



Commentary

“Insufficient” but still “necessary”? EBPM’s dangerous leap of faith: Commentary on Porter and O’Halloran (2009)

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In the opening lines of ‘The postmodernist war on evidence-based practice’ (Porter and O’Halloran, 2009), the authors erect a false binary between health care practice ‘informed by research’ and ‘those who argue that there should be no restrictions on the sources of knowledge used by practitioners’. This, the authors submit, is the distinction between the evidence-based approach and the postmodern approach. But nothing could be further from the truth. First, according to this characterisation, the relatively narrow understanding of “research” promulgated by the evidence-based practice movement is set up as the only type of research that *can count* as research. This is empirically false and dangerously misguided. Second, the authors understand postmodern approaches as epistemologically vacuous and as “anything-goes”. This view is also wrong.

It is unsurprising, then, that the paper’s summary of our critical work on evidence-based practice movement (EBPM) is at times misguided, decontextualised. Fine; but let us focus instead on the epistemic stakes, the claims of the paper itself. The paper fails to provide a substantive reflection regarding the limits of EBPM in clinical practice. These limits are acknowledged by the authors, but are not met with solutions or alternatives that would address them. While what the authors contend is not incorrect, it does not contribute anything new to the ongoing debate about the hegemony of EBPM in clinical and research settings. For instance, it is not enough to claim that EBPM is

‘necessary but not sufficient’. How would the authors define and address this insufficiency? How would they reconcile practitioners’ subjection to EBPM with the notion of empowerment? Why do they focus exclusively on the “postmodernist” critique of EBPM? Many clinicians, including physicians and nurses, have argued against the dominance of EBPM in their practice, indicating that the debate is not limited to postmodern scholars but to a larger population (both academic and nonacademic) who problematise this phenomenon. This substantial body of work is ignored by the authors, which suggests that it is not just “postmodernists” whose research cannot count as research, but anyone else whose research is critical of “good research” as defined by EBPM. We soon forsake science for dogma.

Among other things, we are accused of having an “acerbic delivery”, and that this obscures the substantive issues. But how does the evidence-based movement compare? Some of its proponents have lashed out at us in a style that is downright vitriolic. Indeed, the authors pick up certain charges by Goldacre (a self-appointed “expert”) and the bloggers who feed the BadScience website. Here again, the analysis is unbalanced. While the authors make a point of meticulously dissecting our arguments, they fail to do the same with the charges made by Goldacre and his followers, most of whom do not have the courage to identify themselves and their affiliated institutions (this should suffice to exclude them from any academic debate). There are glaring flaws in these arguments (not least the gross, if not wilful, misunderstanding of our use of the term “fascism”), but again, because the authors refuse to problematise these arguments, the paper

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tends to read like a piece of journalism. Furthermore, including thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre in the “post-modernist” camp reveals a lack of understanding, by the authors, of such thinkers, which further undermines the credibility of their analysis.

Finally, in contrast to our apparent obscurantism, the authors suggest rather directly that EBPM addresses “substantive issues” in an apparently neutral and value-free vocabulary, a presumably “objective” language. We have argued clearly that this rhetorical gesture of scientific neutrality (“facts”, “evidence”, “truth”) itself obscures the deeply disavowed power, politics, and subjectivism that lies at the heart of EBPM. The paper’s terribly obscure conclusion that EBPM is “necessary but insufficient” (a formulation common in analytic philosophy) amounts to one thing: that EBPM is necessary—

despite its insufficiencies. The question of “necessity” is foreclosed. This sort of justificatory logic opens onto an epistemological abyss, in the spirit of edicts and declarations of faith. Rather than follow the authors into these mists, we believe that readers would be better off to read the original articles, to problematise the terms of the debate, and to judge for themselves.

Conflict of interest

All authors confirm that there are no actual or potential conflicts of interests.

Reference

Porter, S., O’Halloran, P., 2009. The postmodernist war on evidence-based practice. *International Journal of Nursing Studies* 46 (5), 740–748.