

MAKING ORGANIZATION RESEARCH MATTER: POWER, VALUES, AND *PHRONESIS*

16.

Bent Flyvbjerg

If we want to empower and re-enchant organization research, we need to do three things. First, we must drop all pretence, however indirect, at emulating the success of the natural sciences in producing cumulative and predictive theory, for their approach simply does not work in organization research or any of the social sciences.¹ Second, we must address problems that matter to groups in the local, national, and global communities in which we live, and we must do it in ways that matter; we must focus on issues of context, values, and power, as advocated by great social scientists from Aristotle and Machiavelli to Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu. Finally, we must effectively and dialogically communicate the results of our research to our fellow citizens and carefully listen to their feedback. If we do this – focus on specific values and interests in the context of particular power relations – we may successfully transform organization research into an activity performed in public for organizational publics, sometimes to clarify, sometimes to intervene, sometimes to generate new perspectives, and always to serve as eyes and ears in ongoing efforts to understand the present and to deliberate about the future. We may, in short, arrive at organization research that matters.

What I describe below as “phronetic organization research” is an attempt to arrive at such organization research. I would like to emphasize at the outset, however, that this effort should be considered as one among many possible, as a first approximation that will undoubtedly require further theoretical and methodological refinement, just as it will need to be developed through further practical employment in actual organizational studies. Despite such qual-

¹ For the full argument, see Flyvbjerg, 2001.

ifications, I hope the reader will agree that given what is at stake – organization research that matters – the attempt at reforming such research is worthwhile.

What is phronetic organization research?

Phronetic organization research is an approach to the study of organizations based on a contemporary interpretation of the classical Greek concept *phronesis*. Following this approach, phronetic organization researchers study organizations and organizing with an emphasis on values and power. In this chapter I will first clarify what *phronesis* and phronetic organization research is. Second, I will attempt to tease out the methodological implications of this research approach.²

Aristotle is the philosopher of *phronesis* par excellence. In Aristotle's words *phronesis* is an intellectual virtue that is "reasoned, and capable of action with regard to things that are good or bad for man."³ *Phronesis* concerns values and goes beyond analytical, scientific knowledge (*episteme*) and technical knowledge or know how (*techne*) and it involves judgments and decisions made in the manner of a virtuoso social actor. I will argue that *phronesis* is commonly involved in practices of organization and, therefore, that any attempts to reduce organization research to *episteme* or *techne* or to comprehend organizational practices in those terms are misguided.

Aristotle was explicit in his regard of *phronesis* as the most important of the three intellectual virtues: *episteme*, *techne*, and *phronesis*. *Phronesis* is most important because it is that activity by which instrumental rationality is balanced by value-rationality, to use the terms of German sociologist Max Weber; and because, according to Aristotle and Weber, such balancing is crucial to the viability of any organization, from the family to the state. A curious fact can be observed, however. Whereas *episteme* is found in the modern words "epistemology" and "epistemic," and *techne* in "technology" and "technical," it is indicative of the degree to which scientific and instrumental rationality dominate modern thinking and language that we no longer have a word for the one intellectual virtue, *phronesis*, which Aristotle and other founders of the Western tradition saw as a necessary condition of successful social organization, and the most important prerequisite to such organization.

² For an example of the practical implementation of phronetic organization research in actual studies of public and private organizations, I refer the reader to Flyvbjerg, 1998. See also shorter examples in the main text of this chapter.

³ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter abbreviated as *N.E.*), translated by J. A. K. Thomson, revised with Notes and Appendices by Hugh Tredennick, Introduction and Bibliography by Jonathan Barnes (1976), 1140a24–b12, 1144b33–1145a11.

Aristotle on *episteme*, *techne*, and *phronesis*

The term “epistemic science” derives from the intellectual virtue that Aristotle calls *episteme*, and which is generally translated as “science” or “scientific knowledge.”⁴ Aristotle defines *episteme* in this manner:

[S]cientific knowledge is a demonstrative state, (i.e., a state of mind capable of demonstrating what it knows) ... i.e., a person has scientific knowledge when his belief is conditioned in a certain way, and the first principles are known to him; because if they are not better known to him than the conclusion drawn from them, he will have knowledge only incidentally. – This may serve as a description of scientific knowledge.⁵

Episteme concerns universals and the production of knowledge that is invariable in time and space and achieved with the aid of analytical rationality. *Episteme* corresponds to the modern scientific ideal as expressed in natural science. In Socrates and Plato, and subsequently in the Enlightenment tradition, this scientific ideal became dominant. The ideal has come close to being the only legitimate view of what constitutes genuine science, such that even intellectual activities like organization research and other social sciences, which are not and probably never can be scientific in the epistemic sense, have found themselves compelled to strive for and legitimate themselves in terms of this Enlightenment ideal.⁶ Epistemic organization research is the type of work to which Barbara Czarniawska and Guje Sevón refer in the introduction to this book as claiming universality and searching for generic truths about organization and organizing. Epistemic organization research is the mainstream of organization research, as described by Czarniawska and Sevón.

Whereas *episteme* resembles our ideal modern scientific project, *techne* and *phronesis* denote two contrasting roles of intellectual work. *Techne* can be translated into English as “art” in the sense of “craft;” a craftsperson is also an *artisan*. For Aristotle, both *techne* and *phronesis* are connected with the concept of truth, as is *episteme*. Aristotle says the following regarding *techne*:

⁴ In the short space of this chapter, it is not possible to provide a full account of Aristotle’s considerations about the intellectual virtues of *episteme*, *techne*, and *phronesis*. Instead, I have focused upon the bare essentials, based on a reading of the original texts. A complete account would further elaborate the relations between *episteme*, *techne*, and *phronesis*, and the relationship of all three to *empeiria*. It would also expand on the relationship of phronetic judgments to rules, on what it means to succeed or to fail in the exercise of *phronesis*, and on the conditions that must be fulfilled if *phronesis* is to be acquired. For further discussion of these questions and of the implications of Aristotle’s thinking for contemporary social science, see my discussion with Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus in Flyvbjerg, 1991: 101 ff. See also Alasdair MacIntyre, 1984; Richard Bernstein, 1985; Agnes Heller, 1990; Carnes Lord and David K. O’Connor, 1991; and C. W. Taylor, 1995.

⁵ *N.E.*, 1139b18–36.

⁶ For the full argument that organization research and other social science can probably never be scientific in the epistemic sense, see Flyvbjerg, 2001, Chapters 3 and 4.



