



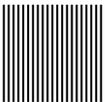
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Evidence-Based Management: A Backlash Against Pluralism in Organizational Studies?

Mark Learmonth

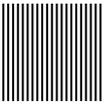
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***Abstract.** Methodological and ideological pluralism has been a defining feature of much organizational analysis for many years now—although resistance to it has always been present. The rise of ‘evidence-based management’ (EBM) is read as the latest form of resistance to pluralism—one that might prove particularly hard to refuse given the popularity of many other forms of evidence-based practices. So I explore the prospects for EBM within organization studies and some of its implications for those who value the continuation of pluralistic forms of analysis in organizational research. **Key words.** evidence-based management; evidence-based practice; organization theory; pluralism.*



It has become something of a truism to observe that the last 20 years or so has witnessed a distinct turn to more philosophically grounded and reflexive theorizing in management and organization studies. We have become much more aware of our epistemological and political orientations, whilst methodological pluralism has grown and flourished.

Debate about the occurrence of this change now seems settled; what to make of its significance is rather more contested. On the one hand, the very existence of this journal, with its encouragement of a ‘broad spectrum of issues, and a wide range of perspectives, as the foundation for a “neo-disciplinary” organization studies relevant to the 21st century’ (*Organization*, 2007), can be read as a celebration of this pluralistic turn:



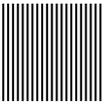
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the kind of pluralistic stance that I, for one, believe can encourage more open, reflective, imaginative and critical work. On the other hand, this revolution within organization studies has also been met by resistance. For example, even before *Organization* was launched, Jeffrey Pfeffer (1993) bemoaned what he saw as 'the proliferation of theoretical perspectives ranging from feminism to conversation analysis and radical humanism ... in which fundamentally any theoretical perspective or methodological approach is as valid as any other' (1993: 615). In his account, economics had benefited from a paradigmatic unity enforced by a group of scholars who: 'intentionally and systematically took over positions of power and imposed their views ... on the field' (1993: 618)—and he proposed similar action within organization studies.

However, this call to close down debate outside narrow parameters received heavy criticism for its attempt to produce reductivist, and politically convenient, knowledge (Cannella and Paetzold, 1994; Perrow, 1994; Van Maanen, 1995a, 1995b). Indeed, the subsequent years have, if anything, seen an acceleration of the disintegration in consensus to which Pfeffer objected. So, has the battle for pluralistic, critically-informed analyses of organization and management now been won? Well, let's not be *too* sure! I believe that today there are growing signs of a backlash against ideological and methodological pluralism; a backlash that may well represent a new means to encourage a unified view within organization studies. My claim is that this backlash is being enabled by a contemporary cultural phenomenon known as 'evidence-based practice': the central doctrine of which is that practice (in any professional domain) ought to be based upon sound research evidence about the effectiveness of each intervention (Harrison, 1998). *What works* (that is, what can be established to work according to certain traditionally 'scientific' criteria) is its key catchphrase.

The evidence-based movement started in health care in the early 1990s, and has now achieved success in improving health outcomes while remaining a popular discourse among clinicians (Pope, 2003). Thus, in spite of the criticisms of evidence-based medicine that are beginning to emerge (Lambert et al., 2006), the possibilities for replicating its successes in sectors outside health have an understandable appeal. However, the way that a bio-medical mindset is being adopted is causing concerns in many areas of social science. Not only does it limit (what counts as) legitimate research methodologies—to those that natural science finds acceptable; more directly politically, the emphasis on what works tends to assume elite definitions of effectiveness. That is, constructions of 'what works' are often interest serving. In the light of these developments, while the evidence-based movement is ringing alarm bells for many critically orientated social scientists (Denzin and Giardina, 2006), it is perhaps unsurprising that Pfeffer (along with a number of other more traditional management scholars) have started actively to commend a version of evidence-based practice: evidence-based management (EBM).

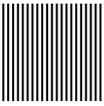


As someone who was involved in health care for a number of years, I have witnessed the rise of evidence-based health care, and what I consider to be its largely deleterious side-effects on the social scientific research (especially the organizational research) conducted in this sector (Learmonth, 2003; Learmonth and Harding, 2006). So this essay is offered as an early warning—alerting us to some of the threats that evidence-based practices may pose to a pluralistic organization studies—while suggesting some possible approaches to counter its worst possibilities.

A New Threat To Pluralism In Organizational Studies?

