

## **The Politics of Evidence-Based Decision Making**

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### **Abstract**

This chapter argues that evidence-based management is an inherently political project, which risks creating an illusion of rationality, a multilayered façade masking underlying fundamental differences of interpretation, purpose, and power among the various stakeholders situated on both sides of the academic-practitioner/policy divide. To avoid this unfortunate scenario, it needs to accommodate on a more systematic basis the important influence of power and politics in organizational life, rather than downplaying them as it currently does, treating political problems as a minor by-product of an otherwise radical improvement to organizational decision processes. Only then will its advancement accelerate the development of work organizations that are more humane, and more productive, to the benefit of all stakeholders of the modern enterprise.

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                  **Power**  
                  **Political use of evidence**  
                  **Stakeholders**  
                  **Competition for resources**

## **The Politics of Evidence-Based Decision Making**

On Thursday October 29, 2009, Professor David Nutt, of Imperial College London, the then UK government's chief advisor on illicit drugs policy, published a briefing paper entitled 'Estimating drug harms: A risky business?' In the paper, a transcript of 'the Eve Saville Lecture', a talk he had delivered some three and a half months earlier at Kings College London, he reported evidence indicating that tobacco and alcohol were more harmful than a number of illegal drugs, not least LSD, ecstasy, and cannabis. Drawing upon his extensive experience as chair of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD), he argued that the classification of recreational psychoactive substances had become a highly politicised process:

“One thing's for sure: at present, experts and politicians don't agree, which is why I think the public debate needs to begin. Who do the public trust more – the experts or the politicians? When we look at the discussion that we had about ecstasy (where the ACMD recommended class B... and the government maintained it as A), I think there's very little doubt that we, the scientists, won the intellectual argument, but we obviously didn't win the decision in terms of classification. Any agreement will be difficult if we're not talking in the same language about the same relative measures of harm; this is what I am trying to address in this talk.” (Nutt, 2009, p. 11)

A press release announcing the publication of the briefing paper stated:

“Professor Nutt argues strongly in favour of an evidence-based approach to drugs classification policy and criticises the precautionary principle', used by the former Home Secretary Jackie Smith to justify her decision to reclassify cannabis from a class C to a class B drug. By erring on the side of caution, Professor Nutt argues, politicians 'distort' and 'devalue' research evidence. 'This leads us to a position where people really don't know what the evidence is', he writes.”

[<http://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/estimatingdrugharmsp.html>] (Accessed 20.10, October 1, 2010)

The next day, newspapers and websites across the world were reporting the fact that Professor Nutt had been sacked by the home secretary. In an interview reported on the Sky News website, Nutt stated: “I think ‘asked to resign’ is a euphemism for being sacked...” Declaring it a “bad day for science”, he explained that: “Politics is politics and science is science and there's a bit of tension between them sometimes.” [<http://news.sky.com/skynews/Home/UK-News/David-Nutt-Governments-Chief-Drug-Adviser-Is-Sacked-Over-Claims-About-Ecstasy-And-LSD/Article/200910415426304>] (Accessed at 20.30 on 1 October, 2010)

At the time of writing this chapter, no less than six further members of the ACMD have resigned in the wake of Nutt's sacking, amid further revelations of political pressure being brought to bear on its work. The seventh advisor to quit, Eric Carlin, resigned in protest over the banning of the party drug mephedrone, classified by the government as a class B substance, in the run up to the 2010 general election. See, for example:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/7547605/Eric-Carlin-becomes-seventh-government-drugs-advisor-to-quit.html> (Published: 3:18PM BST 02 Apr 2010);

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/apr/04/eric-carlin-mephedrone-classification> (This article appeared on page 31 of the main section of the Observer on Sunday, April 4, 2010. It was published on guardian.co.uk at 00.07 BST on Sunday 4 April.)

The above case renders abundantly clear why a chapter on the politics of evidence-based decision making is required in a handbook of evidence-based management. It illustrates the fact that evidence-based approaches to decision making are no less political than other forms of collective decision making (cf. Pettigrew, 1973, 1985; Pfeffer, 1981). All decisions of a sufficient magnitude to warrant the apparatus of an evidence-based approach are ultimately the product of a negotiated order (Walsh & Fahay, 1986), in which the conflicting agendas of multiple stakeholders must somehow be reconciled (Johnson, 1987; Mintzberg, 1983; Pettigrew, 1973, 1985; Pfeffer, 1981). By way of illustration, consider the following scenarios:

- A large general hospital serving a densely populated city is seeking to reduce significant levels of staff turnover within its highly successful neurosurgery unit. Government-funded, the highly specialized surgeons, anaesthetists and nursing staff of this unit are being frequently lured into more lucrative positions at a neighbouring private sector hospital. In an attempt to stem the exodus of some of its most talented staff, the hospital's Director of Human Resources is contemplating the introduction of a flexible and highly attractive rewards package, effectively signalling a move away from transactional psychological contracts to relational psychological contracts (Rousseau, 1990, 1995), in the hope that the new deals will engender a sense of loyalty and commitment within this particular unit. In a climate of growing financial stringency, several members of the hospital's board of directors, including the Chief Executive, are sceptical that the additional costs this will entail are warranted and there are also concerns that the policy will create a sense of inequity among the wider workforce and given the hospital's current finances there is no prospect that the scheme could be extended to other departments.
- A local US manufacturer of automotive vehicle components is contemplating how best to increase the scale of its operations in order to meet the growing demand for its products. One option it is considering is to outsource some of its contracts to an overseas

company located in the Far East. Alternatively, it could embark on an aggressive recruitment campaign within the domestic labour market. However, domestic labour costs are considerably higher and there is an acute skills shortage, such that it will have to invest in additional training and development should it chose to embark on the latter course of action. Understandably, community leaders and employees are anxious that the company in question should opt to expand its domestic workforce, notwithstanding the additional economic burden that this option would entail.

