

Toward a More *Phronetic* Leisure Science

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In this essay, we examine the assumptions underlying natural science, social science, and the humanities. More specifically, we suggest that social science in general and leisure science in particular be guided by a different set of assumptions than those guiding natural science and the humanities. Drawing on the Aristotelian idea of phronesis, we propose that value rationality more so than instrumental rationality guide social scientific inquiry, and that social science in general, and leisure science in particular, be viewed as a bridge between natural science and the humanities.

Keywords episteme, humanities, instrumental rationality, natural science, phronesis, social science, techne, value rationality

In *The Closing of the American Mind*, Bloom (1987) characterizes natural science, social science, and the humanities as the big three that rule the academic roost and determine what we consider knowledge to be. He goes on to suggest a pecking order led by natural science, with social science and the humanities squawking over who gets to perch on the second rung. According to Bloom, natural science knows what it is doing. It has its epistemological act together, and there is general agreement about how natural scientists should go about their work. The fruits of their labor have made us healthier, wealthier, and wiser, at least insofar as it comes to understanding how the physical world works and how to take advantage of that understanding in service of humankind.

“But where natural science ends,” Bloom (1987) continues, “trouble begins. It ends at man, the one being outside of its purview, or to be exact, it ends at that part or aspect of man that is not body, whatever that may be” (p. 356). The problem, as Bloom sees it, is that while the body is the purview of natural science, studying that part of us that is not body is claimed by both social science and the humanities. The difference between them is that

social science wants to believe human beings are predictable while the humanities say we are not.

The result has been two continuous and ill-assorted strands of thought about man, one tending to treat him essentially as another of the brutes, without spirituality, soul, self, consciousness, or what have you; the other acting as though he is not an animal or does not have a body. (p. 358)

Bloom winds down his assessment of the big three by observing that “while both social science and the humanities are more or less willingly awed by natural science, they have a mutual contempt for one another, the former looking down on the latter as unscientific, the latter regarding the former as philistine. They do not cooperate” (p. 357). This is unfortunate, Bloom concludes, because social science and the humanities “occupy much of the same ground” (p. 357).

Our purpose in writing this essay is to explore this “same ground” occupied by social science and the humanities to see if we might be able to rid ourselves of any “mutual contempt” and replace it with a more constructive sentiment. We enter the discourse as three social scientists who feel caught in between the concreteness of natural science that addresses questions of what “is” and the fluidity of the humanities that address questions of what “ought” to be (Schumacher, 1978). Ultimately, we want to better understand the differences among the “is,” “ought,” and “in between” so that we might better appreciate and value the scholarship carried out in the name of natural science, social science, the humanities, and, more particularly, in the name of leisure science.

The Pretensions of Social Science

Much has been written about social science’s attempt to emulate natural science. Indeed, Bloom traces this effort back to the Enlightenment when that part of us that is not body was ejected from nature and hence from natural science and natural philosophy. Social science picked up the challenge to assimilate our invisible selves into the new natural science and to treat the science of humankind as “the next rung in the ladder down from biology” (Bloom, 1987, p. 358). Meanwhile, the humanities have gone their separate ways in trying to understand our humanness. They have employed different methods and come to different conclusions as to why we humans act the way we do. “Neither challenged the champion, natural science,” Bloom contends. Rather, “social science tried humbly to find a place at court, humanities proudly to set up shop next door” (p. 358).

Social science’s adoption of the assumptions and methods of natural science has yielded mixed results (see Hemingway, 1990, for a critique of this attempt in leisure science). While certain of its branches, such as economics and psychology, have demonstrated modest predictive power, social science in general has not. The failure of social science to deliver the same cause and effect certitude about our invisible selves that natural science has delivered about our physical selves has generated mounting criticism of the underlying assumptions and methods governing the conduct of social science. Flyvbjerg (2001) summarizes the essence of this criticism in *Making Social Science Matter*, in which he discusses the failings of social science’s aping of natural science. He also considers social science’s promise if governed by a different set of assumptions leading to the employment of different methods of discovery and analysis to address scientific questions that are ill-suited for natural science.

