

# Empirical Diaconal Research and Normativity

A discussion about methodology<sup>1</sup> in Diaconal Science illustrated by the term “phronesis” and the understanding of power<sup>2</sup>

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The article discusses the relevance of the methodological approach called “Phronetic Social Science” (PSS) developed by Bent Flyvbjerg, in the context and framework of empirical diaconal research. This methodology anchors the understanding of knowledge in the Aristotelian term “phronesis”. PSS also uses the power understanding of Michel Foucault as an analytical tool. An understanding of empirical diaconal research as normative is a core statement and a premise for the methodological discussion. Solidarity with the weak part is the basis of this normativity, and the analytical approach is anchored in the norms of the Church.

The research question is: What relevance has PSS as a methodological approach to discussion of the concept of normativity in empirical diaconal scientific work?

**Keywords:** Empirical Research, Diaconia, Methodology, Power, Phronesis, Normativity.

## Introduction

A study of the relationship between empirical diaconal research and normativity presupposes a clear understanding of diaconal research and of the relevant perspectives on normativity in this context. In my experience, the understanding of normativity in empirical diaconal research is very often implicit, and taken for granted. The unspoken will often unconsciously influence the researcher’s approach. “Nothing should be taken for granted in terms of how we understand human beings or the world” is a normative claim that I support – and which I believe has actuality in the field of empirical diaconal research.<sup>3</sup>

My aim in this article is to discuss the ways in which the methodology called “Phronetic Social Science” (PSS), developed for social science by Bent Flyvbjerg, may be relevant to empirical diaconal research. Flyvbjerg’s approach is anchored in the Aristotelian term of practical knowledge, called *phronesis*, and in an understanding of the relational exercise of power based on the analytical

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- 1 “Methodology is the systematic, theoretical analysis of the methods applied to a field of study. It comprises the theoretical analysis of the body of methods and principles associated with a branch of knowledge”; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Methodology>
  - 2 An article with the same headline is published in Norwegian (in *Tidsskrift for Praktisk Teologi*). This article’s content is based on that article, but developed and also given an international approach to the topic.
  - 3 Henriksen, “Normative dimensions in empirical research on religion, values and society,” 24.

approach of Michel Foucault. This methodology is basically normative, which in itself challenges traditional social scientific thinking.

## 1. Preliminary Statements and Research Question

The relevance of PSS as a methodological approach to diaconal research is the basic subject of this article. This will be examined in a discussion of the following statements.

- Empirical diaconal research (understood as research founded on a theologically justified definition of diakonia) is basically normative. This normativity is anchored in solidarity with the weak part with the aim of revealing and criticizing assaulting and oppressing conditions. The approach is based on the norms of the Church.
- Diaconal science presupposes an explicit normativity that is transparent in the substantive and procedural context of research.<sup>4</sup>
- The scientific interdisciplinary approach in diaconal research challenges the framework of understanding in the analysis of empirical material. Normativity in this research is primarily connected to the choice of perspectives in the interpretation.
- The research is founded on a methodology to manage the dialectic between the descriptive and the normative to reveal a basis for improved practice.
- The tension between empathetic proximity to the position of the weak part and the distance presupposed by the contextualizing theory is a hallmark of empirical diaconal research. This is the basis for developing wisdom, which includes competence to act (“phronesis”), a framework to uncover oppressive power mechanisms, and strengthening of the forces that increase dignity.

An understanding of normativity is the core of these statements. The research question in this article is:

*What relevance has PSS as a methodological approach to discussion of the concept of normativity in empirical diaconal scientific work?*

The first step in this investigation is to present the concept of PSS and clarify what is meant by “diaconal research.” The research question presupposes a discussion about normativity in this context. These reflections will be the premises upon which to base answers to the research question. They will be answered in the context of a discussion on the following topics:

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4 The understanding of “explicit normativity” is explained by Henriksen, “Normative dimensions in empirical research on religion, values and society,” 25.

- In what ways does *phronesis* as a framework for understanding knowledge affect the content of normativity in empirical diaconal research?
- What are the normative implications of Michel Foucault's analytical approach to the understanding of power?

The last part of the article will apply the question in the PSS concept to provide some tentative answers to the research question.

The methodical approach is a study of the literature. Testing this methodology in empirical diaconal research work is a logical next step to judge the relevance of PSS in this context.

