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Beyond “New Scientific Managemen?” Critical Reflections on the Epistemology of Evidence-based Management

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Abstract

This essay draws on social theory and philosophy of science to outline controversies about EBMgt as a critical movement versus a one-sided ideological project marginalizing non-mainstream research. Discussed issues include the authority to define evidence, research topics, methods, and evaluation criteria for managerial decisions. A critical and self-reflexive perspective is suggested to enhance awareness of ideological and epistemological constraints that could turn EBMgt into a reloaded version of scientific management.

Keywords: Critical management
Positivism
Ideology
Managerial authority
Managerial accountability
Scientific Management
Taylorism
Exploitive conditions
“[S]cientific management must inevitably in all cases produce overwhelmingly greater results, both for the company and its employees […] so that they together do the work in accordance with the scientific laws which have been developed, instead of leaving the solution of each problem in the hands of the individual workman.”
(Fredrick W. Taylor, 2008/1911: 90 f.)

“For is it not possible that science as we know it today, or a ‘search for the truth’ in the style of traditional philosophy, will create a monster?”
(Paul Feyerabend, 1975: 154)

“The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class.”
(Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 1955/1848: 30)

Preface: Personal Involvement in Evidence-based Management

My personal interest in Evidence-based Management (EBMgt) is partly rooted in the disillusionment of a young scholar realizing that research and practice are largely unconnected domains, each functioning according to its own set of rules. More often than not, business plays a brutal “profit game” to maximize productivity, revenue, and growth, whereas academia is engaged in an equally competitive “publication game” for personal career opportunities and fame. A lesson learned from field studies is that applied topics of interest to practitioners are often viewed as too descriptive and pragmatic to be of academic value, whereas highly published material is typically indigestible and of little interest to managers. Educated in a European tradition of work and organizational psychology emphasizing applied research and humanistic principles, such as worker autonomy, health, and well-being, this disconnect is particularly unsettling.
The existence of a yawning research practice-gap being an undisputable fact, the concept of EBMgt raises the right questions. Joining the Collaboration right from its inception, I witnessed how our discussion of EBMgt evolved from a rather blurry and vague idea to an increasingly sophisticated, elaborated concept. Despite our progress, for which this handbook is perhaps the best proof, a number of fundamental issues, such as the political nature and ideological foundations of our field, ethical and moral implications, and epistemological constraints have been sufficiently addressed in our discussions. The radical criticism of EBMgt that has started to appear in the literature, on the other hand, seems to leave little room for reconciliation.

Based on the conviction that it is not intended to position EBMgt as a counterforce to existing research streams and traditions, but to provide an integrative umbrella to increase the impact of management and organizational research in general, the aim of this chapter is to draw attention to these less salient issues and sketch out ways to address them. That said, the following essay is written in a critical and hopefully thought-provoking manner. The confidence that such a different philosophical perspective is embraced and valued within the EBMgt collaborative is not least based on the positive feedback I received on this chapter from fellow members.

Introduction

Evidence-based management (EBMgt) is an evolving movement, which draws heavily on evidence-based concepts from other fields, most notably medicine and healthcare (Briner, Denyer, & Rousseau 2009; Sackett, Straus, Richardson,
Rosenberg, & Haynes, 2000). Its goal is to promote the uptake and use of best available research evidence to enhance the overall quality of managerial decision-making and organizational practices (Rousseau, 2006). Could there possibly be anything fundamentally wrong with that? At first glance, the obvious answer seems “no” -- of course applied research should provide business practice with useful knowledge and decision heuristics; of course it seems desirable that management education should be based on sound research evidence; and, naturally, high quality management decisions and organizational practices seem preferable to uninformed or bad ones. In an attempt to better align management research, education, and practice, EBMgt thus seems to aim at bringing together what belonged together in the first place.

Why then has the notion of EBMgt turned out to be such a controversial one? Objections from different perspectives and of varying scope have been raised by a number of scholars. From a systems-theory perspective, Kieser and Leiner (2009) argue that the gap between management research and practice is fundamentally unreconcilable as these two subsystems function according to completely different rules and criteria for evaluating and accepting or rejecting propositions or courses of action. Reay, Berta, and Kohn (2009) have raised issues regarding the lack of systematic research evidence on the efficacy of EBMgt, thus implying that the whole concept is largely based on rhetoric and -- unless and until such proof is provided -- appears not substantially different from other management fads and fashions. Using a narrative theory approach to analyze the literature on EBMgt, Morrell (2008) points out several of its implicit
ideological foundations and particularly criticizes the lack of attention to political, moral, and ethical issues. The most radical critique has been brought forward by Learmonth (2006, 2008), who has argued that -- from the perspective of critical management studies -- the very idea of EBMgt should be rejected as positivistic and poses a threat to methodological and ideological pluralism in organizational studies.

Judging from this array of articulate criticisms, the concept of EBMgt has obviously hit a sore spot. By calling into question the current state of the relationships between management and organizational research, teaching, and practice, it brings to the fore some frictions, tensions, and contradictions within and between these societal subsystems, which are often conveniently ignored or left under the table (Kieser & Leiner, 2009). In this essay I will review and elaborate on some of the more fundamental criticisms to illustrate the need for EBMgt to develop more self-reflexive qualities by calling into question some of the implicit assumptions that the greater part of contemporary management research is based on.

To the critical mind, the objective to increase the uptake of best available research evidence to improve managerial decision-making indeed raises a host of questions (Learmonth, 2006; Learmonth, & Harding, 2006). For example, who determines what the best evidence is and on what topics evidence is gathered in the first place? Improving decisions with regard to what criteria or from which perspective? In the following, I argue that EBMgt has “poked into a wasp nest” by being both critical and uncritical at the same time -- and consequently being
criticized for both. However, I also suggest that the resulting controversy can be a healthy and productive one; it offers an opportunity to open up a discussion to reflect on the nature of contemporary management and organizational research and practice. At best, this can aid the EBMgt movement in overcoming some of its unquestioned and overly optimistic -- or even positivistic -- assumptions by adding a more critical and self-reflexive dimension to the concept, which enhances awareness regarding its own ideological and epistemological constraints and limitations.

