

# An Archaeological Critique of ‘Evidence-based Management’: One Digression After Another

Kevin Morrell, Mark Learmonth<sup>1</sup> and Loizos Heracleous

Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, Scarman Road, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK, and <sup>1</sup>Durham University Business School, Durham University, Millhill Lane, Durham DH1 3LB, UK  
Corresponding author email: kevin.morrell@wbs.ac.uk

**Fundamental problems remain with evidence-based management. We argue that, rather than being addressed, these problems are treated as digressions. One explanation for this is an ongoing incoherence: the evidence-based approach relegates narrative to a ghetto category of knowledge, but it is itself a narrative. Moreover, while this narrative is becoming more polished through repetition and selective assimilation of critique, it is also becoming simplified and less interesting. A Foucauldian, archaeological analysis accounts for this development by locating evidence-based management in a broader historical context. This analysis shows how the roots of incoherence can be informed by older exchanges between evidence and narrative.**

Although scholarly debates advance, they do so in a non-linear and sometimes circuitous direction.

(Wood and Budhwar, 2014, p. 2)

In a word, my work is digressive, and it is progressive too, and at the same time ... Digressions incontestably are the sunshine; they are the life, the soul of reading.

(Sterne, 1985, p. 95)

We examine the roots of evidence-based management (EBMgt), adopting a method for framing knowledge contrasting with that associated with the ‘evidence’ in EBMgt. We analyse ostensibly the high-water mark for EBMgt advocates, *The Oxford Handbook of Evidence-based Management* (hereafter *The Handbook*) (Rousseau, 2012), but suggest *The Handbook* and advocates have been unable to innovate theoretically. The movement is more preoccupied with establishing jurisdictional claims than with questions of science. The explanation for a lack of theoretical progress is that at the heart of EBMgt lies incoherence: advocates denigrate narrative and narrative forms of

knowledge,<sup>1</sup> but are themselves relating a narrative about research and practice in management

<sup>1</sup>In EBMgt discourse, ‘narrative’ is usually presented as a straw man that is somehow defective, to be knocked down in favour of something more scientific. This applies most obviously in making the case for the systematic review as a superior form of knowledge production, but also to the pathologizing of managers who resist evidence in the form of scientific findings, and more widely still to the idea that particular cases and circumstances should always be subordinated to an evidence base. Madhavan and Mahoney (2012, p. 85) call on Egger, Schneider and Smith’s (1998) (here false) dichotomy, ‘that formal meta-analysis of observational studies can be misleading and that insufficient attention is often given to heterogeneity does not mean that researchers should return to writing highly subjective narrative reviews’. Frese *et al.* (2014, p. 99) state, ‘Narrative literature reviews put together the literature in an unsystematic and often biased way’ (both documents that are themselves narrative reviews). Pfeffer and Sutton (2006, p. 4), in a book that contains many excellent and illustrative stories, set severe limits on when stories are acceptable: ‘Good stories have their place in an evidence-based world, in suggesting hypotheses, augmenting other (often quantitative) research, and rallying people who will be affected by a change’. Giluk and Rynes-Weller (2012, p. 141), at the same time as trying to address

studies (Morrell, 2008). This narrative depends on a simplistic comparison between management and medicine, and the corollary, narrow constructions of evidence (Learmonth, 2008).

An unwavering, unreflective commitment to this narrative means that advocates are repeating something that is becoming less interesting. Another consequence of this unwavering commitment is that advocates are unable to engage with criticisms, and instead have to treat even fundamental problems as mere digressions. Using Foucault's concept of archaeological excavation (Burrell, 1988; Foucault, 2002a, 2002b; Heracleous, 2006), the paper excavates EBMgt by situating both evidence and narrative in a broader historical context. Doing so shows how the roots of incoherence lie in older exchanges between evidence and narrative. Instead of denigrating narrative and narrative forms of knowledge, the paper argues for equivalence between evidence and narrative or, rather, for recognizing narrative as evidence, and evidence as narrative. In doing so, it incorporates distinctive features of narrative and uses digression not to avoid problems with EBMgt, but to surface them.

## Evidence-based management

The evidence-based approach has had advocates and critics; with some suggesting the need for dialogue between these camps: see Morrell (2012) and Tourish (2013) for recent reviews. Critics are not against evidence per se, but problematize the construction of evidence within EBMgt. An influential paper in the *British Journal of Management* (Tranfield, Denyer and Smart, 2003) proposed the evidence-based approach as a contribution to

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the problem that practitioners resist research findings, acknowledge that people, 'have a strong preference for anecdotal evidence ... narratives (such as stories and anecdotes) are how we make sense of the world ... when it comes to stories versus statistics, people generally prefer the stories'. Anecdotes (see Rousseau, 2006) are frequently the basis for appeals to use EBMgt, yet these are at the base of a hierarchy of evidence. Denigration of narrative is a concern felt by critics of evidence-based medicine, 'the evidence of testimony or opinion has been identified as dirt on the lens of science, which [evidence-based medicine] has been created to remove, and its methods are such as to eliminate the complexity of individual variation' (Roberts, 2000, p. 432).

several important debates in management studies (Tranfield and Starkey, 1998). Prominent among these are rigour/relevance (Grey, 2001; Starkey and Madan, 2001; Weick, 2001), the two modes of knowledge production (Huff and Huff, 2001; also MacLean, MacIntosh and Grant, 2002), and the status of management knowledge and management practice (Hatchuel, 2001; Pettigrew, 2001). These remain pertinent to *British Journal of Management* readers' interests (van Aken, 2005; Hodgkinson and Starkey, 2011; Thorpe *et al.*, 2011; Willmott, 2012; Learmonth, Lockett and Dowd, 2012), but little theoretical progress has been made by advocates of EBMgt.