### “Phronetic Social Science”<sup>5</sup> – A Presentation

The methodological concept was developed by Bengt Flyvbjerg in his 2001 book, “Making Social Science Matter.” In 2012, an anthology edited by Flyvbjerg, Todd Landman and Sanford Schram entitled “Real Social Science: Applied Phronesis” was published. This described various research projects where the methodology had been applied in different contexts.

When Flyvbjerg presents his theoretical basis for the methodology, he argues for connecting Foucault's understanding of power closely to the concept of *phronesis*.<sup>6</sup>

For Foucault praxis and freedom are derived not from universals or theories. Freedom is a practice, and its ideal is not a utopian absence of power. Resistance, struggle, and conflict, in contrast to consensus, are for Foucault the most solid basis for the practice of freedom.”<sup>7</sup>

Flyvbjerg uses the so-called Dreyfus Model to argue for integrated and internalized “silent” knowledge as the highest level of knowledge. This understanding is very closely connected to *phronetic* knowledge.<sup>8</sup> The Dreyfus Model shows that analytic rationality is a limited and limiting form of rationality, and has greater relevance at the lower levels of knowledge formation.<sup>9</sup> The complexity of phronetic rationality may be described as a negotiation between different kinds of normative sources (such as Biblical texts, tradition, experience,

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5 Sanford Schram claims that “Phronetic Social Science” is today an established term based on the presentation in Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter*; Flyvbjerg et.al., *Real Social Science*, 16

6 Foucault himself has never explicitly mentioned any kind of connection to *phronesis*.

7 Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter*, 102

8 The “Dreyfus Model” is presented in Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus, *Mind of Machine*. This understanding is based on five levels in the process of learning: (1) Novice, (2), Advanced beginner, (3) Competent performer, (4) Proficient performer, and (5) Expert; Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter*, 10.

9 Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter*, 21

and science). The tension between intuitive judgment and cognitive rationality is not an obstacle to, but rather a basis for, competent action, while still allowing the critical voices from different sources to challenge continuously the choice of position for actions.<sup>10</sup>

The classical “phronetic” value-based approach may be summarized in three questions: “Where are we going? (2) Is this desirable? (3) What should be done?”<sup>11</sup> However, these questions are not sufficient if we take into account the power analytic perspective. Then we have to add the following questions:

- Who gains and who loses, and through what kind of power relations?
- What possibilities are available to change existing power relations?
- Is it desirable to do so?
- Regarding those who are asking these questions, what kind of power relations are they a part of?<sup>12</sup>

Sanford Schram points to four reasons to prefer “Phronetic Social Science.” This illuminates some core characteristics of the methodology:

1. Focus is on a “critical assessment of values, norms and structures of power.”
2. The research is dialogical, context dependent, and “stays within a horizon of involvements of social life.”
3. Understanding of truth will in different ways be understood in a context “that is pluralistic and culture-bound.”
4. To interpret “is itself a practice of power.”<sup>13</sup>

## **Diaconal Research and Theological Premises**

Empirical research in the theological field as such has only become common in the past 20–30 years, and the term “diaconal research” is still relatively new in the scientific tradition, at least in Norway.<sup>14</sup> However, the diaconal field and its content have been the subject of empirical research for a longer period. What qualifies as “empirical diaconal research” is therefore not obvious. Diaconal research may be understood simply as research in a diaconal field. In addition, diaconal research may also be interpreted as research using methods from a variety of academic disciplines, but still based on a chosen understanding of

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10 Henriksen, “Normative dimensions in empirical research on religion, values and society,” 25

11 Ibid., 60

12 Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter*, 131. The questions mentioned are applied to the research question in the last part of the article.

13 Flyvbjerg et.al., *Real Social Science*, 18–19

14 Henriksen (ed.), *Difficult Normativity*, 11

diakonia anchored in a theological justification. Both approaches are legitimate. My approach is the last one. Danish professor of theology Hans Raun Iversen describes diakonia as “the service given to man when it has turned to the Kingdom of God. *Diakonia is, in short, successor practice.*”<sup>15</sup> He denotes diakonia as “*help for living when life is threatened.*”<sup>16</sup> This underlines some core points in the theologically based normativity of diaconal research: The concept of diakonia presupposes practice proximity, which is followed by experience-based movement. Practice proximity in conditions where “life is threatened” will actualize threats against the values of life and dignity. However, “the position of the threatened” and “the weak part” have often been used as static and stereotypical descriptions of individuals and groups. This is in itself confronting. “The weak part” must be identified with an analysis of power relations in context and anchored in the exercise of power, and not just by defining the powerful.<sup>17</sup>

An obvious example of vulnerability and “the weak part” is small children. A new ritual for baptism in the Norwegian Church emphasizes the responsibility that parents and the Christian fellowship have to “take care” of the child. Church workers focusing on this matter when meeting parents preparing baptism exemplify this kind of “empirical diaconal research”.<sup>18</sup> Other examples may be empirical research among different groups or themes in a church context focusing on the diaconal dimension in preaching, counseling, children and youth work or encountering people who have experienced grief, offense or abuse.