The structure of this essay supports its goal to point out and discuss both critical and uncritical or positivistic elements in the concept EBMgt and to subsequently provide some recommendations on how to reconcile them. The emphasis will be on fundamental philosophical, ideological, and political concerns, which have received significantly less attention within the EBMgt movement so far -- rather than practical, technical, and methodological issues which already have been addressed elsewhere in some detail (e.g., Briner et al., 2009; Rousseau, Manning, & Denyer, 2008). In fact, I will argue that continuing and refining the focus on methods and implementation will not be useful to address the fundamental criticism of EBMgt as an ideological project to advance a particular form of management research while marginalizing others (Learmonth, 2008). Rather, doing so will require unearthing and discussing underlying issues of power, values, and ethics in organizational research and practice. Before turning to the radical critique of EBMgt and its implications, however, the following section will recapitulate the critical core intentions of EBMgt as an
outgrowth of scientific rationality, aimed at disenchanting unsubstantiated management and organizational practices based on personal beliefs, lay theories, tradition, or recurring trends and fashions.

**Critical Elements: Science as Rationality**

In the self-image of its proponents, EBMgt is not an uncritical or reactionary concept. At its core, after all, stands the critique of the status quo in the relationships among management and organizational research, education, and practice (Rousseau, 2006; Rousseau, & McCarthy, 2007). This criticism was born out of the observation that, on the one hand, the uptake of research results in management and organizational practices is low, whereas, on the other hand, the use of practices continues, to which studies attest no positive or even detrimental effects. Examples for tried and tested practices fitting in the former category are goal setting, work design, and feedback, candidates for the latter category are, for example, certain personnel assessment techniques, like graphology, dubious personality tests, or unstructured interviews, as well as management fads and fashions like benchmarking, reengineering, or downsizing (Pfeffer, & Sutton, 2006; Rousseau, 2006). Reasons for this research-practice gap have been identified in the nature of academic research, in which the development of new constructs and original empirical studies are typically more valued than replicating, integrating and synthesizing previous work -- let alone framing and publishing it in ways that practitioners can understand and use (Rynes, Giluk, & Brown, 2007). Secondly, it has been pointed out that the prevailing form of management education does not make sufficient use of research evidence.
compared to others fields and suggestions how to improve this situation have been brought forward (Rousseau, & McCarthy, 2007). Indeed, popular textbooks used in MBA classes, often seem to emphasize personal interest stories of CEO’s and other “great leaders,” case-based learning, where the criteria for a evaluating decisions often remain quite unclear, and best-practices of successful firms (even though in today’s dynamic economy this success may be short-lived and teaching material may create the unintentionally comical situation of portraying an organization as a role-model that has been recently ridden by scandals or gone bankrupt). The motivational models of Maslow and Herzberg -- their historical significance notwithstanding -- have become prime examples of outdated content of an academic nature that is persistently taught, in spite of weak or contradicting empirical evidence (Rousseau, et al., 2008). Lastly, the critique of EBMgt is also directed at business practice itself, where time and political pressure often force managers to provide a “quick fix” instead of being given the opportunity to analyze the situation, gather relevant information, evaluate alternatives, anticipate possible outcomes and side-effects, and then make an informed decision (Briner, 1998). Moreover, as there appear to be no objective standards for evaluating managerial decisions, managers are seldom held accountable, even in light of obvious malpractice.

The concerns that EBMgt has raised and solutions it has suggested with regard to the generation, transfer, and application of knowledge in management and organizational research, education, and practice are outlined in more detail elsewhere (e.g., Briner et al., 2009; Rousseau, et al., 2008) and in other
contributions to this volume. The major point here is that the idea of EBMgt has grown out of the frustration of organizational researchers with the persistent use of ineffective or unsubstantiated practices, recurring waves of management fads and fashions, and organized unaccountability in business on the one hand; and, on the other hand, the large amounts of theoretical and under-utilized research evidence produced by academics, which is comprehensible and of interest mostly to other academics (Rynes et al., 2007). The goal of EBMgt thus is to reduce the extent to which the spheres of academia and business are isolated from each other; or -- to use the terminology of systems theory -- increase the degree to which these two sub-systems “disturb” each other in their self-referential and autopoetic (i.e., self-reproducing) functioning (Kieser & Leiner, 2009). Not only does this goal seem theoretically possible, but there are ample historical precedents both in the economic sphere as well as in other areas of society. The increasing use of systematic methods to discover, calculate, and utilize the most effective and efficient means to achieve specified objectives in more and more subsystems is characteristic for a process that sociologists have termed “rationalization” (e.g., Habermas, 1984). Rationalization, the use of “ratio” or reason to optimize output-to-input relationships is an inherent feature of modernity and closely tied to the rise and proliferation of the scientific method. Basing decisions on systematic empirical data, logic, and calculation, rather than orthodoxy, tradition, dogma, or unsubstantiated beliefs, is at the core of the philosophy of Enlightenment, marking the advent of modernity in Europe during the 18th century (e.g., Jacob, 2001). The Enlightenment was a critical movement,
advocating the methods of reason and science to dismiss metaphysical explanations, question the rule of the church and aristocracy, educate larger parts of the population, and bring about social change -- culminating in the French and inspiring the American Revolution (Israel, 2009).

Putting EBMgt in the tradition of Enlightenment may appear to be somewhat of a stretch, but helps to better understand the two sides of the “EBMgt coin” that its proponents and critics have a hard time finding agreement on. On the one side, EBMgt is effectively a critical project, advocating use of the scientific method as a way to “debunk” widespread myths, unsubstantiated beliefs and business practices, and improve managerial education, decisions, and accountability (Briner et al., 2009; Pfeffer, & Sutton, 2006; Rousseau, et al., 2008). The humanistic core intent of EBMgt becomes evident in the frequently voiced concern for the managed, i.e., those who are often subjected to arbitrary or misguided decisions. Moreover, its demand for stronger ties between management research and education seems to mirror the Humboldtian ideal of unity and freedom of research and teaching in academia (e.g., Ash, 2006). As such, EBMgt appears to revive classic humanistic ideas that are inherent in the concept of scientific rationality as a vehicle for critique, emancipation, and societal advancement.