We can make this claim because later iterations have incorporated changes that speak to some omissions – explicit consideration of ethics is now 'one of the four fundamental activities' (Rousseau, 2012, p. 4), while it was absent in both (Tranfield, Denyer and Smart, 2003) and Rousseau (2006). However, in *The Handbook* we see a distilled version of the same central messages mobilizing critics: narrative relegated to a ghetto category; EBMgt as 'the' answer; the value of technique; the need for commensuration of knowledge; and the lack of managers' enthusiasm or engagement with EBMgt being exclusively, or principally, a failing of practitioners (Clegg, 2005; Fox, 2003; Hammersley, 2001; Hope, 2004; Learmonth, 2008; Morrell, 2008).

## An archaeological perspective

To continue to develop this point, it is helpful to introduce two interdependent concepts from Foucault: 'discursive formation' and 'excavation'. 'Discursive formation' is a useful way to interrogate the roots of any intellectual movement, school or regime (Foucault, 2002a, 2002b). A discursive formation is a 'general system of thought' (Foucault, 2002b, p. 83), underpinned by shared rules and understandings that govern 'emergence, delimitation, and specification' (Foucault, 2002a, p. 49); such a system 'defines the conditions that make a controversy or problem possible' (Foucault, 2002b, p. 83). Discursive formations evolve over time, as currents of thought establish the 'conditions necessary for the appearance of an object of discourse, the historical conditions required if one is to "say anything" about it' (Foucault, 2002a, p. 49). Discursive formations are more than simply a way of

looking at, and talking about, the world. They are a space, a set of possibilities and constraints about what we are, in a sense, allowed to say. Excavation is how we gain access to the contours of a discursive formation, in an attempt to situate social and intellectual categories in history, and to unearth their aetiology and foundations, though it is in some sense a paradoxical exercise, since we cannot step outside time. We are all historically situated and locked into talking about phenomena from a fixed point of view.

To give a brief example, Foucault's (2009) *History of Madness* identifies that madness is not something that can be categorized as an absolute – as a medical or religious, or philosophical phenomenon. Instead, it is a product and residue of history, of institutions, social formations and of cultural epochs and their transition through different phases. Indeed, the categories of mental illness have been greatly expanded with each subsequent *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, not because there is now a higher proportion of people with mental health problems, but because of the professionalization of therapists, the realities of state funding of treatments that only apply to 'recognized' illnesses, and simply medical fashion (an example of mimetic isomorphism). The expansion of illness categories engenders its own evidence and brings about its own reality; an expanded list of mental illnesses frames a larger set of actions as abnormal, and individuals as mentally ill. Excavation concerns itself with the 'historical construction of meaning' (Khalifa, 2009, p. xiv). In the *History of Madness* (Foucault, 2009), excavation traces the legacy and influence of power in shaping and producing social categories. From this perspective, 'evidence' in EBMgt is also something with a history. It is not something that is in any sense transcendental, nor is it the result of any kind of gradual discovery or progressive understanding that we might associate with models of scientific progress. Instead, it is something that has emerged as a consequence of shifts in shared ways of representing social phenomena.

Using Foucault's language in a local and narrow way, and representing the evidence-based approach to management as a discursive formation, part of our argument is that little theoretical progress has been made because the Tranfield, Denyer and Smart (2003) paper was instrumental in setting the parameters for this formation (Foucault, 2002b). Using Foucault's language in

a broader way, we could locate EBMgt in the context of empiricism. Evidence-based management can be seen as deriving from empiricism in at least two senses: first, in its emphasis on evidence based on experience (in that sense seen as a posteriori knowledge, rather than a priori, conceptual or abstract knowledge independent of experience); second, in terms of the conception of evidence as something that can be measured, that can be additive, and that can be systematized or integrated across discrete sources or experiments because it is already defined and collected in a standardized, homogenized manner. In both these senses, EBMgt operates within the grander discursive formation of empiricism. Indeed, this is also a fruitful way in which to locate the Tranfield, Denyer and Smart (2003) paper and doing so helps to excavate the contours of 'evidence' as the foundational concept of EBMgt.

#### *Excavating evidence*

The Tranfield, Denyer and Smart (2003) paper, in structure and intent, is an argument prosecuted in the best traditions of empiricism, with a characteristically scientific and progressive title: 'Towards a methodology for developing evidence-informed management knowledge by means of systematic review' (Tranfield, Denyer and Smart, 2003). Rather than intended as negative, by 'the best traditions of Empiricism' is meant the paper uses purposive, reasoned argument to develop a proposal for empirical research, for consideration by a scientific community. In doing so, it follows sustained engagement with some important questions in the philosophy of science. Again, rather than being intended as negative, 'characteristically scientific and progressive' is meant to signal an association with empiricist ideals.

The foundations of empiricism lie in the work of the 17th-century philosopher John Locke (Russell, 1984; Woolhouse, 2005, 2007). Locke gives the following account of his project, from the introductory 'Epistle to readers' in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Locke, 1690/1990):

The commonwealth of learning is not at this time without master-builders, whose mighty designs, in advancing the sciences, will leave lasting monuments to posterity ... in an age that produces such masters as ... the incomparable Mr Newton ... it is ambition enough to be employed as an under-labourer in

clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way of knowledge.