In summary, research from a diaconal scientific perspective must be conducted based on the following imperatives:

- Stand up in solidarity with the weak part,
- expose and criticize injustice and oppression,
- focus on use and misuse of relational, cultural, and structural power,
- anchor the analysis on the norms of the Church.<sup>19</sup>

There is an obvious connection between research based on liberation theology, feminist theology, and the choice of perspectives in this kind of diaconal research. All represent a confronting attitude to oppression and assaulting behavior. Research work based on liberation and feminist theology therefore reveals important anchoring points and methodological perspectives, which

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15 My translation. In Danish: “den tjeneste mennesket er sat i, når det har vendt sig mod Guds rige. *Diakoni er kort sagt efterfølgelsens praksis*” Raun Iversen, *Praktisk teologi*, 161

16 Ibid. My translation. In Danish: “*livshjælp, hvor livet er truet.*”

17 This point will be discussed in greater detail when I reflect on the understanding of power described by Michel Foucault.

18 A research project focusing on this topic is in progress.

19 A more thorough treatment of these norms from a diaconal academic perspective is given in Kleiven, *Intimitetsgrænser og tillitsmakt*, 54–63.

makes scholars in these fields important dialogue partners in diaconal research. However, there is an essential difference. Liberation and feminist theology have a chosen ideological perspective that forms a basis for the interpretation of oppression. Diakonia is a dimension of being a Church. Therefore, scholars in diaconal research are responsible for and have authority to discuss the exposure of the weak part without linking the analysis to limiting theological frameworks.<sup>20</sup>

Diakonia is academically part of theology as a science, and in tradition it is linked to the practical theological field. When diaconal research is anchored in a theological justification, this may be described as a perspective “from within.” Normativity is dependent on and linked to the self-understanding of the Church as diaconal.<sup>21</sup> However, it is also a hallmark by diaconal science that it has a multidisciplinary approach. Øivind Foss describes the status of diaconal science by linking scientific traditions such as psychology, sociology, history, and social science as necessary parts of the diaconal scientific framework.<sup>22</sup> Jan-Olav Henriksen stresses the necessity of theoretical pluralism to defamiliarize internalized normativity because a perspective “from within” may easily create blind zones.<sup>23</sup> Harald Hegstad characterizes this pluralistic theoretical approach (called theology encountering social science) as a necessity for theology. This approach must relate to “experience” as methodically secure empirical material.<sup>24</sup> Hegstad makes a deeper examination of normativity in practical theological research by using and supporting what Johannes van der Ven characterizes as an “intra-disciplinary” approach.<sup>25</sup> This implies that “theology should make use of insights and results from the general social sciences, and follow the same methodological standards in its own work.”<sup>26</sup>

## Normativity and Empiricism

Normativity in a social scientific context means using evaluative questions, asking what kind of value a social reality has. Normative arguments are responses to evaluative questions.<sup>27</sup> Henriksen presents a cluster of different di-

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20 A reflection on this point appears in Kleiven, *Intimitetsgrenser og tillitsmakt*, 266–270.

21 Hegstad, “Normativity and empirical data in practical theology,” 77

22 Foss, *Kirkens diakoni*, 200

23 Henriksen, “Normative dimensions in empirical research on religion, values and society,” 26

24 Hegstad, “Praktisk teologi som empirisk teologi,” 16

25 Hegstad, “Normativity and empirical data in practical theology,” 85; Hegstad, “Praktisk teologi som empirisk teologi,” 19. Johannes van der Ven also discusses a monodisciplinary, a multidisciplinary, and an interdisciplinary approach in his model; see Van der Ven, *Practical Theology*, 89–112.