- In an attempt to raise the productivity of its staff, a major research-intensive university has recently revamped its performance management process, abandoning the predominantly developmental ethos of the previous scheme in favour of a new system, in which staff must meet demanding but achievable targets. At a recent staff meeting, the Vice-Chancellor justified the launch of the new scheme on the basis of goal setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990), citing the extensive high quality empirical evidence supporting this particular theory (Latham & Pinder, 2005) as a valid foundation for driving the enterprise forward, amid growing competition to maintain the University's position in global performance league tables.

In each of the above cases, from the initial framing of the problem to be addressed, to the gathering of the evidence to inform the decision, to its

evaluation, interpretation, and implementation, all aspects of the decision process are inherently political in nature, as is the closely related fundamental question of who is to be involved in each aspect of the process and with what effect.

Evidence-based decision making is thus no less political in the context of small-medium enterprises than in the context of much larger organizations and wider policy making circles, the only substantive differences being the scale of the problems addressed and the range and number of stakeholders affected by the decisions at hand (cf. Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010; Mintzberg, 1983; Pettigrew, 1973, 1985; Pfeffer, 1981; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). The failure to recognize these fundamental truths risks creating an illusion of rationality, a multilayered façade that masks underlying differences of interpretation, purpose, and power among the various stakeholders involved in and affected by the decisions in question (Abrahamson & Baumard, 2008; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Accordingly, this chapter offers a unified treatment of the political dimensions of evidence-based management at the levels of policy and practice. It first sketches the political background to the rise of evidence-based management and then identifies a range of issues that need to be addressed in order to ensure that its advancement accelerates the development of work organizations that are both humane and more productive to the benefit of all stakeholders of the modern enterprise.

The chapter is organized in four main sections. Following this introduction, the second section briefly identifies the political backdrop to the rise of evidence-based management as an approach to organizational decision making

that seeks to incorporate the insights of scholarly research alongside other forms of evidence. The third section identifies a range of stakeholders who in all likelihood will hold fundamentally different views in relation to the sorts of questions typically addressed by evidence-based management practitioners and policy makers. The final section summarizes the principal arguments and conclusions.

## **The Rise of Evidence-Based Management: Politics in the Making**

### **Historical Background**

As argued by Hodgkinson and Herriot (2002) a number of the strategic imperatives confronting the applied social sciences, including the management and organizational sciences (MOS), are driving researchers and the users of research away from what might be loosely termed ‘the scientific inquiry approach’ and toward ‘the problem-solving approach’ to knowledge production (see also Hodgkinson, Herriot & Anderson, 2001; Starkey & Madan, 2001; Tranfield & Starkey, 1998). As illustrated in Figure 1, the scientific inquiry approach implies a simple and linear model of knowledge production and application. Common criticisms of this generic approach to knowledge production include the fact that the problems addressed are derived from only a very limited set of stakeholders, dissemination is delayed, and is addressed, for the most part, to this same set of stakeholders, the process of translation from dissemination to practice is not specified, and practice has little or no effect upon issues addressed in subsequent work. In marked contrast, the problem solving approach to knowledge production, represented schematically in Figure 2,

constitutes a more socially distributed form of knowledge production, in which IVknowledge is generated in the context of application by multi-stakeholder teams, drawn from a range of backgrounds that transcend traditional discipline boundaries, and results in immediate or short time-to-market dissemination or exploitation.

----- Insert Figures 1 and 2 about here -----

Hodgkinson and Herriot (2002) maintain that four major environmental pressures are driving the changing landscape of knowledge production and concomitant shift in emphasis away from scientific inquiry toward problem solving, namely:

1. The changing nature of demand; stakeholders are seeking solutions to problems which increasingly threaten the very survival of their organizations.
2. Increasingly, the problems confronting organizational stakeholders are new problems, characterized by high levels of ambiguity, such that they defy clear and straightforward definition.
3. Research skills are becoming far more distributed; as firms, charities, and public service organizations increasingly procure the services of highly trained individuals who would previously have only considered traditional university careers, employers are increasingly directing and controlling resources and research activities so as to address their own or their clients 'real' problems.

4. The rise in the Internet and related technologies is such that knowledge which previously might only have been available in highly technical journal articles is becoming increasingly accessible to non-academics.

Responding to these pressures, over the past decade growing numbers of business school academics have begun to advance creative solutions born out of a common underlying belief that research can often meet the twin imperatives of scholarly rigor and social usefulness, thereby combining the best of both worlds. This philosophy is gaining momentum among behavioral and social scientists allied to MOS (e.g. Anderson, Herriot & Hodgkinson, 2001; Dunbar & Starbuck 2006; Hodgkinson & Healey, 2008a; Hodgkinson & Starbuck, 2008; Huff, 2000; Pettigrew, 1997, 2001; Romme & Endenburg, 2006; Starbuck 2006; Van de Ven 2007; Van de Ven & Johnson 2006), although debate continues (see, e.g., Grey 2001; McKelvey 2006; Kieser & Leiner, 2009, 2011).

