

CAN EXPERIENCE BE EVIDENCE?

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No systematic body of knowledge or special training exists to instruct political and bureaucratic executives on how to handle their mutual relationships. They may have technical or professional qualifications, but their interactions are not derived from professional expertise. Instead, operations are based on craft knowledge – understanding acquired by learning on the job (Hecl, 1977: 3).

To declare that existence is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given a meaning; to say that it is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won (de Beauvoir 1980 [1948] p. 129).

Introduction

There is a vigorous debate in policing about the relative merits of evidence-based and experiential decision making. On the one hand we might consider that evidence based policing (EBP) that draws on ‘what works’ and puts police decision-making on a solid empirical basis is a ‘no-brainer’. Who could object after all to a movement that allows police to use the best evidence to shape the best practice? Sherman observes (1998: 4), ‘most police practice ... is still shaped by local custom, opinions, theories and subjective impressions’. Evidence based research, characterised by randomized experiments which reveal the generality and reliability of a particular intervention is used to guide practice and evaluate police activity. In Sherman’s terms there is a strict dichotomy between experience, craft and scientific facts and evidence based research must be ‘a systematic effort to parse out and codify unsystematic “experience” as the basis for police work, refining it by ongoing systematic testing of hypotheses’ (Sherman 1998: 4).

We demur from such sweeping judgements. Instead, we suggest as others have before us, that science takes many forms, it is not as Moore notes (2006: 324), restricted to random controlled experiments, ‘it has always included many more different types of investigations to acquire and use knowledge’ (see also Sparrow 2011; Fleming 2015a; Fyfe and Fleming 2015).

We suggest that whatever the merits of evidence-based research it cannot confine itself to ‘scientific facts’ – there are far too many limits to such an approach:

In summary, we argue:

1. EBP ignores the limits to social science knowledge, displaying a touching faith in given facts, naturalism, and observer neutrality.
2. Evidence, whether evidence-based or experiential, is constructed in an organisational and political context that selects the facts and their relevance.
3. Experience cannot only count as evidence but its use is also essential and inevitable given the limits to social science knowledge.
4. The discussion of experience is bedevilled by the demand for instrumental knowledge; for efficiency and reform. Experience is about sense-making in organisations; not how we do something but *why we do it*.

To examine the debate between evidence based and experiential policy making in the UK police, we start by examining the limits to social science knowledge, focusing on the informational and cognitive limits to such research and its relationship to policy making. We unpack the idea of ‘experience’ to show that it is not intuitively obvious. Briefly, we identify experience as: incrementalism; framing; institutional memory; craft; common sense; local knowledge; and occupational culture. We use these overlapping meanings to analyse focus groups composed of police officers drawn from two forces. We conclude that police officers draw on political knowledge and local knowledge as well as research-based knowledge in their everyday lives. All these sources of knowledge have their limits, including experience, and all are constructed in an organisational and political context that selects the facts and their relevance. We suggest that no one source of knowledge should be accorded priority. Rather, we need to weave them

together and in this process local knowledge, or experience, can not only count as evidence but it is also essential and inevitable given the limits to social science knowledge.

The limits to social science knowledge

So much has been written on the limits to social science knowledge that a further summary seems redundant, especially as our main concern is to unpack the notion of experience. However, it is important to recognise that the philosophical roots of positivistic social science have been subjected to a swingeing critique, although we do not have space to consider such issues here¹ Such philosophical objections to one side, there are also major limits to EBP in practice. Moreover, EBP exacerbates these defects with its inadequate conception of politics and the policy making.

The practice

The point is much rehearsed but it will bear repetition; social scientists have 'the capacity to offer some hindsight, a little insight, and almost no foresight' (Hayward 1991: 104; see also Bevir and Rhodes 2003; and Oakeshott 1991). Trenchantly, Lindblom (1990: 136) claims he cannot 'identify a single social science finding or idea that is undeniably indispensable to any social task or effort'. He cites approvingly, Alasdair MacIntyre's (1971: 238) observation that:

What we have to learn from the social sciences as they now exist is how little understanding the social sciences can give us beyond the everyday understanding of social life that we have anyway.

¹ For thorough-going philosophical critiques of naturalism see: Kuhn 1996; MacIntyre 2007; Rorty 1980; Taylor 1985; Winch 2002; and Wittgenstein 2009.

The 'impairments' to social science knowledge arise from: incomplete information; lack of, and costs of, time; limited cognitive and technical skills; scarce expert personnel; the monetary costs of analysis; the complexity of problems; theories that cannot predict ; and hypotheses that we either cannot or have not tested (see Lindblom 1988: Part II). Such impairment is compounded by the political and economic context which introduces powerful biases into the policy making processes.