26 Hegstad, “Normativity and empirical data in practical theology,” 85

27 Engelstad mfl, *Samfunn og vitenskap*, 107

mensions of normativity in the theological field. He mentions examples of normativity in research design and research ethics, theological normativities, and institutional and political normativities.<sup>28</sup> He also illuminates the complexity of the normative issue when he points to the tension between the dimension of normativity in theological research (which is taken for granted) and the opposite, which has been taken for granted in religious studies: “considered a discipline without any traits of normative grounding.”<sup>29</sup>

Johannes van der Ven is an authority in developing methodologies and in the methodology for empirical approaches, especially in the practical theological field. An important premise of his work has been the value-laden nature of empirical research. He links this to Aristotle’s statement that “hard facts do not exist” when he discusses this issue:

Science does not proceed from facts that exist independently of human beings, but from appearances (phenomena) that present themselves to people as data in which the facts “appear” to them (experiences). Because these data are associated with opinions (beliefs) about which people may differ, they pose problems of perception and interpretation (puzzles).<sup>30</sup>

“There are no theory-free ‘facts,’ only theory-laden data,” asserts van der Ven.<sup>31</sup>

Nowadays there is a common awareness that insight, perception, and interpretation are always intertwined with the actual situations shaping our understanding of empirical material.<sup>32</sup> There are therefore good reasons for questioning the understanding of normativity and empirical research in a framework of polarity, or an approach working “to ‘detect’ normativity within an empirical given situation”.<sup>33</sup> Peter Meyer states that “normative orientations can be researched empirically as social facts”, and that “empirical facts about value-orientation may accompany, yet not justify a normative theory”.<sup>34</sup> This circularity underlines the intertwined understanding. In a phronetic approach knowing is not instrumental in “trying to find the proper or effective means to a given end”, but understands ends and means as interwoven.<sup>35</sup> An empirical approach is not only based on a normative position but it is also

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28 Henriksen (ed.), *Difficult Normativity*, 12

29 Henriksen (ed.), *Difficult Normativity*, 12

30 Van der Ven, “An empirical or a normative approach”, 104. This quote is also rooted in a quote of Aristotle.

31 Van der Ven, “An empirical or a normative approach”, 106

32 Geir Afdal describes theories within an interpretive model of religious education as “empirically engaged, theoretical reflected and dialogically interpretive”; see *Research Religious Education as Social Practice*, 86

33 Meyer, “The Normative and Empirical: Revisiting a Contentious Relation”, 183

34 Meyer, “The Normative and Empirical: Revisiting a Contentious Relation”, 183

35 Afdal, *Research Religious Education as Social Practice*, 82

intertwined with normative presuppositions, reflections and choice of perspectives.

The term “normativity” is linked to various dimensions of research work in formal, structural, and substantive choices of content and perspectives. Hans-Georg Ziebert links two main sections to theological normativity: “material spheres” and “the process of research.”<sup>36</sup> When the research is rooted in a substantial normative aim (e.g. “stand up in solidarity with the weak part”), then the research process must be examined so that it provides answers to research questions based on knowledge about the perspective of the weaker part and consequences for the living conditions of those in this situation.

The term “empiricism” is connected to practical conditions and experience. Empirical research is based on systematic, valid and methodical data collection. Types of questions may differ, and fall into three categories; ascertainable, evaluative and constructive.<sup>37</sup> Ascertainable and evaluative questions answer questions regarding what is (facts) and how it ought to be. Constructive questions ask what is necessary and sufficient to achieve an objective. This correlates with searches for improved praxis.

Normativity can be applied when research has constructive questions. A diaconal scientific perspective aimed at improved practice presupposes constructive questions.

## Phronesis in Research

*Phronesis*, together with *techné*, are the terms that Aristotle names “practical knowledge.”<sup>38</sup> *Phronesis* is closely connected to ethics based on practical value rationality, and is generally defined as “practical wisdom and knowledge of the proper ends of life.”<sup>39</sup> Flyvbjerg characterizes it as pragmatic, contextual, and action oriented.<sup>40</sup> Aristotle himself describes the term in this way:

We may grasp the nature of prudence [*phronesis*] if we consider what sort of people we call prudent... prudence cannot be 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 [*techné*] because action and production are generically different... 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.<sup>41</sup>

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36 Ziebertz, “Empirical Methodology and Normativity,” 289

37 Kalleberg, “Forskningssopplegget og samfunnsforskningens dobbeltdialog,” 38

38 *Episteme* is related to Aristotle, where the theoretical and scientific knowledge is understood as knowledge that is universal and context independent, based on an analytic rationality.

