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Against Evidence-Based Management, for Management Learning

KEVIN MORRELL
Warwick Business School, U.K.

MARK LEARMONTH
Durham University Business School, U.K.

Evidence-based management has been widely advocated in management studies. It has great ambition: All manner of organizational problems are held to be amenable to an evidence-based approach. With such ambition, however, has come a certain narrowness that risks restricting our ability to understand the diversity of problems in management studies. Indeed, in the longer term, such narrowness may limit our capacity to engage with many real-life issues in organizations. Having repeatedly heard the case for evidence-based management, we invite readers to weigh the case against. We also set out an alternative direction—one that promotes intellectual pluralism and flexibility, the value of multiple perspectives, openness, dialogue, and the questioning of basic assumptions. These considerations are the antithesis of an evidence-based approach, but central to a fully rounded management education.

The "evidence-based" approach has been promoted widely across a number of fields (Cartwright & Hardie, 2012; Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2007). In management studies, following earlier contributions (e.g., Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003; Walshe & Rundall, 2001), a landmark event increasing the profile of evidence-based management (EBMgt) was Denise Rousseau's Presidential Address to the 2005 Academy of Management Conference (Rousseau, 2006a). There is now a dedicated handbook on EBMgt (Rousseau, 2012), and there are several heavily cited academic articles (e.g., Briner, Denyer, & Rousseau, 2009; Briner & Rousseau, 2011a; Rousseau, Manning, & Denyer, 2008; Rynes, Giluk, & Brown, 2007), as well as various other forums promoting EBMgt to management teachers and practitioners (e.g., Charlier, Brown, & Rynes, 2011; Erez & Grant, 2014; Latham, 2009; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006; Rousseau & McCarthy,

2007), including a Center for Evidence-based Management (CEBMa).

Evidence-based practice in management is recently defined as

making decisions through the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of the best available evidence from multiple sources by

1. **Asking**: translating a practical issue or problem into an answerable question
2. **Acquiring**: systematically searching for and retrieving the evidence
3. **Appraising**: critically judging the trustworthiness and relevance of the evidence
4. **Aggregating**: weighing and pulling together the evidence
5. **Applying**: incorporating the evidence into the decision-making process
6. **Assessing**: evaluating the outcome of the decision taken

to increase the likelihood of a favorable outcome (Barends, Rousseau, & Briner, 2014; emphases in original).

There is a lot to commend in a vision of practice informed by scholarship where managers exercise careful, reasoned judgment; where their actions are accountable because they are informed by rational, transparent, and fair processes; where they draw sensibly on research. Our field has benefitted in some areas from a renewed emphasis on meta-analyses and related methods, and EBMgt can sometimes help advise on how such methods may bring about given goals within organizations (Triantafillou, 2015). However, alongside others (e.g., Arndt & Bigelow, 2009; Bartlett, 2011; Cassell, 2011; Guest, 2007; Hewison, 2004; Learmonth, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2011; Learmonth & Harding, 2006; McLaughlin, 2004; Morrell, 2008, 2012; Tourish, 2013), we argue EBMgt will not usher in the world it promises. We are "against" evidence-based management because this movement defines evidence narrowly and inflexibly, whereas problems in management can always be understood in different ways and from different perspectives. Also, and contrary to its own stated values, EBMgt fails to question its assumptions and is blind to criticism. These features mean EBMgt is likely to lead to a greater distancing of practice from research.

Critique of EBMgt is important and timely. There is a growing expectation throughout social science that research outcomes be couched in a pervasive "evidence-based" language, which is starting to shape expectations about what counts as legitimate social science (Morrell & Lucas, 2012). Governments and research funding agencies across the globe are more and more mandating evidence-based knowledge—even in contexts where such an approach can fundamentally misunderstand the issues at hand—ultimately leading to poorer results. For instance, House (2006) and Lather (2004) outline the deleterious effects on educational research in the United States, where there has come to be a dogmatic insistence on narrow forms of "evidence" to solve any and all research questions. Comparative case analysis of evidence-based programs in nonformal education (in the U.S. and Kenya) finds that "the dominant approach to making nonformal education more evidence-based . . . is seriously flawed" (Archibald, 2015: 146). In the United Kingdom, Hope's (2004) analysis of how an evidence-based approach was actually applied by a major government department trying to reduce burglaries finds it was not so much a case of seeing "what works," but a case of "pretend it works" (the title of Hope's paper).

These sorts of problems have arisen, in part, because the evidence-based movement (including EBMgt) is inconsistent in important respects. Although the factors are interrelated, to structure discussion, these inconsistencies can be separated into three strands of critique:

1. EBMgt supposedly involves seeking out and evaluating all evidence. Yet in practice, the evidence-based approach has a selective and narrow view of evidence.
2. EBMgt devalues stories or narrative forms of knowledge. Yet the evidence-based approach is itself a story about relations between research and practice, one of many possible stories.
3. Despite claims to be scientific and impartial, EBMgt is managerialist: i.e., it is for management not about management.

