the best of my understanding, nowhere in *Making Social Science Matter* does Flyvbjerg argue for qualitative as opposed to quantitative research. Furthermore, Laitin’s consistent equation of narrative research to *phronesis* overlooks the central aspect of Flyvbjerg’s argument concerning the nature of relationships that ought to exist between the three Aristotelian knowledge traditions. Finally, Laitin’s dismissal of Flyvbjerg and the entire Perestroika agenda as ‘Luddites’ opposed to anything ‘mathematical and statistical’ neglects the fact that Flyvbjerg’s own phronetic research on urban planning draws on both statistically-based and narrative-type research. It also overlooks the diversity of the adherents of the Perestroika idea of methodological openness, which includes not only scholars of qualitative research but quantitative scholars as well.

Flyvbjerg’s own spirited defence of his position *vis-à-vis* the Laitin critique illustrates the points I have just highlighted. Flyvbjerg explains:

Aristotle found that every well functioning society was dependent on the effective functioning of all three intellectual virtues - episteme, techne and phronesis. At the same time, however, Aristotle emphasized the crucial importance of phronesis, ‘for the possession of the single virtue of prudence (phronesis) will carry with them the possession of them all’. Phronesis is most important from an Aristotelian point of view, because it is that intellectual virtue that may ensure the ethical employment of science (episteme) and technology (techne). Because phronesis today is marginalized in the intellectual scheme of things, scientific and technological development take place without the ethical checks and balances that Aristotle and later Max Weber saw as all important. (2006, p. 71)

I have so far provided an overview of how a phronetic approach, in Flyvbjerg’s view, can make social science more relevant to the needs and challenges of contemporary society and some of the main critiques levelled against the approach by contributors to the Perestroika debate. The question of whether a particular piece of social scientific research is relevant to society is always going to be contentious, not least because such issues are heavily value-laden. Clearly needed in the Perestroika discourse is a move beyond theory towards greater reflexivity (Hawkesworth, 2006) regarding specific ways in which individual practitioners seek to make their work relevant to the needs and challenges of society and the strengths and limitations involved in the process. This, at least, provides the required information that allows peer researchers, as well as people who are the subjects of research, to judge for themselves the extent to which they consider a particular research relevant. I now draw on my community development and empowerment research experience in rural Ghana and Aboriginal Australia to suggest that, by asking ‘what is working in spite of problems’ rather than ‘what is the problem and how can it be fixed’, social research has the potential to act as a mirror for individuals and communities to routinely consider important questions about where they are going and what can be done to make things better.

3. Locating myself

I will start with two anecdotal incidents about how I first became involved in community development research some thirty years ago as these, and similar formative experiences, to this day continue to shape my approach to social research. The first happened in 1970 when I left my native village in Ghana to attend boarding school in a nearby town. On a holiday back in the village, my father started a conversation with me about the relevance of what we were learning at school to the needs of our village. I was glad that my father was curious and interested but I found myself struggling to relate my studies to the needs of the village. After a period of silence my father looked straight into my eyes and said, “Look, our child, if we send you to boarding school and you cannot come back to this village and find ways of

explaining and making what you are learning at the school relevant to the interests and aspirations of people in this village, then what is the point of you going to school?... The more you make your learning relevant to other people, the stronger you become in who you are, no matter where you go."

The other incident occurred several years later when, as an undergraduate student, I approached the chiefs and elders of the village for permission to research and write the village history as part of my studies (Tsey, 1980). The chiefs and elders were pleased that, for the first time, the predominantly oral accounts of the village would be written. After meticulous preparations with my research methods lecturer, I selected information-rich people for interview using semi-structured questions. After a few scheduled interviewees failed to materialise due to a range of excuses, some appearing questionable to me, I approached one of the respected elders in frustration. In a calming voice he said, *"I think you are trying to do this the wrong way. We have our own ways of telling stories. Ask us and we will guide you how to go about it. Think about eko dodo at funerals [procedure for narrating genealogy often at the funerals of the very elderly]. Start with what we know best and then you can share your own new ideas."*

These and similar formative incidents, and my subsequent reflections on them, led me to a lifetime involvement in community development and related social research. Over the years, I have played a range of roles: letter writer, translator, interpreter and advisor for the chiefs and elders of my rural village regarding development issues; local historian; executive positions in rural development associations; and as academic researcher, trainer and facilitator. I have used mainly participatory action research approaches that are grounded in the relevant local knowledge traditions and customs to support and enhance community development and empowerment initiatives in rural Ghana and, more recently, Aboriginal Australia. Indeed, the desire to make my work relevant to my village has resulted in a lifetime 'orbiting', to borrow from Noel Pearson (2006), between my village and a variety of places around the world, wherever possible seeking to take new knowledge and ideas back to the village and vice versa.

