EVIDENCE, ONE MORE TIME:
TOWARDS A CRITICAL ROLE FOR EVALUATION RESEARCH [?]

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'one more time'

↓

evidence and evidence-based policy and practice:
a discussion since the late 1980s/early 1990s;
extended from medicine to many other professional fields;
a favourite policy-mantra

in some fields EBP has become <u>near-hegemonic</u> (e.g., social work);
some practices appear <u>more resistant</u> to transformation (e.g., education)
EB policy is actually <u>quite difficult</u>

still a need to interrupt the <u>rhetorical power</u> of the idea that interventions in key
professional domains should be based on scientific evidence about 'what works'

research: a functional role or a critical role?

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[1] EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY AND PRACTICE

The Journal of Evidence-Based Medicine; The Journal of Evidence-Based Healthcare; The Journal of Evidence-based Dental practice; Evidence Based Nursing; The Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work; Journal of Evidence Based Health Policy and Management; The International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring; The Journal of Evidence Based Library and Information Practice; The Journal of Evidence-Based Practices for Schools

professions, unlike other areas of work, "lay claim to the possession of specialised knowledge and skill thought to be of value to human life" (Freidson 1994)

what role <u>should</u> evidence play?
what role <u>can</u> evidence play?

can/should evidence replace <u>professional judgement</u>?

the democratic' deficit' of evidence-based policy and practice (Biesta 2007)

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"evidence"
↓
"the available body of facts or information indicating
whether a belief or proposition is true or valid"

<u>in theory</u>:
evidence can be more than 'true knowledge' – e.g., testimonies, witness reports

<u>in practice</u>:
evidence as true scientific knowledge generated through a particular form
experimental research: large scale randomised controlled trials

'what works' is a legitimate concern in professional practices
but

three issues:
<u>epistemology</u>: what kind of understanding of knowledge?
<u>ontology</u>: what kind of understanding of (social) reality?
<u>practice</u>: what kind of understanding of the relation between research and practice?

[2] EPISTEMOLOGY: REPRESENTATION OR TRANSACTION?

assumption: once we have true and complete knowledge about how things re in the world and about the laws that govern their behaviour, we will be able to say with certainty that if we do A, B will follow

↓

representational epistemology: a "Kodak picture" (John Dewey)

tension between representational epistemology
and experimental methodology: interventions change the world
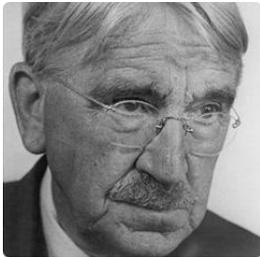
does this compromise our knowledge?
or should we adjust our epistemology?

↓

John Dewey: a transactional epistemology

knowledge not a representation in space
but a relationship in time: between (our) actions and (their) consequences

we know the world in function of our interventions
(see, for example, Large Hadron Collider)

taking experimentation seriously means that we have to give up the idea that it is possible to have complete knowledge of the world 'out there'

↓

"not spectators of a finished universe but participants in an ever evolving universe"

a transactional epistemology 'suits' the idea of evidence-based practice

BUT

the implication is that knowledge is not about <u>certainty</u>

not what works as *what will work* now and in the future,
but what works as *what has worked* in the past

knowledge is about <u>possibility</u>

not generating recipes, but making our action more intelligent (Dewey)

the knowledge deficit (insufficiency) of EBP

[3] ONTOLOGY: CAUSALITY OR COMPLEXITY?

How do interventions work?

causes that produce effects?
↓
only in closed deterministic systems

social systems are open systems
social systems are recursive systems
social systems are semiotic systems

most processes in the social domain in a non-deterministic way because:
-- they are open rather than closed towards their environment
-- the 'elements' in the system can think for themselves and act accordingly
-- they operate through meaning and interpretation

for example: education

'what works' is about closed deterministic systems
<u>not</u> about open, recursive semiotic systems

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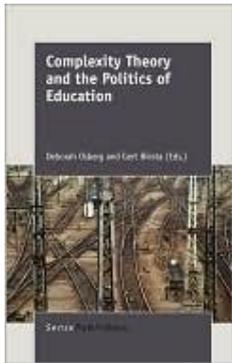
the efficacy deficit of EBP

but how can things be made to work in the social domain?
↓
complexity reduction (Biesta 2010; Osberg & Biesta 2010)

reducing the available 'options' for the system
for example: fast food restaurants
for example: call centres
for example: the school

complexity reduction requires attention to three dimensions:
openness – recursivity – semiosis

reducing impact from and communication with the outside world
reducing the possibility for the 'elements' in the system to think and act for themselves
reducing the openness of interpretation = controlling semiosis

in itself this is neither good nor bad, but complexity reduction **comes at a price**
and ultimately leads to suppression and repression (see North Korea)

[4] PRACTICE: APPLICATION OR INCORPORATION?

Are the "extraordinary advances in such fields as medicine and agriculture" the result of "the acceptance by practitioners of evidence as the basis for practice" (Slavin)?

an alternative view: Bruno Latour:
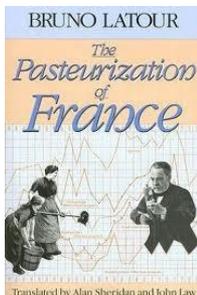Science in Action (1987);The Pasteurization of France (1988)

Is it the case that 'techno-scientists' create 'facts and machines' in their laboratories which are then distributed to the world outside of their laboratory?

Latour: The Pasteurization of France
↓
Pasteur's technique could only be made to work on all farms in France because these farms were transformed into laboratories, so that the technology could work

the success of modern techno-science is not a matter of bringing techno-science into the world, but of bringing the world into the network of techno-science

not application, but incorporation
the application deficit

BRUNO LATOUR
The
Pasteurization
of
France

Translated by Alan Sheridan and John Law

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[5] DISCUSSION: TOWARDS A CRITICAL ROLE FOR EVALUATION RESEARCH?

"Interventions in key professional domains such as education, social work, nursing and management should be based on scientific evidence about 'what works.'"

3 problems

'interventions'
physical push and pull
social practices operate through interpretation
professional action is not intervention on objects,
but encounter and communication between subjects
↓
encounters that are always semiotically open
and orientated towards subjects, not objects (even in education)

the language of interventions may be appropriate for chemistry, physics and agriculture, but not for interactions between human beings

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'evidence'
↓
the kind of evidence proponents of EBP argue for (based on experiments) does not
generate knowledge that can dictate what should be done;
it provides possibilities, not certainties
it cannot tell what will work, but what has worked (in the past, in particular situations)

'what works'
↓
deterministic cause-effect relationships only occur in closed systems
social systems are open, recursive semiotic systems;
at most probability, but because the 'elements' in the system can think, judge and act
for themselves, they can even refuse any 'intervention'
↓
to make open recursive semiotic systems operate as causal closed systems thus
requires shielding them off from interactions with the environment, suppressing
recursivity (thinking) and controlling semiosis
↓
at what price?
a question of values, ethics and politics

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a role for research?

EBP tends to push research into a <u>functional</u> role
↓
generating evidence about 'what works'
through one favoured design: randomised controlled trials

a form of evaluation research
a <u>black box model</u>: only attention to inputs and outcomes

step 1: opening up the black box:
not <u>that</u> things work but <u>how</u> things work

step 2:
how things are <u>made</u> to work
at what price?

so that we (as individuals, groups, or society at large) can judge whether we are
willing to pay the price for making things work in the social domain
↓
a critical role

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THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION

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