Such sources of inconsistency can be traced back to the earliest writing on EBMgt, and all three feature in contemporary work. Over time there have been different emphases in its rhetoric; however, something discrete and distinctive can still be called EBMgt, and in the pro-EBMgt literature, there remains a very high degree of consensus in terms of a core language, epistemological commitments, and beliefs. So much so, that we focus here on EBMgt itself as an object of study, rather than discrete contributions by its advocates. In doing so, we want to consider the implications of this way of representing the relationship between research and practice for management learning and education. Our intent, therefore, is to analyze what EBMgt *does*: how it frames relationships with practice, what it counts and discounts as "evidence," and whether it is coherent and robust enough to warrant the kind of uniform and wholesale change to our field that it explicitly and repeatedly calls for. We recognize the focus on what EBMgt "does" invites a logical error: attributing agency to something that is a bundle of talk, texts, and practices. But it is difficult to separate any movement from its advocates, and this seems the most straightforward language to use in trying to achieve that separation.

By showing there are serious inconsistencies in EBMgt, we aim to scrutinize and challenge its claims. To do so we engage critically with the recent 2014 Special Issue (SI; volume 13, number 3) on EBMgt in *Academy of Management Learning & Education* (*AMLE*) alongside a wide range of earlier pro-EBMgt work. Our article also more broadly provides an opportunity to reenergize an on-going conversation in *AMLE* about the limits to what we can know and do as management researchers and educators, given the complexities of the human condition (Ghoshal, 2005; Grey, 2004).

We proceed by developing our critique of EBMgt in terms of the three inconsistencies set out above and discussing their implications. We then propose alternative intellectual values that are more inclusive and pluralist. These celebrate a wide range of different perspectives, including those influenced by the humanities, as more appropriate for a rounded approach to management learning and education. A more humanities-orientated perspective highlights some of EBMgt's blind spots and omissions, things which may be harder to see from within the movement. Doubtless our own blind spots and omissions will be equally clear to others.

A SELECTIVE AND NARROW VIEW OF EVIDENCE

EBMgt has always been associated with broad ambitions, most recently expressed in the title of the editorial of the *AMLE* SI, inviting readers to "Change the World" (Rynes et al., 2014). At the same time, however, it has very narrow horizons in terms of the construction of "evidence." Even within health sciences, a narrow view of evidence has been recognized as a problem. There, the evidence-based movement has been criticized as "outrageously exclusionary and dangerously normative with regards to scientific knowledge" (Holmes et al., 2006:180). We believe this is also an accurate description of EBMgt, even though, taken as a whole, the discipline of management studies is far more diverse than health sciences in terms of methods and approaches. Instead of acknowledging that there are radically different ways of looking at the social world and that such differences can be valuable, EBMgt excludes and even denigrates scholarship from different traditions because it ranks them as inferior. This is true even though EBMgt might at first glance appear to welcome diversity in what counts as evidence:

When we say "evidence," we basically mean *information*. It may be based on numbers or it may be qualitative or descriptive. Evidence may come from scientific research suggesting generally applicable facts about the world, people, or organizational practices. Evidence may also come from local organizational or business indicators, such as company metrics or observations of practice conditions. Even professional experience can be an important source of evidence, for example an entrepreneur's past experience of setting up a variety of businesses should indicate the approach that is likely to be the most successful . . .

Regardless of its source, all evidence may be included if it is judged to be trustworthy and relevant (Barends, Rousseau, & Briner 2014; italics in original).

At stake in this extract, however, is how we are to judge what is "trustworthy and relevant." What ultimately seems to count in EBMgt is quantification and commensuration. As the same document later argues:

- Forecasts or risk assessments based on the aggregated (averaged) professional experience of many people are more accurate than forecasts based on one person's personal experience . . .
- Professional judgments based on hard data or statistical models are more accurate than judgments based on individual experience . . .
- Knowledge derived from scientific evidence is more accurate than the opinions of experts . . .
- A decision based on the combination of critically appraised experiential, organizational and scientific evidence yields better outcomes than a decision based on a single source of evidence (2014: no page number).

In other words, what is really valued by EBMgt are the sorts of characteristics prized in positivistic research:

General law-like statements relating abstract concepts, nominal and operational definitions of terms; formal language such as logic or mathematics used to express laws; derivation of hypotheses; relations among variables; and statistical analysis (Gartrell & Gartrell, 1996: 640).

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with positivistic approaches to knowledge. We have published positivistic research. Positivism does become problematic if it is held out as the one best way to conduct all research. Unfortunately, EBMgt presents itself in this way and relies on positivistic techniques to do so. That is why it promotes a narrow and singular view of research that rests on highly contested assumptions about the nature of the social world. For example, and again in relation to the trustworthiness of our cumulative knowledge, in the *AMLE* SI, Kepes et al. propose a "[h]ierarchy of evidence to assess evidence in the management literature" (2014: 454), and by doing so strongly suggest the universalization of positivistic assumptions. They present a pyramid with six levels that echoes other similar rankings in EBMgt (Tranfield et al., 2003). This hierarchy is (as Kepes et al. explain) grafted

onto a model that originates in the review of medical evidence. Systematic reviews are at the top of this evidence hierarchy (level 1); case studies and narrative reviews one rung up from the bottom (level 5). As a footnote to the pyramid there is a disclaimer: "appropriateness of different research designs is affected by, for instance, the particular research question and the context (2014: 454)."