It is because of Locke that philosophy, in relation to scientific questions, is sometimes said to play one of two broad roles. The first role, in keeping with the traditions of empiricism, is as an under-labourer for science. The under-labourer allegory is a rich one when we consider the role and intended benefits of the evidence-based approach. Evidence-based management is retrospective ('evidence' has already happened) and less likely to lead to theoretical innovation, but, done well and applied to appropriate questions, it can be a valuable, ground-clearing exercise: building on the work of others, helpfully organizing what has already gone before, prior to guiding research or informing an intervention. This chimes with the strident title of Pfeffer and Sutton's (2006) *Hard Facts, Dangerous Halftruths, and Total Nonsense*, with Tranfield, Denyer and Smart's (2003, p. 220) goal of 'developing and enhancing the quality of management reviews and ensuring that they are practitioner and context sensitive', with Briner, Denyer and Rousseau's (2009) ambition of 'concept clean-up time', and with Rousseau's (2006, p. 260) emphasis on 'reliable and valid information when making managerial and organizational decisions'.

The second role that philosophy can play in relation to scientific questions is to support critique. This is what motivates many critics of EBMgt. Critics have no universal prejudice against the methods and techniques underpinning or associated with EBMgt (meta-analysis, systematic reviews, replication). These are a staple in applied psychology, and self-evidently have their place (Lucas, Morrell and Posard, 2013; Morrell and Lucas, 2012). Nor do critics have a universal prejudice against positivist research or work in the empiricist tradition. They are not against these things, or against evidence. What critics resist is homogenization and the idea that, consequently, EBMgt is a threat to pluralism (Learmonth, 2008).

The schism between these two roles – under-labourer or critic – can usefully be traced to Locke. This is not simply because he coined the under-labourer metaphor – but because in his work we find the first attempt to apply the principles of the experimental, hard sciences to social science, and to the first empirical theory of mind. If one believes that the goal and methods of the natural sciences are always analogues for the social sciences, the

under-labourer metaphor works. If not, the comparison awakens the critic.

## Digressions from ontology

One thing the Tranfield, Denyer and Smart (2003) paper does more explicitly than subsequent advocates is comprehensively list ontological differences between the types of phenomena medicine and management study (see also Grey, 2004; Hewison, 1997, 2004; Walshe and Rundall, 2001). In doing so, it maps out their consequently different characteristics as fields of inquiry. Drawing on Tranfield and Starkey (1998), it describes management research as:

'soft' rather than 'hard' 'applied' rather than 'pure', 'rural' rather than 'urban', and 'divergent' rather than 'convergent' [while] medical research enjoys considerable and extensive epistemological consensus, this is untrue of management research, in general. (p. 212)

Following this discussion, the paper incorporates a page-long table, with 19 dimensions each represented by a dichotomy between 'medical science as an applied field of study stemming from the biological sciences, and management research as an applied field with strong connections to the social sciences' (Tranfield, Denyer and Smart, 2003, pp. 212–213). Writers subsequently advocating EBMgt in *The Handbook* have digressed from such questions. They have turned away from a difficult conversation about these epistemological differences relating to research towards a simpler conversation about differences relating to practice, and about the nature of medicine and management as professions. For example, Barends, ten Have and Huisman (2012, p. 39) warn against any critics who assert 'that evidence-based practice ... is not possible because management is not a profession'. But, they are creating and battling an imaginary opponent, because (as Tranfield, Denyer and Smart, 2003 show) the problems of comparing management to medicine run much wider and deeper than questions of comparative professional status or practice (Grey, 2004).

The role that this imaginary opponent plays in advancing the argument for EBMgt is in helping to swap difficult questions of ontology for easier questions of jurisdiction. Since Tranfield, Denyer and Smart's (2003) account, simplified analogies

based on practice are a recurrent theme in EBMgt discourse: for instance, in Latham (2009, p. ix), 'few of us would expect a neurosurgeon to remove a brain tumour ... by drawing on intuition alone' and throughout Rousseau's Presidential address (Rousseau, 2006). Rousseau's opening chapter to *The Handbook* also promotes this view (Rousseau, 2012, pp. 19–27 *passim*):

Not being a formal profession, management has not been subject to the forces in place in other fields ... Mainstreaming new professional practices takes time. An entire generation of managers educated to use and access evidence may be needed before organizations make widespread use of behavioural science ... The professional field we call management is still in its infancy.

Yet the central problem facing EBMgt is not whether enough people can be trained and educated to follow its principles, it is whether these principles are appropriate in the first place. At the same time as being simplified in terms of the comparison with medicine, EBMgt discourse has been more simplistic about the relationship to practice, predicated on scrutinizing the failings and responsibilities of managers (Giluk and Rynes-Weller, 2012, p. 132). The overly simplistic comparison with medicine and the stock character of the reluctant, untrained or unwilling manager both serve to establish jurisdiction and support territorial claims. In this way, digression underpins promotional activities as well as commodification through licensing, accreditation, training, certification, and schooling, as a manifesto-like opening paper from the recent special issue indicates:

Given that management (unlike medicine) does not require managers or graduating MBAs to pass standardized exams, the medical experience suggests that the most practical ways of increasing the coverage of EBMgt in business schools may be to (1) build a larger cadre of instructors willing and able to teach it (a goal of this special issue), and (2) push for its inclusion in accreditation criteria. (Rynes, Rousseau and Barends, 2014, p. 313)

While specialization can support jurisdictional claims, it can narrow our collective scope to address social problems if we fail to make innovations in theory. Academic schools gather momentum by establishing consensus, but they also need to build in novelty to sustain the interest of the

academic community. This resonates with concerns by Dunne and Martin (2006, p. 517) about the role of business schools: 'we are in a period of diminishing returns to research ... because we have ploughed away at figuring out everything within narrow disciplines and the only way we can study those narrow disciplines is to assume away all the complexity and make them narrower and narrower' (in Hodgkinson and Starkey, 2011, p. 365). Lefebvre's play on the metaphor of the field is appropriate here: 'each specialization stakes out its own particular mental and social space [the] sectioning-off of a "field"'. The field yields 'a permanent niche' in which the specialist can 'curl up happily' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 107).

