Why should we pay attention to power within research co-production approaches?

NHMRC Symposium on Research Translation

Sydney, Australia

November 28, 2018

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Why should we pay attention to power within research co-production approaches?

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Co-Producing Health Research: Saying What We Mean, Meaning What We Say, And Learning As We Go

-- Dr. Bev Holmes, CEO, Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research

"Committing to co-creation – and all it implies with regard to shared decision-making – means acknowledging that co-production is challenging: it requires role clarity, attention to power imbalances, difficult discussions about research rigour versus research relevance, and constant monitoring.[*] It also means putting in place the mechanisms to support it."

In their work on public involvement, Antoine Boivin and colleagues[*] note there is such widespread support for the rhetoric that we may dismiss (I would add not even acknowledge) the tensions that arise when professionals and lay people work together. I think co-production in health research is similar, and suggest we need to work harder to say what we mean, mean what we say, and learn as we go.

Boivin A, Lehoux P, Burgers J, Grol R. What are the key ingredients for effective public involvement in health care improvement and policy decisions? A randomized trial process evaluation. Milbank Q. 2014; 92(2): 319–350.
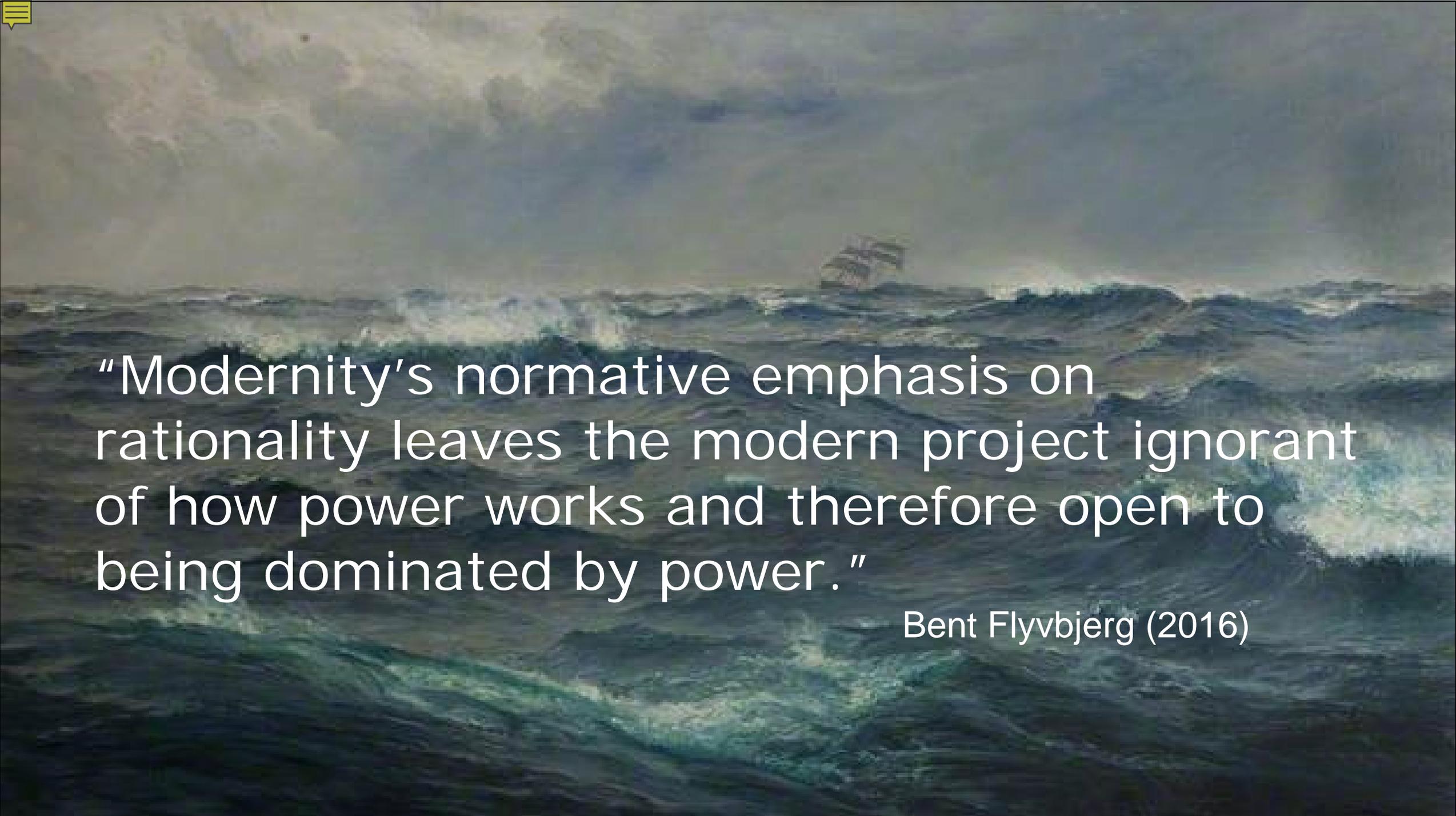
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"Modernity's normative emphasis on rationality leaves the modern project ignorant of how power works and therefore open to being dominated by power."