39 Kinsella and Pitman, “Engaging phronesis in professional practice and education,” 2

40 Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter*, 57

41 *Ibid.*, 56

The wisdom of life, which includes competence to act, is in my view the closest we come to a translation of the term. *Phronesis* cannot be separated from a person because it is internalized knowledge that characterizes acting and being. It is value-based knowledge, but is not unconsciously taken from a schematic value system. On the contrary, it is characterized by “the greatest degree of flexibility, openness, and improvisation.”<sup>42</sup>

Flyvbjerg’s “Phronetic Social Science” is based on Aristotle’s concept of knowledge called *phronesis*. However, Flyvbjerg is not alone in using this concept in a methodological and scientific context. Almost all empirical diaconal scientific work, at least in Norway, has been based on the methodology of Don S. Browning and Kjell Nordstokke.<sup>43</sup> In Browning’s concept of “practice–theory–practice” *phronesis* is a core term to describe the aim of the research process.<sup>44</sup> Browning’s concept in many ways was a paradigm shift in theological research. It questioned the traditional understanding of theology as a movement from theory to practice by anchoring theology in practice. However, he stresses that all practice is “theory-loaded,” and that theory is “normative theory-loaded practice.”<sup>45</sup> This underlines the interwoven and dialectical understanding of the relationship between theory and practice. Kjell Nordstokke has not explicitly linked *phronesis* to his model of diaconal scientific research, but he takes a similar procedural approach to that of Browning. Research of diaconal practice in context provides a basis for evaluations based on theological and empirical scientific knowledge together with diaconal theory. This is the starting point for a search for a methodology that improves practice.<sup>46</sup>

Hans-Georg Gadamer uses *phronesis* as a core term in his hermeneutic philosophy. According to Joseph Dunne, Gadamer states that *phronesis* may be “the fundamental form of experience compared with which all other experience represents denaturing.”<sup>47</sup> Gadamer’s application of the hermeneutic circle may illuminate the role of the term as a core point in the hermeneutic process. Gadamer describes the circle in this way:

The circle, then, is not formal in nature. It is neither subjective nor objective; but describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter.<sup>48</sup>

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42 Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground*, 245

43 Kjell Nordstokke was the first professor in Diakonia I Norway, working in Diakonhjemmet University College, Oslo.

44 Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 34–54

45 Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 7

46 Nordstokke applies a model (“See–Evaluate–Act”) from liberation theology in his presentation. The model applied is described in Nordstokke, “Diakonivitenskapens teoretiske utgangspunkt.” It appears in the thesis of Kleiven, *Intimitetsgrenser og tillitsmakt*, 66–69.

47 Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground*, 127

48 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 293

A model of the hermeneutic circle in this context is shown below.<sup>49</sup>

This visualizes an important point in the dynamic of *phronesis* as a knowledge concept. The dialectical movement between practice and theory and between experience and tradition is a tool used to develop an internalized, acting, competent wisdom of life and living. In the diaconal research field, this characterizes a process of digging into “present theory-laden practice” and “normative theory-laden practice” as a dialectical movement to discuss the development of “theory-laden practice” based on a diaconal scientific normativity.

Johannes A. van der Ven offers the three-phase model of Paul Ricoeur. This is relevant in discussing *phronesis* applied in empirical diaconal research. Ricoeur’s model is normatively based on what is the good (similar to Aristotle), the just, and the wise. His model gives “the good primacy over the right, because it is embedded in the community in which we live, the tradition from which we are fed, the context by which we are shaped.”<sup>50</sup> He attempts to refine the dialectic between the good and just through the third criterion, “the wise, which refers to practical-moral wisdom, moral wisdom in situation.”<sup>51</sup> Van der Ven claims that Ricoeur’s application of the phronetic perspective is anchored in an interpretation of the self. In this context, he applies Emanuel Levinás’ distinction between “being with” and “being for” another. “Being with” is the awareness of being together without necessarily being responsible for the welfare of the other. “Being for” means to validate “the appeal of the other to take responsibility.”<sup>52</sup> “Being for” correlates with normativity, which characterizes the diaconal scientific perspective as it has been defined in this article.