There is now a quite substantial body of literature that seeks to promote EBM (see Holloway, 2007; Reid and Spinks, 2007 for reviews). Indeed, EBM has recently been advocated in particularly high-profile ways. For example, at the 2005 Meeting of the Academy of Management, Denise Rousseau, the Outgoing President of the Academy, entitled her presidential address: ‘Is There Such a Thing As ‘Evidence-based Management’?’ (Rousseau, 2006a). In another prominent move, Pfeffer and Sutton published *Hard Facts, Dangerous Half-Truths and Total Nonsense: Profiting from Evidence-based Management* (Pfeffer and Sutton 2006).¹ Rousseau’s address was aimed at the academic community, *Hard Facts* at practicing executives. However, they share a desire to convince their audiences of the benefits of EBM, and both do so by providing pretty much unconditional praise—virtual panegyrics—for EBM’s potential influence on managerial practice. Thus, for Rousseau, evidence-based practice is a (theoretically unproblematic) ‘paradigm for making decisions that integrate the best available research evidence with decision-maker expertise and client/customer preferences to guide practice toward more desirable results’ (2006a: 258).

Let’s be clear. I believe that ‘evidence’ can (and should) inform practice. Indeed, I welcome some of the sentiments expressed: Rousseau’s championing of EBM as ‘a counterforce to the arbitrariness and self-serving bias observed in how firms are organized’ (2006b: 1092) or Pfeffer and Sutton’s ambition for evidence to be an ‘antidote to the smart talk, self-aggrandizement, and bullshit that pollute so much of business life’ (2006: 222) for instance. In fact I’d go so far as to say that an emphasis on evidence could have significant critical and emancipatory potential (more on this later). But my problems with the currently dominant version of EBM (the version championed by people like Rousseau or Pfeffer and Sutton) are to do with the more axiomatic assumptions that underpin it. Not only does their take on EBM often have a top management bias (seen, not least, in the way that *Hard Facts* is littered with the first names of US CEOs—as well as in the nature of the ‘problems’ invariably addressed), more crucially for me, the attempt to dichotomize evidence with ideology, facts with values is problematic. This is because in organization studies, 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



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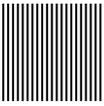
ideological and always contestable—not merely a technical, ‘scientific’ task. Thus, questions like what counts as evidence; what organizational practices² evidence might ethically and politically inform; what interests different evidence supports and denies (and so on) represent radical disputes: in other words, such debates can be conducted only on grounds which are themselves contested.

These issues are not mere academic point scoring. They are important politically because they highlight the need for organizational research to be reflexive—in particular, to be reflexive about one’s ontological and epistemological assumptions as well as one’s political and ethical obligations. But where is any reflexivity concerning the political implications of research and evidence in *Hard Facts* or Rousseau’s speech? Take this excerpt from the latter as a typical example:

Through evidence-based management, practicing managers develop into experts who make organizational decisions informed by social science and organizational research—part of the zeitgeist moving professional decisions away from personal preference and unsystematic experience toward those based on the best available scientific evidence. (2006a: 256)

The rhetoric of ‘the best available scientific evidence’ can only plausibly be created by an elision of the pluralism within our discipline. And the absence of any revealed awareness of the political positioning of this statement allows Rousseau’s assertion to lionize managers as ‘experts’ whilst suggesting that, when associated with science and evidence, managerial decisions are above dispute. Her assertion can be understood, therefore, as an example of how the ideological nature of management is hidden by an appeal to objective knowledge—to an ‘evidence-base’ that is (apparently) independent of political, social or moral considerations. The evidence is constructed to accord with the interests of those in charge, whilst able to give itself out as neutral and universal.

However, whilst it is important to make these objections, my primary concern is *not* to contest EBM on intellectual grounds—largely because I suspect that those advocates who produce panegyrics upon EBM are not particularly concerned to appear intellectually credible to most social scientists. The evidence in *Hard Facts*, for example, consists largely of the authors’ own management consultancy—‘evidence’ that wouldn’t stand up to standard forms of scrutiny;³ and anyway, what self-respecting contemporary social scientist could get away with using a term like ‘facts’ so prominently? At least, that is, without irony! Rather, my primary concern in this short paper is to contest EBM as a *political project*. Proponents like Rousseau or Pfeffer and Sutton appear to me to be set on using their own versions of ‘evidence’ and ‘management’ as a means to further a particular set of interests and values in organizational life—but under cover—the cover provided both by the prestige of science and by the enthusiasm, in certain quarters, for (a narrow rhetoric of) evidence (Learmonth, 2006). In other words, while winning the argument against EBM may be necessary, it will



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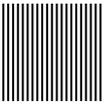
hardly be sufficient, given that the rhetoric of evidence-based practices is being recognized by its proponents to provide them with a new political resource which they can deploy to resist the pluralism to which they object. Indeed, Rousseau has made this explicit: for her, the promotion of EBM 'would *counter* the current organizational research bias toward novelty and fragmentation' (2006b: 1091; italics added).