Lindblom contrasts social science knowledge with ordinary knowledge. The latter is:

knowledge that does not owe its origins, testing, degree of verification, truth status, or currency to distinctive [professional social inquiry] ... techniques but rather to common sense, casual empiricism or thoughtful speculation and analysis. It is highly fallible, but we shall call it knowledge even if it is false ... [W]hether it is true or false, knowledge is knowledge to anyone who takes it as a basis for some commitment or action (Lindblom and Cohen 1979: 12)

Lindblom suggests the difference between ordinary and social science knowledge does not lie in techniques or theory or data collection or causal analysis. Ordinary people do all these activities but social scientists do them better, although they continue to depend on ordinary knowledge for their investigations (Lindblom 1990: 160). In a phrase, ordinary knowledge probes while social science knowledge aspires to prove. However, scientific analysis can only supplement ordinary knowledge, never replace it. We will return to the relationship between experience and ordinary knowledge when we discuss local knowledge below.

The policy process

There are some rather obvious characteristics of the policy making process that need to be restated because some EBP proponents seem oblivious to them (Haynes et al. 2012; Sherman 2015). Policy making is complex and uncertain. Often, it is not informed by evidence because the information is not available, the decision has to be taken yesterday, and can be surrounded by secrecy. Ministers understand the need to negotiate and compromise. Political expediency, whether because of imminent elections or the Minister's career prospects, is inescapable. The Minister is not a scientist and scientists do not understand the political context in which decisions are taken. So, proponents of EBP cannot succeed if they remain neutral scientists with objective evidence. Rather, they must become protagonists in a political game – *partisan evidence advocates* (genuflecting to Schultze 1968: 101) or policy entrepreneurs, but not bearers of truth. Like any other actor in the policy process they must persuade, negotiate and compromise; be political actors, not scientists. And no one should forget that all organisations – police as much as government departments - are to a greater or lesser extent political systems characterised by many conflicts of interest and values, and bargaining between entrenched and diverse stakeholders (Fleming 2010). Decision makers are slow to use EBP, or whatever rational model of decision making is currently fashionable, not because they are ill-trained, stupid, venal, or 'afraid of the unknown' (Sherman 2015: 6) but because such techniques do not fit the political context and can be neutered by both bureaucratic and party political games. Such internal politics are compounded by the demands of political accountability and the media spotlight, which picks up relatively trivial problems of implementation and threaten careers.

To compound the difficulties, there are many kinds of evidence underpinned by various rationalities – economic, legal, social, and political. No rationality is inherently superior to

another. It depends on the context and the contingencies of the moment. We agree with Wildavsky, writing back in 1968 about the then fashionable management reform of PPBS (Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System), when he vigorously argued that:

political rationality is the fundamental kind of reason because it deals with the preservation and improvement of decision structures, and decision structures are the source of all decisions.

There can be no conflict between political rationality and ... technical, legal, social or economic rationality because the solution to the political problems makes possible an attack on any other problem, while a serious political deficiency can prevent or undo all other problem solving.

In a political decision ... action never is based on the merits of a proposal but always on who makes it and who opposes its decisions (Wildavsky 1968: 393 citing Diesing 1962: 203-4 and 231-2).

There is evidence supporting our case about the limits to social science knowledge. . Our account of a complex, uncertain and ambiguous policy process and the primacy of politics is well substantiated in the public policy making literature about British government.² Similarly, there are many accounts of the problems of using social science knowledge in public policy making. We are persuaded by Weiss's (1980) survey data supporting the idea that policy relevant research influences decisions by 'decision accretion' and 'knowledge creep'. Thus, policy emerges from routine bureaucratic processes and builds like a coral reef. Research creeps into the 'undifferentiated, fragmented and multi-layered' decision process almost by osmosis - by 'the amorphous and indirect absorption of research knowledge' - becoming part

² See, among many examples: Diamond 2014; Dorey 2014; King and Crewe 2013; and Rhodes 2011.

of the *zeitgeist*, rather than overt deliberations (Weiss with Bucavalas 1981: 268; see also Edwards 2004, Fleming 2012).

Finally, much policy making now involves networks of organisations (Rhodes 1988; 1997). We live in an era of network governance where services are delivered by packages of organisations. Stakeholder frame both problems and policies differently and agreement is at a premium. Often there is no single authoritative decision maker. What counts as evidence is deeply contested (Learmonth and Harding 2006), especially in politicised policy areas such as the police and criminal justice. So, the question of ‘knowledge for whom’ is acute; the data the government wants to justify its policy may well not be the data that citizens’ groups or police officers want to amend that policy. As Wagenaar (2016) observes ‘**T**truth’ has become ‘**t**truth’ and is ‘multifaceted, theoretically loaded, and embedded in historically situated language games and ordinary practice’.