Viewed in this historical context, the rise of evidence-based management is one of a series of important developments over the past decade in MOS that have sought to enhance the robustness of interventions through collaborative working between practitioners, policy makers, and professionally trained academic researchers. Although these developments in general have generated a number of well-documented 'success stories' (for recent overviews see Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009; Van de Ven, 2007), the above strategic imperatives confronting MOS demand a significant step-change, in order to ensure that the key elements of the scientific inquiry approach continue to meet the needs of reflective practitioners and policymakers (see also Ryan & Ford,

2010). As the marketplace for ideas continues to expand, it is vital the highest quality social scientific evidence available is disseminated as rapidly as possible, in a form that policy makers and practitioners can comprehend. Evidence-based management has emerged precisely because its emphasis on systematic reviews of the best available evidence as its cornerstone (Briner & Rousseau, 2011a; Briner, Denyer & Rousseau, 2009; Rousseau, Manning & Denyer, 2008) meets this rapid and accessible dissemination imperative. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that to a much greater extent than in the case of the earlier attempts to bridge the academic-practitioner/policy divide, evidence-based management is an inherently political project, with potentially far reaching consequences for research, pedagogy, policy making and practice, at a time when the funding for university-based research across the globe is coming under increasingly critical scrutiny by governments and other key stake holders. It is essential, therefore, that the political back ground to its development is rendered explicit, lest the advocates and practitioners of evidence-based management should unwittingly create a façade of rationality of the sort alluded to above.

### **Legitimizing Evidence-Based Management**

As in the cases of evidence-based medicine (Sackett et al., 1996) and evidence-based policy making (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010), the advocates of evidence-based management (e.g. Briner, Denyer & Rousseau, 2009; Briner & Rousseau, 2011a; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006; Rousseau, 2006) are seeking to establish its legitimacy in the eyes of a diverse and divergent range of

stakeholders drawn from the policymaking, practitioner and academic communities. As observed by Morrell (2008, p. 616):

“It would be misleading and overly simplistic to claim that all those pursuing ‘evidence based’ approaches were of one mind. Indeed, they are not even of one label: some eschew the label evidence based and prefer sanitized variants such as ‘evidence informed’ or ‘evidence aware’ for presentational or rhetorical purposes. However... the claims underpinning evidence based approaches can be understood as a shared narrative about the relationship of management research to management practice... As well as consensus over the content of this narrative, it is important to consider the ways in which it is relayed or ‘told’. The power and influence of key actors and networks is such as to support and legitimize the narrative, and to contribute to its being retold in different settings. This is noteworthy because, over and above the inherent appeal of any theory, such contextual factors underpin the likelihood of a school becoming dominant...”

It is in this particular sense that evidence-based management constitutes a political project, which is being driven forward by:

“...a constellation of specialists, research institutes, funding bodies and political organizations with a common

world view, who are powerful because of their shared belief that a particular form of knowledge production is applicable to social problems...” (Morrell, 2008, p. 616).

In the UK context, for example, evidence-based management can be seen as part of a package of measures that might ultimately contribute to the ‘impact agenda’ of the current UK Government in its attempt to ensure a wider contribution from university-based research beyond traditional academic impacts per se. Through the work of its nine Research Councils, which administer the bulk of government-funded peer reviewed awards across all the major disciplines (along similar lines to the National Science Foundation in the US), and its forthcoming national evaluation of publically funded academic research, again spanning all disciplines, known as the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which has replaced the previous Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) as one of the primary funding mechanisms for university research, the UK Government is evolving a major requirement for all UK academic institutions to demonstrate such wider impact.

The move to evidence-based management is one several approaches that a number of academic management researchers are championing as a way to meet the demands of this requirement (see, e.g., Briner & Rousseau, 2011a; Briner, Denyer & Rousseau, 2009; Rousseau, Manning & Denyer, 2008). Other closely related approaches such as design science are also gaining momentum in certain quarters (see, e.g., Denyer, Tranfield & Van Aken, 2008; Hodgkinson & Healey, 2008a; Hodgkinson & Starkey, 2011; Starkey, Hatchuel & Tempest, 2009).

However, there have also been a number of challenges to the legitimacy of evidence-based management, design science and, indeed, the wider impact agenda in MOS, on both intellectual and ideological grounds (see, e.g., Cassell, 2011; Morrell, 2008; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011; Weick, 2001). Some of these objections are based on clear misconceptions (see, for example, the recent interchanges between Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009, and Kieser & Leiner, 2009, 2011), whereas others are based on legitimate ideological differences as to the nature and purposes of social scientific inquiry (cf. Bartlett, 2011; Baughman et al., 2011; Grey 2001; Learmonth, 2011; Learmonth & Harding, 2006; McKelvey 2006; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011; Weick, 2001).

One of the potentially damaging consequences of not reflecting more deeply and critically on the rapidly changing wider political context in which the rise of evidence-based management is occurring is that its ascendancy could potentially impact adversely on the required methodological and theoretical diversity of the MOS field. Were alternative approaches incompatible with the prevailing logics of evidence-based management and related conceptions to fall out of favor with government policy makers and others with the power to divert resources to the extent envisaged by some critical commentators (e.g. Cassell, 2011; Morrell, 2008), the longer-term consequences would ultimately prove immensely detrimental to the academic, policy making and practitioner communities alike. Such is the complexity and richness of the challenges confronting contemporary organizations that many problems falling within the purview of MOS cannot be addressed adequately by means of the logic of

scientific inquiry alone (cf. Kilduff, Mehra & Dunn, 2011; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011; Wensley, 2009).