This pyramid is an excellent visual summary of a key positivistic assumption in EBMgt: that academic research, indeed all forms of knowledge, can be ranked using one metric. We do not think it makes sense to try to put all the work in a field as diverse as management studies into so few categories, still less to rank them using one common metric. The disclaimer, "appropriateness of different research designs is affected by..." is there because there is a clear need to say something cautionary to accompany such sweeping generalization. But it seems both obvious and redundant: like the packet of nuts that reads, "warning: may contain nuts," or the sleeping pills that warn, "may cause drowsiness." Whereas may-contain-nuts and may-cause-drowsiness disclaimers could seem redundant in stating the obvious, they at least communicate actionable information. In contrast, the disclaimer, "appropriateness of different research designs is affected by . . ." is tokenism, because there is no indication of what to do if such an evidence hierarchy does not apply. Indeed, the example included rubs out the disclaimer, as the measure of quality students are invited to consider is "Does the evidence cited come from trustworthy cumulative research (rather than from one case study)?" (Kepes et al., 2014: 455).

This and similar rankings tell a celebratory story about one form of "evidence." They also denigrate methods that do not fit EBMgt's ideals. The best evidence is seen as coming from sources that share an impulse to reduce, quantify, and aggregate. If an approach does not do this, for EBMgt, it is not just different, it is inferior in the sense of ranking lower in the hierarchy of evidence.

THE EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH IS A STORY, ONE OF MANY POSSIBLE STORIES

The narrow and selective view of evidence in EBMgt supports a story told by a particular community of interest. An interesting feature of this story is that it regularly devalues narrative forms of knowledge (Morrell, 2008). EBMgt is most clearly antagonistic toward stories when trying to create a ghetto

category: the narrative review. There are examples of this sort of devaluation in the earliest literature in the field (e.g., Tranfield et al., 2003). In the recent *AMLE* SI, the antipathy toward narrative still comes through clearly: "Literature reviews, even those written by experts, can be made to tell any story one wants them to" (Briner & Walshe, 2014). Such denigration is the basis on which EBMgt promotes the comparative merits of the systematic review:

> Traditional or narrative literature reviews . . . cherry-pick research, may adopt a stance, and include only evidence that tends to support that position [and] summarize highly unrepresentative samples of studies in an unsystematic and uncritical fashion (Briner & Walshe, 2014: 417).

Yet, just as there is a narrowness and selectiveness in relation to evidence, there is a similarly selective approach when it comes to promoting the systematic review. Such arguments invariably choose not to engage with criticisms of the systematic review. This is even though many authors in different disciplines have been critical of the systematic review (Clegg, 2005; Denzin, 2009; Dixon-Woods et al., 2006; Evans & Pearson, 2001; Hammersley, 2001; Larner, 2004; Morrell, 2008; Roberts, 2000; Suri, 2013). There is no mention of these criticisms—what one might call counterfactual or contradictory "evidence"—in Briner and Walshe's review, and no hint that there has been criticism of the systematic review approach (see also more recently, Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2015). In other words, their review exemplifies the very sort of cherry-picking it ostensibly condemns.

EBMgt struggles with inconsistency when it comes to narrative because it is telling a story. Telling stories is something scholars across all disciplines do, but the unique problem EBMgt has, and that it has created for itself, is that it has to maintain an antipathy to stories. This is because the things which give stories their character—idiosyncrasy, individuality, unique details, and difference—are all things that need to be subordinated to pursue an evidence base. But in trying to maintain this antagonism to stories, EBMgt hampers its own claims. For example, hierarchies of evidence tell a story by showing systematic reviews at the top and narrative reviews much lower down. But on their own terms, these hierarchies should not be taken as especially trustworthy: After all, they are promoted in narrative reviews (just as every argument for a systematic review is).

What does EBMgt leave behind when it dismisses stories? To illustrate their value, consider this description of an incident from an article by Korczynski (2011: 1430–14311). It is from a participant-observation study, when he worked for 3 months in what he describes as a "taylorized factory" that makes window blinds:

> Day 34 was Gloria's last day after having worked there for 15 years. She had made many good friends on the shop floor. These friends gathered all the workers in the room around Gloria to give her a leaving present. One of the presents was a blind—this itself caused laughter all round. After it was presented, Ginny took the blind, cut a large hole in the middle and had Gloria pose for photos with her head poking through the cut-up blind.

This briefest of stories, referring to one incident in one case, shows how pursuing a logic of similarity and accumulation of evidence is not the only worthwhile thing to do when studying organizations. While ethnographies can be designed to accumulate evidence, and while meta-ethnography is appropriate in some situations (e.g., Hodson, 2004), Korczynski's study shows people in the midst of drudgery and routine satirizing and joking about work. In doing this they impose control and impart a sense of unique significance to events in an environment where all the work pressures are to conform and routinize. Amid the drudgery and repetition in this factory, this moment is unique and human, and because it involves humor, the particular context is of prime, irreducible importance.

