DIALOGUE

"Is There Such a Thing As 'Evidence-Based Management'?": A Commentary on Rousseau's 2005 Presidential Address

Professor Rousseau, in her 2005 presidential address (Rousseau, 2006), sets out an optimistic vision of how organizations might change if academic management evidence came to be widely known and used by practicing managers. For her, evidence-based management would enable managers to "develop into experts who make organizational decisions informed by social science . . . moving professional decisions away from personal preference and unsystematic experience toward those based on the best available scientific evidence" (2006: 256).

Basing health care on evidence has generally been received enthusiastically by politicians and policy makers, who are starting to impose the model elsewhere, although arguably with regressive consequences (Denzin & Giardina, 2006). And even in clinical practice, social scientists are increasingly making elements of the current zeitgeist problematic (for a review, see Lambert, Gordon, & Bogdan-Lovis, 2006). So while Professor Rousseau acknowledges the formidable implementation problems that evidence-based management might face, her apparent faith in the efficacy of science for solving organizational problems is challenged by rather more complex and deep-seated issues (Learmonth & Harding, 2006)—both theoretical and political—that she does not directly address.

I submit that we need to avoid a situation in which evidence-based management becomes an expectation—or a requirement—before the issues are fully debated. So, with the aim of widening debate, and in deliberate counterpoint to Professor Rousseau's speech, I briefly point to two major problems with evidence-based management: (1) management studies' radical, paradigmatic disputes over legitimate evidence and (2) the rhetoric of science as a mask for the politics of evidence.

CAN MANAGEMENT SCHOLARS AGREE?

Readers of *AMR* need little reminder that disagreements in the study of management and organization tend to be essentially contested—that is, the very grounds on which debate is conducted are often disputed. Indeed, in contrast to disciplines such as medicine, it is difficult to find a substantial area that everyone in the field accepts as a more or less stable and uncontroversial guide for further research. It is hardly surprising, then, that the article following Rousseau's in the same issue of *AMR* (Fineman, 2006) provides an example of a radical dispute—a dispute, furthermore, that illustrates a major difficulty for proponents of evidence-based management.

In discussing different interpretations of "employees who say they feel better, good, or positive" (2006: 282) following empowerment or similar HRM initiatives, Fineman points out that some scholars might take these statements at face value—as an indication that staff are indeed empowered—while others might consider employees to be "complicit in their own subjugation" (2006: 282). Such divergent opinion is particularly difficult for evidence-based management because it cannot be resolved merely by more, or better, evidence; in this case, divergence is a reflection of researchers' contrasting beliefs about the nature of the social world, views held a priori, shaping what they see while conducting research.

Furthermore, Fineman's work suggests that the evidence as a whole (in this case, about managers being positive) does not converge on a single way forward to which all scholars can assent. Indeed, the absence of consensus might imply that a search for evidence in this area would introduce *more* ambiguity and uncertainty, reducing (rather than promoting) the possibilities for evidence to enhance decision making. And surely it is not unique in this regard; indeed, for many major themes in our discipline—culture, change, leadership, and so on—Weick's comment seems particularly apt: "When people experience uncertainty and gather information to reduce it, this often backfires and uncertainty increases. As a result. . . . the more information is gathered, the more doubts accumulate about any option" (2001: s73).

EVIDENCE AND POLITICS

It follows, then, that if radical dispute is so common in management studies, the rhetoric Rousseau uses to imply certainty—promoting "practices the evidence validates" (2006: 260), "advanced knowledge . . . about effective implementation" (2006: 261), and so on—has plausibility only when some evidence gets excluded. And, paradoxically for a project that makes such prominent claims to be scientific, what appears to legitimate her exclusions are not scientific factors (epistemological or methodological issues, for example) so much as personal and political considerations. Let us illustrate these processes at work in the speech.

Rousseau's focus is clearly on evidence she considers "affords higher-quality managerial decisions that are better implemented, and . . . yields outcomes more in line with organizational goals" (2006: 267). Similarly, her teaching aspirations are to encourage each student to become "a great manager in a great company" (2006: 257). Such ideals might seem laudable, but they appear so only inasmuch as they reflect dominant ideologies that naturalize managerial interests and suppress conflicting interests. After all, who gets to be thought of as a "great manager" is hardly dependent upon natural, self-evident criteria. Indeed, her arguments proceed by excluding evidence that might encourage reflection on the ideologies that underpin her views. There is no hint, for example, of evidence from organizational ethnographers who "detect how power is exercised, control asserted and maintained, conflict and resistance expressed, and social inequalities manipulated and recreated" (Smith, 2001: 224). So although there are criticisms of management practices in Rousseau's account, they tend to be technical rather than ideological. Even the "harsh and arbitrary behavior" (2006: 257) her father suffered seems to be interpreted as a problem that better management practices could have resolved, rather than as symptomatic of wider social inequities or the exercise of power.