As demonstrated by the current financial crises confronting the global economy, approaches antithetical to the evidence-based management agenda, on moral, philosophical, scientific, and even aesthetic grounds, each may have a role to play in contributing to the vibrancy and health of management research, policy and practice. It is essential, therefore, that key sections of the scholarly research community continue to question the central tenets of evidence-based management and champion alternatives based on a diverse range of ontological and epistemological positions. The failure to recognize and accommodate theoretical perspectives and research methods antithetical to evidence-based management as legitimate forms of management inquiry and render these issues explicitly discussable would constitute an unacceptable form of hegemony, a scenario that needs to be avoided at all costs (cf. Morrell, 2008).

### **The Political Challenge of Changing the B(I)ases of Organizational Decision Making**

The second sense in which evidence-based management is arguably a political project, which thus requires political analysis and political situational awareness, is in the sense that its practice demands a fundamental change to the ways in which work organizations (and work-related policy makers) make decisions. As recently observed by Briner and Rousseau (2011a, 2011b), although evidence-based management has been defined in a variety of ways the majority of definitions build on evidence-based notions advanced in medicine and elsewhere.

Reflecting this trend, Briner et al. (2009, p. 19) offer a succinct definition of evidence-based management, paraphrasing Sackett et al's (1996) definition of evidence-based medicine, which is convenient for present analytical purposes:

Evidence-based management is about making decisions through the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of four sources of information: practitioner expertise and judgment, evidence from the local context, a critical evaluation of the best available research evidence, and the perspectives of those people who might be affected by the decision.

It is clear from this definition that evidence-based management seeks to combine key elements of the aforementioned scientific-inquiry and problem-solving approaches to knowledge production, in an attempt to derive workable solutions to the problem or problems at hand. In so doing, its explicit intent is to empower decision makers to weigh and combine the various information sources in accordance with their own critical judgment:

In some circumstances, the opinions of stakeholders or ethical considerations may be judged by the decision makers to be much more important than the external research evidence and thus be given much greater emphasis in the decision. In other circumstances, there may be little internal evidence available and thus its influence on the decision would be relatively minor. In all

cases, though, the choice to place more or less emphasis on various elements should be made in a mindful, conscious fashion. (Briner et al., 2009, p. 21)

The requirement to blend an explicit basis the insights of state-of-the-art evidence distilled through a formal evaluation of the pertinent social science literature with other forms of knowledge and knowing changes fundamentally the rationale upon which powerful, politically motivated stakeholders with potentially conflicting agendas and ideologies must negotiate and bargain with one another:

The conscientious use of the four sources of information means that an [evidence-based] approach involves paying careful and sustained attention to sources of what can be potentially different, conflicting, and sometimes difficult-to-interpret information. Being explicit means using information from each source in a clear, conscious, and methodical way such that the roles played by all the information in the final decision are understood. And being judicious involves using reflective judgment to evaluate the validity and relevance of the information from each source. Evidence and information is critically evaluated in relation to the practice context and problem.

(Briner and Rousseau, 2011a, p. 7)

As I have observed elsewhere (Hodgkinson, 2011), in seeking to manage uncertainty, senior managers and other influential organizational stakeholders do

not typically rely upon scientific research; rather, they adopt industry recipes, shared mental models of ‘what works and what doesn’t,’ acquired through participation in inter-organizational social networks (Spender, 1989). Over time, the insights and practices acquired in this fashion, suitably adapted to meet the particular contingencies confronting the individual enterprise, much as a chef adapts a given recipe to the ingredients at hand, become institutionalized and legitimated through the cultural norms and formal requirements of professional bodies and regulatory agencies, in turn stifling further innovation (Abrahamson & Fombrun, 1994). Furthermore, there is also evidence showing that hard-pressed decision makers, particularly senior executives and professionals, base important decisions on expertise manifest as intuitions (see, e.g. Burke & Miller, 1999). Recent advances across a number of basic and applied branches of psychology and MOS lend credence under certain conditions to the validity of intuition and other non-conscious cognitive-affective processes (for overviews see Dane & Pratt, 2007, 2009; Hodgkinson & Healey, 2008b, 2011; Hodgkinson, Langan-Fox & Sadler-Smith, 2008; Hodgkinson et al., 2009; Salas, Rosen & DiazGrandos, 2010).

In short, politically motivated and powerful actors do not typically rely upon formal sources of evidence and ways of knowing as the prime basis of organizational decision making (see also Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). Rather, they are inclined to fall back on ‘practitioner expertise and judgment’, just one of the four sources identified by Briner and Rousseau (2011a, 2011b). Despite warnings supported by clear evidence that intuition can only be of positive benefit

in situations where it is possible to identify appropriate cues for its successful deployment on a reliable basis and when there is an underlying body of requisite expertise (Kahneman & Klein, 2009, 2010), as borne out in the fields of evidence-based medicine and evidence-based policy making (e.g. Hunter, 2003) it is unlikely that managers and other key organizational stakeholders will embrace readily new practices that externalize these tacit and informal sources of knowledge and knowing, so as to render them explicit and thus open to the scrutiny of potential rivals, for to do so would require them to relinquish major sources of power upon which they typically rely to drive forward their own agendas (cf. Johnson, 1987; Pettigrew, 1973; Pfeffer, 1981). Furthermore, as observed by Bartlett (2011), in situations where evidence derived on the basis of systematic reviews challenges the legitimacy of the extant practices of those who wield power within organizations, it is highly likely that the evidence in question will be ignored, rejected or misinterpreted, an observation borne out by recent findings in social psychology showing that individuals tend to ignore and misinterpret scientific information that is inconsistent with their own viewpoints (Munro, 2010). The validity of these observations can be illustrated conveniently by means of the well-documented case of personnel selection and assessment.