[S]ince (e.g.) building is an art [*techne*] and is essentially a reasoned productive state, and since there is no art that is not a state of this kind, and no state of this kind that is not an art, it follows that art is the same as a productive state that is truly reasoned. Every art is concerned with bringing something into being, and the practice of an art is the study of how to bring into being something that is capable either of being or of not being ... For it is not with things that are or come to be of *necessity* that art is concerned [this is the domain of *episteme*] nor with natural objects (because these have their origin in themselves) ... Art ... operate[s] in the sphere of the variable.⁷

Techne is thus craft and art, and as an activity it is concrete, variable, and context-dependent. The objective of *techne* is application of technical knowledge and skills according to a pragmatic instrumental rationality, what Foucault calls “a practical rationality governed by a conscious goal”⁸. Organization research practiced as *techne* would be a type of consulting aimed at better running organizations by means of instrumental rationality, where “better” is defined in terms of the values and goals of those who employ the consultants, sometimes in negotiation with the latter.

Whereas *episteme* concerns theoretical *know why* and *techne* denotes technical *know how*, *phronesis* emphasizes practical knowledge and practical ethics. *Phronesis* is often translated as “prudence” or “practical common sense.” Let us again examine what Aristotle has to say:

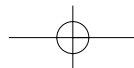
We may grasp the nature of prudence [*phronesis*] if we consider what sort of people we call prudent. Well, it is thought to be the mark of a prudent man to be able to deliberate rightly about what is good and advantageous ... But nobody deliberates about things that are invariable ... So ... prudence cannot be a science or art; not science [*episteme*] because what can be done is a variable (it may be done in different ways, or not done at all), and not art [*techne*] because action and production are generically different. For production aims at an end other than itself; but this is impossible in the case of action, because the end is merely doing *well*. What remains, then, is that it is a true state, reasoned, and capable of action with regard to things that are good or bad for man ... We consider that this quality belongs to those who understand the management of households or states.⁹
[Italics in the original]

Please note that the word “management” is not mine, but that of the original English translator of Aristotle’s text. The person possessing practical wisdom (*phronimos*) has knowledge of how to manage in each particular circumstance

⁷ *N.E.*, 1140a1–23.

⁸ Michel Foucault, 1984b:255.

⁹ *N.E.*, 1140a24–b12.



that can never be equated with or reduced to knowledge of general truths about managing. *Phronesis* is a sense or a tacit skill for doing the ethically practical rather than a kind of science. For Plato, rational humans are moved by the cosmic order; for Aristotle they are moved by a sense of the proper order among the ends we pursue. This sense cannot be articulated in terms of theoretical axioms, but is grasped by *phronesis*.¹⁰

One might get the impression in Aristotle's original description of *phronesis* that *phronesis* and the choices it involves in concrete management are always good. This is not necessarily the case. Choices must be deemed good or bad in relation to certain values and interests in order for good and bad to have meaning. Phronetic organization research is concerned with deliberation about values and interests.

In sum, the three intellectual virtues *episteme*, *techne*, and *phronesis* can be characterized as follows:

- Episteme* Scientific knowledge. Universal, invariable, context-independent. Based on general analytical rationality. The original concept is known today by the terms "epistemology" and "epistemic." Organization research practiced as *episteme* is concerned with uncovering universal truths about organization and organizing.
- Techne* Craft/art. Pragmatic, variable, context-dependent. Oriented toward production. Based on practical instrumental rationality governed by a conscious goal. The original concept appears today in terms such as "technique," "technical," and "technology." Organization research practiced as *techne* is consulting aimed at running organizations better by means of instrumental rationality, where "better" is defined in terms of the values and goals of those who employ the consultants, sometimes in negotiation with the latter.
- Phronesis* Ethics. Deliberation about values with reference to praxis. Pragmatic, variable, context-dependent. Oriented toward action. Based on practical value-rationality. The original concept has no analogous contemporary term. Organization research practiced as *phronesis* is concerned with deliberation about (including questioning of) values and interests.

The priority of the particular

Phronesis concerns the analysis of values – "things that are good or bad for man" – as a point of departure for managed action. *Phronesis* is that intellec-

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, 1989:125, 148.

tual activity most relevant to praxis. It focuses on what is variable, on that which cannot be encapsulated by universal rules, on specific cases. *Phronesis* requires an interaction between the general and the concrete; it requires consideration, judgment, and choice.¹¹ More than anything else, *phronesis* requires *experience*. About the importance of specific experience Aristotle says:

[P]rudence [*phronesis*] is not concerned with universals only; it must also take cognizance of particulars, because it is concerned with conduct, and conduct has its sphere in particular circumstances. That is why some people who do not possess theoretical knowledge are more effective in action (especially if they are experienced) than others who do possess it. For example, suppose that someone knows that light flesh foods are digestible and wholesome, but does not know what kinds are light; he will be less likely to produce health than one who knows that chicken is wholesome. But prudence is practical, and therefore it must have both kinds of knowledge, or especially the latter.¹²

Here, again, Aristotle is stressing that in practical management (in this case the management of health, which was a central concern for the ancient Greeks), knowledge of the rules (“light flesh foods are digestible and wholesome”) is inferior to knowledge of the real cases (“chicken is wholesome”). Some of the best management schools, such as Harvard Business School, have understood the importance of cases over rules and emphasize case-based and practical teaching. Such management schools may be called Aristotelian; whereas schools stressing theory and rules may be called Platonic.

Some interpretations of Aristotle’s intellectual virtues leave doubt as to whether *phronesis* and *techne* are distinct categories, or whether *phronesis* is just a higher form of *techne* or know-how.¹³ Aristotle is clear on this point, however. Even if both *phronesis* and *techne* involve skill and judgment, one type of intellectual virtue cannot be reduced to the other; *phronesis* is about value judgment, not about producing things.

Similarly, in other parts of the literature one finds attempts at conflating *phronesis* and *episteme* in the sense of making *phronesis* epistemic. But insofar as *phronesis* operates via a practical rationality based on judgment and experience, it can only be made scientific in an epistemic sense through the development of a theory of judgment and experience. In fact Alessandro Ferrara has called for the “elaboration of a theory of judgment” as one of “the unaccomplished tasks of critical theory”¹⁴. In line with Jürgen Habermas, Ferrara says

¹¹ On the relationship between judgment and *phronesis*, see Richard S. Ruderman, 1997.

¹² *N.E.*, 1141b8–27.

¹³ For such an interpretation, with an unclear distinction between *phronesis* and *techne*, see Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus, 1990, 1991.

¹⁴ Alessandro Ferrara, 1989:319.

that a theory of judgment is necessary in order to avoid contextualism, although he also notes that such a theory “unfortunately is not yet in sight”¹⁵. What Ferrara apparently does not consider is that a theory of judgment and experience is not in sight because judgment and experience cannot be brought into a theoretical formula. Aristotle warns us directly against the type of reductionism that conflates *phronesis* and *episteme*.

With his thoughts on the intellectual virtues, Aristotle emphasizes properties of intellectual work, which are central to the production of knowledge in the study of organizations and other social phenomena. The particular and the situationally dependent are emphasized over the universal and over rules. The concrete and the practical are emphasized over the theoretical. It is what Martha Nussbaum calls the “priority of the particular” in Aristotle’s thinking.¹⁶ Aristotle practices what he preaches by providing a specific example of his argument, viz. light flesh foods vs. chicken. He understands the “power of example.” The example concerns the management of human health and has as its point of departure something both concrete and fundamental concerning human functioning. Both aspects are typical of many Classical philosophers.