The second merit of discussing EBMgt in the context of societal rationalization is the promise of getting a better understanding of the fundamental criticisms that have been voiced against the concept. While there is a broad consensus on the initially emancipatory nature of the Enlightenment, critical
scholars have long maintained that, at some point, the specific form of rationality it has advocated in itself has become a tool for societal repression and dominance (Habermas, 1971; Marcuse, 1964). A root cause for this metamorphosis lies in the separation of the authority to define the ends ("what") and the ingenuity to discover the optimal means ("how") to achieve whatever ends have been specified. In Max Weber’s terms these two different applications of reason refer to issues of “value rationality” and “instrumental rationality” (e.g., Oakes, 2003). The scientific method is, by definition, an exemplary form of instrumental rationality. That is, is it primarily concerned with finding the right means, but, as a general rule, it does not explicitly question the ends too much. As such, it is indifferent to whether its results are used to build power plants or nuclear bombs, produce vaccination material or biological weapons, or motivate specified behaviors among software developers, soldiers, or suicide bombers. Therefore, it has been argued that the idea of a neutral science runs the danger of, knowingly or not, providing a willing tool and a rationalization for advancing the particular societal interests of those who possess the power to define objectives, while simultaneously delegitimizing opposing positions.

Uncritical Elements: Science as Rationalization

After briefly highlighting the essentially critical intent of EBMgt, I will now turn to its uncritical assumptions or blind spots. The core of EBMgt forms an optimistic belief in scientific progress, what it seems to lack, so far, is a critical epistemological debate on the limits of scientific rationality and objectivity in light of the ideological foundations and disparities that characterize our field.
Others have started such a discussion and have raised valid concerns, which should be taken seriously and provide a basis for the following arguments (e.g., Learmonth, 2008; Learmonth & Harding, 2006; Morrell, 2008).

The previous section has localized EBMgt within the larger project of societal rationalization. Doing so may also help to better understand the discomfort of critical scholars with the concept, which is rooted in a long-standing methodological dispute over scientific positivism and the radical critique of instrumental rationality as a tool to disguise the interests of those in power and exercise suppression over the individual (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002/1944). Put more simply, science and technology are assumed to be never neutral or universal, but take on specific forms that fulfill the purpose of particular interests in sustaining and reproducing social order or domination (Habermas, 1971).

Scientific positivism colludes with this system of anonymous repression by demanding that the status-quo should be taken for granted and at face value -- rather than an object of theoretical deconstruction. The result is that predominant modes of thinking are systematically restricted to a one-dimensional form of instrumental rationality, which refers to optimizing the means to achieve predetermined ends, but does not permit reflecting on or questioning the value of these objectives themselves (Marcuse, 1964). At this point, scientific rationality, which has started out as medium of critique and emancipation, turns into a rationalization in the sense of an unconscious justification and defense of the particular interests that profit from those – now implicit and therefore unquestionable -- goals. The Eclipse of Reason (Horkheimer, 2004/1947) and the
Dialectic of Enlightenment (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002/1944) are key works of the Frankfurt School of critical theorists describing this process in much more sophisticated ways. For the present purpose, the reductionist and fragmentary summary of this stream of thought should suffice, however, to recognize how EBMgt seems to fit into the described pattern of instrumental rationality. That is, it predominantly focuses on technical and practical aspects, but turns a blind eye on the political embeddedness and interest-guided nature of the generation, evaluation, transfer, and application of research evidence. To broaden its scope and transparency, EBMgt needs not only to provide convincing answers to the “how-to” questions, but also needs to deal with questions of “to what end”. In the following, I will discuss some of these w-questions that in my opinion have not received sufficient attention within the EBMgt movement so far.

**What Evidence -- and Why?**

A fundamental problem pertains to what constitutes or is defined as evidence or, even more ambitious, “best evidence” in management and organizational research. The short answer given by advocates of EBMgt is that scientific evidence is ideally based on systematic reviews, using standardized and replicable methods to aggregate, integrate, interpret, and/or explain the results of all available studies relevant to the specific research question (Rousseau, et al., 2008). The role model here is the rigorous process for reviewing and summarizing trial-control studies in medicine as implemented, for example, by the Cochrane Collaboration (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003; Higgins & Green, 2009). To evaluate research results evidence-based medicine adheres to a hierarchy of
evidence, which attests the highest value to systematic reviews and meta-analyses of double-blind randomized controlled trials; subsequently, individual non-aggregated randomized controlled trials should be considered, followed by longitudinal cohort studies, case-control studies, and uncontrolled experiments or correlational studies; finally, expert opinions and personal experience form the lowest levels of recognized medical evidence (Sackett et al., 2000; Tranfield et al., 2003). It needs to be stressed that this hierarchy of evidence is by no means undisputed in the medical field. Among others, it has been noted to hold the danger of devaluing common sense, medical expertise, individual treatment of patients, and alternative research designs (e.g., Little, 2003). Aside from probably offending practitioners, transferring this evidence hierarchy into management and organizational research has been described as an agenda to exclude and further marginalize qualitative research approaches, which are more strongly rooted in the social sciences, rather than subscribing to or emulating the methods of natural science (Learmonth, 2008). Similar objections have been raised in healthcare, where the protagonists of such a radical critique even went so far to attest the evidence medicine movement fascist tendencies (Holmes, Murray, Perron, & Rail, 2006).