A copious amount of high quality scientific evidence has been accumulated across the globe demonstrating the psychometric superiority of cognitive ability tests, structured interviews and work sample tests vis-à-vis a range of less satisfactory alternatives in terms of reliability, validity and utility. Despite numerous meta-analyses confirming the generalizability of this

conclusion (e.g. Hunter & Hunter, 1984; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998), survey after survey has found that organizations typically reject these more effective practices in favor of psychometrically weaker ones, especially traditional interviews and letters of reference, a finding that generalizes across a wide range of different types of organizations, applicant groups and countries (see, e.g., Bartram et al., 1995; Hodgkinson & Payne, 1998; Robertson & Makin, 1986; Shakleton & Newell, 1994; Zibaras & Woods, 2010). An obvious explanation for this paradoxical state of affairs, whereby psychometrically robust assessment techniques are rejected in favor of a ‘stubborn reliance intuition and subjectivity’ (Highhouse, 2008), is that they ultimately reduce the latitude of otherwise powerful decision makers to appoint individuals who will fit in with their own agendas, for in the final analysis personnel selection and assessment is fundamentally a socio-political process, not a psychometric one (Cleveland & Murphy, 1992; Herriot, 1989).

In sum, the extent to which and in what ways organizational decision makers are able and willing to blend the four sources of evidence identified by Briner et al. (2009) is itself the outcome of a fundamental political decision, which both reflects the prevailing ideologies of key stakeholders and bestows a form of rationality on the proceedings. Just as the various contributors to this handbook and its readers will differ in their views as to what extent and in what ways formal social scientific knowledge can and should predominate over expert judgment and contextual awareness in any given situation so, too, will the various stakeholders seeking to implement evidence-based approaches to management

and organizational decision making in particular contexts of application, reflecting important differences in their goals and underlying sources of power.

Acknowledging the fact that power and politics are indeed fundamental to decision making in organizations, Briner and Rousseau (2011a, 2011b), view the politics of evidence as a potentially significant barrier to the adoption of evidence-based practice:

Power and politics are fundamental to decision making and also surround the identification and use of evidence in organizations. Senior leaders may feel they have the right or even responsibility to make decisions based on their experience and judgment that seem to fly in the face of the available evidence. The need to be explicit in evidence-based decision making means that those with vested interests in a particular course of action may find it more difficult to hide such interests. In general, an evidence-based approach may prove challenging particularly in organizations with highly political cultures. Although it is impossible to remove politics from evidence and decision making, evidence-based approaches do at least offer the possibility of making clearer distinctions among politics, values, interests, and other forms of information such as research evidence. The more decision makers are held accountable for their decisions, the more likely they are to

welcome such distinctions. (Briner & Rousseau, 2011a, p. 19).

However, it is highly unlikely that organizational decision makers are going to willingly embrace practices that render their differing vested interests explicit. Accountability is a sure fire recipe for escalating the commitment of politically motivated actors to extant, failing courses of action (cf. Schwenk, 1989; Staw, 1981, 1997). Hence, forcing decision makers to differentiate ‘politics, values, interests, and other forms of information such as research evidence’ is not going to automatically yield less political outcomes; nor is it indeed clear that decision makers will uniformly ‘welcome such distinctions.’ Further, as argued by Bartlett (2011), the admission that: ‘an evidence-based approach may prove challenging particularly in organizations with highly political cultures,’ is tantamount to an admission that it is only likely to succeed in a small number of highly circumscribed settings and contexts of application, because the cultures of virtually all work organizations are political, a fact recognized long ago by researchers of organizational power and politics (e.g. Johnson, 1987; Mintzberg, 1983; Pettigrew, 1973, 1985; Pfeffer, 1981; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978).

### **The Politics of Evidence Construction**

More fundamentally what Briner and Rousseau’s (2011a, 2011b) analysis downplays, is that “...the nature of evidence, and importantly, the way it is constructed, is politics, values, and interest laden... Definitions of quality inevitably privilege certain sources and interests, as do definitions of evidence” (Cassell, 2011, p. 23). As demonstrated some 50 years ago by Baritz (1960), the

idea that social science can be applied in the workplace in an apolitical and interest-free fashion is a fundamentally untenable proposition. The failure to recognize and accommodate alternative ontological and epistemological positions and perspectives regarding what constitutes evidence as a basis for informing organizational decisions and explicitly render this issue discussable when enacting evidence-based management would thus constitute a second form of unacceptable political hegemony.

However, even when an agreed philosophy is in place, there is still nonetheless considerable political latitude in terms of how it is to be enacted. Taking the dominant systematic review approach as a working case in point to illustrate what is clearly a much bigger issue, the question of how the problem to be addressed is framed, what criteria are to be adopted for inclusion versus exclusion, and the threshold in respect of each inclusion-exclusion criterion are all political issues, in the sense that different stakeholders may well want to contest these micro-decisions, each of which will undoubtedly have a fundamental bearing on the answers eventually “revealed” in connection with the focal policy or practice. There is also the question of how the evidence will be interpreted and ultimately implemented once the findings of the systematic review become apparent.

