

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Towards an understanding of the politics of 'evidence': a response to Dr Jefferson, MD

Given the mass of evidence, there is no plausible hypothesis but reality. Given the mass of evidence to the contrary, there is no solution but illusion.

Jean Baudrillard¹

Dear Dr Jefferson:

Thank you for your response to our paper. Remarkably, you raise the racist, hateful spectre of lynching. To be clear: we, the authors, are far from an angry lynch mob, real or illusionary. Lynching, in the strongest sense of this term, was a racist murderous practise of the Southern United States until the mid-twentieth century; it sought black submission through terror tactics; and it was often 'legitimated' though perverse appeals to patriotism and divine will. Indeed, the lynching of blacks was often tolerated or even unofficially sanctioned precisely because of an ideological refusal to engage in critical political debate – an unwillingness to interrogate those rigid political hierarchies by which white supremacy was the prevailing 'regime of truth'.

If nothing else, the 'meat' of our paper is not to reduplicate but to expose rigid political hierarchies and to engage in critical political debate. We argued that the evidence-based movement (EBM) is part of a wider political regime of truth; that it relies on potentially dangerous hierarchies, such as the Cochrane taxonomy; and that it ideologically refuses to critique the deeper terms of its own 'legitimacy'. As responsible researchers, we believe it is our ethical and scholarly duty to question the norms and constraints that govern EBM's research paradigm and epistemological commitments. In this regard, it would be mistaken to claim that we are opposed to 'evidence'. We ask deeper and more exigent questions: Within EBM's paradigm, what or who decides what will *count* as evidence? And what are the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of such decisions? Furthermore, what are the agendas that motivate funding agencies in their support of this research? Our arguments are clearly aligned with Denzin's² assertion at the First International Congress of Qualitative Research:

The congress is a call to the international community of qualitative researchers to address the implications of the attempts by federal funding agencies to regulate scientific inquiry by defining what is good science. Around the globe governments are enforcing evidence-based, biomedical models of inquiry. These regulatory activities raise fundamental philosophical epistemological, political and pedagogical issues for scholarship and freedom of speech in the academy. (p. iv)

To be more specific, Dr Jefferson, in your letter you state that the Cochrane Library is a 'database of systematic reviews' and that 'all evidence' is 'synthesised and weighted by its quality'. While you mock our paper for its use of 'jargon-laden' terminology, it is only fair to ask, in turn: what is 'synthesis' and by what standards are these reviews 'systematic'? Moreover, what will qualify as 'quality'? Your declarations of 'pluralism' notwithstanding, the very process by which diverse research is 'organised', ranked, and endorsed as 'systematic' must itself be interrogated. Who decides? You mention the 'friendly debate' over who is 'entitled to vote' for representatives of the Cochrane Collection Steering Group, but this itself is hardly evidence of pluralism and democracy – this group was already highly self-selected. The 'gold' standard for truth according to the Cochrane taxonomy remains the randomised controlled trial. In this manner, research is rigidly hierarchised, e.g. the Cochrane taxonomy denigrates clinical expertise, and similarly, qualitative research based on participants' narratives is 'systematically' ranked lower in value as 'evidence'. To be sure, none of this is to dispute the goodwill or noble intentions of researchers or practitioners; rather, it is to hone in on the deleterious *effects* of their working paradigms and evaluative templates. As an 'international network', the real danger lies in the systemic or global application of such research: paternalistically, it is extended to systems in which it is sometimes woefully inappropriate.

It would be disingenuous to dismiss our argument as unscholarly just because it is controversial and disrupts the status quo. To repeat, we do not wish to do away with 'evidence', to subvert one hierarchy only to replace it with another, more 'utopian', one. The purpose of our critique was to spark epistemological and political debate over the implicit paradigms that impose a dangerously narrow and rigid system of 'truth', and impose it universally. To overlook

the effects of research paradigms and their associated epistemologies is a major flaw in the Cochrane taxonomy.³⁻⁷ Instead, we argue that researchers ought to encourage diverse and pluralistic paradigms and to eschew the rhetoric of the 'average patient', which is potentially totalising. And so while we might agree that the purpose of science is to better man's – and woman's – lot, the critical ethical question that must be debated is: *how?* and *at what cost?*

In your final sentence, Dr Jefferson, you state that you favour 'what works' and 'do not care' about the paradigm itself. But this is to wilfully ignore the real *effects* of the paradigm; in the name of efficiency, it says that the ends justify the means. This is symptomatic of EBM and the Cochrane taxonomy. We contend that such a view promotes a *dangerous* ideology, one that threatens to reproduce the justificatory rhetoric of human pharmaceutical testing in developing nations and of eugenic programmes intended to 'better man's lot', to offer two gruesome instances. This, too, must be admitted as 'evidence', however, repugnant. Research *is* a political enterprise, and we must not recoil from this reality.

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