In Ghana, I worked in teams supporting rural development projects including schools, health clinics, water and sanitation, income generation and rural electrification. I demonstrated the transferability of my Ghanaian community development expertise to the context of Aboriginal Australia, working in teams implementing a range of action research initiatives, starting with a community mobilisation against the use of strip tease shows by the hospitality industry to promote the sale of alcohol among rural Aboriginal people (Boffa, George & Tsey, 1994). I learnt the valuable lesson that community development is more than building physical infrastructure. Central to community development is capacity to confront and sensitively, but firmly, deal with customs and traditions that are inimical to health and wellbeing or violate sections of the community's human rights and dignity. This is particularly the case among traditionally-oriented societies that are experiencing rapid social change. The community development practitioner is routinely confronted with such issues as the role and position of women and children in society, violence, child brides, disputes over chieftaincy, and beliefs and attitudes about sorcery and witchcraft. All can have profound and debilitating effects on sections of the community. I learnt the importance of narrative, the human propensity to share stories of human diversity and unity, as fundamental to working with people to tackle difficult and sensitive cultural beliefs and attitudes. I sought to develop facilitation techniques that create safe environments for respectful but critical dialogue between diverse groups with unequal positions of power and influence. In all these roles, the two interrelated questions I keep asking myself are 'what are the interests and aspirations of the people with whom I work' and 'how can I make my knowledge, skills and experience relevant to those interests and aspirations'. Through this process, I have developed the understanding that no matter how desperate the social conditions of a community of people might look to the outsider there are always pockets of strength, resiliency and creativity within such community and it is the role of the development facilitator to search, locate and work with such centres of strength and energy from within. This allowed me to develop facilitation approaches that seek to engage and tap into peoples' own strengths rather than deficits, thereby inspiring confidence and hope that no matter how desperate a social problem might look, there are always possibilities for using such problems as opportunities to change things for the better. This realisation now sits at the core of all my work, across different settings, different cultures and addressing different types of social issues.

3.1 Example 1- Rural Ghana

As part of routine reflective planning, an oral history study was designed to enable the citizens of Botoku to reflect on their long tradition of community development as a basis for setting future priorities. Botoku is a large rural community of about 3000 people in southeast Ghana, some 200km from the capital Accra. Like most rural Ghanaian communities (Abloh & Ameyaw, 1997), Botoku has a long and interesting history of community development (Schmidt-Hergeth & Tsey, 1996; Tsey, Schmidt-Hagerth & Lubrani, 1995). The oral history documentation involved a series of iterative semi-structured group discussions in Botoku as well as with Botoku residents in Accra and other regional towns and cities. Participants in the groups were carefully recruited to reflect the demographic profile of the village. Included in the groups were male and female chiefs and elders, resident and non-resident citizens, development association executives, participants in development projects, young people and church groups. Group participants were asked to identify and narrate the histories of what, in their view, they considered the most significant community development