Essentially, Flyvbjerg reasons that social science will never be able to derive context-independent theories that explain human behavior in the same way natural science has derived context-independent theories to explain the workings of the physical world. This is

due, in part, to the self-reflexive nature of what social scientists study; that is, the objects of interest to social science are subjects with their own interpretations of themselves and events which are often inconsistent and highly contextualized. They defy generalization in the abstract. The upshot of Flyvbjerg's analysis is that social science is doomed to second class citizenship as long as it insists on mimicking the assumptions and methods of natural science. Social science cannot deliver the cumulative epistemic understanding that natural science can because it is trying to come to grips with a fundamentally different subject matter. To compare the contributions of social science with natural science along epistemic lines is thus rendered futile, and if perpetuated without critical review, social science is bound to come up short.

Flyvbjerg's remedy for the misguided pretensions of social science is to adopt a new set of assumptions and methods for addressing questions that natural science is ill-equipped to answer, questions that are based on value rationality rather than instrumental rationality. Value rationality and instrumental rationality can be thought of as different means-ends processes. Both types of rationality involve consciousness and planning; their main difference is that value rationality focuses on the value of the ends it seeks to reach, asking why an act is ultimately of value, and less on the means to get there or the questions of how to reach the end. Instrumental rationality, on the other hand, considers questions of how to reach an end but not so much why, or the value of the ends it seeks to reach. In Flyvbjerg's view, value rationality means "the purpose of social science is not to develop theory, but to contribute to society's practical rationality in elucidating where we are, where we want to go, and what is desirable according to a diverse set of interests" (2001, p. 167). Flyvbjerg legitimizes these questions as worthy of social scientific inquiry by anchoring them in Aristotle's idea of *phronesis*.

Phronesis

Phronesis is a "true state, reasoned, and capable of action with regard to things that are good or bad for man" (Aristotle, as cited in Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 2). Phronesis is practical wisdom involving judgments and decisions. Aristotle's phronesis contributes 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*" (Flyvbjerg, p. 3). To Aristotle, the "most important task of social and political studies was to develop society's value rationality vis-à-vis its scientific and technical rationality. Aristotle did not doubt that the first type of rationality was the most important and ought to influence the second" (p. 53). As Flyvbjerg points out, however, since the Enlightenment phronesis has receded into the background as instrumental rationality has taken over as the dominant position informing science. What this means is that "is" questions have been addressed by science largely uninformed by "ought" questions. Stated differently, value questions have been deemed to be outside the purview of science. Bronowski's (1965) *Science and Human Values* provides a clear illustration of where this can lead when he describes the building of the atomic bomb with little forethought given to the moral question associated with dropping it. When it comes to just who was responsible for the atomic bomb, Bronowski asks in the words of a popular dance tune of the day, "Is You Is, or Is You Ain't Ma Baby?" (p. 11). Absent any value rationality-guided social science preceding the weapon's development, a crucial phronetic question that should have been asked was not.

This, then, is the role Flyvbjerg sees for social science. While natural science is strong in epistemic qualities, it is weak in phronetic qualities. And while social science is weak in epistemic qualities, it is strong in phronetic qualities. Their strengths and weaknesses lay

along different dimensions, and rather than seeing natural and social science as competing with one another, they, along with the humanities, should be seen as striving to serve fundamentally different ends.

Toward a More Phronetic Social Science

What might a more phronetic social science look like? A brief review of Aristotle's three important forms of intellectual work—*episteme*, *techne*, and *phronesis*—is illustrative. Episteme can be interpreted as the scientific ideal based on the promise of universal theories that explain the physical workings of the world. Techne can be interpreted as applied science, the practical application of technical knowledge. Phronesis can be interpreted as ethical deliberation about values related to praxis. They are all necessary to intellectual thought, and they all should be valued in their own right. But as long as social science continues to try to emulate natural science, episteme will likely be held up as the scientific ideal, and social science will continue to be evaluated in ways patterned after natural science. That, following Flyvbjerg's logic, will be counterproductive to what social science can contribute in the way of phronetic insights about the workings of that part of us that is not body.