Responding to such criticisms of EBMgt, Rousseau et al. (2008) have outlined the variety and scope of approaches to conduct systematic reviews, including meta-ethnographies of qualitative research. In a similar vein, Briner et al., (2009) have clarified that it would be neither feasible nor desirable for EBMgt to simply adopt the hierarchy of evidence-based medicine and have claimed that a
defining feature of the EBMgt movement would be to not privilege one particular type of academic research over another. Although these commitments to inclusiveness and plurality are important, it remains questionable how practicable and credible they really are. The orientation towards the natural sciences and their methods of experiments, quantification, and statistical analysis is a pervasive trend in the social sciences and is deeply engrained in concepts of evidence-based practice (Holmes et al., 2006; Learmonth & Harding, 2006; Little, 2003). Being able to draw on a critical mass of studies using standardized measures and comparable methods, and the availability of well-established statistical procedures for meta-analysis are likely to set quantitative researchers at an advantage in contributing to EBMgt. So, even the explicit inclusion of qualitative research on a theoretical and methodological level might not be able to prevent discrimination on a practical and factual level.

Second, and probably more important, Rousseau and colleagues have countered the criticisms outlined above with rather technical arguments by discussing the ways in which different types of research can be integrated into the method of systematic reviews. However, they have missed the deeper point that some lines of research may just not be compatible with each other, because not only their methods, but their underlying worldviews, assumptions, and even the language or jargon they use are so fundamentally different that they do not even share a common understanding of phenomena, concepts and terminology. Since Thomas Kuhn’s (1962) seminal work on the structure of scientific revolutions, we know that such incompatible or incommensurate research paradigms are
characteristic for scientific progress in general, but they are certainly aggravated by ideological differences in the social sciences. For instance, mainstream management research is primarily concerned with the attainment of organizationally desired objectives (e.g., performance and innovation) or at least seeks to justify any humanistic concern for the working individuals (e.g., satisfaction and well-being) through allegedly positive effects on organizational efficiency and effectiveness. The field of critical management studies, in contrast, focuses on exposing and denouncing “socially divisive and ecologically destructive broader patterns and structures” (Adler, Forbes, & Willmott, 2007: 120). Radically critical management and organizational research thus is aimed at overcoming repressive and exploitative conditions and contributing to the social emancipation and psychological development of individuals, groups, and societies in the context of work and employment. Taking into account that wage labor is, by definition, not voluntary, but based on the silent pressure of the economic necessity to generate income, the common ground between performance enhancement and reduction of repressive structures seems fairly small. To illustrate the above point with a more specific example: Contemporary mainstream research interprets the phenomenon of affective organizational commitment as a genuine form of emotional attachment based on a personally gratifying employment relationship, in which workers are more than happy to “go the extra mile”, partly because they perceive that the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). An extensive number of
studies in various contexts, the use of comparable measures, and already existing meta-analyses make this an appealing topic for a systematic review.

Scholars from a critical and psychodynamic research tradition, however, may have a fundamentally different view on the same phenomenon. In fact, affective commitment can also be interpreted as a kind of Stockholm Syndrome – a psychological defense mechanism to experienced helplessness and lack of alternatives or as a symptom for the domestication of workers by capital through increasingly sophisticated techniques of societal mind control (Braverman, 1974; Robinson, 2004; Marcuse, 1964). From this perspective, affective commitment presents itself as a psychological disability, a form of higher-order alienation separating workers from their genuine needs and true class-interests. The important point here is that -- no matter how methodologically well it is executed -- it appears quite unlikely that research conducted from the perspective of such a labor control paradigm would be represented in an EBMgt-style research synthesis on affective commitment or related constructs. Moreover, as a principle of EBMgt is the claim to review the full body of research relevant to a certain question, focusing on the quantitative mainstream implicitly excludes deviating perspectives and alternative approaches from the realm of science (e.g., Holmes et al, 2006; Little, 2003; Learmonth, 2008). A stronger focus on EBMgt may -- whether intentionally or not -- further discredit and marginalize such non-mainstream research. To get back to our example, it seems fairly easy and maybe even convenient to brand the interpretation of commitment as a psychologically sublimated form of higher-order alienation as normative or ideological. In fact,
however, theories of conflict or convergence of interest in the employment relationship are equally ideological, the latter are just better compatible with the ideology of the Zeitgeist and typically studied with methods the results of which - - not coincidentally -- are more geared towards the natural sciences and thus can be more conveniently treated according to principles of EBMgt.

It seems important to note that the taxonomy of quantitative versus qualitative research is merely one of methodology, whereas the distinction between critical versus mainstream or positivist research refers to the theoretical background and ideological perspective, which determine the content and interpretation of research results (Adler et al., 2007). Principally, both quantitative and qualitative research can be critically oriented, which, in and of itself, is more a matter of degree rather than a dichotomous taxonomy. As quantitative research tends to take participants’ statements at face value, whereas qualitative research offers more possibilities to look beyond or deconstruct this first layer of subjective reality, demarcation lines regarding method and content tend to overlap to some degree, but are by no means congruent. The arguments made above thus apply to both qualitative research in general as well as to research conducted from a critical or non-mainstream perspective, regardless of whether it is predominantly based on quantitative and qualitative methodology. The point here is not to say that it is impossible, but that is definitely harder and, in fact, more unlikely for some research methods, traditions, and topics to be included into an EBMgt-style research syntheses than for others.
The above is my understanding of the real danger that Learmonth (2008) points out, when he calls EBMgt a *backlash against pluralism in organizational studies*. Interestingly enough, the controversy between Rousseau and him is a good example of incommensurate paradigms or different world views. The methodological and ideological pluralism Learmonth perceives under attack by EBMgt at least partly corresponds with what Rousseau regards as the fragmentation and specialization that needs to be overcome for the purpose of assembling the field’s full weight of scientific knowledge (Rousseau et al., 2008). Underlying the feasibility assumption of the latter is the optimistic -- or rather positivistic -- notion that research evidence accumulates and over time converges with reality or truth (Popper, 1972). To the former position, the fragmentation in organizational studies reflects the tensions and demarcations between antagonistic societal interests in defining reality. Consequently, from this perspective, consolidation almost inevitably implies exclusion or marginalization and, eventually, a totalitarian thought reform (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002/1944; Holmes et al., 2006). Again, it would be too easy to simply ignore or discard these concerns, if EBMgt wants to establish itself as a serious and self-reflective project within social science.