We will return to these points later. At this stage we simply conclude that despite their importance, the concrete, the practical, and the ethical have been neglected by modern science. Today one would be open to ridicule if one sought to support an argument using an example like that of Aristotle’s chicken. The sciences are supposed to concern themselves precisely with the explication of universals, and even if it is wrong the conventional wisdom is that one cannot generalize from a particular case.¹⁷ Moreover, the ultimate goal of scientific activity is supposedly the production of theory. Aristotle is here clearly anti-Socratic and anti-Platonic. And if modern theoretical science is built upon any body of thought, it is that of Socrates and Plato. We are dealing with a profound disagreement here.

Below, we will look at specific examples of phronetic organization research. More generally, in contemporary social science, Pierre Bourdieu’s “fieldwork in philosophy” and Robert Bellah’s “social science as public philosophy” are examples of intellectual pursuits that involve elements of *phronesis*.¹⁸ Bourdieu explicitly recognizes Aristotle as the originator of the habitus concept, which is so centrally placed in Bourdieu’s work, and he sees the practical knowledge that habitus procures as being analogous to Aristotle’s *phronesis*.¹⁹ In philosophy Richard Bernstein’s and Stephen Toulmin’s “practical philosophy” and Richard Rorty’s philosophical pragmatism are also phronetic in their

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 316. See also Ferrara, 1999.

¹⁶ Martha C. Nussbaum, 1990:66. See also Daniel T. Devereux, 1986.

¹⁷ Regarding ways of generalizing from a single case, see Flyvbjerg, forthcoming.

¹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, 1990:28; Robert N. Bellah et al., 1985 (especially the Methodological Appendix, pp. 297 ff.)

¹⁹ Pierre Bourdieu and Loic J. D. Wacquant, 1992:128.



orientation, as are Foucault's genealogies.²⁰ As pointed out by Rorty, "philosophy" in this interpretation is precisely what a culture – including organizational cultures – becomes capable of when it ceases to define itself in terms of explicit rules, and becomes sufficiently leisured and civilized to rely on inarticulate know-how, to "substitute *phronesis* for codification"²¹. Aristotle found that every well-functioning organization and 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 it the possession of them all."²² *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 saw as all-important. This is a major management problem in its own right.

Key questions of phronetic organization research

Regardless of the lack of a term for *phronesis* in our modern vocabulary, the principal objective for organization research with a phronetic approach is to perform analyses and derive interpretations of the status of values and interests in organizations aimed at organizational change. The point of departure for classical phronetic research can be summarized in the following three value-rational questions:

1. Where are we going?
2. Is this development desirable?
3. What, if anything, should we do about it?

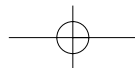
The "we", here consists of those organization researchers asking the questions and those who share the concerns of the researchers, including people in the organization under study. Later, when I have discussed the implications of power for *phronesis*, I will add a fourth question:

4. Who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power?

²⁰ Richard Bernstein, 1985:40; Stephen Toulmin, 1988:337; Richard Rorty, 1995:94–5.

²¹ Rorty, 1991b:25.

²² *N.E.*, 1144b33–1145a11. For Aristotle, man [*sic*] has a double identity. For the "human person," that is, man in politics and ethics, *phronesis* is the most important intellectual virtue. Insofar as man can transcend the purely human, contemplation assumes the highest place. *N.E.*, 1145a6 ff. and 1177a12 ff.



Organization researchers who ask and provide answers to these questions, use their studies not merely as a mirror for organizations to reflect on their values, but also as the nose, eyes, and ears of organizations, in order to sense where things may be going next and what, if anything, to do about it. The questions are asked with the realization that there is no general and unified “we” in relation to which the questions can be given a final, objective answer. What is a “gain” and a “loss” often depend on the perspective taken, and one person’s gain may be another’s loss. Phronetic organization researchers are highly aware of the importance of perspective, and see no neutral ground, no “view from nowhere,” for their work.

It should be stressed that no one has enough wisdom and experience to give complete answers to the four questions, whatever those answers might be. Such a wisdom and experience should not be expected from organization researchers, who are on average no more astute or ethical than anyone else. What should be expected, however, is attempts from phronetic organization researchers to develop their partial answers to the questions. Such answers would be input to the ongoing dialogue about the problems, possibilities, and risks that organizations face and how things may be done differently.

A first step in achieving this kind of perspective in organization research is for researchers to explicate the different roles of research as *episteme*, *techne*, and *phronesis*. Today’s researchers seldom clarify which of these three roles they are practicing. The entire enterprise is simply called “research” or “science,” even though we are dealing with quite different activities. It is often the case that these activities are rationalized as *episteme*, even though they are actually *techne* or *phronesis*. As argued previously, it is not in their role of *episteme* that one can argue for the value of organization research and other social sciences. In the domain in which the natural sciences have been strongest – the production of theories that can explain and accurately predict – the social sciences, including organization research, have been weakest. Nevertheless, by emphasizing the three roles, and especially by reintroducing *phronesis*, we see there are other possibilities for organization research and other social sciences. The oft-seen image of impotent social sciences versus potent natural sciences derives from their being compared in terms of their epistemic qualities. Yet such a comparison is misleading, for the two types of science have their respective strengths and weaknesses along fundamentally different dimensions. As mentioned previously, the social sciences, in their role as *phronesis*, are strongest where the natural sciences are weakest.

It is also as *phronesis* that organization research and other social sciences can provide a counterweight to tendencies toward relativism and nihilism. The importance of *phronesis* renders the attempts of organization research and social science to become “real” theoretical science doubly unfortunate; such efforts draw attention and resources away from those areas where they could make an impact and into areas where they do not obtain, never have



obtained, and probably never will obtain any significance as genuinely normal and predictive sciences.

Methodological guidelines for phronetic organization research

What, then, might a set of methodological guidelines for phronetic organization research look like? This question will be the focus of the remainder of the chapter. I would like to stress immediately that the methodological guidelines summarized below should not be seen as imperatives; at most they are cautionary indicators of direction. Let me also mention that undoubtedly there are ways of practising phronetic organization research other than those outlined here. The most important issue is not the individual methodology involved, even if methodological questions may have some significance. It is more important to get the result right – to arrive at organization research that effectively deals with deliberation, judgment, and praxis in relation to the four value-rational questions mentioned above, rather than being stranded with organization research that vainly attempts to emulate natural science.