It is submitted, then, that EBM effectively re-legitimizes the very sort of sentiments Pfeffer expressed in his 1993 article,⁴ but it does so in ways that may be harder to refuse. Not least because EBM's buzzwords appear (seductively) to represent commonsense. They also provide some neat answers (or so it might seem) in the debates about the relevance and application of organizational research; answers packaged in the rhetoric of science that make them especially appealing to managers because they might thereby appear to be untainted by ideology. Indeed, it is hardly surprising that evidence-based practices can claim important apologists among influential CEOs, and even prominent politicians.⁵ But of more immediate importance to people in business schools, the EBM catchphrases are also starting to have an appeal to bodies which can directly influence research practice: research funding councils. For example, in the UK, a range of social research projects have already been funded through the 'Evidence Network'—a body dedicated to 'furthering the proper understanding of the methodology and practice of evidence based research' (Evidence Network, 2007), which operates under the auspices of the government's social science funding council, the Economic and Social Research Council. Similarly, in the US, the Coalition for Evidence-based Policy (CEP):

seeks to advance a major federal and state strategy to: (i) Fund rigorous studies—particularly randomized controlled trials—to build the knowledge base of social interventions proven effective and replicable in community settings; and (ii) Facilitate and/or incentivize the widespread use of these research-proven interventions. (CEP, 2006)

Of course, sources of research funds are important for all organizational researchers, whatever their stance on EBM. Indeed, the rise of EBM (which seems likely to put extra money into organizational research) coincides with an era in which there are unparalleled pressures for scholars to prove themselves able to generate research income. A coincidence which promises much for those supporting EBM,⁶ but which makes it increasingly likely that critical researchers will face unpalatable options.

Unfortunately, these sorts of processes are already well advanced in some sectors of social research analogous to management and organization. For example, in US education policy research, in spite of a strong tradition of qualitative research, federally funded research is now dominated by randomized control trials and the other experimental designs used in medical research—a phenomenon that Lincoln and Canella (2004) call 'methodological fundamentalism' (2004: 7). Or, to return to one of my own areas of interest, in UK health care, a government research-funding agency



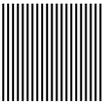
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known as the National Health Service Service Delivery and Organisation (sic) Programme has, since 2000, become important in the organizational research scene in the sector because of the relatively large amounts of research funding it has made available. While the agency often commissions qualitative work, its explicit policy is to develop research that managers find useful (Edwards 2003); furthermore, its research funding is administered via closely specified tenders that give researchers little freedom in the sort of reports produced. Perhaps then, in parallel to the methodological fundamentalism of US education policy research, what can be seen in UK health care organizational research is an ideological fundamentalism growing from EBM.

Evidence-Based Misbehaviour: A Model For Critical EBM?

It may not be overly pessimistic, therefore, to foresee the research climate within business schools becoming increasingly orientated towards the discourses of EBM. This climate, especially when taken together with the (related) pressure to secure grants for research deemed 'relevant' might cause new problems for those researchers, who, for personal and political reasons, want to resist the incorporation of social science into applied projects that support unitary managerialist ambitions. What are such researchers to do? Quite honestly, I'm not entirely sure! All options are potentially problematic; nonetheless, here are some thoughts to further debate.⁷

The highest risk option, it seems to me, would be to apply for grants from bodies that require evidence-based research, provide them with the reports they want, and then write separate, critical academic papers from the data. This is (career) advice I regularly receive, but a major problem with it is that these reports are generally in the public domain—and rather more likely to be read by practitioners than articles in scholarly journals. So what about simply ignoring EBM? Not an entirely unreasonable stance given the changeable fashions in our discipline. However, it's worth reflecting that similar action by some scholars in health care failed to halt evidence-based medicine's popularity. Or let's consider actively refusing to participate in *any* 'evidence-based' representational practice. Certainly, I think the nefarious ideological baggage that the EBM (or even the 'evidence-informed')⁸ catchphrases are gathering makes this stance attractive. But if evidence-based discourses do become increasingly pervasive, to exclude ourselves may be unrealistic; indeed, it could bar us from important debates. My provisional preference, therefore, would be to follow some advice found (ironically enough) in *Hard Facts*, where Pfeffer and Sutton, though they 'hesitate to recommend' it (2006: 230), briefly discuss the value of what 'might be called *evidence-based misbehavior*' (2006: 230; italics in original). They realize (if, apparently, reluctantly) that the logic of their position on EBM means that it would be legitimate for subordinates, more aware of the evidence than their managers, to subvert orders in the (evidence-based) interests of the company. Especially in the