The boundaries of fields, i.e. discursive formations, set the perimeters of a space where knowledge can be cultivated and taken to market. Evidence-based management, owing to a lack of theoretical innovation, is becoming this type of field – characterized by questions relating to territory rather than scientific curiosity. This is a narrative that depends on digression and follows this trajectory: problem > digression > jurisdictional claims > rent claiming (see Table 1).

Table 1 shows these processes at work by considering how the story set out in Tranfield, Denyer and Smart (2003) has been simplified in *The Handbook*, and in editorial comments in *Academy of Management Learning and Education (AMLE)* (Bartunek, 2012, 2014). Italics are direct quotes – points in Tranfield, Denyer and Smart (2003) (column 1) have been simplified in *The Handbook* (column 2) to support specialization (column 3), jurisdictional claims (column 4) and the prospect of 'curling up happily' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 107) or rent claiming (column 5).

## Digressions from the political economy of research

Specialist knowledge and territorial claims are one part of the process of establishing rent claims. These claims also need to be accompanied by practices driven by homogenization, because that is necessary in order to support relations of exchange. This is why the mechanisms of commensuration and aggregation in the evidence-based approach are so important. Having a common metric for scientific work, and being able to accumulate 'evidence' supports the commodification of

Table 1. Digression from basic problems supporting the trajectory: specialization&gt;jurisdiction&gt;rent claiming

Problem	Digression	Enables specialization by	Enables jurisdictional claims by	Rent claiming
Key ontological differences between management research and medical science	<i>hindrances that block the further development of [EBMgt] are the same hindrances that blocked the development of Evidence-Based Medicine.</i> (Barends, ten Have and Huisman, 2012, p. 25)	Replacing concerns over ontological differences between medicine and management, for comparisons in terms of professional practice	Staking out a territorial claim, based on professionalization of practice rather than scientific knowledge	<i>seeking out evidence-informed consultants and scholars as contacts [helps] the individual practitioner deepen ... expertise as an evidence-based professional.</i> (Rousseau, 2012, p. 18) <i>among the solutions offered by consulting organizations ... is 'fact-based' decision-making, with the implicit promise that expensive consultants will provide ... better strategic decisions.</i> <i>The consultants may very well be on to something here: evidence may be just the antidote.</i> (Madhavan and Mahoney, 2012, p. 84) <i>MBA as well as DBA programs should include rigorous training in EBMgt, including systematic review and research synthesis.</i> (van Aken and Romme, 2012, p. 56)
Evidence alone is often insufficient and incomplete; translation ... is not unproblematic	<i>after being exposed to relevant research, practicing managers may disbelieve, dismiss, or simply ignore the findings. What are the underlying sources of such behavior?</i> (Giluk and Rynes-Weller, 2012, p. 132)	Pathologizing managers and imposing a power imbalance, based on comparative understanding of the evidence-based approach and associated techniques	Cementing differences in power chances that translate into inequalities in forms of capital (expertise); these can be commodified	<i>Formal training, directed reading and developing a network of managers acquire this knowledge.</i> (Rousseau, 2012, p. 72) <i>The issue ... is not so much that managers do not undertake or value evidence, but they appear not well oriented to turning to the academic community for support.</i> (Spetcher-Bocija and Adams, 2012, p. 294) <i>There is ... a center for evidence-based management, (see <a href="http://www.cEBMgta.org/">http://www.cEBMgta.org/</a>).</i> (AMLE Associate Editor and CEMBa member, Bartunek, 2012, p. 684) <i>After reading the essay, I wondered if there are other resources available to instructors who may also wish to teach using evidence-based approaches. I found that the Center for Evidence-Based Management (<a href="http://www.cEBMgta.org/resources-and-tools/">http://www.cEBMgta.org/resources-and-tools/</a>) has several.</i> (Bartunek, 2014, p. 102)

knowledge. To return to Locke's metaphor, in the social sciences, when specialization, homogenization and commodification of knowledge happen, movements become the under-labourer for capital not science.

For this critique to have purchase, it does not need to be anywhere near as grand as to call capitalism into question. All it needs to do is show tensions between the figure of the under-labourer and their pursuit of knowledge, and the figure of the specialist and their pursuit of rent (see Table 1). Digression from basic ontological questions promotes codification: of things that are uncodifiable (ontological differences between medicine and social science) or tacit (situated judgement and expertise), and hence it supports processes of commodification. To continue to entertain the idea that there are ontological differences (which are irresolvable and incommensurable) would be problematic, because it is a stumbling block. Instead, comparison in terms of professional practice is safer, because it apparently acknowledges explicit difference, but in a way that supports jurisdictional claims, and boosts legitimacy by rhetorical attachment to a higher-prestige profession, physician envy rather than physics envy.

In contrast to comparisons with medicine as practice, which pepper *The Handbook*, descriptions of ontological differences between medicine and management are hard to see. There is one parenthetical reference to the ontological diversity of management and organization studies (Speicher-Bocija and Adams, 2012, p. 301), with only the two egregiously critical chapters (Hodgkinson, 2012; Hornung, 2012) identifying this issue as problematic for the evidence-based approach. Jelley, Carroll and Rousseau (2012, p. 348) refer to these differences in an interesting way:

We have introduced students, albeit briefly, to philosophical issues regarding the nature of knowledge, and different ontological and epistemological perspectives ... Even brief introductions alert students to the idea that they may encounter different, valuable perspectives during their searches for the best available evidence.