As mentioned earlier, few scholars seem to have reflected explicitly on the comparative strengths and weaknesses of research practised as either *episteme*, *techne*, or *phronesis*. Even fewer are actually conducting research on the basis of such reflection, and fewer still have articulated the methodological considerations and guidelines for *phronesis*-based research. In fact, it seems that researchers doing *phronesis*-like work have a sound instinct for proceeding with their research and not involving themselves in methodology. Nonetheless, given the interpretation of the actual and potential role of organization research as outlined above, it is essential for the development of such research that methodological guidelines be elaborated.

The main point of departure for explicating methodological guidelines for phronetic organization research is a reading of Aristotle and Michel Foucault²³, supplemented with readings of other thinkers – mainly Pierre Bourdieu, Clifford Geertz, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Richard Rorty – who emphasize phronetic before epistemic knowledge in the study of organizations and society, despite important differences in other domains.²⁴

²³ For an interpretation of Foucault as a practitioner of *phronesis*, see Flyvbjerg, 2001, Chapter 8, “Empowering Aristotle.”

²⁴ It should be mentioned that Alasdair MacIntyre’s Aristotle is substantially more Platonic than the Aristotle depicted by the others, and more Platonic than the interpretation given here. MacIntyre explicitly understands Aristotle “as engaged in trying to complete Plato’s work, and to correct it precisely insofar as that was necessary in order to complete it”. See MacIntyre, 1988:94, and 1990.

Focusing on values

By definition, phronetic organization researchers focus on values and, especially, evaluative judgments; for example, by taking their point of departure in the classic value-rational questions: “Where are we going?” “Is it desirable?” “What should be done?” The objective is to balance instrumental rationality with value-rationality and increase the capacity of employees and managers to think and act in value-rational terms. Asking value-rational questions does not imply a belief in linearity and continuous progress. The phronetic organization researcher knows enough about power to understand that progress is often complex, ephemeral, and hard-won, and that set-backs are an inevitable part of organizational life (on power, see below).

Focusing on values, phronetic organization researchers are forced to face questions of foundationalism versus relativism – that is, the view that there are central values that can be rationally and universally grounded, versus the view that one set of values is as good as another. Phronetic organization researchers reject both of these “isms” and replace them with contextualism or situational ethics. Distancing themselves from foundationalism does not leave phronetic organization researchers normless, however. They take their point of departure in their attitude to the situation in the organization and society being studied. They seek to ensure that such an attitude is not based on idiosyncratic morality or personal preferences, but on a common view among a specific reference group to which the organization researchers refer. For phronetic organization researchers, the socially and historically conditioned context – and not the universal grounding that is desired but not yet achieved by certain scholars, constitutes the most effective bulwark against relativism and nihilism.²⁵ Phronetic organization researchers realize that our sociality and history is the only foundation we have, the only solid ground under our feet; and that this socio-historical foundation is fully adequate for our work as organization researchers.

As regards validity, phronetic organization research is based on interpretation and is open for testing in relation to other interpretations and other research. But one interpretation is not as good as any other, which would be the case for relativism. Every interpretation must be built upon claims of validity, and the procedures ensuring validity are as demanding for phronetic organization research as for any other activity in the social sciences. Phronetic organization researchers also oppose the view that any one among a number of interpretations lacks value because it is “merely” an interpretation. As emphasized by Alexander Nehamas, the key point is the establishment of a *better* option, where “better” is defined according to sets of validity claims.²⁶ If

²⁵ Nihilism is a theory promoting the state of believing in nothing or of having no allegiances and no purposes.

²⁶ Alexander Nehamas, 1985:63.

a new interpretation appears to better explain a given phenomenon, that new interpretation will replace the old one – until it, too, is replaced by a new and yet better interpretation. This is typically a continuing process, not one that terminates with “the right answer”. Such is the procedure that a community of organization researchers would follow in working together to put certain interpretations of organizational life ahead of others (see also the section on “dialogue” below). The procedure does not describe an interpretive or relativistic approach. Rather, it sets forth the basic ground rules for any social inquiry, inasmuch as social science and philosophy have not yet identified criteria by which an ultimate interpretation and a final grounding of values and facts can be made.

Placing power at the core of analysis

Aristotle, the philosopher of *phronesis* par excellence, never elaborated his conception of *phronesis* to include explicit considerations of power. Hans-Georg Gadamer’s authoritative and contemporary conception of *phronesis* also overlooks issues of power.²⁷ Yet, as Richard Bernstein points out, if we are to think about what can be done to the problems, possibilities, and risks of our time, we must advance from the original conception of *phronesis* to one explicitly including power.²⁸ Unfortunately, Bernstein himself has not integrated his work on *phronesis* with issues of power. Elsewhere I have argued that conflict and power have evolved into phenomena constitutive of organizational inquiry. Modern organizational inquiry can only be complete if it deals with issues of power. I have therefore made an attempt to develop the classic concept of *phronesis* to a more contemporary one, which accounts for power.²⁹

Besides focusing on the three value-rational questions mentioned above, which are the classical Aristotelian questions, a contemporary reading of *phronesis* also poses questions about power and outcomes:

“Who gains, and who loses?”

“Through what kinds of power relations?”

“What possibilities are available to change existing power relations?”

“And is it desirable to do so?”

“What are the power relations among those who ask the questions?”

²⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, 1975.

²⁸ Bernstein, 1989:217.

²⁹ Flyvbjerg, 2001, Chapters 7 and 8.

Phronetic organization research poses these questions with the intention of avoiding the voluntarism and idealism typical of so much ethical thinking. The main question is not only the Weberian: “Who governs?” posed by Robert Dahl and most other students of power. It is also the Nietzschean question: What “governmental rationalities” are at work when those who govern govern?³⁰ With these questions and with the focus on value-rationality, phronetic organization researchers relate explicitly to a primary context of values and power. Combining the best of a Nietzschean–Foucauldian interpretation of power with the best of a Weberian–Dahlian one, the analysis of power is guided by a conception of power that can be characterized by six features:

1. Power is seen as productive and positive, and not only as restrictive and negative.
2. Power is viewed as a dense net of omnipresent relations, and not only as being localized in “centers”, organizations, and institutions, or as an entity one can “possess”.
3. The concept of power is seen as ultradynamic; power is not merely something one appropriates, it is also something one reappropriates and exercises in a constant back-and-forth movement within the relationships of strength, tactics, and strategies inside of which one exists.
4. Knowledge and power, truth and power, rationality and power are analytically inseparable from each other; power produces knowledge, and knowledge produces power.
5. The central question is how power is exercised, and not merely *who* has power, and *why* they have it; the focus is on process in addition to structure.
6. Power is studied with a point of departure in small questions, “flat and empirical”, not only, nor even primarily, with a point of departure in “big questions”.³¹

Analyses of organizational power following this format cannot be equated with a general analytics of every possible power relation in organizations. Other approaches and other interpretations are possible. They can, however, serve as a possible and productive point of departure for dealing with questions of power in doing *phronesis*.

³⁰ See also Stewart Clegg, 1989; 1997; and Cynthia Hardy and Stewart Clegg, 1999.

³¹ Foucault, 1982:217.