There is some recognition of these problems in the EBP community. For example, Head’s (2010: 80-81), sympathetic survey of the ‘state of the art’ notes: the lack of information and analysis and the brute reality that the more we know, the less we understand; the key importance of building political support, winning elections, managing the media and placating multiple stakeholders; the poor fit between data and the needs of practitioners; the belief in the value and relevance of professional or craft knowledge; and crucially the extent to which an issue is politicised (see also: Cartwright and Hardie 2012; Hodginson 2012). And this list is from a sympathiser! For those of a more critical disposition, EBP seems at best limited and at worst fatally flawed. For example, Dunlop (2016) describes the use of RCTs to identify the ‘best’ way of culling badgers and provides a wonderful example of how the political context made ‘scientific’ veterinary evidence incomplete, uncertain, and ambiguous because the RCT based recommendation was politically unacceptable.

What is experience?

Part of the problem with any debate between evidence vs. experience is that the concept of ‘experience’ is treated as if an intuitively obvious notion, a default position when all else fails. We believe we can shed some light on the debate simply by identifying the overlapping if not synonymous meanings of experience.

First, we need to do some definitional ground clearing. We do not use experience to refer to a particular incident or event or feeling that makes an impression, such as the sensations of heat or cold or the experience of joy or sorrow. Rather, the term refers to the practical knowledge about the world amassed by individuals. In this paper, we are interested in experience in work or organizational contexts. We have identified several related and overlapping notions and we discuss each briefly. We start by surveying the public policy literature followed by anthropology and, finally, police studies.

Experience as incrementalism

Experience underpins Lindblom’s (1988) notion of incrementalism or decision making in small steps. Such decision-making looks backwards to what worked last time and it is rooted in learning by trial and error (Goodin 1982: chapter 2). It is the bedrock of the departmental philosophy (see below).

Experience as framing

According to Schon and Rein (1994: xiii) an action frame refers to ‘the beliefs, values and perspectives held by particular institutions and interest groups from which particular policy

positions are derived'. Such framing is selective, often tacit, and involves the social construction of policy problems. It has much in common with Vickers' (1968: chapter 5) notion of the appreciative system or that combination of factual and value judgements which describe the 'state of the world or 'reality'. Although frames:

Exert a powerful influence on what we see and on how we interpret what we see, they belong to the taken-for-granted world of policy making, and we are usually unaware of their role in organising our actions, thoughts, and perceptions.

The key points about framing are the recognition that facts and problems are not given but constructed, and that much knowledge is tacit.

Experience as institutional memory (or the departmental philosophy)

Institutional memory, corporate memory, organisational memory and departmental philosophy are well established variants on framing. They describe an organisation's knowledge base – the combination of tacit and explicit information and knowledge it generates and which exists in members' minds, in agency records; in its routines, and in its inherited customs, traditions and stories (Pollitt 2008: 5-6; see also March 2010: 86). It is essential to any organisations' identity, their ability to remember and learn from past experience' (Covington 1985).

The departmental philosophy is described by Sir Edward Bridges, former Head of the British Civil Service, as the result of nothing more startling than the slow accretion and accumulation of experience over the years. ... [B]y trial and error something has come about which differs greatly from the original plan ... [I]t is less logical but wiser and more

comprehensive (Bridges 1971 [1950], 50-51; see also Wass 1984, 49-50). Bridges sees it as ‘the essence of a civil servant’s work’; the ‘slow accretion and accumulation of experience’. A departmental philosophy contains knowledge about what worked and what did not work, what aroused public criticism and what did not. Incremental decision making is at its heart. It is thus ‘the duty of the civil servant to give his Minister the fullest benefit of the storehouse of departmental experience; and to let the waves of the practical philosophy wash against ideas put forward by his ministerial masters’ The basis for much advice is the collective memory of the Department; its departmental traditions.

Top public servants, politicians and police officers learn through the stories they hear and tell one another. Such stories are a key source of institutional memory, the repositories of the traditions through which practitioners filter current events. The departmental tradition is the storehouse of the stories. It is a form of folk psychology. It provides the everyday theory, the frames and shared languages for storytelling. It is the collective memory of the department and it can be found in the stories people tell one another:

Stories are to the storytelling system what precedent cases are to the judicial system. Just as in the courtroom, stories are performed among stakeholders to make sense of an equivocal situation. ... Bits and pieces of organisation experience are recounted socially throughout the firm to formulate recognisable, cogent, defensible and seemingly rational collective accounts that will serve as precedent for individual assumption, decision and action (Boje 1991: 106).

From her observational fieldwork in DEFRA, Wilkinson (2009: 14) concluded:

Without this memory ... policymakers lose the knowledge of their constitutional context, departmental history, and awareness of which policies have succeeded and failed in the past. ... This corporate memory – understanding procedures, history, context – is maintained by bureaucracy.

So, institutional memory refers to the organised, selective retelling of the past to make sense of the present. It is used by senior public servants and police officers to explain past practice and events and to justify recommendations for the future.