Implicit within the dominant approach to evidence-based management outlined above is a model of human information processing predicated upon the late Herbert Simon’s notion of bounded rationality (e.g. Simon, 1955, 1956), which treats social scientific evidence pertaining to organizational decision

problems like any other feature of the decision environment. This model implies that the decision environment is in essence an objective entity, and that the reason subjective differences in perception occur is because the objective environment can only be partially comprehended, due to limited processing capacity ('bounded rationality'). Karl Weick's work, through the inter-related notions of 'enactment,' 'sensemaking' and the 'enacted environment' (Weick, 1969, 1979, 1995), challenges this limited view of the environment (which he terms 'the perceived environment'), arguing that theories stressing the notion that reality is selectively perceived over-emphasize the object → subject relationship, at the expense of the idea that often the subject exerts considerable influence on the object:

*"... Managers construct, rearrange, single out, and demolish many 'objective' features of their surroundings. When people act they un-randomise variables, insert vestiges of orderliness, and literally create their own constraints... There is a reciprocal influence between subjects and objects, not a one-sided influence such as implied by the idea that a stimulus triggers a response.*

(Weick, 1979, pp. 164-166)

The concept of enactment refers to the basic process by which organization members actively go about creating their environments, which in turn act back upon them, as if they were true, objective entities, thereby imposing constraints on what is considered possible, i.e. through enactment processes organizational decision makers socially construct key aspects of their material

worlds (Weick, 1969, 1979, 1995). Viewed from this social constructionist standpoint, all aspects of evidence-based decision making, from the earliest stages of problem definition, to the gathering and sifting of the evidence (i.e. all forms and sources), to its weighting in determining the final outcome, are each interpretive acts, which ultimately render the entire process just as political as any other collective decision process in which the key actors are seeking to enact alternative visions of the future.

In the words of Learmonth (2011), as quoted by Cassell (2011, p. 23): “evidence is never just there, waiting for the researcher to find. Rather it is always necessary to construct the evidence in some way -- a process that is inherently ideological and always contestable -- not merely a technical, ‘scientific’ task.” In seeking to formalize otherwise informal processes, it really does matter, therefore, that all parties to evidence-based decision making in the workplace, as in any other setting, enjoy situational awareness politically speaking, lest a facade of rationality should be created through a process in which divergent stakeholders are lulled into a false sense of consensus, founded on a false premise of rationality (i.e. pseudo-rationality). Just how the power dynamics pertaining to the social construction of evidence in work-related evidence-based decision making can play out at the levels of policy and practice in ways that exclude important forms and sources of evidence that potentially have a major bearing on the problem at hand can be conveniently illustrated by reference to how the UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) went about developing its best practice guidelines for the management of occupational stress (Cousins et al.,

2004; Mackay et al., 2004; Rick et al., 2002). In an area that is clearly fraught with political difficulties, the HSE through a series of consultation exercises with relevant scientific experts and a range of key stakeholder bodies chose to adopt a particular conception of stress akin to metal fatigue in the field of mechanical engineering. The result is a set of practices and standards that treat all employees on exactly the same basis, regardless of variations in hardiness, Type A Behavior Pattern and a host of other individual difference variables that have long been well documented in the primary scientific literature as significant moderators of the stressor-strain-stress chain of relationships (see, e.g., Cooper, Dewe & O'Driscoll, 2001; Ferguson, Daniels & Jones, 2006). Equally conspicuous by its absence is any notion that the experience of stress is mediated by cognitive-affective processes known to impact on the subjective experience of stress in the workplace and in life more generally (cf. Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001; Lazarus & Folkman 1984; Daniels, Harris & Briner, 2004).

As observed by Hodgkinson and Healey (2008b) the question as to whether a socio-cognitive or objectivist perspective constitutes the most appropriate underlying ontological and epistemological bases for exploring the stressor-strain-stress chain of relationships remains a hotly contested issue. Perrewe and Zellars (1999), for example, have argued for the incorporation of attribution processes in the modeling of work stress appraisal, whereas others (e.g. Frese & Zapf, 1999; Schaubroeck 1999) maintain that studying the effects of 'objective' environmental features is a more fruitful approach. The HSE's decision to settle on an objectivist conception of stress effectively rendered 'off

limits' a systematic consideration of individual differences and cognitive-affective processes in the scientific derivation of its policy framework. Had the systematic review that ultimately informed the resulting standards and guidelines for management practitioners (Rick et al., 2002) been predicated upon a notion of stress that required a consideration of cognitive-affective appraisal processes and individual differences that are known to potentially mediate and moderate the stressor-strain-stress chain of relationships, arguably, the end result would have been a more sophisticated and contingent set of guidelines and practices. Context-sensitive and thus arguably more effective as a basis for combating occupational stress across the board, unfortunately, it is clear that the resulting guidelines and practices would also have been potentially far more costly for employers to implement. The fact that the HSE's systematic review did not address a wider range of factors is a powerful display of how external stakeholders holding scarce financial resources can ultimately determine the overall framing and scientific direction of a given evidence-based project, controlling, for example, which bodies of evidence are deemed admissible and which are not (cf. Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). In the final analysis, the HSE, the organization which commissioned this particular evidence-based management project, is embedded within a wider network of powerful institutional players, which ultimately control the resources upon which it is dependent for its longer-term financial and political wellbeing. These resources could easily be scaled back or withdrawn altogether in the event that the HSE's scientific outputs were to ultimately cause political embarrassment to the Government of the day.

Fortunately, however, the fact that the basis upon which the evidence underpinning these guidelines and standards has been rendered explicit by means of systematic review means that those stakeholders who might want to contest the scientific adequacy of the project are able to do so.

### **Given the Political Realities: Where Do We Go From Here?**

Evidence-based management is an inherently political project, but one that is contestable on both sides of the academic-practitioner/policy divide. From an academic standpoint, its more extreme detractors (e.g. Cassell, 20011; Morrell, 2008) are concerned that its champions are seeking to privilege a particular form of inquiry (positivism) and attendant research methods (quantitative techniques) over others in what is essentially a “soft” (low consensus), applied, divergent and rural (as opposed hard, pure, convergent and urban) field of endeavour (Tranfield & Starkey, 1998). At a time when governments and other key resource providers are seeking to shift the funding-base of university academic research in favor of work that will lead to an array of significant impacts on the economy and wider society (going well beyond traditional citation counts and mentions in the mass media), the fear that the evidence-based management community could come to dominate the field is not an unreasonable concern. However, it is important to recognize that although the evidence-based management community is being championed by some highly influential, high profile scholars -- not least several past Presidents of the Academy of Management (including the editor of this volume) -- it does not enjoy a monopoly of ideas, nor indeed unfettered access to the corridors of power.