Van der Ven includes three aspects of the term *phronesis* in Ricoeur’s model, as mentioned above. (1) He emphasizes situational and context dependence. Wisdom means awareness of the unique in the situation being analyzed and interpreted. (2) It is important to be conscious of the moral plurality in the value-based choices in the complex interactions of relations and systems. This plurality may be characterized as holy uncertainty, which leaves scope for doubt in the authority of the analysis and interpretation of the situation. (3) This doubt should not lead to indecision “after weighing all the relevant aspects and carefully weighing the consequences.”<sup>53</sup> An important aspect is that decisions should preferably be made in dialogue with others, because “the *phronimos* is not necessarily one individual alone.”<sup>54</sup>

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49 Bontekoe, *Dimensions of the Hermeneutic Circle*, 114. This illustration is consistent with some core points in the hermeneutic theology of Browning.

50 Van der Ven, *Formation of the Moral Self*, 9

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid., 157

53 Ibid., 172

54 Ibid.; van der Ven quoting Ricoeur.

## Understanding of Power from the Perspective of Michel Foucault

Bertrand Russell once said, “The fundamental concept in social science is Power, in the same sense in which Energy is the fundamental concept in physics.”<sup>55</sup> Michel Foucault goes one step further when he characterizes power as “omnipresence” by claiming that “power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.”<sup>56</sup> No power-free interaction exists. Power is impossible to characterize or categorize. “Power is exercised rather than possessed,” says Foucault,<sup>57</sup> and elaborates thus:

Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategic situation in a particular society.<sup>58</sup>

This way of understanding the power issue is to focus on the relational interaction, at both the personal and institutional levels. However, the content of power must also be understood in the light of structures. That power may be mainly understood as exercise and not possession shows that the primary question is not who exercises power, but how we do so.

Foucault’s aim in developing his analysis of power was a wish to challenge “every abuse of power, whoever the author, whoever the victim” because he believed this kind of confrontation created freedom.<sup>59</sup> Van der Ven concretizes this understanding when he describes “the dissymmetry of violence, which may be understood in terms of the distinction between ‘power-to-do’ and ‘power-over’.”<sup>60</sup> Foucault’s motive in his power analytic approach is related to the normativity of diaconal scientific research. I do not believe this is crucial for the use of his understanding in a methodology for empirical diaconal research, but it reinforces the reasons to continue reflecting on the possibility.

Flyvbjerg considers the perspectives of various sources (such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Robert Dahl, Max Weber) on the subject of power, and correlates these with the basic understanding in Foucault’s analysis. A summary and preparation of his presentation is a good basis upon which to describe the normative issue of a power analytic approach to empirical diaconal research.

1. Power is seen as “productive and positive” and not only as “restrictive and negative.”

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55 Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter*, 88

56 Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 93

57 Quoting Foucault in Flyvbjerg, *Real Social Science*, 117; see Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 26

58 Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 93

59 Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter*, 100

60 Van der Ven, *Formation of the Moral Self*, 162

2. Power is seen as a network of omnipresent relations, not only localized in “centers” or institutions, or something to be possessed.
3. The concept of power is seen as “ultradynamic;” power is a movement in a continuing exercise of appropriation “in relations of strength, tactics, and strategies.”
4. It is not possible analytically to separate knowledge, truth, and rationality from power; “power produces knowledge, and knowledge produces power.”
5. The core question is how the power is exercised, not only who and why someone is in a position of power; “the focus is on process in addition to structure.”
6. Power has to be studied in a situational and experience-based context, and not primarily by discussing the big and overarching questions.<sup>61</sup>

## **Discussion of PSS as a Methodological Approach to Diaconal Scientific Work**

The article so far has been a description and discussion of the term “Empirical diaconal research” and of PSS, and a discussion of the elements of the concept of PSS in relation to diaconal science and normativity. This final part is an attempt to apply the observations concerning normativity, drawing on the concept of *phronesis* and adopting a power analytic approach to examine PSS as a methodology in empirical diaconal research. I structure this according to the basic questions in this methodology.