Bent Flyvbjerg (2016)

What is IKT?

"Integrated knowledge translation is a model of collaborative research, where researchers work with knowledge users who identify a problem and have the authority to implement the research recommendations." (Kothari, McCutcheon and Graham, IJHPM, 2017)

Why IKT?

- Relevance (solutions-focused research)
- Higher probability of impact

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Different forms of co-production have different points of emphasis

PAR
Partners: Equitable roles, become experts, act as knowledge brokers

Co-production
Citizens: Active involvement as change agents; differing capabilities and interests, which sometimes may require finding synergies or trade-offs among them
Factors that influence involvement: willingness to participate (intrinsic values), sense of ownership and perceived ability, social capital.

Modes of knowledge production
End-users: Active role in producing socially robust knowledge; focus on return on investment, increasing accountability, closing the society-science gap

Engaged scholarship
Stakeholders: Engaged in deliberation in the creation of new knowledge to solve complex real-world issues

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Knowledge users: Equal decision-making authority; engaged when knowledge users deem appropriate but at least study conception and application of outcomes; do not necessarily become researchers but will use generated knowledge

Some aspects of research co-production

- joint refinement of the research questions and design; questions reflect practice/policy needs
- joint data interpretation
- knowledge user involvement in data collection, where possible
- sharing expertise (not trying to turn knowledge users into researchers)
- sharing of perspectives about the problem and the context, leading to a shared understanding of possible solutions
- jointly developed dissemination and implementation plan
- joint authorship of knowledge products resulting from the research
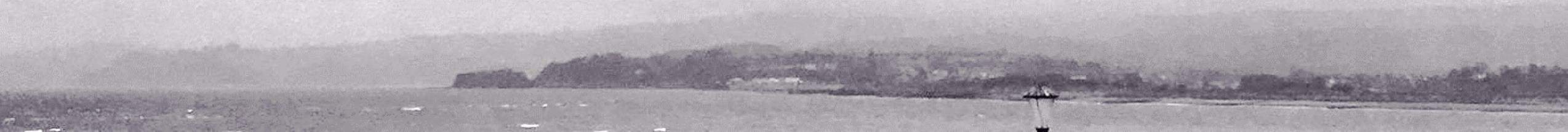
Engagement vs partnership

Adapted from Patterson Kirk Wallace
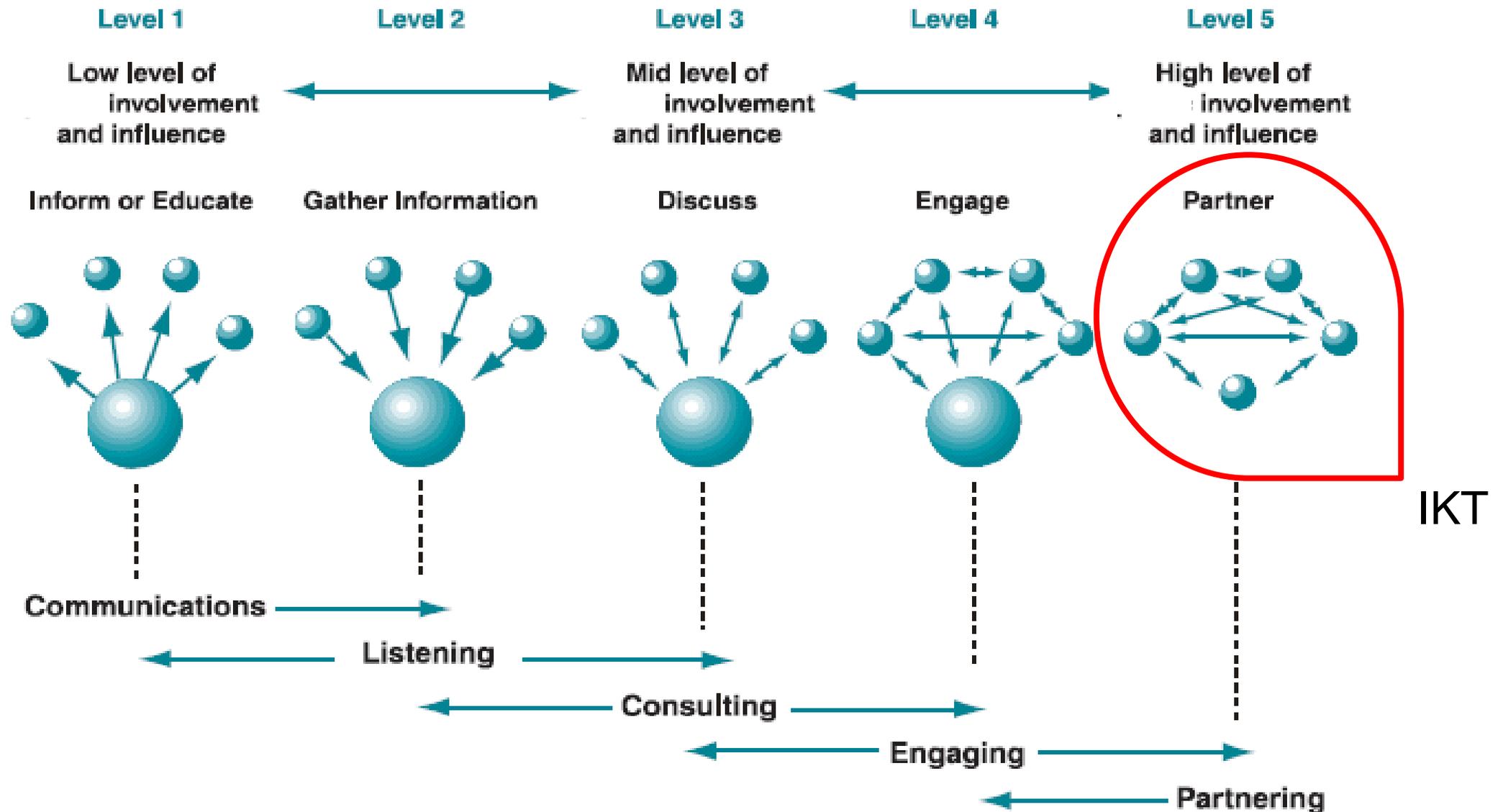
Why Power?