Experience as craft

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* a craft is a skill, an occupation or profession requiring special skill or knowledge. That is only the beginning when seeking to understand the term. As our first epigram makes clear, to call something a craft rather than a science is to accept the importance of experiential knowledge as well as formal knowledge. The craft is learned on-the-job. A craft involves passing on practical beliefs and practices from generation to generation. In contrast to a science, a craft has no one best way. In contrast to an art, it has utility. The craft is learnt from a ‘master’ and the novice moves from apprentice to journeyman to master. Commonly, a profession - or historically, a guild – controls membership and regulates knowledge and practices. Much of that knowledge is tacit and local. It has not been systematized. It is complex. Often it is secret. In this way, the practitioners of the craft can control the supply and demand for their skills.

Goodsell (1992, 247) unpacks the notion of ‘practical wisdom.’ He considers public administration as ‘the execution of an applied or practical art’. It is concerned with helping practitioners find the right ‘tool’. Public servants must become *masters* of their craft; that is, become experts. They acquire this mastery through *practical learning*, which recognizes

‘traditional craft knowledge is not systematically codified and written down. It is known informally, passed on verbally to apprentices and journeymen over time’. Through this mastery and practical learning, public servants build a sense of identity; an *esprit de corps* – the French phrase encapsulates more than the prosaic English equivalents of ‘loyalty’ and ‘morale’. Finally, this identity breeds pride in one’s work and a willingness to accept *responsibility* for it (adapted from Goodsell 1992, 247-8; see also, Rhodes 2016a).

In police studies, it has long been commonplace to talk about such practical skills and to stress the craft like nature of police work:

‘Practical skill ... ‘refers to those methods of doing certain things, and to the information that underlies the use of the methods, that *practitioners themselves* view as proper and efficient’. Skill is ... a stable orientation to work tasks that is relatively independent of the personal feelings and judgments of those who employ it’ (Bittner 1990 [1967]: 33, emphasis in original; see also Bayley and Bittner 1984; Wilson 1968).

More recently, the importance of experience/craft has been resurrected in the context of evidence based policing as scholars seek to reclaim craft as a component in the move towards improving policing.³ Willis and Mastrofski (2014: 323) define craft as ‘the knowledge, skill, and judgment acquired by daily experience’. Both authors argue that craft must be ‘treated with respect’ and integrated into any scientific experiments tasked with moving the field forward:

‘A real partnership with craft means that the practitioners of science must converse with the best practitioners of craft, listening as much as asserting’ (Willis and Mastrofski 2014: 327).

³ See for example, Willis 2013; Willis and Mastrofski 2014; 2016; Wood et al. 2014; Fleming and Fyfe 2015; Fleming, Fyfe and Wingrove 2016.

Moore (2006: 336) also argues for experience and ‘practical wisdom’, making the point that:

‘The world of crime and policing is far too important, far too complex, and far too urgent to leave entirely in the hands of scientists’.

Experience as common-sense

Turning next the anthropology literature, we identify two more related uses; common sense, and local knowledge.

Geertz (1983: 75) defines common-sense as ‘practical, collective and strongly rooted in a particular place’ and it forms an ‘organised body of thought based on immediacy of experience’. Common-sense is an integral part of local knowledge. It is a web of inherited folk theories that pervade everyday life. It is tacit knowledge rooted in social interaction and shared practices. They constitute ‘a relatively organised body of considered thought’ (Geertz (1983: 75-6). It is an ‘everywhere found cultural form’:

Religion rests its case on revelation, science on method, ideology on moral passion; but common sense rests its assertion that it is not a case at all, just life in a nutshell. The world is its authority (Geertz 1983: 75)

Geertz (1983: 85-92) identifies five ‘tonal shadings’ or ‘unstandard properties’ of common sense; it is natural, practical, thin, ad hoc wisdom, and accessible. Also, Aronoff and Kubik (2013: 251) add, it is defensive rather than offensive, and slow to change. It is also local.

Experience as local knowledge

Yanow (2004: s10-11) sees local knowledge as ‘typically developed within a community of practitioners’ which ‘makes it ‘local’ knowledge – that is, specific to a context

and to a group of people acting together in that context at that time; but it is seemingly not recognised beyond the boundaries of that community'. Indeed,

its very locality, that first-hand experience that made its generation possible, is not perceived as having any bearing on, or legitimacy in, or value to the wider organisation. It (at times along with its 'knowers') is typically discounted and dismissed, and sometimes even disparaged, by managers higher up in the organisation; and those even higher than that rarely have any knowledge of its existence at all.

So, local knowledge is the 'mundane, yet expert understanding of and practical reasoning about local conditions derived from lived experience'. It is 'contextual knowledge', it is 'tacit knowledge' and it develops out of interaction 'specific to a local context, such as a work practice in an organisational setting'.