initiatives in the recent history of the village and to provide reasons to justify their choice. The discussion process was based on the local tradition of *ko dodo*, the framework for moderating genealogical narrative accounts referred to earlier. The aims of the project were explained to one group of people. A lengthy discussion of what people thought were the most important development initiatives occurred within the group. A *tsiami* (spokesperson) was appointed to narrate the story while others interjected to make 'corrections' as required. The consensus story from the group was carefully written down by the researcher and narrated back to the group for confirmation. The researcher then took the confirmed version of the story to the next group who discussed it, made their own changes to the story as they considered appropriate, and appointed their own *tsiami* to narrate what was, in their view, the correct story. The process continued until new groups started accepting the narrative accounts as mainly correct without many changes and additions. The process, which provided inbuilt capacity for multiple versions of the same account to be accepted as valid interpretations, is one that I have applied in my work since. A dozen development initiatives were identified including a 14km dirt road which allowed the first motor vehicle to enter the village in the 1930s; a decision in the '60s not to allow dogs in Botoku due to a rabies epidemic; an '80s decision to outlaw 'trial by ordeal' involving the administration of herbal concoctions to those accused of witchcraft and sorcery as a means to determine innocence; and a 1990s rural electrification project resulting in the arrival of electricity supply in the village in 2000. The main point to note here is the way in which the reflexive process acted as a mirror for the community to appreciate its own strengths and, hence, renew confidence for the future. One oral history participant explained, "*It is hard to imagine we have achieved so much.... These stories, we have to make them like a book in Ewe and Inglisi [English], then it will be like mirror for us and our children and their children. For people living at home in Botoku and those of us living outside, these stories are like mirror to see what we have done as people and what we can do in future....*" Clearly, the successful adaptation of a locally relevant oral tradition in this rural Ghanaian context confirms Bruner's (1990) view that narrative process (sharing stories) builds social cohesion.

3.2 Example 2 – Aboriginal Australia

My introduction to Aboriginal Australia from the early '90s was, and in many ways still is, a shock about the white-black divide. Having spent most of my community development life working with my own people in Ghana, I found myself trying to practice as an outsider in Aboriginal Australia, an entirely different socio-economic environment involving the world's oldest surviving culture. The question that dominated my mind was how to make sense of the stark contradictions between wealthy democratic Australia on one hand, and small minority Indigenous populations living in relative poverty and deprivation with issues of alcohol abuse and inter-personal violence so endemic and public on the other hand (Boffa et al., 1994). As an outsider, where to start in the context of such social volatility was clearly a challenge. I was acutely aware that no matter how desperate the Indigenous social conditions might look to an outsider, there are always pockets of strength, resiliency and creativity. Part of my engagement task, therefore, was to locate and work with such centres of strength by asking the question 'what are people doing to improve their own situation despite the obvious problems and how can social research enhance and enable that process?' This naturally led me to the field of evaluation research in terms of what works and why in the context of Aboriginal health and wellbeing. The rest of the case study is an example of my attempt, as an outsider, to make my research relevant.

In 1998, I was invited by Tangentyere Council, an Alice Springs Aboriginal housing and community development agency, to evaluate a Family Wellbeing (FWB) empowerment education program. Developed by a group of survivors of the stolen generations (Aboriginal children who, under government assimilation policies, were taken away from their biological families and brought up in white Australian families and on church missions), the FWB course was premised on the idea that all humans have basic physical, emotional, mental and spiritual needs. The course developers argue that governmental policies, such as the removal of children from parents, resulted in denial of basic human needs to generations of Aboriginal people. This explains, in part, the high levels of destructive behaviours, such as suicide, alcohol and other substance abuse and domestic violence, facing many families and communities. It also means that many adults lack the skills or the ability to provide quality parenting to their children. The FWB course therefore aims to empower participants and their families to take greater control over the conditions influencing their lives.

Given the personal and sensitive nature of the program, I took a participatory approach to enable a deeper understanding and allow a more trusting relationship with participants. Following negotiations with facilitators and course participants, I enrolled as a participant evaluator. I was struck by the enthusiasm of participants and their regular reflections on how much the course was benefiting them in dealing with such issues as alcohol dependency, violence, parenting and other family relationship issues, and beyond. Capitalising on this enthusiasm, I asked their advice on how to best capture their experience in an evaluation. The participants made a number of suggestions. Firstly they said that, for Aboriginal people, it is important to consider a person within their relationships so an evaluation should examine the impact of their participation on their ability to bring about changes or improvements, as defined by themselves, in their family, community and for those employed in the workplace. Secondly, they said that story telling was an important aspect of Aboriginal culture so the evaluation should capture participants' stories of change. Together, we designed a formative methodology that encouraged participants to provide narrative accounts of real life situations when they sought to use

the FWB knowledge and skills to make changes in their family, work and broader community life and the highlights and challenges involved (Tsey, et al., 2009).