**Evidence for What -- and Whom?**

Other important issues, which are closely related to the matters discussed above, refer to the questions being asked in EBMgt and who asks them. That is, what are the topics that evidence is gathered and synthesized on and from what perspective or with what purpose in mind is this done? Evidence, especially in social science
but also in natural science, is by no means neutral, but at least partly socially
construed and guided by particular interests (Kuhn, 1962). A prominent example
in support of this claim is medical research, where private corporations have long
been known for their successful attempts to actively influence and manipulate
research outcomes (e.g., Martinson, Anderson, & de Vries, 2005). Most scholars
would at least partly agree that from obtaining funding and university positions to
publication opportunities, conducting research is inherently a social and political
process. In other words, when talking about the uptake and use of best available
evidence, we should ask ourselves, why a particular body of evidence is available
and who it is best for. Rogers (2004) has raised a similar argument with regard to
EBMgt’s role model, evidence-based medicine. His analysis suggests that, by
systematically excluding disadvantaged and vulnerable groups (e.g., ethnic
minorities, groups of low socio-economic status, populations from third-world
countries, and patients with mental health problems and comorbidities) from
research commissioning, design, and participation, evidence-based medicine
aggravates rather than ameliorates injustice and discrimination in the provision of
healthcare. He concludes that evidence-based medicine theoretically would hold
the potential to contribute to improving the health situation of those who most
need it. In reality, however, this seems most unlikely due to the inherently
interest-guided nature of medical research, where 90% of research funding is
spent to investigate the diseases of 10% of the world’s population (Rogers, 2004).

EBMgt, which is leaning so heavily on its medical counterpart, should
take these objections very seriously. In fact, in management and organizational
research the situation is even more complicated, as the goals or evaluation criteria are more diverse and less specified. That is, determining the efficacy of a medical treatment may require taking into account boundary conditions and ethical questions, however, it is still bound to be less controversial than judging the quality of management decisions. In other words, what would be the equivalent of the patient’s health status in EBMgt? Organizational performance, productivity or shareholder value -- the more the better -- for those who are managing or in the name of whom management is carried out? The complete physical, mental and social well-being of those who are being managed? Or whatever objective the respective decision-maker had in mind, which would make EBMgt a willing means to all possible ends?

It is quite common in our field to either implicitly assume or explicitly state that a particular construct, intervention, or management practice would benefit both workers and the organization and thus -- on a broader scale and in the longer term -- eventually may also have a positive impact on the economy and society as a whole (e.g., Hodson & Roscigno, 2004). This convenient notion of goal congruence, however, is largely a myth or ideology; at least it remains untested for the most part and is easily falsified by real-world examples. Indeed, some evidence suggests that in relatively high qualified jobs in industrially developed countries, a positive correlation between indicators of employee well-being and organizational performance exists (e.g., Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001; Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002). However, the range and boundary conditions for such a joint optimization are likely to be highly restricted. On a
world-wide scale, the most profit is still made with the least humane work, including child labor, forced labor, unjustifiable occupational hazards, and poverty wages (International Labor Organization, 2008, 2009). Only the most cynical economists would tell the poverty-stricken and exploited masses in the third world that what is good for their employer is good for them -- and vice versa. Moreover, in the industrially developed world, a rising prevalence of mental-health problems, coinciding with a steady increase in productivity can be taken as just one indicator for negative externalities, which are characteristics for the tension between micro- and macroeconomic objectives (e.g., Compton Conway, Stinson, & Grant 2006; Druss, Bornemann, Fry-Johnson, McCombs, Politzer, & Rust, 2006).

Sticking with this example, psychopathological effects of work threaten to violate basic human rights for unimpaired mental and physical health and pose a challenge to society as a whole, including enormous costs to healthcare systems. Yet, in management and organizational research, comprehensive well-being and positive psychological development of workers often seem to be legitimate objectives only to the extent that it can be shown or at least argued for that they are tied to performance – and thus taking them into consideration is a profitable deal for the organization (e.g., Knights, 2008). A similar point can be made for other conditions and consequences, which are officially valued in society, but are not regarded suitable as stand-alone objectives in business, such as individual freedom or self-determination, democratic procedures and orientations, dignity and respect in interpersonal work relationships, corporate social responsibility,
ecological sustainability, and so forth. Adler et al. (2007: 121) bring this criticism to the point when they argue that “prevailing structures of domination produce a systemic corrosion of moral responsibility when any concern for people or for the environment requires justification in terms of its contribution to profitable growth.”

The point here is not that efficiency, performance, or profitability are not legitimate goals, but that they are by far not the only or – from a societal, let alone an ethical perspective – necessarily the most important or desirable goals. Multiple and potentially conflicting interests and goals are a defining feature of organizational research, the underlying trade-offs and tensions, however, are often not made explicit. If EBMgt has been accused to naturalize managerial interests while suppressing conflicting interests (Learmonth, 2006), this is attributable to the fact that it does not disclose or discuss its implicit assumptions on the goals and implications of improved managerial decision-making. In my personal understanding, the label EBMgt does not necessarily imply a one-sided subscription to a managerial perspective, the field of critical management studies being a point in case, however, a heads-on discussion on this issue within the EBMgt movement has yet been opened up.

Evidence – and What Else?

It should have become clear by now that the evidence does not come in a pure form, but always carries some ideological baggage relating to the underlying world views, interests, and objectives. In this regard, the postulate that the major goal of private business is to not only generate, but continuously increase
productivity or profits, for example, is as much of a normative statement as the principle that the life, liberty, and dignity of people at work need to be protected at all costs. What does EBMgt have to say on these questions of value-rationality as well as their possible conflicts and prioritization, which, if the goal is to improve the quality of management decisions, are obviously of high relevance?