This digressive style is like that of the colonial tourist, for whom historical curiosities are identified on the way to an agreed destination – where 'the best' evidence is. Because *The Handbook* has swapped questions of ontological differences for comparisons about practice, what a tour such as

this overlooks is the entire, principal and express purpose of some 'ontological and epistemological perspectives'. Many critical theorists would explicitly and avowedly deny the validity of any claims to 'best available evidence' (Hornung, 2012). The digressive 'brief introduction' on the way to 'best available evidence' conjured up a strange image: how would someone conduct such a tour? Consistent with our perspective of narrative as evidence, we present a narrative-inspired episode as a way to highlight the incoherences within current conceptions of EBMgt:

FADE IN:

INT. LECTURE THEATRE, DAY.

A LECTURER stands behind a PEDESTAL, faced by banks of occupied, tiered seats. Sunken spots arranged like dots on dice flood the softly carpeted, dark room. Behind them is a mammoth SCREEN on which is projected the words 'Evidence Based Management 101.'

LECTURER

OK, everyone ready?

Some STUDENTS sit up, rows of faces, many hidden behind glowing APPLES.

LECTURER (CONT'D)

Good morning, now before we start ...

They CLICK on a hand-held remote, so the screen is captioned 'CRITICAL THEORY 1'

LECTURER (CONT'D)

Right, some people, appalled by the horrors of the last century would want us to fight and resist, as a matter of deep, existential belief anytime we ever heard people talk about science, facts and human affairs in the same breath. Got that?

SILENCE.

CLICK. 'CRITICAL THEORY 2'

LECTURER (CONT'D)

Moving on, some others suggest we should resist some forms of Capitalism including the commodification of things like culture and knowledge, and that we should engage in perpetual critique, because otherwise we become enmeshed in relations of exchange and this alienates us from our true nature as human beings. Got that?

SILENCE.

LECTURER (CONT'D)

OK? Moving on, let us start by looking at this hierarchy of evidence.

The screen shows a PYRAMID, captioned HIERARCHY OF EVIDENCE, by the pyramid an ARROW points from its base ‘‘Anecdotes Or Opinions’’ to the top ‘‘Systematic Review’’.

The screenplay is quite an extrapolation from the preceding quote. Still, it seems to echo what happens in *The Handbook's* dedicated section, ‘Ethics and stakeholder considerations’ (Rousseau, 2012, pp. 14–15). This opens with a quote by Peter Drucker, and directly underneath is a quote from Theodor Adorno. It then discusses an example of a ‘tough call’ between ‘a huge airstrike that might kill hundreds of civilians’ and a ‘smaller attack ... killing dozens of militants’. This example is used to illustrate the need to consider stakeholders when making decisions. It is difficult to follow the connection to EBMgt at this point, and even more difficult to see the relevance of the quote from Adorno. Adorno opposed the commodification of knowledge and was optimistic about the generative power of art and aesthetics; one can safely assume he would feel exceedingly uncomfortable with a hegemonic discourse such as EBMgt; invoking his authority seems conspicuously out of place. But, what this all indicates is that the dedicated section on ethics, like the ‘brief introductions’ on the way to ‘best available evidence’, is a digression.

In the course of repeating and refining the story, occasional digression is how critique has been assimilated. This is also the role the two ending, critical chapters in *The Handbook* play: digressions from the narrative that can be bracketed, but also identified to demonstrate that critical perspectives are entertained at the same time as uncoupled from the real business of *The Handbook*. Hodgkinson (2012) and Hornung (2012) offer intrinsically valuable contributions. However, in their setting they are treated as rhetorically useful digressions, rather than incorporated into debate; their role is identified in a recent review: ‘To its credit, this volume embraces the criticism of EBMgt with two thoughtful concluding chapters’ (Sitkin and Rader, 2014, pp. 2–3). But is ‘the’ criticism ‘embraced’? Criticisms of EBMgt are multiple and diverse, and movements are not typically criticized most heavily from within. Although embraced in

the literal sense of being within the covers of *The Handbook*, the introduction digresses from these ‘critical views’, repackaging and sanitizing them (see Table 2).

Here is how the role of the chapters is described in *The Handbook's* introduction (p. xxvii): ‘Presenting critical views at this early stage serves to remind us that potential unintended consequences must be addressed before EBMgt can fully realize its full promise’. The end result, where the evidence-based approach remains the one best way, will only have been slightly delayed by such criticisms – these are temporary digressions. There is such certainty, it implies prescience, correcting unintended consequences before they even happen. There is no doubt that problems will be addressed, that EBMgt is an unadulterated good, and that the end destination is inevitable.

It is interesting to speculate about the implied trajectory in the phrase ‘at this early stage’. It suggests such contributions will not be presented in future, or perhaps be the basis for ‘brief introductions’ satirized in the screenplay above. This framing of the chapters does not reflect either Hodgkinson (2012) or Hornung (2012), who are also collectively mis-described as expansionist: ‘Both critiques suggest constructive ways of balancing and expanding the influence of constituents so that EBMgt’s benefits are more broadly shared’ (p. xxviii). Instead, they are both conspicuously cautionary and critical.

Having excavated ‘evidence’, let us now excavate ‘narrative’.