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light of the rich literature on worker resistance, perhaps critical scholars might pursue Pfeffer and Sutton's own suggestion about evidence-based misbehaviour—only with less hesitancy and more radicalism.

However, there are a number of reasons for caution if we are going to link ourselves with the evidence-based movement—even as explicitly critical researchers. Let's not forget, for example, that the results of our work will seldom provide activists with evidence for 'what (misbehaviour) works'—to use the catchphrase! This is because, despite the claims of EBM's proponents, social science rarely provides categorical bases for any kind of practical action. If our research can provide an evidence-base its contribution would more likely be in its ability to change thinking about misbehaviour, or, indeed, about the acceptability of some currently standard managerial practices. Bear in mind, too, that we'll have to work very hard (even when our proposals strategically deploy 'evidence-based' buzzwords) for this kind of research to become universally acceptable to funders, many of whom are dominated by conservative interests. In other words, let's not bank on bagging *too* many big (career-enhancing) grants in evidence-based misbehaviour!

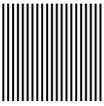
Concluding Thoughts

Given the recent growth of CMS, I don't think EBM could entirely delegitimize critical empirical work in business schools. On the other hand, I do think that, over time, an increase in the popularity of EBM could make it considerably harder for CMS researchers to pursue promotions and other institutional advantage. This should not be regarded as a trivial problem—many of us will compromise our principles when money is at stake. Indeed, the sort of incentives that are developing makes it a real possibility that more and more ostensibly critical researchers will end up working on research simply because they've got funding. In other words, the sort of paradigmatic unity Pfeffer (1993) advocated may gradually emerge if EBM becomes popular—only without the need, as originally envisaged, for overt imposition.

Nevertheless, I still believe optimism is possible. After all, if critical research increasingly has to be conducted in spite of institutional incentives, this could have the effect of revitalizing critique. So you never know, EBM might end up doing critical management scholarship a favour!

Notes

- 1 More recently, *Academy of Management Learning and Education* published a special section on EBM (2007, issue 1), in which *Hard Facts* was broadly sympathetically (often very sympathetically) reviewed by a range of contributors. The same journal issue also included a separate response to the reviews (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2007) as well as a piece by Rousseau and a colleague, which revisited her 2005 presidential address, this time with an emphasis on evidence-based management education.

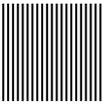


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- 2 Of course, *organizational* practices are rather wider than *management* practices: indeed, I suggest that the privileging of ‘management’ in the formulation *EBManagement*, reveals the interests many of EBM’s advocates seek to serve.
- 3 A point Pfeffer and Sutton acknowledge (2007: 153).
- 4 In clarifying the benefits of EBM, Pfeffer and Sutton cite Pfeffer (1993) to question scholars’: ‘preoccupation with what’s new and interesting and novel ... at the expense of what’s true’ (2007: 154). They also take the opportunity, incidentally, to caricature—and dismiss—the critiques Pfeffer (1993) received.
- 5 For example, according to Ashkanasy, during a televised interview Hillary Clinton remarked: ‘the Democratic Party is known as the evidence-based party’ (2007: 6).
- 6 An insight unlikely to be lost on EBM’s proponents. Indeed, one of Pfeffer’s (1993) justifications for his proposal to enforce paradigmatic unity was to improve organization studies’: ‘ability to compete successfully with adjacent social sciences such as economics in the contest for resources’ (1993: 599). So it is, perhaps, not entirely cynical to read *Hard Facts* as a sales pitch for what management research offers executives.
- 7 The difficulties are heightened in that some scholars, such as contract researchers, have very little discretion over the nature of the work they undertake.
- 8 There has been a recent move, especially in the UK, away from an ‘evidence-based’ rhetoric to terms such as ‘evidence informed’ (see, for example, Tranfield et al., 2003). Whilst this no doubt distances such work from mere panegyric, it is hard to interpret it as much more than a rhetorical sop to objectors who argue that any aspiration to base management *exclusively* on evidence is rather fanciful.

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