The factory, an analog for thousands of other such places, is a setting where humanity is flattened and smoothed by impersonal, industrial forces of technology, aggregation, and standardization. This same logic underpins EBMgt, because diversity and variety are what the EBMgt approach overlooks, ignores, or writes out in its search for determining "the" evidence, and that alone is ample reason to resist its logic. The story of Gloria's last day should not be something we appraise in terms of whether we can make it equivalent with other incidents to aggregate them altogether, because the story cherishes a moment and privileges a voice. It is evidence and moreover—directly contrary to the logic of EBMgt—it is trustworthy evidence precisely because it is a rich account of the particular, and about things that are not commensurable. Korczynski's work is telling us something profound about

something mundane, which is what the best science across different fields has always done.

EVIDENCE-BASED MANAGEMENT IS MANAGERIALIST

Whenever we consider an individual case, rather than an aggregated and impersonal mass of evidence, the experience of doing so brings us closer to more critical questions about "management." The spoof present is, after all, a form of resistance, and what closely follows questions about resistance are questions of ethics: Is this situation "right" or "fair?" Could it be different?

EBMgt has only recently begun to acknowledge the importance of ethics explicitly (Morrell, 2008). To address ethical questions carefully often requires consideration of contingencies: the circumstances and histories of the individuals involved; micropolitics, traditions, characteristics, and conditions in that workplace; its political, economic, geographic, and historical context; the situation in other settings; financial and legal information; the nature of work in wider society, and so on. It also requires explicit consideration of the play of power. Critical ethnographies can equip us to grapple with these kinds of complexities, but it is harder to see a role for EBMgt in considering situated complexity, given that its focus is firmly on accumulating evidence. We know from decades of such critical research, if not from our own working lives, that there are often no unambiguous or unanimous solutions to dilemmas in the workplace. There are often irreconcilable tensions between fairness and care on the one hand, and profit or efficiency on the other (King & Learmonth, 2015).

"We know from decades of critical research, if not from our own working lives, that there are often no unambiguous or unanimous solutions to dilemmas in the workplace. There are often irreconcilable tensions between fairness and care on the one hand, and profit or efficiency on the other."

To understand politics, power, and ethics, rather than beginning with a search for best available evidence we would first need to consider more

fundamental questions—the framing of the situation—because this would influence how we defined "right," or "fair." In all likelihood, this would require taking care about how exactly one understood the role of "management." In considering such fundamentals, we would need to be mindful of the limits and benefits of our way of framing the situation, our "way of seeing" and would be aware others would see it differently. This is something that ethnographers pay great attention to, as it is core to their craft.

In contrast, in seeking to quantify and aggregate, EBMgt denies a great deal of people's experiences of their day-to-day dilemmas. We have already acknowledged (uncontroversially we hope) that to ask "what is right, or fair?" is to ask difficult questions about ethics and politics. But then, for managers and employees the question is not even as simple as that. We very rarely ask in the abstract "what is fair?" or "what is right?" what we ask is, "is this situation fair?" or, "what is fair *here*?" and "what is the right thing to do *here*?" The complexities and challenges of what to do "here" are everyday, existential questions for many managers and workers. For some, this "here" is the essence of managing people, and very often it is not answered by looking "there"—whether that is in another workplace, or in an aggregated and simplified body of evidence.

Questions relating to ethics and politics are a challenge to evidence-based approaches, because they often cannot be thought of in aggregated terms. Each setting, such as the factory on Gloria's last day, is different and needs to be seen on its own merits, not necessarily in relation to a body of evidence. If EBMgt promotes the idea that answers to ethical and political problems can come from looking at aggregated evidence, it will alienate people who know from their daily work experience and from the simplest and shortest conversations they have with colleagues, that the picture is more complex. It is admirable to look for solutions to problems, but not knowing the best way to approach decisions, or the best way to approach a problem, can be extremely valuable because it can encourage people to take care. Rather than a sense of humility and care, to propose the evidence-based approach as the one best solution is encouraging a false sense of confidence.

EBMgt struggles with questions of ethics and politics because alongside the narrow view of "evidence," is a narrow view of "management." EBMgt risks losing sight of the critical perspective to the study and teaching of management: the view from below (e.g., Collinson & Tourish, this issue; Grey, 2004; Learmonth, 2007). In theory one could use evidence-based principles to promote workers' interests against those of the management, but "in theory" is where this idea is likely to be destined to remain. The unexamined assumption made throughout the EBMgt narrative is that managers are clients—as well as being neutral, technical experts—with no personal or collective stake in the issues being researched. Consequently, managers' own problems and dilemmas become the obvious, and apparently unproblematic, starting point for evidence-based analyses. One example of people being trained to see the world in this way comes in the *AMLE* SI:

> [S]tudents team up with other students to work as consultants for a company. They have to find a client (i.e., a manager), identify and define a problem of interest to the manager, establish a plan for executing the evidence-based problem-solving steps . . . and give a recommendation to the manager for addressing the problem at the end of the project (Dietz et al., 2014: 401–402).