## Excavating narrative

Narrative has far older, pre-historical, roots than the Lockean account of evidence. However, it is instructive, in trying to discern a point of first contact in terms of exchanges between evidence and narrative, to look at one aspect of the historical reception of Locke’s work. This can usefully be traced to a novel stretching the limits of narrative: *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy: Gentleman* (from now on: *Tristram Shandy*) (Sterne, 1985). Ostensibly a biographical novel, it is largely about the impossibility of writing a biographical novel, and subverts both the form of the book and the genre of biography. Contrary to its title, the book does not ever really describe Tristram Shandy’s life or give his opinions. Sterne

Table 2. *Digressions in The Handbook (Rousseau, 2012)*

Verbatim extracts from respective chapters	Re-packaged and re-described in the Introduction as
<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>the Frankfurt School [show] 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.</p> <p>Rousseau and colleagues have countered the criticisms outlined above with rather technical arguments ... 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.</p> <p>at the core of the radical disagreement on the concept of EBMgt are incompatible paradigms regarding the nature of scientific rationality and progress.</p>	<p>Hodgkinson explores the politics of evidence and ways to reconcile threats that use of evidence might pose to the interests of various constituencies.</p>
<p>evidence-based management is an inherently political project, which risks creating an illusion of rationality, a multilayered façade masking underlying fundamental differences of interpretation, purpose, and power among the various stakeholders situated on both sides of the academic-practitioner/policy divide.</p> <p>failure to recognize and accommodate theoretical perspectives and research methods antithetical to EBMgt as legitimate forms of management inquiry and render these issues explicitly discussable would constitute an unacceptable form of hegemony.</p> <p>the fear that the EBMgt community could come to dominate the field is not an unreasonable concern.</p> <p>the evidence-based practice movement must ultimately accommodate on a more systematic basis the important influence of power and politics in organizational life, rather than downplaying them as it currently does, treating political problems as a minor by-product of an otherwise radical improvement to organizational-decision processes.</p>	<p>Hodgkinson explores the politics of evidence and ways to reconcile threats that use of evidence might pose to the interests of various constituencies.</p>

collapses, stops and stretches time throughout; one character, Toby, takes his pipe out to speak, begins saying, 'I think ...' and we only get to read the second half of his sentence 31 pages later (in the 1985 edition); another is informed by letter of an event having happened, but at the time of reading the letter the event lies 15 days in the future. When we skip from chapter 23 to chapter 25 (volume IV) the narrator explains there was no chapter 24 because he tore it out. At one point, Sterne includes a blank page for the reader to draw one of the characters on, based on a cursory description, providing the reader with 'one page, at least, within thy covers, which MALICE will not blacken and which IGNORANCE cannot misrepresent' (Sterne, 1985, p. 452, original capitals); at another, he draws a squiggle on the page to show a character who is himself illustrating an action, 'a flourish with his stick' (Ricks, 1985, p. 8).

What does this have to do with evidence? The digressive style that Sterne was promoting is not simply humorous play, it needs to be seen in terms of the broader political and ideological context for *Tristram Shandy*, where narrative is key to understanding Sterne's wider contribution to 18th-century life and thought; and to our lives and thoughts since. Sterne's digressive style makes *Tristram Shandy* a landmark, as it rails against the tradition that stories should have a beginning, a middle and an end. It is problematic to say where *Tristram Shandy* (the narrator) or *Tristram Shandy* (the novel) begins. In terms of the narrator, Tristram, his 'adult opinions and circumstances are set side by side with the fragmented account of his conception, birth, and childhood' (Briggs, 1985, p. 511). One of the most famous passages describes the timing of *Tristram Shandy's* conception, an act which coincides exactly with *Tristram's* mother asking his father to wind the clock up – both these domestic matters were regularly carried out on Sundays. *Tristram Shandy* the novel 'does not quite begin or end at any specific place' (Briggs, 1985, p. 515–516). After about 300 pages, Sterne has *Tristram Shandy* explain: 'from this point properly ... the story of my LIFE and OPINIONS sets out ... I have but been clearing the ground' (Sterne, 1985, p. 336, original capitals) although, as mentioned, he never does quite get round to discussing those.

Iser (1988) identifies it as the first novel to attack our concept of 'time': 'permanent digression [is] the vital counter-movement through which writing defends itself against the narrative process'

(Iser, 1988, p. 80). This style, the kind only narrative can afford, comes some 230 years before parallels in Burrell's iconoclastic, *Pandemonium: Towards a Retro-Organization Theory*, a text designed to be 'disruptive, randomizing and reliant upon the reader's creativity ... to underplay the importance of developing an argument in a linear, logical way' (Burrell, 1997, pp. 1–27 *passim*), and, consequently, a warning of the 'dangers of Enlightenment linearity' (Hancock and Tyler, 2005, p. 27). Sterne had a comparable goal, and one that helps us understand historical tensions between evidence and narrative. *Tristram Shandy* satirizes Locke's ideas of empiricism. Pierce (1996, p. 8) calls it the 'most powerful critique of Locke's theory of knowledge'. In his *Essay*, Locke's main assertion was that sensory experience was the basis for all knowledge. The *Essay* lies at the beginnings of our modern theory of mind and is the basis for the discipline of psychology. Locke begins the most famous passage in his *Essay* by asking:

Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any *ideas*: How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? (Locke, 1690/1990, p. 33, original emphasis)

He continues:

To this I answer, in one word, from *experience*. In that all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives itself. Our observation employed either, about *external sensible objects* or about the *internal operations of our minds perceived and reflected on by ourselves*, is that which supplies our understandings with all the materials of thinking. These two are the fountains of knowledge, from whence all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring.