- True partnership implies a redistribution of power

- How power is distributed through a project is likely to affect its relevance, results and impact.

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What is power?

Max Weber's definition of power:

"The probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his will despite resistance" (Weber 1922)

Power = the ability to influence decisions (Boivin et al. 2014)

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Lukes' Three Dimensions of Power

1. **Decision-making**
   - Conflicting interests in open competition
   - "Episodic" (Clegg 1989)

2. **Non-Decision-making**
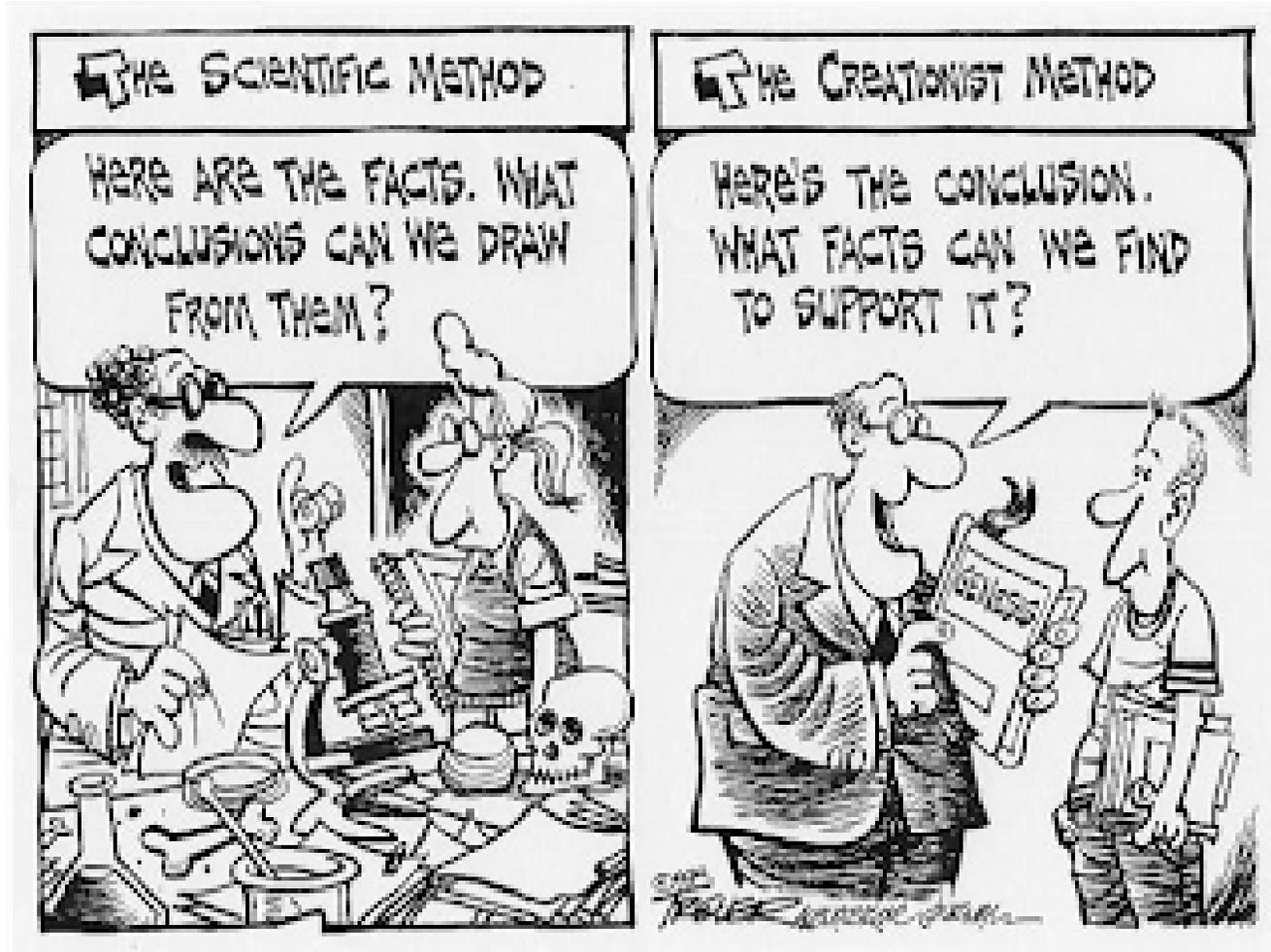   - Agenda-setting
   - "Manipulative" (Clegg 1989)