Such "evidence" championed by EBMgt ends up serving power (Baritz, 1960). It does so because it makes corporate interest the starting point for scientific inquiry. Nowotny et al.'s (2001: 52) observation about scientists generally, that "in too many cases scientists adopted the language of and aligned themselves to the powerful and privileged" seems true of EBMgt—the powerful and privileged are EBMgt's clients. This problem is compounded, as Critical theorists have shown, because one danger of claims to science or "evidence" is that they can naturalize dominant interests: They can mean that groups who are marginalized become further marginalized, or even invisible (Deetz, 2003).

An absence of reflection about power relations is essentially what makes EBMgt managerialist. Problems of "management" are not seen as the product of a set of relations under a particular political-economic system, or form of government, or as in any way sociohistorical, or as ethically and politically fraught, or as one category alongside another countervailing category of problems of "labor" or "society." Instead, the problems of management are presented as natural and universal, in everybody's interests to resolve in specific ways. In this light, it is revealing to ask where, in the whole

EBMgt canon is any mention of that large body of evidence produced from decades of organizational ethnographies which consider, "how power is exercised, control asserted and maintained, conflict and resistance expressed, and social inequalities manipulated and recreated" (Smith, 2001: 224)? No such ethnographic work is included at all, as far as we can identify. It has been recognized for some time that qualitative work can be harder to synthesize, but the reasons critical ethnographies are absent from EBMgt are unlikely to be principally about methods and epistemology; they more likely reflect an uncritical gaze on management.

CONSEQUENCES FOR MANAGEMENT LEARNING AND EDUCATION

For all its inconsistencies, EBMgt is—and will likely remain—influential in management learning and education. In capturing a zeitgeist, its continuation serves a range of institutional interests—not least, the interests of governments and research funders, as well as the needs of business schools to be able to show that they engage with practice (Kieser, Nicolai, & Seidl, 2015). Given this is the case, what are the likely consequences of a continuing institutionalization of EBMgt?

Beginning in very broad terms, EBMgt can be read as the latest intervention in a long-running debate in management studies about the relative merits of the humanities and the sciences. In this debate the sciences and the humanities often still get portrayed as polar-opposite rivals, as "two cultures" (Snow, 1959/1993) competing ferociously in the market place of ideas over how the world should be studied (Cascio, 2007). It is also a debate in which, historically within the business school sector, a constellation of actors and institutions have combined to promote our field's ties with the sciences and mathematics, at the relative expense of the humanities (O'Connor, 2008; Gagliardi & Czarniawska, 2006). With this reading, EBMgt can be portrayed as a radical intervention that is as much anti-humanities as it is pro-sciences. This broader discursive context may explain why EBMgt remains blind to what the humanities have always prized: the value of critical reflection on personal, communal, and intuitive experience (Kostera, 2012). These things necessarily fall outside what is traditionally represented as the objective domains of "scientific" inquiry.

Perhaps particularly in relation to management learning, we would emphasize the equal importance of learning from disciplines rooted in the humanities. This would include, for example, the study of literature, history, philosophy, narrative, and human culture. These forms of scholarship are often intrinsically associated with critique and emancipation but currently go unmentioned or are explicitly devalued in EBMgt. (For recent reviews of these topics in the context of management studies, see, e.g., Hibbert et al., 2014; Michaelson, 2015; Saggurthi & Thakur, 2014). The learning implications of this kind of pluralism are neatly expressed by Colby et al. (2011: 4) in their assertion that

> to contribute to the larger life of society, students must be able to draw upon varied bodies of knowledge . . . to gain fluency in looking at issues from multiple points of view, which requires the opportunity to explore with others different ways of posing problems and defining purposes.

We read "students" here to include ourselves, colleagues, and colleagues-to-be; undergraduates and future undergraduates; MBAs and future MBAs; managers, workers, and wider society. In management studies we need to "draw upon varied bodies of knowledge" and use "multiple points of view" as well as "explore with others different ways of posing problems and defining purpose." As Nowotny et al. (2001:19) argue, it is

> the merging together of different ways of knowing and their inbuilt rivalry for legitimacy and challenge to the respective monopoly of the other way of knowing, which produces heterogeneity, pluralism and fuzziness.

Nowotny et al.'s (2001) idea of fuzziness is particularly helpful. There is no place for fuzziness on the smooth slopes of EBMgt's pyramids, but in thinking about learning and education "heterogeneity, pluralism and fuzziness" are to be celebrated at some level are they not? The infinite variety of contexts in which "evidence" is encountered and made sense of by managers and others in organizations from nonacademic "thought worlds" (Cascio, 2007: 1009), makes uncertainty, fuzziness, and difference inevitable. Furthermore, there are dangers if we avoid or ignore these kinds of factors because we can end up "knowing" things we don't know, which is ignorance, not enlightenment.