For Locke, experience and observation were the bedrock of scientific progress and of human knowledge; observation and analysis were how we learned anything about the world, and what made us human. It is difficult to overstate the weight of Locke's thinking on 18th-century scholarship or social practices such as education and research (Bedard, 2003). His influence was immense, partly because of the brilliance of his theory of knowledge, the basis of Enlightenment thought, and partly because it coincided with a scientific revolution led by Newton. Moreover, it was because Locke's political philosophy happened to be

shared by contemporary elites. Locke's ideas were adopted in the then British constitution, prominent in thinking associated with French revolutionaries, and still underpin elements of governance in contemporary democracies. Within the USA, in the Supreme Court, we see the clearest example of Locke's constitutional advice to separate executive, legislature and judiciary (Russell, 1984; Shovlin, 2000). Even so, Locke's brilliance cast a lot of other ideas into shadow, arguably crushing subsequent innovation and squeezing out scholarly space. Even at the time Sterne was writing, some 70 years after the publication of the *Essay*, narrative seemed to afford the only space where one could truly transgress Lockean thought. The passage referred to earlier, relating Tristram's conception and the winding of the clock, is a pregnant way to poke fun at Locke's ideas of the blank slate, of association and the linearity of time implicit in empiricism. Sterne is asking questions such as: if we are blank slates and products of experience, which experiences are formative and when do our lives begin?

*Tristram Shandy* had its enemies among other narrators: for instance, Samuel Johnson did not question whether it would last, but stated simply it 'did not last' (Ricks, 1985, p. 8). He was already wrong at the time of his review 17 years after *Tristram Shandy* had been published and was enjoying wild success (Douglas and Douglas, 2001, p. viii), but his comically cruel assessment is useful inspiration in considering EBMgt. It may seem strange to suggest the evidence-based movement 'did not last', but as a 'movement' it has not really moved far from Tranfield, Denyer and Smart (2003). The earliest criticisms (Learmonth, 2006) are still unanswered, and advocates are still telling the same exhortatory story. The paradoxical suggestion that EBMgt 'did not last' helps to consider whether Tranfield, Denyer and Smart (2003) was the high-water mark (rather than *The Handbook* or the recent special issue of *AMLE*). It also signals the dangers for advocates of repeating the same old story. What we have in 'evidence-based management' now, as in 2003, is a label that can be a useful banner term to continue prosecuting important and worthwhile debates: rigour/relevance, how we engage with practice; how we conduct and review research – the role of replication, meta-analysis, bias against null results and so on. But the links to evidence-based medicine still indicate an approach that has a

narrow view of evidence, that denigrates narrative as a form of knowledge and is ontologically unsophisticated. This narrative about evidence still faces fundamental problems and, in response, it digresses.

What is lacking in the literature on EBMgt is a revealed appreciation that, first, EBMgt is a narrative and, second, that narrative can be evidence. In a masterful discussion of the field of strategy from a narrative perspective, Barry and Elmes (1997) show that contrary to its apparently non-fictional nature, strategy is at its core a story: both in terms of strategy as a field and in terms of strategy as a manifestation in particular situations. There are many parallels with EBMgt. Materiality, voice, protagonists, plots and readership are essential considerations in establishing credibility in strategy and EBMgt – even though these inherently fictional elements may need to be disguised in pursuit of credibility (Barry and Elmes, 1997). Yes, strategy frameworks employ 'evidence' as input and judgement in the process in order to provide directions for investment and action, but this process is contextual, embedded in a particular historical moment that conditions the role of evidence, and what is accepted as evidence and for what purposes. The same evidence may be interpreted in divergent ways, leading to divergent responses (Trank, 2014). In fact, difference rather than homogenization is the desirable state in strategy (Porter, 1996). Expanding this line of argument, social studies of science (e.g. Latour and Woolgar, 1979) have shown that the process of scientific advancement is one characterized by allegiances, agendas, historicity and serendipity.

Now to the second suggestion, that narrative can be evidence (something that can be the basis for reasonable inferences). Evidence-based management does not deny that narratives are a form of evidence, but places such things as anecdotes, cases, texts, perspectives, statements and other fragments at the bottom of an evidence hierarchy. These are not just evidence though, they are also essential to theory generation: to pushing understanding in ways not currently appreciated and unavailable from pre-existing data and research (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Where needed, this can be done in ways that address traditionally orthodox concerns such as validity and reliability (Gibbert, Ruigrok and Wicki, 2008), making the process palatable and even legitimate to more deductive-minded

scholars. There are many instances where narratives pertaining to a few cases or events, or to isolated ones, have delivered outstanding advances in our understanding. Piaget's studies of his three children formed the foundation of our understanding of child cognitive development; Freud's descriptions of his clients shaped psychotherapy; anthropological studies such as those of Levi Strauss and Malinowski spurred our understanding of how societies develop and function; and atypical cases of pathology often enhance understanding of norms. Indeed, a single disconfirming or unique case can be an extremely powerful form of evidence (Siggelkow, 2007), whereas studies that support statistical generalization may have limited use or be misleading, since they depend on having already made basic assumptions. A systematic review, the highest form of knowledge in EBMgt (Briner and Denyer, 2012) is not likely to deliver new theoretical insights.