Getting close to reality

Donald Campbell, Charles Lindblom, and others have noted that the development of organization and other social research is inhibited by the fact that researchers tend to work with problems in which the answer to the question: “If you are wrong about this, who will notice?” is usually: “Nobody”³². Mary Timney Bailey calls the outcome of such research “‘so what’ results”³³. Phronetic organization researchers seek to transcend this problem of relevance by anchoring their research in the context studied and thereby ensuring what Gadamer called a hermeneutic “fusion of horizons”. This applies both to contemporary and historical organization studies. For contemporary studies researchers get close to the organization, phenomenon, or group that they study during data collection, and remain close during the phases of data analysis, feedback, and publication of results. Combined with the above-mentioned focus on relations of values and power, this strategy typically creates interest in the research by parties outside the research community. These parties will test and evaluate the research in various ways. Phronetic organization researchers will consciously expose themselves to positive and negative reactions from their surroundings, and are likely to derive benefit from the learning effect, which is built into this strategy. In this way, the phronetic organization researcher becomes a part of the phenomenon studied, without necessarily “going native” or the project becoming simple action research. Action researchers and anthropologists who have gone native typically identify with the people they are studying; they adopt the perspective and goals of those studied and use research results in an effort to achieve these goals. This is not necessarily the case for phronetic organization researchers who at all times, in the service of truth, retain the classic academic freedom to problematize and be critical of what they see.

Phronetic organization researchers performing historical studies conduct much of their work in those locales where the relevant historical materials are placed, and they typically probe deeply into archives, annals, and individual documents. To the attentive researcher archives will reveal a knowledge whose visible body “is neither theoretical or scientific discourse nor literature, but a regular, daily practice”³⁴. In historical studies, as in contemporary ones, the objective is to get close to reality. *Wirkliche Historie* (real history), says Foucault, “shortens its vision to those things nearest to it”³⁵. C. Roland Christensen, arguably one of the fathers of the case method at Harvard University,

³² Donald T. Campbell, 1986:128–9; Charles E. Lindblom and David K. Cohen, 1979; 1984; Charles E. Lindblom, 1990. The quote in the text is from Campbell.

³³ Mary Timney Bailey, 1992:50.

³⁴ Foucault, 1969:4–5; here quoted from Eribon, 1991:215.

³⁵ Foucault, 1984a:89.

expresses a similar attitude about his research by invoking Henry Miller to describe the approach taken by case researchers:

My whole work has come to resemble a terrain of which I have made a thorough, geodetic survey, not from a desk with pen and ruler, but by touch, by getting down on all fours, on my stomach, and crawling over the ground inch by inch, and this over an endless period of time in all conditions of weather.³⁶

Emphasizing little things

Phronetic organization researchers begin their work by phenomenologically asking “little questions” and focusing on what Clifford Geertz, with a term borrowed from Gilbert Ryle, calls “thick description”³⁷. This procedure may often seem tedious and trivial. Nietzsche and Foucault emphasize that it requires “patience and a knowledge of details”, and it depends on a “vast accumulation of source material”³⁸. Geertz explicates the dilemma involved in skipping minutiae. The problem with an approach that extracts the general from the particular and then sets the particular aside as detail, illustration, background, or qualification, is, as Geertz says, that “it leaves us helpless in the face of the very difference we need to explore...[it] does indeed simplify matters. It is less certain that it clarifies them”³⁹. Nietzsche, who advocates “patience and seriousness in the smallest things”⁴⁰, expresses a similar, though more radical, point regarding the importance of detail when he says that “[a]ll the problems of politics, of social organization, and of education have been falsified through and through ... because one learned to despise ‘little’ things, which means the basic concerns of life itself”⁴¹.

The focus on minutiae, which directly opposes much conventional wisdom about the need to focus on “important problems” and “big questions”, has its background in the fundamental phenomenological experience of small questions often leading to big answers. In this sense, phronetic organization research is decentered in its approach, taking its point of departure in organizational micropractices, searching for the Great within the Small and vice versa. “God is in the detail”, the proverb says. “So is the Devil”, the phronetic organization researcher would add, doing work that is at the same time as detailed and as general as possible.

³⁶ Henry Miller, 1941:27; quoted in slightly different form in Christensen with Hansen, 1987:18.

³⁷ Clifford Geertz, 1973:6 and 1983.

³⁸ Foucault, 1984a:76.

³⁹ Geertz, 1995a:40. See also Geertz, 1990; 1995b.

⁴⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, 1968a:182 (§59).

⁴¹ Nietzsche, 1969a:256 (§10).



Looking at practice before discourse

Through words and concepts we are continually tempted to think of things as being simpler than they are, says Nietzsche: “there is a philosophical mythology concealed in *language*” (emphasis in original).⁴² Michel Serres puts the matter even more succinctly, saying that: “Language has a disgust for things.” Phronetic organization research attempts to get beyond this problem. Thus, organizational practice or what people do in organizations is seen as more fundamental than either discourse or theory – what people say. Goethe’s phrase from *Faust*, “Am Anfang war die Tat” (in the beginning was the deed), could be the motto for phronetic organization research. It is echoed by Foucault who says, “discourse is not life”; regular, daily practice is life.⁴³ Phronetic organization research does not accept the maxim that there is nothing outside the text or outside discourse. Such an approach is too easy, giving its practitioners limitless sovereignty by allowing them to restate the text indefinitely.⁴⁴ Textual analysis must be disciplined by analysis of practices. Here, again, the position is not relativism but contextualism. The context of practices disciplines interpretation.

Phronetic organization research focuses on practical activity and practical knowledge in everyday situations in organizations. It *may* mean, but is certainly not limited to, a focus on known sociological, ethnographic, and historical phenomena such as “everyday life” and “everyday people,” with their focus on the so-called “common”. What it *always* means, however, is a focus on the actual daily practices – common or highly specialized or rarefied – which constitute a given organizational field of interest, regardless of whether these practices constitute a stock exchange, a grassroots organization, a neighborhood, a multinational corporation, an emergency ward, or a local school board.

At the outset, organizational practices are recorded and described simply as events. “The question which I ask”, says Foucault, “is not about codes but about events ... I try to answer this question without referring to the consciousness ... the will ... intention”.⁴⁵ The phronetic organization researcher records what happened “on such a day, in such a place, in such circumstances”.⁴⁶ In *The Will to Power*, in describing his “principles of a new evaluation”, Nietzsche similarly says that when evaluating human action one should

⁴² Nietzsche, 1968a:191 (Appendix C).

⁴³ After Ludwig Wittgenstein had abandoned any possibility of constructing a philosophical theory, he suggested that Goethe’s phrase from *Faust*, quoted in the main text, might serve as a motto for the whole of his later philosophy. See Ray Monk, 1990:305–6. The Foucault quote is from Foucault, 1991:72. On the primacy of practices in Foucault’s work, see also Foucault, 1981:5; and Foucault quoted in Eribon, 1991:214–6.

