Deconstructing the evidence-based discourse in health sciences: truth, power and fascism

Unbelievably, this prime piece of postmodernist bollocks is even worse than Barry's paper!

Download the full paper here (if you can bear it). Dave Holmes RN PhD, Stuart J Murray PhD, Amelie Perron RN PhD(cand) and Genevieve Rail PhD, Int J Evid Based Health 2006; 4: 180, 186.

The authors of this paper are from Department of English, Ryerson University Toronto, Ontario, Canada, and Faculty of Health Sciences, School of Nursing, University of Ottawa, Ottawa. Ryerson University is an ex-polytechnic which became a university in 1971. It runs courses in Traditional Chinese Medicine (but, at least, no homeopathy). In Canada, as here, it seems that such institutions are the first to damage their new reputations by encouraging gobbledygook like this.

Stuart J. Murray lists his interests as "phenomenology, Foucault, bioethics, biopolitics, and psychoanalysis. Currently researching a project on posthuman "life" in digital and mediatized contexts." In his contribution to the McLuhan International Festival of the Future he says (apropos of McLuhan) "We will be frustrated if we look here for a firm, communicable content." Well that's very true.

Abstract

Background Drawing on the work of the late French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari, the objective of this paper is to demonstrate that the evidence-based movement in the health sciences is outrageously exclusionary and dangerously normative with regards to scientific knowledge. As such, we assert that the evidence-based movement in health sciences constitutes a good example of microfascism at play in the contemporary scientific arena.

Objective The philosophical work of Deleuze and Guattari proves to be useful in showing how health sciences are colonised (territorialised) by an all-encompassing scientific research paradigm “that of post-positivism” but also and foremost in showing the process by which a dominant ideology comes to exclude alternative forms of knowledge, therefore acting as a fascist structure.

Conclusion The Cochrane Group, among others, has created a hierarchy that has been endorsed by many academic institutions, and that serves to (re)produce the exclusion of certain forms of research. Because ‘regimes of truth’ such as the evidence-based movement currently enjoy a privileged status, scholars have not only a scientific duty, but also an ethical obligation to deconstruct these regimes of power.

Unfortunately, the nature of this scientific fascism makes it attractive to all of us the subjected. In Foucault’s words: the major enemy, the strategic adversary is fascism. . . . And not only historical fascism, the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini which was able to mobilize and use the desire of the masses so effectively but also the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us. (p. xiii) Fascism does not originate solely from the outside; it is a will within us to desire, although often unwittingly, a life of domination. Such a “lovable” fascism requires little more than the promise of success (grants, publications, awards, recognition, etc.) within its system to get us to participate wholeheartedly. Perhaps it is time to think about governing structures that impose their
imperatives (academic, scientific, political, economic) on academics and researchers, and
to ask ourselves what drives us to love fascist and exclusionary structures.

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institutions, and that serves to (re)produce the exclusion of certain forms of knowledge production.
Because EBM, as a “regime of truth”, currently enjoys a privileged status, there exists a scientific
and ethical obligation to deconstruct such regime. Given the privileged relation to knowledge
defining the intellectual mission, intellectuals are well located to deconstruct the ‘truth’ and to
‘speak truth to power’, to use Foucault’s expression. Unfortunately, most would prefer not to hear
alternative, marginalised discourses because the latter tend to expose the very power relations
that create our current situation and prop up those academics/scientists with a vested interest in
the status quo. However, we believe that one of the roles of the intellectual is to decolonise, to
deterritorialise the vast field of health sciences as it is currently mapped out by the EBM.


Final remarks

Critical intellectuals should work towards the creation of a space of freedom (of thought), and as
such, they constitute a concrete threat to the current scientific order in EBHS and
the health sciences as a whole. It is fair to assert that the critical intellectuals are at ‘war’ with those
who have no regards other than for an evidence-based logic. The war metaphor speaks to the
‘critical and theoretical revolt’ that is needed to disrupt and resist the fascist order of scientific
knowledge development.

Raymond Tallis, in his review of Intellectual Impostures, said

“The profound significance of S & B’s [Sokal and Bricmont’s] wonderfully written, deeply
passionate and authentically erudite book, is that, by shining real light on the fake jewellery of the
leading postmodernist theorists, it has shown what has happened to academic humanities over the
last thirty years under the influence of individuals like Kristeva for whom intellectual legerdemain
has become a way of life.”

“Academics intending to continue as postmodern theorists in the interdisciplinary humanities after
S&B should first read Intellectual Impostures and ask themselves whether adding to the quantity of
confusion and untruth in the world is a good use of the gift of life or an ethical way to earn a living.
After S & B, they may feel less comfortable with the glamorous life that can be forged in the wake
of the founding charlatans of postmodern Theory. Alternatively, they might follow my friend Roger
into estate agency — though they should check out in advance that they are up to the moral
rigours of such a profession.”

And it seems that some people still haven’t noticed. But then the abuse of scientific language by people who don’t
understand it (or whose intent is to deceive) has been the mainstay of quackery for several hundred years. Plus
ca change.

What can one say in the face of such gross betrayal of everything we have learned since the enlightenment? I
suppose one simple explanation that its paranoid style, and its imagined conspiracies are all a manifestation of a
giant chip on the shoulder from people who feel that their genius has not been recognised appropriately by those
who fund research. But that is a matter for psychiatrists, not me.

Ben Goldacre, who first drew my attention to this paper, comments on his Badscience site, and has now written
about it in his regular column in the Guardian.
“Even from looking at the title, you just know this academic paper from the September edition of the International Journal of Evidence-based Healthcare is going to be an absolute corker. And it uses the word “fascist” (or elaborate derivatives) 28 times in six pages, . . .”