Briner et al. (2009) provide some mundane examples of the everyday use of evidence (“Jane is booking a holiday …”), but how about the following, slightly more sophisticated uses of evidence: A company is aware of the fact that it sells a dangerous product; to estimate whether it should initiate a recall, it compares the overall costs for recall and repair with the expected number of resulting deaths, severe, and light injuries, multiplied by the average out-of-court settlement money for each category. What cineastes may identify as “the formula” that Edward Norton’s character applies as a recall coordinator for an insurance company in the movie Fight Club, goes back to the real-world case of the Ford Pinto in the 1980’s (Birsch & Fielder, 1994). Moreover, a reanalysis of this case from a legal perspective could find no major deviations from common practice in Fords publicly highly disputed, but distinctively data-based and rationally calculated decision not to make the recall; however, the paper acknowledges that the case foremost provides a good example of “how disturbed the public can be by corporate decisions that balance life and safety against monetary costs.” (Schwartz, 1991). Likewise, from an economic point of view it is perfectly rational for an employer to consume or use up an employee’s labor power through unsustainably high workload or hazardous working conditions, if the associated
gains outweigh the costs of hiring and training a new worker. The optimal timing for getting rid of the worn out “personnel resource” in favor of fresh human capital then becomes an optimization problem; its solution will require taking an evidence-based approach, including the extent and likelihood that incurring costs can be externalized to the individual and society (e.g., to government funded social security or welfare programs). In the same vein, it has been pointed out that organization often treat the deliberate violation of laws as a business decision (e.g., Bakan, 2004). The heuristics that are applied here -- comparing the stochastic gains and potential losses -- are data-based and very much aligned with the recommendations of rational choice theory.

The list of examples could be carried on. My point here is that managers in business organizations often do make rational and evidence-based decisions, which, however, do not conform to ethical and moral standard of large parts of society. Briner et al. (2009) explicitly acknowledge the need to include practitioner judgments, contextual circumstances, and ethical concerns in evidence-based decision making. With regard to the latter, they describe one step in EBMgt as follows: “The views of stakeholders and those likely to be affected by the decision would be considered, along with ethical implications of the decision.” (Briner et al., 2009). That sounds nice, but – with all due respect – is overly vague and non-committal. How and what ethical implications should be considered? What if the views of stakeholders and those affected by decision differ? How exactly should their diverging interests and potential trade-offs be taken into account, evaluated, and prioritized? Moreover, the article seems to
imply that ethical considerations and values are a subjective and discretionary matter of the decision-makers ("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 …”; Briner et al., 2009). However, if EBMgt declares ethics a part of evidence-based decision-making, it will need to be much more specific and transparent about the ethical and moral standards that should apply (Morrell, 2008). Again, the medical field might serve as a role model. In medicine, the evidence-based movement is complemented by a highly developed discipline of medical ethics, which is solely concerned with moral values and judgments in medical decision-making (e.g., Lakhan, Hamlat, McNamee, & Laird, 2009). In contrast, the field of business ethics is rather underdeveloped. The latest financial crisis, however, has seen a number of politicians and public persons calling for a stronger adherence to socially acceptable ethical standards in business. Overall, it seems that educating managers from an ethical and value-based perspective is equally important and called for as from an evidence-based perspective. EBMgt will have to make sure that the knowledge it provides is used responsibly. It needs to take a firm stance on the ethical standards and values that it calls for to be taken into account in managerial decision-making. Failure or lack of courage to fill these blanks with action-guiding content would bring its arguments dangerously close to the infamous slogan of an influential lobby group, claiming that “guns don’t kill people, people kill people.”
What is at Stake: EBMgt as New Scientific Management?

The discomfort of some scholars with concept of EBMgt may be better understood if we take a look at the last major rationalization movement that has claimed to improve the quality of managerial decisions through the use of scientific methods: Scientific Management or Taylorism (e.g., Littler, 1978). In his lifetime, Frederick W. Taylor was despised by workers and organized labor, who, in the words of a biographer (Kanigel 1997), saw in him “a soulless slave driver, out to destroy the workingman’s health and rob him of his manhood“. In 1911, the notoriety of his system in sparking labor strikes and unrest even resulted in a congressional investigation into the dehumanizing nature of his proposed management practices (Kanigel 1997). Nonetheless, Taylor would not get tired to state that his system, which substitutes the rule of thumb or tradition for principles based on scientific study of the work, would result in enormous gains and benefits for both employers and employees (Taylor, 1947/1911). Indeed, alongside with technological progress, extreme division of labor, separation of planning and execution, optimization and predetermination of each minuscule operation based on time and motion studies, and strict pay-for-performance schemes have increased the productive forces within a short period of time so tremendously that historians speak of a second industrial revolution (Littler, 1978). Although evaluations of the contributions of Taylorism vary, there seems to be a common understanding that its success was partly based on the degrading, de-skilling and dehumanization of work – and the associated shift in power between labor and capital.
Based on the work of Marx, critical scholars have described dominant modes of control in specific phases of industrial development in terms of different forms of subordination or “subsumption” of labor by capital (e.g., Burawoy, 1984; Braverman, 1974). The first industrial revolution, characterized by the establishment of dependent wage-labor relationships at the beginning of the capitalist production system, was mainly based on contractual or monetary control mechanisms or, so-called, “formal subsumption”. At the core of the second revolution was the transformation of the production process itself, aimed at reducing needed skills, breaking up solidarity among workers, and transferring the de-facto control from labor to management – a process that Marx has termed “real subsumption.” All of these aims are explicitly stated and embodied in Taylor’s system of scientific management. However, the downsides of Taylorism soon became evident in working conditions that were externally controlled, unchallenging, monotonous, and meaningless, thus frustrating basic psychological needs and functions of work. In the short term, these negative consequences were often met with worker unrest, strikes, and sabotage. In the longer run, they tended to induce passivity and symptoms, learned helplessness, and psychological alienation in workers, thus hampering further increases in productivity (Braverman, 1974; Seeman, 1983).