This formative FWB evaluation experience was significant for me in several respects. Firstly, it was the first program I evaluated in Australia that was developed by Aboriginal people in response to their own specified need. Before then I had evaluated at least half a dozen initiatives developed mainly by government and other outside agencies that targeted Aboriginal communities. Secondly, at \$3000, the FWB program was the least funded of all evaluations in which I had been involved, compared with \$20 000-\$150 000 for government-run projects and services. Particularly significant, although the least funded, the FWB program was the most promising in terms of the potential to actually prevent illness and promote wellbeing. Finally, the key elements and attributes of psychosocial empowerment, such as enhanced self-worth, resilience, hope, belief and confidence about the mutability of the social environment documented in the FWB qualitative evaluation, in many ways resonated with internationally recognised epidemiologically-informed, evidence-based, cost-effective preventative health programs (United Kingdom (UK) Department of Health, 2009). For these and other reasons, I made a deliberate decision that Aboriginal-developed programs and initiatives constituted priority areas for systematic research in order to enhance the evidence base. Hence, as part of interdisciplinary teams, including social scientists, public health physicians, epidemiologists, social workers and such, a long-term program of collaborative empowerment research agenda involving several Aboriginal organisations and government agencies was developed (Mayo, Tsey & Empowerment Research Team, 2008; Tsey et al., 2007). Seven years of developmental research involving over one thousand adults and two hundred school children participants in FWB, in a variety of settings, resulted in an emerging evidence base about the dimensions and benefits of empowerment and the potential of these benefits to contribute nationally to improving Indigenous health (Bainbridge 2009; Mayo et al., 2008; McCalman, Tsey, Wenitong, Wilson, Cadet-James, Whiteside et al., in press; Tsey, 2008; Tsey, Travers, Gibson, Whiteside, Cadet-James, Haswell-Elkins et al., 2005a; Tsey, Whiteside, Daly, Deemal, Gibson, Cadet-James, et al., 2005b; Tsey, Whiteside, Deemal & Gibson, 2003; Tsey, Whiteside, Haswell-Elkins, Bainbridge, Cadet-James & Wilson, 2009; Whiteside, 2009; Whiteside, Tsey, McCalman, Cadet-James & Wilson, 2006).

Key factors that contribute to the FWB program's success are Aboriginal self-determination and control over program conceptualisation and development and the notion of holism that addresses the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual dimensions of health (Tsey et al., 2009). Equally important to the program's success are the mutually respectful strategic research partnerships between qualitative and quantitative researchers on one hand and Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and/or participants on the other, all committed to improving the evidence base for Indigenous-instigated empowerment initiatives. Operationalising concepts, such as those identified as success factors behind the FWB program, are heavily value-laden and, accordingly, require ethically informed reflexivity, a legitimate domain of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) while quantifying the impact of FWB in terms of cause and effect, require epistemic thinking and skills. Clearly, the Perestroika debate is not, and should not be, about qualitative versus quantitative research but rather the nature of *phronesis* and how best to make this relevant to society.

4. Conclusion

The paper provided an overview of Flyvbjerg's conceptualisation of *phronetic* social science and the main critiques of the approach within the Perestroika debate. It is true that the commitment on behalf of many academics towards quantitative research, especially from the last quarter of the 20th century, has arisen out of a genuine dedication towards evidence-based public policy making. But, for some, it can also be seen largely as the product of unreflective science envy and as a method for protecting their disciplinary and professional interests. In the first decade of the 21st century in particular, the situation has been worsened by the introduction and/or the prospect of new research productivity policy frameworks in many countries. Emphasising quantitatively biased journal 'impact factor' and citation frequency as a key research quality measure, these frameworks have significantly influenced the criteria by which funding bodies presently select research to fund. Such pressures prompted Australian analysts to rightly argue for a "separate humanities research funding completely from that of the sciences...to desist in asking it to compete on unequal terms by trying to be something it is not" (Pitman & Berman, 2009, p.324). Evidence suggests a heightened sense of disquiet and consternation among many social science and humanities researchers within the current research policy climate. However, few scholars will admit this openly because of a fear of recrimination from dominant disciplinary interests. Indeed, the fact that the author of the Perestroika email had to write under a pseudonym in a country which prides itself as the bastion of free speech says a great deal about the politics of daring to challenge the hegemony of established professional and disciplinary paradigms and interests. It is within this context that I believe that social scientists and, more broadly, researchers and policy makers will find *Making Social Science Matter* and *Making Political Science Matter* highly relevant.