### **Where are we going?**

Empirical diaconal research is still in a pioneer phase, at least in Norway. This challenges us to reflect on the kinds of methodological perspectives that have a crucial influence on this kind of research. PSS may clarify the normativity issue. In my view is PSS not a methodological approach in contrast to the approach of Browning and Nordstokke . PSS is based on practice both as input and output in a process and it emphasizes a multidisciplinary and contextual approach. These are elements that are familiar in the context of *phronesis* . This is also a methodology that would be completely or partially recognized by Browning and Nordstokke. However, the advantage of PSS is that it is a richer methodological approach; it creates a *phronetic* understanding of knowledge with an explicit power analytic element. The theoretical perspective of power is based on a dynamic and relational understanding. The aim is to identify and analyze the exercise of power more than the possessor of the power. The focus

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61 Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter* , 131–132

is on what the power exercise creates rather than on the static understanding of where and how power is placed.<sup>62</sup>

Diaconal research has a normative base upon which to recognize good exercising of power; it creates or helps to define the cause of freedom and empowerment of the weak part. Diaconal scientific research is in that sense “doing theology from below,” which includes “a preferential option for the poor.”<sup>63</sup> In other words, it is not only a choice of thematic focus, but also a choice of perspective and positioning. To use a power analytic approach in the research is necessary because power asymmetry is the basis for identifying the weak part, the poor or the assaulted.

Empirical diaconal research seems to depend on an empathic proximity to the situation of the weak part. This position may appear to be in tension with the research ideal of an adequate distance from the context, making it possible to establish an understanding based on critical and theoretical reflection. This tension is part of the normative challenge in diaconal research. Empathy can be defined as “an affective response that stems from the apprehension or comprehension of another’s emotional state or condition, and that is similar to what the other person is feeling or would be expected to feel.”<sup>64</sup> Empathy is not isolated from emotional sympathy, but is also connected to “the apprehension or comprehension.” Empathy may be characterized as the dialectic between proximity and distance. It depends on proximity, which gives insight and makes it possible to respond in an empowering manner to the experience of the living conditions of another. On the other hand, there must be distance to enable an open-minded and critical reflection on the circumstances of these living conditions. These two positions are mutually dependent. This takes into account the paradoxes and ambiguity that make it possible to manage the complexity of the situation. That is also what a phronetic approach can and ought to achieve. I conclude that the empirical material, examined through various theoretical perspectives may not only improve our understanding of the empirical material but also may be applied to improve practice. *Phronesis* is an understanding of knowledge that creates a necessary tension between proximity and distance. Charles Taylor’s statement may shed further light on this point:

Empathy may certainly be useful in coming to have the understanding we seek, but it is not what understanding consists of. Science is a form of discourse, and what we want is an account which sets out the significance of action and situation.<sup>65</sup>

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62 The challenge connected both to the chosen perspective of liberation theology and the feminist theology is the emphasis on identification of the possessor of power (as a person and institutional authority) rather than the dynamic exercise of power in a relational interaction.

63 Ballard, *Practical Theology in Action*, 89

64 Eisenberg, “Empathy-Related Emotional Responses, Altruism, and Their Socialization,” 135

65 Taylor, *Philosophy and Social Sciences*, 117

The position of knowledge, *phronesis*, in combination with a power analytic approach, may help the researcher to gain self-awareness, in situations where an empathic approach reveals the subjectivity and power position of the researcher in presenting the results of the research. “Understanding is inseparable from criticism, but this in turn is inseparable from self-criticism,” is how Taylor expresses this.<sup>66</sup>

### Who gains and who loses, and through what kind of power relations?

A methodology that emphasizes a power analytic approach (in the manner of Foucault) challenges us because it shows that the power exercise is interwoven with both our own and others’ research and production of knowledge. The power of definition has always been linked to the domain of the mighty, and changes in structures on the micro and macro levels cannot be isolated from the exercise of power and changes in dominance. This challenges the common understanding of research as independent and free – as if it were ever free. A methodology that focuses explicitly on this primarily challenges the forces seeking to obscure the importance and role of the power issue.

Diaconal science focuses on the living conditions of the weak part, the marginalized, the oppressed, and the assaulted. Research taking the power issue seriously will necessarily challenge power mechanisms that oppress and assault. This may create noise and conflict. It would also challenge stereotypical identifications of the weak and the strong as permanent conditions. A continuous analysis of the power dynamics, focusing more on the exercise and less on the exerciser is far more constructive, but also much more inflammatory.

Diaconal work and research will always be a disturbing element in the Church, but they are also connected to the Church’s relationship with society at large. This is linked to the understanding of *Diakonia* as “successor practice” – practicing discipleship of Jesus Christ.<sup>67</sup> The loser will be research and churches based on harmonizing ideals, where the contradictions and conflicts are to be muted. A methodology anchored in *phronesis* makes it possible to conduct research based on pragmatic and context-dependent premises. However, the phronetic approach is not only contextual. It is also founded on a choice of values that guide attitudes and behavior in context. “Successor practice” presupposes an elaboration of the relationship with the Church’s universal and general quests and content at the macro level and related to the research project.