3. **Ideological**
   - Thoughts and preferences shaped to act against one's own interests
   - "Hegemonic" (Clegg 1989)

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- Power is pervasive (nothing is neutral and there is no outside to power)
- Power is structural and discursive
- Power can be exercised intentionally and unconsciously
- Power is repressive and productive
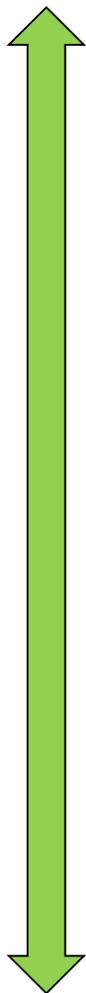- The analysis of power leads to strategies that can change power relations

Michel Foucault

Rationality vs rationalization

"Rationalization presented as rationality is a principal strategy in the exercise of power."
(Flyvbjerg, 2016)

Lukes' Three Dimensions of Power

Intentionality/
visibility

1. **Decision-making**
   - Conflicting interests in open competition
   - "Episodic" (Clegg 1989)

2. **Non-Decision-making**
   - Agenda-setting
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1. Decision-making power

- Who has authority over the project and control of resources?

- How do the interests of the researchers (e.g., professional incentives) conflict with those of the knowledge users?

- Are there governance structures and procedures in place that are known to all participants and transparently reported?

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2. Non-decision-making power

- Which participants and what ideas have been excluded?

- Who sets the agenda for the project and how does this bias decision-making?

- At what decision-making points are all participants involved and with what frequency?

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3. Ideological power

- How are power relations (e.g., gender, race, intersectionality, professional hierarchies) reproduced in the project and what steps are taken to manage their effects?

- Researchers have more familiarity with the concepts, procedures and culture of research than knowledge users. How does this affect the behavior and interactions of the project participants?

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Are there strategies available to manage power in co-production research?

Adapted from Rolfe, Ramsden, Banner-Lukaris and Graham. 2018. "Patient engagement and integrated knowledge translation research: What can be learned from qualitative health research methods?"

Rigour

How do we know that the interpretation of knowledge users' interests and perspectives has been done well?

Representation

Are the right people involved?

Reflexivity

Is collaboration being done ethically and equitably (and with attention to power)? (Continually and explicitly consider how decisions about study were made).

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Ways to improve engagement and collaboration

Member checking
Summarizing what was understood and verifying the content with partners

Dense description
Transparent and detailed reporting on the engagement/collaboration

Improving accessibility
Allocate resources to facilitate active participation (transportation; child care; remuneration for time off work)

Varying engagement strategies
Different strategies may be more effective depending on the knowledge user and the research process stage

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Involvement processes can balance power

"Specific components of involvement interventions foster public members legitimacy, credibility, and power to influence health care improvement and policy decisions." (Boivin et al. 2014)

Moderation
Moderators focused on process techniques (ground rules; clarifying technical terms; actively seeking views of less vocal participants; emphasizing compromise and deliberation; altering seating plans).

Information support

Provide relevant evidence; translate technical language; consider dedicating time to training

Informal social interaction

Informal interactions promote mutual understanding

Strength in numbers

Power effects can be altered when ratio of researchers to knowledge users is changed