⁴⁴ Foucault, 1979:27.

⁴⁵ Foucault, 1991:59; 1981:6–7.

⁴⁶ Foucault, 1972:15; here quoted from James Miller, 1993:191.

“take doing *something*, the ‘aim’, the ‘intention’, the ‘purpose’, back into the deed after having artificially removed all this and thus emptied the deed” (emphasis in original).⁴⁷ Events and phenomena are presented together with their connections with other events and phenomena.⁴⁸ Discontinuities and changes in the meaning of concepts and discourses are documented. The hermeneutic horizon is isolated and its arbitrariness elaborated. At first, the organization researcher takes no position regarding the truth-value and significance ascribed by participants to the organizational practices studied. No practice is seen as more valuable than another. The horizon of meaning is initially that of the single organizational practice. The researcher then attempts to understand the roles played by single practices studied in the total system of organizational and contextual relations. If it is established, for example, that a certain organizational practice is seen as rational according to its self-understanding – that is, by those practicing it, but not when viewed in the context of other horizons of meaning – the researcher then asks what role this “dubious” rationality plays in a further context, historically, organizationally, and politically, and what the consequences might be.

In addition to the Nietzschean removal of the doer from the deed, the focus on organizational practices as events also involves a self-removal on the part of the organization researchers to allow them to disinterestedly inspect the *wirkliche Historie* of organizations. This distancing enables the researcher to master a subject matter even when it is hideous, and when there is a “brutality of fact” involved in the approach. This approach may, in turn, offend people who mistake the researcher’s willingness to uncover and face the morally unacceptable for immorality. There may also be intensity and optimism, however, in facing even the pessimistic and depressing sides of power and human action in organizations. The description of practices as events endures and gains its strength from detecting the forces that make life in the organization work. And if the researcher uncovers an organizational reality that is ugly or even terrifying when judged by the moral standards, which, we like to believe, apply in modern organizations, this reality may also demonstrate something deeply human that may have to be faced squarely by people in the organization, by organization researchers, and by the general public, if this reality is to be changed. Nietzsche acutely named this approach to research “The Gay [*fröhliche*] Science”, and he called those practising the approach “free spirits”, describing them as “curious to a vice, investigators to the point of cruelty, with uninhibited fingers for the unfathomable, with teeth and stomachs for the most indigestible ... collectors from morning till late, misers of our riches and our crammed drawers”.⁴⁹ We need more “free spirits”

⁴⁷ Nietzsche, 1968b:356 (§ 675).

⁴⁸ For more on eventualization, see Andrew Abbott, 1992.

⁴⁹ Nietzsche, 1966:55.

in organization research and this depiction of what they would be like may serve as a description of phronetic organization researchers.

Studying cases and contexts

We have seen that Aristotle explicitly identifies knowledge of “particular circumstances” as a main ingredient of *phronesis*.⁵⁰ Foucault similarly worked according to the dictum “never lose sight of reference to a concrete example”.⁵¹ Phronetic organization research thus benefits from focusing on case studies, precedents, and exemplars. *Phronesis* functions on the basis of practical rationality and judgment. As I have argued elsewhere, practical organizational rationality and judgment evolve and operate primarily by virtue of in-depth case experiences.⁵² Practical rationality, therefore, is best understood through cases – whether experienced or narrated – just as judgment is best cultivated and communicated via the exposition of cases. The significance of this point can hardly be overstated, which is why Richard Rorty, in responding to Max Weber’s thesis regarding the modern “disenchantment of the world”, invokes John Dewey to say: “the way to re-enchant the world ... is to stick to the concrete”.⁵³

Context is important to case studies in organizations. What has been called the “primacy of context” follows from the observation that in the history of science, human action has shown itself to be irreducible to predefined elements and rules unconnected to interpretation.⁵⁴ Therefore, it has been impossible to derive praxis from first principles and theory. Praxis has always been contingent on context-dependent judgment, on situational ethics. It would require a major transformation of current philosophy and science if this view were to change, and such a transformation does not seem to be on the horizon. What Pierre Bourdieu calls the “feel for the game” (a.k.a. *Fingerspitzengefühl*) is central to all human action of any complexity, including organizational action, and it enables an infinite number of “moves” to be made, adapted to the infinite number of possible situations, which no rule-maker, however complex the rule, can foresee.⁵⁵ Therefore, the judgment, which is central to *phronesis* and praxis, is always context dependent. The minutiae, practices, and concrete cases that lie at the heart of phronetic organization research must be seen in their proper contexts; both the small, local context, which gives phenomena their immediate meaning, and the larger,

⁵⁰ N.E., 1141b8–1141b27.

⁵¹ Foucault, 1969:7, quoted in Eribon, 1991:216.

⁵² Flyvbjerg, 1989. See also MacIntyre, 1977.

⁵³ Rorty, 1985:173.

⁵⁴ Rabinow and Sullivan, 1987:8. See also Henderson, 1994.

⁵⁵ Bourdieu, 1990:9.

international and global context in which phenomena can be appreciated for their general and conceptual significance.⁵⁶ Given the role of context in phronetic organization research, insofar as such research is practised as applied ethics, it is situational ethics. The focus is on *Sittlichkeit* (ethics) rather than *Moralität* (morality).

Asking “how?” Doing narrative

Phronetic organization research focuses on the dynamic question, “How?” in addition to the more structural “Why?”. It is concerned with both *Verstehen* (understanding) and *Erklären* (explanation). Outcomes of organizational phenomena are investigated and interpreted in relation to organizational processes. In the study of relationships of power in organizations, we already emphasized with Foucault the how-question, “the little question ... flat and empirical”, as being particularly important. Foucault stressed that our understanding will suffer if we do not start our analyses with a “How?”

Asking “How?” and conducting narrative analysis are closely interlinked activities. Earlier we saw that a central question for *phronesis* is: What should we do? To this Alasdair MacIntyre answers: “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”⁵⁷ Thus Nietzsche and Foucault see history as being fundamental to social science and philosophy, and criticize social scientists and philosophers for their lack of “historical sense”.⁵⁸ The same may be said about organization research and researchers. History is central to phronetic organization research in both senses of the word – that is, *both* as narrative containing specific actors and events, in what Clifford Geertz calls a story with a scientific plot; *and* as the recording of a historical development.⁵⁹ Narratology, understood as the question of “how best to get an honest story honestly told”, is more important than epistemology and ontology.⁶⁰

Several observers have noted that narrative is an ancient method and perhaps our most fundamental form for making sense of experience.⁶¹ To MacIntyre, the human being is a “story-telling animal”, and the notion of a history is as fundamental a notion as is the notion of an action.⁶² In a similar

⁵⁶ For more on context, see Daniel Andler, 1998; Craig Calhoun, 1994; Susan Engel, 1999; Richard F. Fenno, Jr., 1986; and Benny Shannon, 1990:157–66.