Local knowledge is closely linked to the exercise of discretion by, for example, street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) such as police officers. Durose (2009: 36) suggests that local knowledge develops 'from [SLBs] own subjective interpretations or 'readings' of a 'situation, which is passed on in the stories people tell. They are not heroes, softening the implacable face of the bureaucracy for needy clients. Rather, they struggle to manage the 'irreconcilable' dilemmas posed by clients' needs, bureaucratic supervision (of rules and resources), and the exercise of state power.

There is a danger that local knowledge is seen as uniform or fixed when it is often elusive and ambiguous. Thus, Vohnsen (2015) argues that 'local knowledge and practice is a tricky phenomenon' because it is 'dispersed and, not possessed equally by all':

what one person holds to be of importance in one specific situation is not necessarily what the same person might attribute importance to in a different situation – in other words what people know to be of local relevance in one situation might be different from what they know to be of local relevance in the next situation.

Moreover, SLBs do not have clear, fixed identities; they ‘swap identities all the time: one minute they are advocating the [reform] like true politicians, while the next moment they are criticising it like detached academic scholars’. To use Vohnsen’s colloquial phrase, local knowledge is ‘shifty’ or, more formally, as Rhodes (2016b) argues it is contested, contingent, and generative. Local knowledge is complex, specific, and contextual. It is ever-different and changing because actions intersect and interact spinning off to create and recreate webs of inordinate complexity that are the product of no one person’s intentions but become part of the beliefs and practices of all. This spinning-off or generative effect is ever present.

Experience as an occupational culture

In the organisational theory literature, culture encompasses the idea of experience. Schein’s (1985:7) defines culture as a ‘stable social unit that has a shared history’ Chan (2003: 21-22) in her discussion of organisational socialisation and professionalization cites Schein’s definition of organisational culture as ‘especially appropriate when applied to police organisations’:

[Culture is] ‘a pattern of basic assumptions – invented, discovered, or developed by a given groups as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaption and internal integration – that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.

In short, occupational culture is directly analogous to the traditions of government departments, referring to the beliefs and practices of the police as handed down from generation to generation.

There are more overlaps in these several uses of experience. Framing and incrementalism underpin the departmental philosophy and occupational culture. Similarly, there is a fine line dividing common-sense, ordinary knowledge, and local knowledge. Earlier, we summarised Lindblom on ordinary knowledge. Once local is separated from locality, and seen as specific to an organisational context or to a group of people, then it is indistinguishable from ordinary knowledge. These overlaps do not matter. The important point is that these several notions help us to read the focus groups transcripts. We assimilate them to the language of Bevir and Rhodes (2003). So, experience refers to the institutional memory or the inherited traditions of the organisation and to the storytelling which hands down those traditions to new arrivals. In particular, we searched for:

- i. Evidence of a craft of policing, its practices, and the ways in which new recruits learn that craft.
- ii. Evidence about shared beliefs and practices; the inherited folk theories.
- iii. Evidence about the extent to which the police draw on craft knowledge, political knowledge, and local knowledge as well as research-based knowledge.

‘We do what we’ve always done’⁴: the focus groups

We explore our three themes with data drawn from six focus groups (FG1-6) conducted with constables, sergeants, inspectors and one Chief Constable across two southern England police forces (Sites A and B). The focus groups were conducted as part of the ‘What Works in

⁴ Constable FG1, p. 5.

Crime Reduction Programme’ – a university consortium in conjunction with the College of Policing.⁵

The focus groups were held in May-June 2014 with a pilot taking place in March of that year. The focus groups for this research were organised by rank (Fleming 2011). Each police organisation identified participants for the focus groups. The overall response was good but it was not clear whether officers had been ‘cajoled or instructed’ to attend or whether officers had volunteered their time. However, as the Focus Group report suggested (Fleming and Fyfe 2015: 9):

[While] ‘participants made it clear they were there under sufferance but some of this was possibly due to anxious anticipation of what might be expected of them. When it became clear that it was a discussion rather than a test, most participated fully and many even seemed to enjoy the experience.

The numbers for each group varied between 10 - 14 persons with two facilitators. Each focus group ran for approximately two hours. Each participant was provided with an information sheet prior to the start of discussions. This information sheet included the background information on the broader ‘What Works’ project and the questions the facilitators sought to address. All discussion was taped and transcribed and analysed using NVivo 10.

One of the four aims⁶ of the focus groups was to better understand police officers’ attitudes to, understandings of, evidence based research. This paper focuses on the responses to this question.

⁵ The What Works Centre for Crime Reduction is part of a network of What Works Centres created to provide robust and comprehensive evidence that will guide decision-making on public spending. For the consortium programme details see <http://whatworks.college.police.uk/About/pages/cpp.aspx>

The craft

Although it was not central to the stated purpose of the focus groups, all six groups commented in passing on their craft. The emphasis was invariably on practice: *'the shared knowledge of practitioners is of more value than the evidence'* (Pilot FG at Site A).

Facilitator: What is the best way?

F: Hands on, practical

M: Hands on

F: You've got to be able to show you can do it in practice (Constable FG4, p. 8).