In the context of management learning, perhaps the biggest flaw in EBMgt is its closed-mindedness. This repeatedly displays itself through an inability

to respond to anything but the mildest criticism. While EBMgt has changed in terms of softening its rhetoric, the record (e.g., Charlier, 2014; Rousseau, 2006b; Briner & Rousseau, 2011b; Rynes et al., 2014), reveals an inability to respond adequately to challenging questions about its basic values and assumptions. This is especially the case for criticisms coming from outside its own paradigm—in which case they tend to be misunderstood or dismissed as mere "grumbles" (Bartunek, 2011). For instance, at the time of writing, the CEBMa website states in the section, Articles on Evidence-Based Management:

> Here you can find all major articles on evidence-based practice in the field of management as well as related topics such as management education, the practice-knowledge gap, methodology and systematic reviews.

This website lists dozens of articles on evidence-based management, but it includes no articles critical of EBMgt (of the type cited earlier here). Another example of EBMgt's refusal to engage in critique, this time from within the *AMLE* SI, comes during Steven Charlier's interview with Gary Latham (Charlier, 2014: 472):

> [Charlier:] "Some critics of EBMgt have stated that unlike medical research, 'evidence' from management research . . . features 'paradigmatic disagreement' over what should be considered as 'evidence'" (Learmonth & Harding, 2006). How would you respond to these criticisms?

> [Latham:] "I have close friends who are medical doctors. They can't agree on whether a pregnant woman should take aspirin! This issue is not at all unique to our field."

The response ignores a fundamental, first-order criticism about paradigmatic disagreement, and repackages it as a second-order question of practice. The SI's editorial introduction (Rynes et al., 2014) contains a parallel example. Trank's (2014) emphasis on the reader and the construction of meaning challenges basic epistemological assumptions in EBMgt. However, these first-order criticisms are again ignored, and Rynes et al. (2014: 311) defend more specific, second-order criticisms:

A related issue Trank raises is her concern that the evidence-based movement may produce "neutral technical experts" no longer committed to "values transcending the immediate and the practical" (Freidson, 2001: 209). At least in theory, this should not happen because EBP visualizes practitioners as professionals who use personal experience, knowledge of the local context, and stakeholder preferences—in addition to research findings—in making decisions.

This selective response supports Trank's (2014: 392) characterization of EBMgt:

> Although practitioners are said to "disbelieve, dismiss, or simply ignore findings from scientific research" (Giluk & Rynes, 2012: 130), it could be said that advocates of EBMgt "disbelieve, dismiss or simply ignore" critical treatments of EBMgt, and cling, just as "resistant" practitioners do, to their prior beliefs and practices.

Even when radical criticisms have come from within the EBMgt movement itself, they are ignored. For instance, the introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Evidence-Based Management* (Rousseau, 2012) sanitizes and repackages the book's two critical chapters (Hodgkinson, 2012; Hornung, 2012; see Morrell et al., 2015 for a more detailed discussion).

Such myopia in the face of criticism is a hallmark of dogma. Ignoring all counterfactual and contradictory criticisms damages EBMgt's self-appointed status as the authority on "evidence." Although evidence is crucial to the scientific method, another crucial consideration is the need for continual skepticism. In the specific context of management learning there is something particularly troubling about a movement that steers readers and students away from critique, in an attempt to reinforce pre-existing beliefs and practices.

"Such myopia in the face of criticism is a hallmark of dogma. Ignoring all counterfactual and contradictory criticisms damages EBMgt's self-appointed status as the authority on 'evidence.'"

EBMgt also propagates an oversimplification about management and management research. This

oversimplification expresses itself by denying diversity and variety, leading to, at best, partially adequate accounts of important phenomena, and at worst damaging reductionism. To sustain its postivistic way of talking about the social world and the problems we face, and to be able to talk plausibly about cumulative knowledge, systematic reviews, best evidence, what works and so on, EBMgt has to turn away from the things that are more difficult to represent using this discourse. It necessarily has to reduce, simplify, gloss, flatten, or sideline problems and situations that are inextricably contextual, messy, unique, contestable, oppressive, absurd, humorous, or socially complex in dozens of other ways. In other words, EBMgt eliminates the diversity of frames and issues that characterize any context—and yet these are the sorts of things at the heart of day-to-day work, and life, for managers and employees. They are the very stuff of stories. We edit them at our peril.

In sum, then, in terms of its impact on management learning, EBMgt does not draw on varied bodies of knowledge or merge different ways of knowing, because it is committed to there being a hierarchy of evidence. Rather than exploring purposes with others or tolerating rivalry and pluralism, EBMgt excludes or ignores criticism. And it will never encourage fluency in taking multiple points of view, or encourage rivalry across ways of knowing, because of its strong commitment to the single paradigm of positivism as the best way to tackle all organizational problems.

DISCUSSION

There is an age-old tradition of seeing science as the route to changing the world: Archimedes famously said all he needed to move the world was a lever and a place to stand. This analogy is a rich one for EBMgt in so far as it relies on "evidence" as its lever to "change the world." But the problem is that EBMgt lacks Archimedes' insight. He knew there was no extra-worldly independent and stable point on which to stand; this absence of a place to stand is certainly true of management studies. We are enmeshed with our world and cannot simply apply scientific instruments to it as if we were independent or detached, as EBMgt assumes. In the study of management, and of other social sciences, our theories about the world also make the world, and so claims to knowledge are always going to be contested and contestable (Ghoshal, 2005). This idea is well understood within the philosophy of

scientific knowledge (Feyerabend, 1993; Gibbons et al., 1994; Hacking, 1983; Latour, 1987; Nowotny et al., 2001; Woolgar, 1988).