Human relations, sociotechnical design, and quality of work life interventions can be understood as initiatives to address these deficiencies through re-introducing forms of job enrichment, enlargement, rotation, and group work, respectively advocating a joint optimization of technological processes and the
human organization of work. Taylorism itself, however, was never really overcome, but rather formed the basis for those later developments (e.g., Head, 2005; Littler, 1978). In the same sense as it may be impossible to see the wood for the trees, the basic principles of Taylorism are so deeply engrained in our understanding of work organization that they have become hard to identify. In manual labor, especially in the sweatshops of the third world, however, its purest and more radical variations are still alive and well. The legacy of the scientific management system is what human rights activists refer to as the “science of exploitation” (Bakan, 2004).

Changes in the nature of work in industrially developed societies – the rise of computers and other high technology, knowledge intensive work, and increasing demands for flexibility -- have limited the effectiveness of conventional methods of labor control. Modern work increasingly requires the whole person -- hands, head, heart, and all. Sociologists and critical scholars have identified this change in the predominant ways that power and domination are exercised in the working process as a shift towards psychological control (Robinson, 2004). The sociological term “ideological subsumption” refers to the fact that in modern organizations, authority and repression are increasingly psychologically internalized, i.e., external control turns into a form of self-control or self-exploitation. The tools for the manipulation workers’ minds and emotions in the interest of capital are developed and honed by social scientists (psychologists, sociologists, and human resource researchers), who, in the tradition of the human relations movement, may aim towards improving the
quality of working life, but simultaneously take the control exercised over workers to the next level. Following this line of thought, loosening the leash of external control mechanisms in exchange for increased self-control, i.e., the transformation from a Tayloristic labor camp into a high commitment work system, is not an act of emancipation, but one of repression as it increases rather than decreases dominance and psychological dependence (e.g., Braverman, 1974; compare to the concept of “repressive desublimation” in Freudo-Marxian terminology; e.g., Marcuse, 1964)

Scientific management has provided a strong paradigm for perfecting the mode of factual control or real subsumption. The modern era of human resource management and psychologically internalized control or ideological subsumption, so far, lacks such a strong paradigm. Based on the above overview over labor control theory, it should have become clear that scholars from a critical research tradition are righteously concerned that this and only this is what EBMgt will provide -- a psychologically upgraded and refined version of scientific management. However, it is up to the proponents of EBMgt to dispel or least address these concerns. What differentiates EBMgt from the approach of scientific management? What precautions are taken that EBMgt really serves all its constituents and not management alone? These and other questions have already been raised earlier in this essay. The hopefully thought-provoking outline of a labor control theory above should illustrate the historical background that demands directing attention to these issues. Moreover, it also serves a second purpose. Labor control theory provides an established framework of analysis in
the social sciences (e.g., Adler et al., 2007; Spencer, 2000). Not everybody needs
to agree, but if the majority of readers would jump to the conclusion that there is
no place in EBMgt for such a critical perspective, then the controversy would be
been resolved as well -- in that case, however, by confirming the concerns of the
skeptics.

**Implications: Making it Critical**

Finally, I want to make an attempt to reconcile the outlined perspectives on
EBMgt as a critical versus an uncritical project. Based on what has been said
above, I am ambivalent myself if this is possible. However, I am also convinced
that a serious effort to do so is a necessary and important next step to further and
broaden the concept of EBMgt. I have discussed that at the core of the radical
disagreement on the concept of EBMgt are incompatible paradigms regarding the
nature of scientific rationality and progress, giving rise to different views of the
field as either (1) fragmented and in need of synthesis or (2) characterized by
methodological and ideological pluralism and diversity. In light of these
seemingly unbridgeable differences, I invite the reader her- or himself to adopt a
dialectic perspective. At its best, a dialectic reconciliation or synthesis offers an
integrating view of two antagonistic propositions – the thesis and antithesis. In
doing so, however, it preserves the integrity of both positions by reinterpreting
their combined meaning on a higher level of understanding. Thus, the
contradictions may not completely disappear, but will take on a different sense
and meaning (e.g., Williams, 1989). In the philosophy of dialectic materialism,
this three-step approach is expressed in the German word *Aufhebung*, which
simultaneously denotes (1) negation, (2) preservation, and (3) elevation. In less philosophic terms, productively dealing with the concept of EBMgt and its critique requires all parties involved to develop tolerance for ambiguity and differing perspectives as well as the ability to step back and take on a meta-perspective.

From such a meta-perspective, both positions warrant consideration and offer valuable insights for a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of management and organizational research. Personally, I agree to some extent with both. There is indeed a huge body of insufficiently integrated and underutilized research, much to bemoan about the current state of management education, as well as a pressing need for more professionalism and accountability in management practice. However, in trying to address these gaps, EBMgt has to be careful not to throw out the baby with the bath water. Concerns that EBMgt might de-facto exclude certain methodologies and non-mainstream research traditions, neglect ethical and moral considerations, and runs the danger of uncritically adopting a managerialistic perspective, are well made. I recommend that, in order for EBMgt to become more mindful of its own underlying assumptions, the discussion of technical and practical issues that Rousseau and others have led should be complemented by an epistemological and an ethical debate on the foundations of management and organizational research. The former should be rooted in the philosophy of science and center around the individual, social, and political influences on the research process and their implications for the specific form and limitations of research outcomes. On a basic level, this includes
acknowledging the social construction of research evidence, which is at least partly a function of the particular economic context and the interest-guided allocation of resources to certain topics over others. The latter should more explicitly deal with questions of values, i.e., what goals does EBMgt support? Which trade-offs does it accept? According to what criteria does it measure the improvement of managerial decisions and define its own success? If EBMgt is serious about the integration of ethics in managerial decisions and organizational practices, it has to promote the development of guidelines for the ethical conduct of managers, addressing moral responsibilities towards all those who are affected by their decisions, i.e., shareholders, the public, and -- probably most important -- the managed individuals. Drawing on medicine as a role model may help to strengthen such a value-based perspective, which is rooted in academic research into business, managerial, and applied ethics.