Of course, a plurality of interpretations concerning her father's experience would have contributed to the ongoing debate about the nature of management and organization. But it seems that in evidence-based management some research traditions get written out so that "the evidence" can be presented in ways deemed useful for decision making. So the appeals to science in evidence-based management seem precarious, if "useful" nevertheless. As Grey has noted, "The ideological nature of management is obscured by the way in which it appears to be based upon objective knowledge independent of political or social interests and moral considerations" (1996: 601). Indeed, Rousseau's evidence-based management can be interpreted as a means to further a particular set of interests and values in organizational life while doing so under cover—the cover provided both by the prestige of science and by the enthusiasm, in certain quarters, for (a narrow rhetoric of) evidence.

CONCLUSION

Contesting such ideas is important, then, and the issues at stake are not merely intellectual; they may well start to impact directly, both on organizational practices and on research in business schools. Fields such as health and education (Lather, 2004) already have experience of how the evidence-based movement can nurture a seductive form of "common sense" that legitimates further government intrusion into research, threatening work (arbitrarily) deemed "unscientific." But contesting Rousseau's version of evidence-based management is not the same as advocating that evidence should be abandoned; indeed, it can be rather the opposite. Contestation could involve explicitly encouraging and appreciating research heterogeneity, thereby valuing traditions that challenge managerially orientated readings of organizational life or that trouble dominant understandings of research and evidence. Such traditions have, I submit, significant potential to encourage the emergence of new understandings of organizational realities; indeed, they have been represented in *AMR*. However, if they are actively discouraged by being starved of funding, or, perhaps worse, if they are effectively excluded from certain debates, then we risk being deprived of their insights. And all in the name of evidence!

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Keeping an Open Mind About Evidence-Based Management: A Reply to Learmonth's Commentary

Dr. Learmonth and I agree on the need for informed debate before (as well as during and ever-after) developing an evidence-based approach to management and organizing. In that spirit and in hopes that broader discussion will follow, let me respond to his basic concerns and then address the metaissue his commentary surfaces—the process whereby evidence-based management (EBM) might be most effectively designed and implemented.

THE THREE BASIC CONCERNS THE COMMENTARY RAISES

Reaching Agreement on Evidence

Arriving at consensus in social science takes different forms than it does in medicine and other fields, because cause-effect connections in organizational research are not as readily subject to controlled experiments. In general, however, establishing where the science is clear necessitates decision rules that the scientific community endorses. To date, consensus has formed around use of metaanalyses and constructive reviews to identify convergent findings in organizational research and their boundary conditions (e.g., Mathieu & Zajac, 1990).

I anticipate that a movement toward EBM would foster greater attention to convergent findings and their implications for both science and practice. Such a trend would counter the current organizational research bias toward novelty and fragmentation. In its focus on high consensus areas, EBM is likely to prompt more considered efforts to account for the inconsistency and divergence characterizing areas of limited convergence. Dr. Learmonth's concern that EBM will reduce the current use of evidence has no basis in fact: active users of social science evidence in industry, to date, regrettably are few and far between (cf. Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006; Rynes, Brown, & Colbert, 2002).

Politics

Politics are real and pervasive. It would be naive to think otherwise. Developing and implementing an evidence-based approach to managing and organizing can affect how funding, legitimacy, and influence are allocated for scholars, practitioners, and teachers (see the discussion of design issues below). However, it is not politics in general that I believe are Dr. Learmonth's central concern. Rather, based on the commentary and other writings he kindly shared with me (e.g., Learmonth & Harding, 2006), I infer that Dr. Learmonth worries that qualitative research will (1) not meet the evidentiary standards EBM might come to employ, and, consequently, (2) qualitative research will be devalued, resulting in the decline in its legitimacy and funding.

Yet evidence is not particular to any method or measure social science employs. Constructive reviews (including my own [Rousseau, 2005: Chapter 4]) regularly incorporate qualitative work in identifying areas where the science is clear (or not). I put my money on qualitative research playing a central role in identifying the meanings underlying observed patterns and, as important, in helping translate evidence into practice by exploring the subjectivity, politics,