In management studies, we cannot describe the issues we face or the concepts we study from an independent standpoint. The terms we use are value-laden and politically charged. This is true of our most basic concepts: manager, leader, performance, team, and so on. They are essentially contested. What is more, the terms we use do not simply describe a world; they bring a particular world into being (Gond et al., 2015). For these reasons, "[p]eculiar to management is the extent of fragmentation and indeterminacy in its knowledge base … The extent to which its knowledge claims are open to contest and disruption is highly unusual and possibly unique" (Grey & Willmott, 2002: 413). Moreover, it is because we are implicated in the world we study that

> social scientists carry an even greater social and moral responsibility than those who work in the physical sciences because, if they hide ideology in the pretense of science, they can cause much more harm (Ghoshal, 2005: 87).

EBMgt hides ideology in the pretense of science because it is a narrow and exclusionary perspective that discounts other ways of seeing the social world and its social problems—those based on the belief there is "ontological discontinuity between natural and social phenomena" (Knights, 2008: 543). Applying Knights' phrase to management, if you believe every person is unique and different from every other person in important ways, then you sign up to some form of ontological discontinuity. The same is true if you believe every social situation is unique and different from every other social situation in important ways. It is also true if you believe even our most sophisticated measures and techniques can never capture all the intricacies of (to give one example) the simplest everyday human conversation. If this idea of ontological discontinuity has any purchase, EBMgt will never be the catch-all solution to problems in management.

What then are the implications of our analysis? We explicitly do not propose "an" alternative. EBMgt may not be the one best way, but that does not mean there is another one best way. Proposing one alternative would be inconsistent with our critique because we advocate pluralism—a striking departure from an approach that is monolithic. Nor do we propose alternatives that rely on the rhetoric of "evidence" in some

way. Within today's wider culture, an "evidence-based" rhetoric (or even an "evidence-informed," "evidence-aware," rhetoric, etc.) is inexorably tied up with a reductionist and exclusionary model of what counts as knowledge—as much in management studies as in other disciplines. There is, in other words, too much rubble to clear if we begin with talk of "evidence." We are also cautious in framing the implications of this critique because we want to try to avoid any repackaging or appropriation of the paper. We have no wish for it to be recast as in some way designed to assist the development of the EBMgt project or to be suggesting ways forward for EBMgt (selective repackaging has been a response to earlier critique, see e.g., Learmonth, 2006 and Rousseau's, 2006b response).

Therefore, instead of an alternative, or alternatives to EBMgt, we propose pluralism as the antithesis of EBMgt. Recognizing difference in intellectual traditions and celebrating their respective contributions is important not because it will lead to the triumph of the humanities over the sciences; rather, because pluralism promotes a balance between them as complementary ways of thinking about the problems facing people in work organizations. Each of us, as individual scholars or practitioners may well have different interests, values, and skills, but we nevertheless can have mutual respect for different perspectives and views, and rather than devaluing forms of knowledge that do not fit our preconceptions, or pretending that other forms of knowledge do not exist, we can take other traditions' ideas and methods seriously, and see them as potentially valuable. This position is in line with analyses of the role of science and knowledge in modern society. For Gibbons et al. (1994: 4), for example, "socially distributed knowledge" captures the idea that the solution to a problem may be beyond the ability of any one discipline to solve (whether in the sciences or the humanities). As one of our reviewers expressed it, the aim should be "an appreciation of diversity, different points of view, stakes and interests and, as a consequence, not one single right way but rather the options that are available in a situation that an evidence-based approach usually prevents people from seeing (personal communication)."

For example, we find the narrative review (which EBMgt derides because it can be made to tell any story one wants) inspiring and liberating. Readers of reviews are never passive dupes, falling for any argument the author constructs. They respond (Trank, 2014), and there is more scope to respond and construct when the possibilities of format and genre are less constrained. More fundamentally, being able to tell different stories by reviewing knowledge is emancipating. It is emancipating in terms of its possibilities for generating new theory and for learning; it is also emancipating in terms of how we relate things to life: where one ideal many share is to be able to tell any story we want to tell. These possibilities demand more of the reader, and therefore, they can also encourage learning in the sense of looking at old problems in new ways and raising new questions. In a very different context, Einstein and Infeld (1938: 95) explain that

> [t]he formulation of a problem is often more essential than its solution, which may be merely a matter of mathematical or experimental skills. To raise new questions, new possibilities, to regard old problems from a new angle, requires creative imagination and marks real advance in science.