⁵⁷ MacIntyre, 1984:216.

⁵⁸ Nietzsche, 1968c:35 (§ 1).

⁵⁹ Geertz, 1988:114. See also Geertz, 1990, “History and Anthropology”, with responses by Renato Rosaldo; and Gerda Lerner.

⁶⁰ Geertz, 1988:9. In organization research, see Van Maanen, 1988; Czarniawska, 1997; 1998a.

⁶¹ Novak, 1975:175; Mattingly, 1991:237. See also Hannah Arendt, 1958; MacIntyre, 1984; Paul Ricoeur, 1984; Carr, 1986; Abbott, 1992; Fehn et al., 1992; Rasmussen, 1995; and Bal, 1997.

⁶² MacIntyre, 1984:214, 216.



vein, Cheryl Mattingly points out that narratives not only give meaningful form to our experiences. They also provide us with a forward glance, helping us to anticipate situations even before we encounter them, allowing us to envision alternative futures.⁶³ Narrative inquiries into organizations do not – indeed, cannot – start from explicit theoretical assumptions. Instead, they begin with an interest in a particular organizational phenomenon that is best understood narratively. Narrative inquiries then develop descriptions and interpretations of the phenomenon from the perspective of participants, stakeholders, researchers, and others. In historical organizational analysis, both event and conjuncture are crucial, just as practices are studied in the context of several centuries, akin to what Fernand Braudel calls *longue durée*. The century-long view is employed in order to allow for the influence on current organizational practices of traditions with long historical roots, an influence that is often substantially more significant than is assumed in mainstream organization research.⁶⁴

Moving beyond agency and structure

In an attempt to transcend the dualisms of agency/structure, hermeneutics/structuralism, and voluntarism/determinism, phronetic organization research focuses on both actors and structures, and on the relationship between the two.⁶⁵ Organizational actors and their practices are analyzed in relation to the structures of the organization. And structures are analyzed in terms of agency – not for the two to stand in a dualistic, external relationship, but so structures can be part of, can be internalized in actors, and so actors can be part of, can be internalized in, structures. Understanding from “within” the organization and from “without” are both accorded emphasis, which is what Pierre Bourdieu, in adapting the Aristotelian and Thomist concept of “habitus” – a highly relevant concept for phronetic organization research – calls “the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality”⁶⁶. Elsewhere, Bourdieu explicitly states that the use of the notion of habitus can be understood as a way of escaping the choice between “a structuralism without a subject and the philosophy of the subject”⁶⁷.

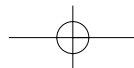
⁶³ Mattingly, 1991:237.

⁶⁴ For examples of the influence on current organizational practices of traditions with long historical roots, see Putnam et al., 1993, and Flyvbjerg, 1998, Chapter 8, “The *Longue Durée* of Power.”

⁶⁵ For a discussion of the problems incurred in moving beyond these dualisms, see Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982, and Thomas McCarthy’s considerations on hermeneutics and structural analysis in his introduction to Jürgen Habermas’s *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1 (1984:xxvi–xxvii). See other works of interest on this problem, which, in my view, is one of the more challenging in phronetic organization research: Giddens, 1982; Seung, 1982; Schmidt, 1985.

⁶⁶ Bourdieu, 1977:72.

⁶⁷ Bourdieu, 1990:10.



As anyone who has tried it can testify, it is a demanding task to account simultaneously for the structural influences that shape the development of a given organizational phenomenon while crafting a clear, penetrating narrative or microanalysis of that phenomenon.⁶⁸ As Diane Vaughan says, theorizing about actors and structures remains bifurcated.⁶⁹ Researchers generally tend to generate either macro-level or micro-level explanations, ignoring the critical connections. Empirical work follows the same pattern. Instead of research that attempts to link macro-level factors and actors' choices in a specific organizational or social phenomenon, scholars tend to dichotomize. Structural analyses and studies of actors each receive their share of attention, but in separate projects, by separate researchers. Those who join structure and actor in empirical work most often do so by theoretical inference: data at one level of analysis are coupled with theoretical speculation about the other. Although issues of actor and structure combine with particular emphasis in organizations and institutions, classic social-science research methodology is less developed for studying organizations and institutions than for studying individuals and aggregate patterns.⁷⁰ Organization research carries the burden of this fact. Therefore, many organization researchers may not be convinced that there is an escape from the duality of structural and individual analysis. They may believe there is no middle ground, for the very recalcitrance of the problem seems to attest to its intractableness.

There is mounting evidence, however, that the actor/structure connection is not an insurmountable problem. In fact, it may not be a problem at all, says Vaughan, but simply an artifact of data availability and graduate training.⁷¹ And we now have excellent examples from other areas of the social sciences showing us how to integrate and move beyond the simple dichotomy of actors and structures. Clifford Geertz's classic description of the Balinese cockfight progressively incorporates practices, institutions, and symbols from the larger Balinese social and cultural world in order to help the reader understand the seemingly localized event of the cockfight.⁷² Robert Putnam and his associates similarly combine individual and structural analysis – as well as contemporary history and the history of the *longue durée* – in their attempt to explain the performance of modern, democratic institutions in Italy.⁷³ James Ferguson demonstrates how local, intentional development plans in Lesotho interact with larger, unacknowledged structures to produce unintended effects that are instrumental to the organization of “development” and development

⁶⁸ See also Diane Vaughan, 1992:183.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Bellah et al., 1991:302.

⁷¹ Vaughan, 1992:182.

⁷² Geertz, 1973.

⁷³ Putnam, 1993.



agencies.⁷⁴ Michael Herzfeld throws new light on bureaucratic organization by studying what appears to be peculiar administrative practices in relation to structural explanations of the nation state.⁷⁵ And, Stella Tillyard works from the basis of personal histories and family dynamics to incorporate the larger socioeconomic and political scene of the entire Hanoverian Age.⁷⁶ Like these scholars, phronetic organization researchers deliberately seek information that will answer questions about the intermeshing of actors and structures in actual settings, in ways that dissolve any rigid and preconceived conceptual distinction between the two.⁷⁷

Dialoguing with a polyphony of voices

Phronetic organization research is dialogical in the sense that it incorporates, and, if successful, is itself incorporated into, a polyphony of voices, with no one voice, including that of the researcher, claiming final authority. The goal of phronetic organization research is to produce input to the ongoing dialogue and praxis in relation to organizations, rather than to generate ultimate, unequivocally verified knowledge about the nature of organizations. This goal accords with Aristotle's maxim that in questions of praxis, one ought to trust more in the public sphere than in science.⁷⁸ Dialogue is not limited to the relationship between researchers and the people they study in the field, however. The relevant dialogue for a particular piece of research typically involves more than these two parties – in principle anyone interested in and affected by the subject under study. Such parties may be dialoguing independently of researchers until the latter make a successful attempt at entering into the dialogue with their research. In other instances there may be no ongoing dialogue initially, the dialogue being sparked by the work of phronetic researchers. In *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah and his coauthors expressed 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 then receive further discussion.”⁷⁹ This hope is as fine an expression of the phronetic dialogical attitude as we will find for a specific piece of research. *Habits of the Heart* was ultimately successful in achieving its aims of entering into and intensifying debate in USA about US values.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ Ferguson, 1990.