Little changed with the rank of the person speaking:

Sergeant 1: This is the most important rank in the police force [sergeant] and when you hear the Government say they want to get rid of sergeants it really annoys me because this is the rank that sells ... difficult messages to the PCs on the ground, this is the rank that's the first port of call for any serious incident, this is the rank that gets things done. The Sergeants are the 'doing' rank and the rank that will sell it to the PCs, and if you don't get the buy-in from the Sergeants you won't get the PCs buy-in.

Sergeant 2: We are trying to change it from political speak ... to encourage our DCs and PCs to go and do the best they can (Sergeant FG2, p. 18).

When pressed on the meaning of practice, they responded:

M: Experience

F: Common sense

F: Knowledge

M: Judgement (Constables FG4, p. 1).

20% of what you go to is your knowledge, the rest is your common sense and judgement (Constable FG4, p. 7).

⁶ The three other aims were: to better understand the extent to which research/evaluation is currently pursued in police organisations; to better understand the challenges and perceived risks and barriers to greater evidence use; to gauge what would be perceived as a useful training tool /programme in order to 'instruct' officers in the value/use of Evidence Based Research

And the best form of training was practical training by one of their own; by a master craftsman:

Facilitator: Do you as Sergeants, do you have a role in training, showing your PCs new things?

F: We do

M: Yeah

M: There is an element of that

F: We should be making them aware of changes, new things

Facilitator: So how do you do that?

F: Go talk to them and tell them

M: Nagging

M: One to ones

F: I think the one to ones work best

M: Yeah, a little bit of time, occasionally you'll get training days, but we don't seem to get training.

Facilitator: What do you do on training days if they've no training?

M: They normally have us walking around the streets or executing warrants (Sergeants FG5 p.10)

It is a practical craft:

Most of our training is around processes and procedures, how to drive a car safely, how to kick in a door, how to do a set thing, but we do not do much in terms of interpersonal skills, how to talk to people, we kind of develop it through those other things, but it's not something we traditionally do, So, what courses in [Site A] could I do that encourages problem solving and thinking at any level? ... Would you get that kind of 'now what's he on about? Has he read a book today? [laughter] (Inspectors FG6, p. 4).

Shared beliefs and practices

Underpinning this conception of craft is a shared set of beliefs and practices. We have described, albeit briefly, the occupational culture of the police and there is supporting evidence in the focus groups for our sketch. As one chief constable observed:

We are essentially blue collar ... We're not medical, we're not law, we're not church, so we don't have a period of deep and thoughtful studying steeped in academia and emerge with a wisdom beyond our brethren (CC1 Interview, p. 1).

This sentiment is echoed by the 'foot soldiers':

I've worked full time since I was sixteen. I never went to college and I don't have a degree ... I'm not an academic at all, I'm a foot soldier and will always be a foot soldier ... I had to do a project ... and I think I went grey. I don't need a course ... I need a facility where I can find ... evidence (Sergeant FG2, p. 14).

In the 21st century, many demands are made on the police. Yet, despite their multifarious tasks the 'cops and robbers' mentality is alive and well:

A thief taker is a lot more admired than a problem solver (Constable FG1, p. 15).

Basic policing hasn't changed, we nick people, that's what our victims, our communities our Chief wants and the new PCCs (Inspector FG3, p. 8).

Against this general backcloth, there are four characteristics of police culture that shape their response to EPB.

First, the hierarchical organisation of the police is obvious from the 'us and them' mentality and everyday phrases like the 'foot soldiers'. It permeates discussion of EPB in particular and reform generally. So, 'if you want it implemented it has to be Constables' (Sergeants FG5, p. 8) but:

They involve practitioners at a very late stage if at all (Constable FG1, p. 3).

We're the ones who are going to make it work, you know, anyone below Chief Inspector tends not to be involved in these discussions ... so people on the ground trying to make it work have little faith because of the way it's being operated (Constable FG1, p. 3).

But nothing's been fed back to us (Sergeants, FG5, p. 17).

Indeed there is weariness about all reforms, not just EBP

We have a lot of change all the time ... and people are fed up with it (Constable FG1, p. 10).

There's a lot of jadedness (Constable FG1, p. 2).

You can't just do a one size fits all with policing (Constable FG1, p. 4).

We have organisational terrorists in this organisation who resist change at every opportunity (Constable FG1, p. 10).

Risk aversion accompanies this jadedness.

There's also a great emphasis on risk aversion rather than possible benefit realisation because it doesn't matter how many jobs you get right, it's the one you get wrong (Constables FG1, p. 9).

We don't recognise failure and it's the failure we want as much as successes because we're very good at promoting ourselves but not very good at being honest with ourselves (Inspectors FG6, p. 6).

The bosses always take the armoured plated option (Sergeants FG5, p. 15).