While we cannot sensibly aggregate and make commensurate some narrative forms of knowledge, an inability to do so certainly does not mean we cannot learn from narrative. We learn on a different basis, from a different way of seeing. This difference is partly about methods and a different understanding of what constitutes worthwhile knowledge, but it is also about a different understanding of what being human means. It involves Knight's (2008) commitment to ontological discontinuity: the primacy and irreducibility of some differences relating to the person, time, or place. Some case studies may be aggregated, but those that perhaps should not be aggregated, such as Korczynski's (2011), are "trustworthy" precisely because they help us see what is different and unique about a particular world of work. Drawing attention to uniqueness is sometimes the purpose of a narrative or case study (Siggelkow, 2007), and case studies often have an entirely different goal from accumulation. They may be intended, for example, to convey the richness and complexities of a situation, and of what it is to be human, rather than a resource to be managed, or a problem to be solved.

We are essentially against evidence-based management because issues in management can always be understood in a variety of ways and from different perspectives. An appreciation of difference—never knowing for certain even what approach to take to a problem—is what should keep us, as scholars, thoughtful and critically reflexive in the kinds of knowledge claims we make. A great many of our stakeholders are also thoughtful and

critical; indeed this is perhaps true of those we want to reach and inspire the most: They realize their world is complex and believe there are no universal approaches. Pluralism is a better basis for learningful dialogue than an evidence-based megaphone. The EBMgt story is now well rehearsed and polished. It is familiar and unconvincing to many, but those hearing it for the first time are as likely to wonder about its essential legitimacy, its exclusionary character, and its inconsistencies. They are likely to ask, "who are you to tell me what evidence is?" Many managers, employees, or members of society will resist the idea that all the most important questions they face, or even the most mundane ones, can be answered by looking at "a body of evidence." Our stakeholders are often keen to learn about the latest and most insightful research, but then many of them are most engaged when they hear our stories. Rather than denigrate and devalue narrative forms of knowledge or sacrifice them on the altar of evidence, we advocate working with and through them.

CONCLUSION

As long-standing critics of EBMgt, we acknowledge professional stakes in this debate. However, our critique does not spring from any dogmatic position in terms of certain methods or favoring a particular epistemology. Our goal is not to promote any single alternative way of looking at the world. We encourage readers to weigh the case against EBMgt, and even to do so following evidence-based principles. Please be "conscientious, explicit, and judicious" (Rynes et al., 2014: 305) because doing so in light of our critique raises questions for this movement:

1. Does a conscientious, (i.e., careful and scrupulous) evaluation of EBMgt support its claim to be the one way to address organizational problems; the one way to engage with practice; an approach informed purely by the evidence? Our critique indicates not, rather, that it is just one account of one way to do these things.

2. Is EBMgt explicit, (i.e., open and unreserved) when it comes to interests and basic assumptions, because it prizes transparency, independence and objectivity and commits to a replicable procedure for synthesizing knowledge in search of an independently real "evidence base"? Our critique indicates not, rather, that it relies on basic and unexamined ideological assumptions about the world, and that it is promoted by, and benefits, people trained to see the world in that way.

3. To be judicious, (i.e., to weigh the case for and against EBMgt), does it basically hang together or hold true? Again our critique rejects this

movement in the wake of inconsistencies. EBMgt is itself a story about relations between research and practice, and its most persuasive work relies heavily on stories, but at the same time, so much of the discourse on "evidence" deliberately positions stories as an untrustworthy form of evidence. Moreover, EBMgt presses users to seek out all available and relevant evidence, but arguments for EBMgt are invariably one-sided and built on a selective picture of the evidence on EBMgt itself.

The case against EBMgt, using its own principles, is compelling. But the brilliant danger of an "evidence-based" slogan is that it can still appear obvious, even as common sense. After all, who can be "against" evidence? Many—including politicians, policy makers, funding bodies, and senior managers—claim to be adherents of an evidence-based approach. Without questioning their intentions, perhaps when they do this they forget to reflect on the wider implications. Perhaps they forget to think through whose interests the approach serves, and whose interests it excludes. We are "for" evidence, we just do not think the EBMgt movement, with its inconsistencies and narrowness, should have any monopoly or any kind of special authority when it comes to evidence.

Just as we are "against" EBMgt but "for" evidence, we are also "for" other values. In particular, we emphasize things we see as fundamental to management learning, yet antithetical to EBMgt: pluralism, critical reflexivity, questioning of basic assumptions, intellectual flexibility. If you agree that this movement threatens these values, we ask you to take a similar stand "against" EBMgt: Refuse to use the rhetoric and question those who do. Where EBMgt is held out as the one best way, question this dogma through your institutions, networks, and roles as scholars and managers, as educators and learners. In challenging EBMgt, make the case for richer and more inclusive understandings of evidence, and make the case for a richer and more inclusive approach to management learning.

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Kevin Morrell is a professor of strategy and currently a British Academy Mid-Career Fellow at Warwick Business School, U.K. Prior to that, he was head of the Strategy and International Business Group. Morrell specializes in understanding the public sector. Other interests and publications are on kevinmorrell.org.uk.

Mark Learmonth is a professor of organization studies and deputy dean (research) at Durham University, U.K. He obtained his PhD from the University of Leeds. Before joining Durham University, Learmonth had worked at the Universities of York and Nottingham. His research interests include the personal consequences of work, and debates about methodology.