⁷⁵ Herzfeld, 1992.

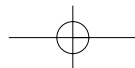
⁷⁶ Stella Tillyard, 1994.

⁷⁷ For more on the actor/structure issue, see Collins, 1980; Giddens, 1984; Coleman, 1985; Bourdieu, 1988; Fine, 1988; Harrison, 1989; Rosen, 1989; Lévi-Strauss and Eribon, 1991:102–4; Sewell, 1992.

⁷⁸ For more on the relationship between the public sphere and science, see Robert Bellah, 1993.

⁷⁹ Bellah et al., 1985:307.

⁸⁰ For an interpretation of *Habits of the Heart* as phronetic social science, see Flyvbjerg, 2001:62–65.



Thus, phronetic organization research explicitly sees itself as not having a privileged position from which the final truth can be told and further discussion arrested. We cannot think of an “eye turned in no particular direction”, as Nietzsche says. “There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective ‘knowing’; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our ‘concept’ of this thing, our ‘objectivity’, be” (emphasis in original)⁸¹. Hence, “objectivity” in phronetic organization research is not “contemplation without interest” but employment of “a *variety* of perspectives and affective interpretations in the service of knowledge” (emphasis in original).⁸²

The significance of any given interpretation in a dialogue will depend on the extent to which the validity claims of the interpreter are accepted, and this acceptance typically occurs in competition with other validity claims and other interpretations. The discourses in which the results of phronetic organization research are used have, in this sense, no special status, but are subordinated to the same conditions as any other dialogical discourse. If and when the arguments of researchers carry special weight it would likely derive not from researchers having access to a special type of validity claim, but from researchers having spent more time on and being better trained at establishing validity than have other organizational actors. We are talking about a difference in degree, not in kind. To the phronetic researcher, this is the reality of organization research, although some organization researchers act as if validity claims can and should be given final grounding. The burden of proof is on them. By substituting *phronesis* for *episteme*, phronetic organization researchers avoid this burden, impossible as it seems to lift.

Some people may fear that the dialogue at the center of phronetic organization research, rather than evolving into the desired polyphony of voices, will all too easily degenerate into a shouting match, a cacophony of voices, in which the loudest carries the day. In phronetic organization research, the means of prevention is no different from that of other research: only to the extent that the validity claims of phronetic organization researchers are accepted will the results of their research be accepted in the dialogue. Phronetic organization researchers thus recognize a human privilege and a basic condition: meaningful dialogue in context. “Dialogue” comes from the Greek *dialogos*, where *dia* means “between” and *logos* means “reason”. In contrast to the analytical and instrumental rationality, which lie at the cores of both *episteme* and *techne*, the practical rationality of *phronesis* is based on a socially conditioned, intersubjective “between-reason”.

⁸¹ Nietzsche, 1969b:119 (§ 3.12).

⁸² Ibid. See also Nietzsche, 1968b:287 [§ 530]: “There are no isolated judgments! An isolated judgment is never ‘true’, never knowledge; only in the connection and relation of many judgments is there any surety.”

Examples of phronetic organization research

The result of phronetic organization research is a pragmatically governed interpretation of the studied organizational practices. The interpretation does not require the researcher to agree with the actors' everyday understanding; nor does it require the discovery of some deep, inner meaning of the practices. Phronetic organization research is in this way interpretive, but it is neither everyday nor deep hermeneutics. Phronetic organization research is also not about, nor does it try to develop, theory or universal method. Thus, phronetic organization research is an analytical project, but not a theoretical or methodological one.

The following examples serve as brief representations of examples in an emerging body of organization research that contains elements of Aristotelian-Foucauldian *phronesis* as interpreted above. It must be stressed again, however, that phronetic organization research may be practised in ways other than those described here, as long as they effectively deal with deliberation, judgment, and praxis in relation to values and power, and as long as they answer the four value-rational questions mentioned above. In the organization of the firm and of accounting, the work of Peter Miller must be mentioned.⁸³ In the organization of science and technology there is the work of Bruno Latour and Paul Rabinow.⁸⁴ And in the organization of government there is Mitchell Dean's work.⁸⁵ The work of Stewart Clegg has already been mentioned.

Examples also exist from more specialized fields of research such as the organization of consumption,⁸⁶ insurance and risk,⁸⁷ space and architecture,⁸⁸ policing,⁸⁹ poverty and welfare,⁹⁰ sexual politics,⁹¹ and psychology⁹². Specifically in Scandinavia, the work of Tomas Brytting, Ulla Johansson, and Svante Leijon, on ethics, responsibility, and the organization of labor and municipalities, may serve as examples of phronetic organization research.⁹³ My own attempts at developing phronetic research have been aimed at the organization of democracy and its institutions, public and private.⁹⁴

⁸³ Peter Miller, 1994:239–264; 1999.

⁸⁴ Bruno Latour, 1996; 1999a; Rabinow, 1996; 1999.

⁸⁵ Mitchell Dean, 1999.

⁸⁶ Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose, 1997:1–36.

⁸⁷ François Ewald, 1986; 1996.

⁸⁸ Rabinow, 1989; Crush, 1994:301–324.

⁸⁹ Jacques Donzelot, 1979; Bernard E. Harcourt, 2001.

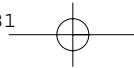
⁹⁰ Dean, 1991; Giovanna Procacci, 1993.

⁹¹ Sandra Lee Bartky, 1990; J. Minson, 1993.

⁹² Nikolas Rose, 1985; 1996.

⁹³ Svante Leijon, 1993; 1996; Tomas Brytting et al., 1997; Ulla Johansson, 1998; Tomas Brytting, 2001.

⁹⁴ Flyvbjerg, 1998; 2001; Flyvbjerg et al., 2003. For more examples of relevant research, see Dean, 1999:3–5; and Flyvbjerg, 2001:162–65.



One task of organization research practised on the basis of the methodological guidelines presented here, is to provide concrete examples and detailed narratives of the ways in which power and values work in organizations and with what consequences, and to suggest how power and values could be changed to work with other consequences. Insofar as organizational situations become clear, they are clarified by detailed stories of who is doing what to whom. Such clarification is a principal concern for phronetic organization research and provides the main link to praxis.

Phronetic organization research explores current practices and historic circumstances to find avenues to praxis. The task of phronetic organization research is to clarify and deliberate about the problems, possibilities, and risks that organizations face, and to outline how things could be done differently – all in full knowledge that we cannot find ultimate answers to these questions or even to a single version of what the questions are.