Rather than seeing narrative as an inferior category nested within evidence, we have afforded them an equivalence, at times subordinating evidence to narrative – excavating both to show that contemporary debates have their ancestry in older exchanges. At the same time as developing this equivalence, we show ways in which they differ, overlap and intertwine. Evidence-based management avoids engaging with fundamental problems and incoherence and, instead, relies on the narrative technique of digression – as a kind of detour on the way to an agreed destination. But digression in narrative can be an end in itself when it satirizes and disrupts implied linearities in time and form. Here, it is used to problematize a narrow construction of evidence. One implication of this analysis is that the EBMgt project is fatally flawed, since it is impossible at this stage for its advocates to acknowledge, coherently, that it is a narrative. This is not to say EBMgt will not be popular or endure, it is merely to say it will remain unreflective and incoherent – in these senses, EBMgt did not last. A second possibility is that this analysis can help us to view narrative and evidence as entities that can be held in a productive, paradoxical tension (Smith and Lewis, 2011) in the service of something higher, the advancement of knowledge and understanding, both broadly defined. In terms of operationalization, this might lead to mixed methods research and alternatives or complements to systematic reviews; but of course in substance it goes beyond that. It is an acknowledgement of the

value of accepting different epistemologies and ontologies, and the recognition that they can potentially speak to each other rather than past each other (Lee, 1991). To emphasize, we are not trying to assist the EBMgt project, but to promote radically different views on evidence.

## Conclusion

In the works that advocate EBMgt, there is never doubt that problems will be overcome, because the destination has been decided. That critical perspectives are a detour, where arrival is never in doubt, is another feature of EBMgt that makes it more like the under-labourer for capital, than the under-labourer in pursuit of knowledge. The value of a Foucauldian, archaeological perspective is that it encourages us to see our views on 'evidence' and fact as historically contingent. It is not as though we have at last arrived at, or are nearing (Briner and Rousseau, 2011), a place where there is no longer a need to question fundamentals. Foucault also teaches us that, far from being the result of Lockean, empirical science, things such as EBMgt reflect the perspective of a community, and the views of our age. They also come about through the deliberate attempts by people in positions of power to change collective understanding of what terms like 'evidence' mean.

Digressions in the EBMgt narrative are not the types of digression that Sterne employs – where the form of narrative itself is used to show the limits and complexities of evidence, and to reject attempts to subordinate the complexities of being human to a neat story about experience and association. The digressions in the EBMgt narrative reflect a more intensely ideological choice – to assimilate experience and critique in whatever way supports the pursuit of a goal, where the destination has been determined. In this sense, EBMgt is profoundly unscientific.

We do not advocate a free-for-all, anything-counts-as-science position. Standards of validity and plausibility, logic and rigor can apply to different forms of evidence, and can have particular meanings and uses with respect to these forms of evidence. What we oppose is the gradual development of an adjudicator or regulator of what can achieve the exalted status of 'evidence' in social science, since inevitably this will be against the best interests of both knowledge and society. If an

EBMgt paradigm, as currently conceived, was regulating the conduct of social science, countless ground-breaking developments would not have occurred, or would not have had any legitimacy if they had occurred. To take a familiar example, Gareth Morgan (1986) would have struggled to show how his metaphors, which have had an immense impact in organization theory, were additive in any way, or that they reliably led to the same conclusions when applied to ambiguous social situations. Many other rich ways of re-describing and re-imagining social phenomena that could reap huge insights would also be dismissed and devalued, from Bourdieu, Marx, Freud, Latour and countless others.

In passing, it is interesting to speculate on how the career of the 20th-century colossus Wittgenstein would be evaluated under an evidence-based regime. Wittgenstein's (1955) move from his early, positivist writings in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* towards the generative insights demonstrated in his later work of philosophical investigations (Wittgenstein, 1968) would be regarded as a profoundly retrograde step, rather than be seen as the celebrated, second thought revolution that underpins contemporary understanding of language. Foucault's masterful *Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault, 2002b) would be seen as having no value as science. Yet this is a book that has energized intellectuals and the mass public alike, inspiring profound and searching questions about the very nature of science. By doing so, it stands as the paradigm example of how to engage non-specialists in a conversation about research. These are gigantic and glaring counterfactuals, but if EBMgt becomes more popular and prevalent, we risk relegating a plethora of similarly minded contributions – which demonstrate or depend on innovation, serendipity, novelty, idiosyncrasy – to second-class forms of knowledge, if they are counted as knowledge at all.

A pluralist approach to knowledge is something to be preserved and cherished, particularly when rules are being noisily laid down about what is legitimate, valid, useful or enlightening knowledge. Pluralism is part of good science as well as part of the human spirit, and these things motivate our critique. Conversely, the narrowing of research horizons to sanctioned forms of knowledge overshadowed by hegemonic discourse is dangerous. The dangers are that genuinely new perspectives will be drowned out, or never emerge, that advances in our

understanding will be marginal and predictable, and that scope for insight into the human condition will be compromised.

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Kevin Morrell is Head of the Strategy and International Business Group at Warwick Business School. He specializes in governance and public administration and has published more than 30 articles in journals including the *British Journal of Management*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Accounting Organizations and Society*, *Public Administration Review*, *Human Relations* and *Public Administration* (where he won the Haldane Prize in 2012).

Mark Learmonth is Professor of Organization Studies at Durham University. He earned his PhD at the University of Leeds. His research interests include the personal consequences of work and the organization of health care. His research has been published in many journals, including *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Human Relations*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Organization Studies*, *Public Administration* and *Sociology of Health & Illness*.

Loizos Heracleous is Professor of Strategy at Warwick Business School. He earned his PhD at the University of Cambridge. His research interests include organizational aspects of strategy, organizational discourse and corporate governance. His research has been published in more than 60 articles in journals including the *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Strategic Management Journal* and *Management Information Systems Quarterly*.