The risk averse thing's a trait of senior management. We are willing to try things, but the number of times you get overruled (Sergeants FG5, p. 14).

The final ingredient in this uninspiring mix is a lack of trust:

We don't have any choice in the matter, we don't trust what you're saying anyway, because you'd be saying it whether it was a good thing or a bad thing (Constable FG1, p. 11)

I think there are a lot of distrusting members of staff in the organisation (Sergeant FG2, p. 6).

It leads to a gloomy prognosis about the role of the police:

As a nation, we've forgotten the role of a constable that we all swore oath to, which is save life, and we've forgotten that. We haven't forgotten what we do, what we swore to, but the Government I think have forgotten what our role is. The public have forgotten what our role is. For this to work we need to go back to grass roots, what does a constable mean to the members of the public as well as the police officers, what do they want from us and how do we fit the research into policing that (Sergeants FG2, p. 23).

Varieties of knowledge

So, finally, we get to the views of the police on the usefulness of different types of knowledge. We did not ask them to distinguish beforehand between research, political, and local knowledge. We have so categorised their remarks and, it is worth noting, we did so with great ease.

Research knowledge

As a first observation, most members of most groups had little prior knowledge of EBP, although Inspectors were better informed than other ranks. When there was a discussion of EBP among Inspectors it resembled an academic seminar. It did not have the practical tone of other discussions; for example, they were few discussions of specific RCTs. There was also a tinge of cynicism:

It does go in fashions (Sergeant FG2, p. 2)

I've heard it mentioned by a few people preparing for Boards (Inspector FG6, p. 1)

I don't want to use the term 'current flavour of the month' (Sergeant FG2, p. 3) ... [but he does].

And, forgive me, evidence based policing, that's common sense ...
(Sergeant FG2 p. 2)

That much conceded, we are talking about a preference for experience, not hostility to research:

I don't think anyone would dispute that information is knowledge and the more you know and draw upon is always going to be useful
(Sergeant FG5, p. 16).

Officers were willing to learn:

POLKA (Police OnLine Knowledge Area) is seen as good because it leads to 'accessing a wider forum of experience' ... [it is] 'something that a police

officer has done and it's worked and this is why it's worked (Constable FG1, pp. 6-7)

However, there were many reservations

The vast majority of the frontline would struggle to see the relevance [of research] (Constable FG1, p. 14).

There were several recurring motifs and the transferability of research was mentioned frequently:

What works in Site A won't necessarily work in Site B (Sergeant FG2, p. 9).

'It (EBP) needs to be tailored to specific areas ... you can't say it's going to work in that area, across all' (Constable FG1, p. 4).

To use the American research example ... research ... in America suggested it was probably a good thing to take a police car home for visibility in the community ... but you put a white police car in my driveway and it'll cost hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of damage to cars and houses ... Mainly your own (Sergeant FG2, p. 7)!

Even when an idea was transferred, there was scepticism about its implementation:

We don't know whether these things are long term effective or not. The research says it isn't but the people we referred it to ... are saying, 'well the research might say that but I think it's a good idea so we'll continue' (Constable FG1, p. 18).

[On EBP and high visibility patrols] there's no guarantee that what it is works and we go back to the old same systems because that's what we feel trusted in and ... we just revert back to old type because that's what we've done before (Inspector FG3, p. 2).

It is not just a question of whether a policy can be transferred. It is not just a question of whether it works, but of what works best:

I've gone as far as contacting the police captain in San Francisco. Seriously, I looked online found out what they were doing and thought I'd find out how they're doing it, but what they were doing wasn't that dissimilar. It was just different terminology. The difficulty you could have is you can look at websites at what they're doing in say Holland, but the mindset you can have is it works in Holland but we're not Holland. But the difficulty is you can have all these

*different people with similar problems just varying degrees and different locations, I don't think there's going to be that many different responses, you contact twenty people and get eighteen same answers, **it's finding out what worked the best is the hardest thing.*** (Inspector FG6, p.7, emphasis added)

If the evidence exists to tell the officer what works, it will not tell her what works best.

The focus groups also identified many practical obstacles. Lack of time was an ever present concern; *'There is an issue of time ... We need to be seen to be doing something all the time'* (Constable FG1, p. 7). Reading research does not count as *doing something*. On occasion, the comment was curt:

Facilitator: Now they [College of Policing] want you to be skilled up enough to recognise good research when you see it and they want you to be thinking about how that evidence can inform your practice

M: When are we supposed to be doing that in our day to day role? (Sergeant FG5, p. 6)

It is not just a question of finding the time to learn about EBP or to read the research reports but also acting on EBP is time consuming: it takes time to implement EBP:

FP: I've tried to implement something in terms of evidence based policing and it's taken two years from implementing it when I was a district commander to it now being adopted by the force, that's two years.

Facilitator: Pretty good

F: Is it? I think it's painful (Inspector FG 3, p. 10).