It is incumbent upon evidence-based management's critics to advance constructive alternatives and there are signs that this is happening (e.g., Hodgkinson & Starkey, 2011; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011; Wensley, 2009). Further, as observed frequently by those promoting evidence-based management (e.g. Briner & Rousseau, 2011a, 2011b; Rousseau et al., 2009), all forms of evidence, including evidence extracted from studies employing the full range of qualitative methods, are amenable to research synthesis by means of systematic review. The fact that systematic review renders explicit and, therefore, transparent the criteria adopted in a given research synthesis, means that the evidence-base is more easily contested in comparison with the conventional narrative reviews typically favored by evidence-based detractors. These essential points are commonly downplayed or misunderstood by opponents of the very idea of evidence-based management and research synthesis (see, e.g., Cassell, 2011). Finally, opponents all too frequently misconstrue the evidence-based management community as a movement that is committed to positivism (e.g. Cassell, 2011; Morrell, 2008), whereas, like contemporary design science (Hodgkinson & Healey, 2008a; Hodgkinson & Starkey, 2011) and engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007) its epistemological roots lie ultimately in Bhasker's (1988, 1989) philosophy of critical realism (Rousseau et al., 2008):

This perspective maintains that all research methods have limits. Rather than advocate one research approach over another (e.g., quantitative or qualitative, laboratory experiment or field study), critical realism makes such a

choice unnecessary... The multi-level and socially constructed character of organizations necessitates a critical realist epistemology, which accommodates immediate (i.e., proximal) causal mechanisms coexisting alongside mechanisms at other levels of analysis that operate more distally...scientific knowledge, although general, is also conditional... (Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009, p. 540)

The notion that a particular form of evidence-based management, one that favors a narrow range of quantitatively based sources of evidence, will ultimately dominate MOS as a scholarly field of endeavor is thus a most unlikely scenario. However, the problems I have identified above pertaining to the implementation of evidence-based management in practitioner and policy making circles, run far deeper, and thus pose a more difficult series of challenges and dilemmas for its advocates.

At this juncture, it is apparent that all of the key stages in evidence-based decision making are fundamentally political in nature, from the definition of the problem at hand, to the judgment calls regarding what will constitute the criteria for inclusion as admissible evidence in the systematic review, to the interpretation of that evidence and its weighting alongside the other forms of evidence gathered as part of the decision process. Arguably, however, the most significant way in which the implementation of evidence-based management constitutes a political project is in relation to the question of which stakeholder groups and which

particular stakeholders are to be involved in the decision making process and with what effect.

The question of who is in and who is out at each stage of the process and the extent to which their involvement is meaningful or merely symbolic are always going to be fundamental and potentially vexed political issues. Scientific experts, for example, can be deployed in a host of different ways, from being the mere providers of data, to playing an active involvement in the definition and scoping of the project, to being full-blown partners in the final outcome(s). As highlighted by the recent sacking of Professor Nutt and the subsequent departures of six further key members of the ACMD, the basis upon which each of the different parties to the decision are to be involved in the process needs to be rendered explicit at the outset. The failure to do so can result in a fundamental misalignment of expectations; in the case the ACMD, whereas the committee's members saw themselves as joint decision makers, the Government of the day viewed them as holding a mere advisory role. In the final analysis, when faced with a body of evidence and accompanying recommendations that would not sit easy with its fellow parliamentarians, nor, indeed, key sections of the electorate, the Government rejected the committee's recommendations. When the committee's leader then rendered his opposition explicit, calling for a wider debate among the public it exercised its ultimate political sanction by removing him from office! More generally, this case highlights that the fact that 'the choice to place more or less emphasis on various elements,' even when 'made in a mindful, conscious fashion' (Briner et al., 2009, p 21) is also fundamentally a

political decision, which, if poorly managed, can result in deleterious political consequences, to the mutual detriment of the conflicting stakeholders of the decision.

How, then, might practitioners of evidenced-based decision making confront the political realities highlighted by the various cases discussed throughout this chapter, and in so doing, avoid rationality façades? Arguably, this is the most difficult problem to be resolved in ensuring that evidence-based decision making authentically meets the requirements of those stakeholders affected by the decisions enacted but who so often lack the power to ensure their voices are heard. Recognizing that evidence-based management, like most forms of organizational decision making, is inherently political in nature is a necessary but insufficient basis upon which to proceed. Rather, its authentic development and application demands that a wider range of stakeholders beyond the dominant coalition is involved meaningfully in the processes of knowledge creation and decision making, from senior, middle, and junior managers to frontline employees, trades unions, government officials (local, regional, and national), to consumer groups, management consultants, pressure groups, and applied social scientists (among others).

The range of stakeholders required for authentic evidence-based management varies from one context of application to another. In all cases, it is essential that a sufficiently representative cross-section of stakeholders are involved in meaningful ways from the outset. By adopting this approach, the

definition and scoping of the problem to be addressed will necessarily result from a social (and political) negotiation among the parties involved.