From Flyvbjerg's perspective, the kind of scholarship that matters in social science need not be theory-based or context-independent as required in natural science. Neither must it to lead to prediction and control. On the contrary, trying to satisfy the canons of natural scientific inquiry is bound to result in ongoing frustration for social scientists. What is needed instead is a revision of thought about what constitutes scholarship in social science that reflects the phronetic qualities inherent in the social scientific enterprise. What is needed is a new appreciation of the intellectual work that goes on in the name of social science that leads to a better understanding of how value rationality can inform instrumental rationality, so that in the end we might have a more satisfying answer to Bronowski's question, "Is You Is or Is You Ain't Ma Baby?"

Flyvbjerg goes into great detail describing what good phronetic social science looks like. He holds up Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton's (1985) *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* as a prime example of phronetic insight guided by variations of the three value rational questions that characterize the starting point for classic phronetic inquiry: "Where are we? Where do we want to go?" and "What is desirable?" As Flyvbjerg describes the book:

Habits of the Heart . . . focuses on values, the authors get close to the people and phenomena they study, they focus on the minutiae and practices that make up the basic concerns of life, they make extensive use of case studies in context, they use narrative as expository technique, and, finally, their work is dialogical, that is, it allows for other voices than those of the authors, both in relation to the people they study and in relation to society at large. The whole point of the study is to enter into a dialogue with individuals and society and to assist them - after they have assisted the researchers - in reflecting on their values. The aim is to make moral debate part of public life. (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 63)

Again employing *Habits of the Heart* as his exemplar, Flyvbjerg asserts that the goal of phronetic inquiry "is to produce input to the ongoing social dialogue and praxis in a society, rather than to generate ultimate, unequivocally verified knowledge" (p. 139). Reinforcing this perspective, Bellah et al. (1985) express their hope that

the reader will test what we say against his or her own experience, will argue with us when what we say does not fit, and, best of all, will join the public discussion by offering interpretations superior to ours that can receive further discussion. (p. 307)

Phronetic social science is thus grounded in praxis, and its aim is to improve praxis. The methods it employs focus on values, place power at the core of analysis, get close to reality, emphasize little things, look at practice before discourse, study cases and contexts, ask “how” as well as “why” employing narrative analysis, join agency and structure, and dialogue with a polyphony of voices (Flyvbjerg, pp. 129–140). From this perspective, “the purpose of social science is not to develop theory, but to contribute to society’s practical rationality in elucidating where we are, where we want to go, and what is desirable according to diverse sets of values and interests” (p. 167). Its aim is to move value rational deliberation to the forefront of social scientific thought and action and to apply phronetic insights to the resolution of real world problems (Flyvbjerg, Landman, & Schram, 2012). There is, then, a strong imperative for adopting an applied phronesis perspective in leisure science as well.

Toward a More Phronetic Leisure Science

In a provocative essay, Williams (in press) extends Flyvbjerg’s assessment of the promise of phronetic social science to the context of leisure. Williams begins by exploring the futility of employing traditional scientific approaches to seeking solutions to problems faced by leisure professionals in the field because of the “fundamental differences between the nature of science, which seeks to transcend place, and the nature of practice, which is by necessity place-based.” In Williams’s view, the age-old science-practice gap is impossible to erase because traditional science seeks to identify context-independent principles upon which to base professional practice, whereas practice is always context bound. Science in the abstract tends not to acknowledge place-based idiosyncrasies, which weakens the utility of scientific generalizations when applied to specific managerial situations. Consequently, Williams, like Flyvbjerg, sees the need to adopt new ways of thinking about how to conduct leisure science if it is to better inform praxis.

One of Williams’s main criticisms of leisure science as it has been traditionally conducted is its top-down structure. Extrapolating from theory to practice, or what Williams refers to as taking a “god’s-eye” view of things, has not led to an integrated and cohesive body of knowledge to guide the work of leisure professionals in the field. On the contrary, theory-based science often obfuscates rather than clarifies professional practice, and practitioners who hunger for science-based managerial insights are routinely fed a diet of murky research results, concluding in effect, “It depends.”