Naturally, these debates are not something that can be led on the side (e.g., in the form of an ethics committee to appease criticism), but need to be action-guiding and to shape the way EBMgt is perceived and advocated by its proponents. To make this clearer, EBMgt recognizes that organizations have multiple stakeholders with potentially differing interests and goals. However, it needs to be more explicit about the fact that these are not necessarily converging, but can imply conflicts and trade-offs (e.g., economic profits, social responsibility, and environmental protection). If decision-makers are supposed to take into account the views of stakeholders and those affected by a specific decision, the consequences for these groups need to be assessed and evaluated in
the first place, i.e., information on the possible trade-offs, side-effects, and downsides has to be provided. As maintaining scientific integrity and independence means not -- explicitly or implicitly -- subscribing to one perspective over others, EBMgt research syntheses should try to balance different views and interests relevant to the phenomenon under study (e.g., Knights, 2008). EBMgt has been very concerned with replicable and objective methods for reviewing and synthesizing the evidence. An issue it has not addressed is how the research question and consequently the results would differ, if a systematic review on a certain topic was commissioned, for example, by a government agency, a private corporation, a social movement, or a labor union – according to theory, all of those perspectives would have to be represented.

As pointed out above, EBMgt could all too easily fall into place as the reloaded and psychologically honed version of scientific management. To prevent this risk, it has to be extra careful not to sacrifice scientific objectivity and pluralism for the acceptance of managers, which constitute just one group of its stakeholders. Theoretically, there are ample possibilities to make sure that the plurality of research is adequately represented in systematic review projects and inclusiveness with regard to different research traditions and methodologies is more than lip service. For example, this may be achieved by systematically investigating implications for different groups of stakeholders; prescribing that reviews should comprise both a quantative and a qualitative part; and mandatory inclusion of critical positions, counterpoints, or opposing interpretations. I admit, however, that -- in light of the necessary efforts and associated complexity -- I am
not sure about the extent to which these suggestions are practically feasible and realistic. To my knowledge at least, to date, there is no precedent or example of a research synthesis that systematically adheres to any of the above suggestions. An alternative venue would be for EBMgt to exercise some more modesty and explicitly acknowledge its own limitations with regard to the objective of including the full body of research on a given topic. After all, the points that advocates of EBMgt have made are compelling and applicable for large parts of management and organizational research. Of course, this would do nothing to dispel concerns that the concept aggravates existing imbalances and divides between quantitative and qualitative as well as mainstream and critical research, but at least it would be somewhat more straightforward and transparent.

The unresolved issues above notwithstanding, I believe that EBMgt can make an important contribution to the advancement of the field, both in terms of increasing the uptake of relevant research results in managerial decision-making, but also by starting a self-reflective discussion regarding the implicit assumptions underlying contemporary management and organizational research and practice. In this respect, the way may be as important as the goal. That is, the merits of the EBMgt movement should not only be judged by its potential and projected outcomes, but also by the processes it already has set off and will continue to fuel within the scientific community. Not only has it called attention to the lack of alignment and knowledge transfer between organizational research and practice, but the controversial discussion surrounding it, has unearthed some usually untapped issues regarding the nature of our field. The radical critique of EBMgt is
as much an ideological critique as it is a critique of ideology in management and organizational research. It reminds us that, although our field has increasingly oriented itself towards natural science and -- explicitly or implicitly -- asserts to produce generally applicable insights into human behavior that are above and beyond any particular interests, it essentially remains rooted in the realm of political economy. As an applied social science discipline that is concerned with a very specific form of economic organization -- typically referring to wage labor in dependent employment relationships -- it can never be neutral or beyond ideology. Acknowledging this fact is an important first step. After all, how is EBMgt supposed to promote scientific rationality, if it clings to rationalizations about its own ideological roots and philosophical foundations as a science? In more poetic terms, the light of reason cannot shine in an outward direction only, but also needs to encompass its source (Fromm, 1962). As such, self-awareness and self-reflectivity regarding its own epistemological conditions and constraints seems to be an important prerequisite for EBMgt’s goal of debunking myths and overcoming widespread illusions in management practice. To me, this seems essential if EBMgt is to live up to its aspiration of becoming an integrating movement within social science rather than a technocratic and interest-guided approach in the tradition of scientific management.

In the present essay I have offered a number of questions that EBMgt needs to address to overcome some of its blind spots regarding the political and social construction of evidence. Getting a better understanding of these issues seems to me a precondition for any serious attempt to promote EBMgt. This does
not necessarily imply consent. Researchers from different subdisciplines, research traditions, and political positions may come to the conclusion that they agree to disagree. However, making the implicit tensions, divides, and diverging interests explicit and, therefore, subject to open discussion, already seems a major achievement. If it succeeds to continue this process in a spirit of open-mindedness and willingness of all involved parties to consider and accept differing perspectives and face some inconvenient conclusions about the nature of our field, EBMgt has already made an important contribution. In this respect, I tend to conclude with Hodgkinson and Rousseau (2009) that this already seems to be happening.

For the academic debate on EBMgt to eventually translate into more socially, ecologically, and economically responsible and sustainable management practices, which explicitly acknowledge, take into account, and seek to balance the diverging needs and interests of all affected stakeholders, there still seems to be a long and rocky road ahead. Depending on one’s perspective, the apparent unsustainability of the current economic system, evident in enduring or more and more rapidly recurring financial, social, and environmental crises of a global scale, can give rise to both optimism as well as pessimism regarding the necessary momentum to achieve such changes in the near future. One lesson that can be learned from these current events is that any serious attempt to establish and enforce evidence-based standards for managerial practice will need to include some degree of formalization, institutionalization, and sanctioning power. Again,
an orientation towards the definition and treatment of professional negligence or malpractice in the medical field might provide a useful role model.
References