Those familiar with recent methodological and ethical developments in fields, such as Indigenous studies, development, participatory action research, empowerment, capacity building, action learning and organisation development and change, will find Flyvbjerg's (2001) guidelines not entirely new (Bainbridge, 2009; Mayo et al., 2008; McCalman et al.,

in press; Mikhailovich et al., 2007; Pascale & Sternin, 2005; Thomas, 2004; Tsey, 2008; Tsey & Hunter, 2002; Tsey et al., 2005a; Tsey et al., 2005b; Tsey et al., 2003; Tsey et al., 2009; Whiteside, 2009; Whiteside et al., 2006; Wilson, 2008). The main advantage of the framework is the potential to make practitioners reflect more explicitly on the nature of social science and the strengths and weaknesses of practising it respectively as *episteme*, *techne* and *phronesis*. Strengths-based, inside-out solutions (Pascale & Sternin, 2005), as the two case studies describe, offer one avenue for making social research relevant. Strengths-based approaches are not only central to many indigenous knowledge systems they also clearly resonate with the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis*.

Development workers and researchers need to routinely remind themselves that no matter how desperate a community's situation might look such communities can still be full of pockets of strength, resiliency and innovation and, in some cases, even flourishing. We should not assume that best practice models and frameworks for change will come from the ingenuity, expertise and generosity of the outsider as this can often lead to repeated mistakes in fixing problems for people rather than harnessing and supporting those strengths from within. An emphasis on strengths does not deny or minimise the seriousness of the real challenges that may be facing the people with whom they work. Too often, the power of problem-saturated images can blind the development researcher to crucial facts that, irrespective of the enormity of problems facing the people with whom they work, such communities still consist, by and large, of people trying to go about their daily business of living meaningful lives, however defined. Starting from what is working in peoples' lives, in spite of problems, makes sense, not least because the more things that are working become stronger, or are strengthened, the more those involved develop capacity and confidence to tackle issues that may have appeared intractable at first sight.

Central to the strengths-based approaches to working with people to bring about improvements in the human condition is the power of narrative as Flyvbjerg (2001, 2006) and others highlight (Bainbridge, 2009; Brunner, 1990; Tsey et al 2009; Whiteside, 2009; Wilson, 2008). This requires sophisticated group facilitation, engagement and negotiation skills and expertise that are grounded in relevant ethical norms and values, essential ingredients in creating environments for critical dialogue to occur across diverse communities of people. Narrative process, in a safe and respectful environment, has an intrinsic value as it builds social cohesion and trust among people. Friendship, good social relations and strong supportive networks documented in the case examples described above and elsewhere (Bainbridge, 2009; Mayo et al., 2008; McCalman et al., in press; Tsey, 2008; Tsey et al., 2005a; Tsey et al., 2005b; Tsey et al., 2003; Tsey et al., 2009; Whiteside, 2009; Whiteside et al., 2006) resonate powerfully with epidemiological evidence linking social capital to mental and physical illness prevention and wellbeing promotion (Berry, 2009; UK Ministry of Health, 2009). Relationships give people support, happiness, contentment and a sense that they belong and have a role to play in society. Where people lack social connection, especially in the context of rapid socio-economic change, they are more likely to experience lower levels of wellbeing and are at increased risk of physical and mental disability and chronic disease (Berry, 2009; UK Ministry of Health, 2009).

In summary, the perennial issue of research relevance is one that is likely to remain with us for a long time to come. Despite all the potential opportunities offered by exceptional advances in science and technology to make the world a relatively peaceful, safe and happy place for most people, we are increasingly polarised from each other. Social inequalities, poverty and deprivation in the midst of affluence, substance abuse and trauma associated with inter-personal violence and armed conflicts are only a few of the real challenges facing most societies, not to mention recent dangerous and threatening changes in climate and global financial crisis. These alone make Flyvbjerg and the Perestroika discourse worthy of attention. As a value-laden question, decisions about social science relevance are always going to be largely subjective. The least practitioners can do by way of accountability for their work, *vis-à-vis* the people with whom they work, is to be more reflexive and transparent about its relevance. Social scientists have an important and legitimate role in combining narrative with values-based facilitation approaches to enhance the capacity of communities of people to deliberate and, where possible, take action around issues that are priority concerns to them. Equally important are epistemic approaches to determine effectiveness including cause and effect relationships depending on the subject matter.

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