Williams’s remedy is to situate social science in the thick of professional practice rather than hovering above it. By embedding the research process in the places where the planning, implementation, and evaluation of leisure services unfold, social scientists stand to benefit from the accumulated wisdom of practitioners while practitioners stand to benefit from the systematic observations of social scientists. This position of “betweenness” is at the same time informed by top-down scientific reasoning while simultaneously being animated by bottom-up insights from practitioners whose knowledge is embedded in place (Entrikin, 1991). Leisure science thus becomes a collaborative exercise in collective sense-making governed by value rationality (see Stewart, Parry, & Glover, 2008, for a similar interpretation). This is the stuff of Aristotle’s phronesis. It values local, practical knowledge situated in place as a foundation for developing informed action “guided by the collective wisdom of networked actors and institutions governing complex systems, each informing

one another in a collaborative form of rationality that operates both horizontally [place to place] and vertically [upwards and downwards in scale]" (Williams).

Toward a Broader Conception of Scholarship in Leisure Studies

How, then, might we think about what constitutes scholarship in leisure studies? The differences between natural science, social science, and the humanities suggest a widening of categories of meaningful contributions. Indeed, leisure studies might better be thought of as a context for episteme, techne, and phronesis rather than as a particular form of intellectual work (i.e., episteme). Significant inquiry is ongoing in leisure studies in all three realms. Natural scientists, guided by epistemic principles, examine leisure impacts on the physical world up to and including the human body (think of David Cole's body of work on physical impacts associated with campground and campsite use); social scientists, guided by techne, apply research results to improve professional practice (think of John Crompton's body of work on marketing and pricing of leisure services); and phronetic social scientists strive to make sense of the meanings and values that self-reflexive individuals ascribe to their leisure experiences (think of Karla Henderson's body of work on women's leisure). Meanwhile, philosophers, poets, novelists, musicians, filmmakers, and other representatives of the humanities contribute in their own ways to understanding the meaning of leisure in our lives. All of this work is important and worthy of consideration and support in higher education.

In a recent review of related literature, Stewart et al. (2008) suggest that leisure scientists are gravitating away from a singular epistemic discourse to embrace a multiplicity of discourses to do justice to their subject matter(s). They underscore the significance of hidden or unexamined values and ideologies that shape and guide leisure science, and they emphasize the importance of making those values and ideologies explicit in the research process. Stewart et al. also challenge the leisure research community to rise above the traditional epistemic perspective to take in a broader view, one that recognizes and honors a range of different ways of knowing and being. This does not require abandoning the canons of scientific inquiry, giving up on theorizing, stopping the search for context-independent principles, or abandoning the idea of prediction and control as one goal of scientific inquiry. It does, however, require acknowledging the limits of the epistemic perspective and being open to other perspectives that invite leisure scholars to investigate more thoroughly the importance of context, the self-reflexive nature of human beings, and the impact of pluralistic views on the nature and meaning of life.

Conclusion

What we are calling for is a view of social science in general, and leisure science in particular, that bridges natural science and the humanities (Goodale, 1990). We think Aristotle's phronesis provides that bridge. Moreover, we are also encouraging the leisure studies community to welcome the humanities into the fold. The kinds of intellectual work that shed light on the meaning of leisure in our lives are extremely wide-ranging, and when done well they all constitute good scholarship.

As Bronowski (1965) reminds us, the distinction between art and science is less pronounced than we commonly think it to be. There is, or ought to be, a kindred spirit animating all three branches of knowledge. They are, after all, bonded by a mutual interest in making sense of the world. Social science and the humanities need not be contemptuous of one another, nor should they be in awe of natural science. Natural science, social science, and the humanities should celebrate what makes their respective branches of knowledge

unique in addition to what unites them—a common concern for better understanding the world, not only for the sake of prediction and control but also for the sake of felicity and for the simple satisfaction that comes with knowing.

Leisure studies, for its part, should honor and reward the intellectual work that is carried out in the name of episteme, techne, and phronesis, as well as the work that is carried out in the name of the humanities. Our community of scholars should reflect the multiplicity of ways we come to know and understand the world, and the measure of what we accomplish together should reside in the coherence of the stories we tell.

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