Inevitably, there are some political tradeoffs that need to be considered in the light of the above analysis. On one hand, incorporating in a meaningful fashion a wider range of stakeholders in evidence-based management projects will add to the complexity of the attendant decision processes. Wider stakeholder involvement in the way I am suggesting will often add significantly to the costs of the project, both in terms of the manpower requirements and financial resources. On the other hand, there are likely to be significant gains that outweigh these costs, chief of which is the fact that the origins of the problems addressed and the attendant solutions enacted will be grounded better in the working lives and experience of those who must ultimately implement the resulting solutions and live with the consequences.

Enacting this vision of an authentically more inclusive approach to evidence-based decision making is, however, far from straightforward. At the heart of disputes like the ACMD debacle lay fundamental differences in attitudes, values, and beliefs, borne of identity conflicts (Haslam, Reicher & Platow, 2011), sustained by a range of conscious and non-conscious cognitive-affective processes (see, e.g., Amodio, 2008; Dovidio, Pearson, & Orr, 2008; Fazio & Olson 2003, Haines & Sumner 2006; Lieberman 2007). As demonstrated throughout this chapter, evidence-based decision making in the workplace is little different in character from evidence-based decision making in policymaking circles. Union leaders, front line workers and other stakeholders beyond the

realms of management are no less likely to fall back on intuition, expertise and other less formal sources of knowledge and forms of knowing than their managerial counterparts.

Researchers have barely begun to consider the implications of the many exciting developments at the forefront of the social neurosciences for the design and validation of tools and processes for organizational decision making, innovation and adaptation (Hodgkinson and Healey, 2008b). Nevertheless, sufficient evidence has accumulated to conclude that ‘cold cognition enhancing technologies’, that is, decision-aiding techniques that seek to foster methodical reflection through explicit conscious reasoning processes, predicated upon affect-free conceptions of human information processing, are unlikely to yield the expected benefits (Hodgkinson & Healey, 2011). One thing is clear, however, in exposing the inclusion-exclusion criteria and tabulating on a study-by-study basis the external evidence from the available scientific literature, systematic reviews are a powerful tool for making explicit one of the four key sources of information that feed into evidence-based organizational decision processes, thus rendering such information amenable to challenge by all with a stake in the decision process and attendant outcomes.

Ultimately, however, as observed by Baughman, Dorsey and Zarefsky (2011), high quality evidence is a necessary but insufficient basis for practice. It is the quality of argumentation by those who bring bodies of evidence to bear on organizational decisions, which determines how it is eventually used:

The role of evidence is to provide the justification for claims that solutions will be effective or that courses of action should be taken. Accordingly, a critical property of evidence in applied settings is its power to convince, persuade, or influence. What warrants decisions under these conditions... is not only good evidence but good argument. Evidence is a part of an argument but clearly not the whole thing.

In calling for an 'argument-based' approach to decision making in organizations, Baughman et al. (2011), "put evidence in its proper place, a place where it will do the most good: as a means and not an end" (Baughman et al., 2011, p. 64).

Viewed from this perspective, systematic reviews nevertheless have a potentially valuable role to play, as transitional objects that can help to mediate differences of interpretation and understanding among stakeholders by enabling deeper dialogue.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that evidence-based management is in a double sense a political project. In seeking to develop an evidence-based approach to management practice, failing to acknowledge this basic social fact can only serve to amplify the rationality façade that pervades so much of organizational life. In the words of Abrahamson and Baumard (2008, p. 438), organizational façades:

[hide] the backstage, which if revealed might make organizational stakeholders decide that problems beset the

organization. This would cause stakeholders to withdraw their support -- they would disinvest, quit, sue, and generally disparage the unveiled organization.

The events surrounding the occasion of Professor Nutt's lecture and associated publication with which I commenced this chapter demonstrate the relevance of this observation to evidence-based decision making in general. In exposing the fundamental differences of opinion between the majority of members of the ACMD and the UK government of the day, Professor Nutt revealed the conflicting rationalities of two immensely powerful stakeholder groups. The ACMD believed that having systematically brought its scientific expertise to bear on the problem at hand, the government could and should have implemented its policy recommendations, whereas the government believed the recommendations of its scientific advisors constituted but one piece of a more complex jigsaw. Once Nutt had exposed the government's approach to evidence-based decision making as a façade, the government sought, through its taking rapid action to remove him, to counter-frame the problem as one of its chief advisor having crossed the line from independent advice giver to politically involved citizen, a move which in its eyes rendered his position untenable.

Evidence-based decision making, like all forms of organizational decision making, is inherently political. In the final analysis, therefore, as argued by Barlett (2011), in order to realise its full potential, the evidence-based practise movement must ultimately accommodate on a more systematic basis the important influence of power and politics in organizational life, rather than

downplaying them as it currently does, treating political problems as a minor by product of an otherwise radical improvement to organizational decision processes.

Members of the evidence-based management research community must each confront some fundamental political dilemmas and choices. What are we really interested in? Helping management practitioners and policy makers increase the legitimacy of their political decisions by giving them the opportunity to dress them up in the language of evidence-based management? Or increasing transparency in decision processes as way to expose the misuse of power in organizations and to include in meaningful ways those who are normally excluded from these processes? Recognizing that evidence-based management is fundamentally political in a double sense, forces all who identify with its cause to make clear choices in respect of these matters. This recognition *increases* our responsibility as social scientists to be aware of the (unintended) consequences of its introduction to management practice. To the extent that the embodiment of this philosophy of transparency and participative decision making is embraced by the evidence-based management research community writ large, much will be accomplished in enhancing the effectiveness and wellbeing of the full range of stakeholders of the organization. As such, it is a movement and cause with which I will be proud to be associated.

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