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66 Ibid., 131

67 Raun Iversen, *Praktisk teologi*, 161

## Is this desirable?

Norms (on a macro level) must be anchored in the normativity of Diakonia as such. Diakonia in this article is understood as “the Gospel in action” and described as “successor practice.”<sup>68</sup> “The desirable” must be measured by theological reflections about the action aspect of the Gospel, illuminated by the discipleship of Jesus Christ: “whether this practice can be understood as participating in God’s acts in and for the world.”<sup>69</sup> The question applied in research (on the micro level) must have the same starting point, but has to be contextualized, and especially clarified in dialogue with those who represent the perspective chosen for that project. However, it is also necessary to establish a critical and reflexive attitude to the ways in which the position of power of a researcher may influence his/her interpretation, and how his/her part in power dynamics may affect the positions of power in the interaction. This makes questions of what is desirable personal for the researcher.

## What should be done?

PSS challenges a traditional scientific perspective; that science is anchored in *epistémé* as the source of understanding of knowledge. The empirical turn in theological research challenges the traditional understanding of theological research as such. At least it creates tension, but I believe in fruitful dialogue in the scientific and methodological fields, of which diaconal research is a part.

Focusing on perspectives of power is not intended to make a loser a winner, but to empower people of the weak part so their perspective is given legitimacy. This is a basis for a dialogue on interactions at both the relational and institutional levels connected to actions, structures, and systems. Foucault states that the reason for his power analytic perspective is because confronting every kind of assault is a movement to freedom. Therefore, empowering the assaulted provides a measure of the kind of practice that is expedient. On the other hand, the practice must maintain the value and dignity of every actor – created in the image of God – whether the person is identified as the assaulter or the assaulted. The movement to freedom is a movement to dignity for every kind of person; a human being living a life with a self-image influenced more and more by the image of the loving God.

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68 The first quote is from Church of Norway National Council, *Church of Norway Plan for Diakonia*, 5. The other quote is from Raun Iversen, *Praktisk teologi*, 61

69 Hegstad, “Normativity and empirical data in practical theology,” 82

## Summary and Conclusions

Application of PSS in empirical diaconal research would be the best basis for evaluation of the appropriateness of the methodology in this kind of research. As a basis for such a trial, there must be clarification of the ways in which the questions in the PSS methodology may apply in a diaconal research project to increase the transparency of its normativity. These questions are examined below as a contribution to this approach:

1. *Where are we going?* The “we” in the question must include a researcher position close to the individuals or groups understood to be the weak part in the context of the survey, to lend validity to this perspective. This presupposes a continuous analysis of who represents the weak part, based on a dynamic and relational movement of power understanding.
2. *Who gains and who loses, and through what kind of power relations?* The understanding of power presupposes that the dynamics in the power positions must remain a part of the analysis. The diaconal scientific perspective must give the voice of the weak part authority and validity. Moreover, the dynamic and relational understanding of Foucault’s understanding of power challenges us to reflect continuously on who is the weaker and who is the stronger part in the context.
3. *Is this desirable?* “The desirable” must be measured according to theological reflections on the active aspect of the Gospel, illuminated by what it is to be a successor of Jesus Christ. In a research project, this must be contextualized and clarified in dialogue with representatives who take the perspective chosen for the survey, and justified in a theological reflection about what it is to be human and what it is to be a church. The researcher’s position of power and the power dynamics in the relational interaction have to be considered in the evaluation of answers to the question regarding what is desirable.
4. *What should be done?* Empowering the weak part in this context must be given legitimacy and form the basis for dialogue about what is good, right, and wise. This discussion is relevant in interactions at the relational and institutional levels, and to the evaluation of actions, structures, and systems in the survey. The question about improved practice must be based on the survey, but the answer needs to be linked to a view that maintains the dignity and eternal value of every actor in the interaction.

Empirical diaconal research is based on a contextualized and situational evaluation of living conditions. The survey will include all people and structures that are relevant to the research questions. However, emphasizing the relational power dimension when discussing the living conditions of the weak part presupposes a perspective that is consistent with this. A phronetic approach

means having the necessary distance to be aware of the complexity of the situation without losing sight of the need to give the voiceless a voice.

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