Other specific complaints were that research knowledge was not practical or user friendly (Sergeant FG2, p. 19); and that acquiring such knowledge and implementing its ideas had to compete with other, invariably more important, priorities (Sergeant FG2, p. 23; Inspector p. 8; p. 14). Indeed, for most of the focus groups, EBP was not a priority; it was a sideshow.

The focus groups also alighted on some more intractable weaknesses in EPB; some ‘*structural problems*’. They pointed out that the objectives of policing ‘*aren’t that clear*’ and data about performance could be misleading; ‘*as any of us know about crime recording ... [the statistics] will be an elaborate fiction*’:

Interpretation is the key, it’s that professional capacity to interpret subjectively objective data, and as you go up the ladder, up the chain of command, they seem to lose touch with the reality and just look at numbers, but there are things that sit outside the numbers that aren’t part of that series and the people on the ground, beat officer, PCSO, residents, all of those people will know that but our interpretation at senior management level of the data can skew things quite badly (Sergeants FG5, p. 2).

Although they would never use such terminology, they are here talking about the constructed nature of facts and evidence.

A second structural problem is the increasingly networked nature of policing:

*Policing now works in partnership with all these other organisations and I think, it was a phrase used a couple of times this morning, they said why are you talking about evidence-based **policing** and not evidence-based **partnerships**. (CC1, Interview, p. 7, emphasis added)*

We need a network, people that we can go to do when we’ve got a problem and have that conversation about the potential tools and potential interventions and so on’. (Chief Constable Interview, p. 10, interviewer summary in transcript of CC’s lengthy comments)

We’ve got a dynamic in our work, multi-agency working ... it is very localised. (Sergeant FG5, p. 7)

Networks can pose in acute form the issue of evidence for whom? One organisation’s evidence is propaganda to another. In politics, it is called spin.

Political Knowledge

There was great awareness among all ranks about the politics of policing and the importance of political know-how. There was some variation between the focus groups. Focus

Group 2 was keenly aware of the elected Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) while she was not mentioned at all by Focus Group 4. Across the board, constables were less likely to mention PCCs. Nonetheless, most respondents were sophisticated, drawing a clear distinction between the internal politics of their police force, and the larger political context (of PCCs). Thus, on organisational politics, they comment:

It comes back to politics; there are too many people who are seeking promotion or seeking certain bonuses' (Sergeant FG2, p. 11).

Politics, I don't do politics but everyone has to end up doing politics of some sort. ... If you haven't got the political buy-in, it ain't happening (Sergeant FG2, p. 17).

If you start going Inspector upwards you then start talking political agendas and promotion, gathering evidence for promotion, and they all arrive with a new idea, they want to change things, 'this is what I've done and this is the mark I made (Sergeant FG5, p. 9).

It is important to note that organizational politics comes in many guises. It refers to careerism, to new policies and, when they are talking about buy-in, to the politics of implementation, although they would never use that phrase. Also, EBP is seen as ammunition in internal political debates:

If we actually developed evidence base around effective policing in all areas it would put us in a much more strong position when we're being held accountable in certain areas by the PCCs (Inspector FG3, p. 14).

On the larger political context, they comment:

We've got a Conservative PCC so we are pumping the Conservative values in policing and that is where it's wrong (Sergeant FG2, p 17).

There's so much politics in policing now (Sergeant FG2, p. 24)

He'll [PCC] respond to something that will win him votes because that's the overwhelming need compared to us who'll say it doesn't work. (Inspector FG3, p. 12)

Add into that the PCC - you get pet projects or flavour of the month projects and the reaction from most people is I haven't got time to do that and do everything else and that is definite (Inspector FG6, p. 6)

So, the focus groups had clear and explicit views on the usefulness of research-based and political knowledge. They saw them as common-sense categories; part of their everyday lives.

Local knowledge

Unsurprisingly given their views on the craft and their shared beliefs and practices, they display a marked preference for their own experience and that of their colleagues:

We problem solve on a daily basis, every incident we go to we problem solve, depending who you go with, there's the experience of some, you can have two different officers and two different outcomes and that's the way policing is and in some respects that's a good thing because if you go to an incident and you think definitely this way and colleagues say well actually what about this, well actually it could work and it's worked out a lot better and that's just the joy of policing, being diverse in the way you deal with things (Constable FG4, p. 4).

Time after time members of the focus groups spoke about experience or their local knowledge and its centrality in their working lives.

We probably do look at what things have been done in the past, chat to people, so evidence comes from others' experiences rather than a database (Inspectors FG6, p. 1).

Every branch, department and division has a local policy on what they have adapted from the force policy (Sergeant FG2, p. 11).

You have hundreds of little kingdoms doing their own thing (Sergeant FG2, p. 11).

Its' got to be bespoke to each area (Sergeant FG2, p. 12).

We're talking about local, local in [Site B] (Sergeant FG2, p. 20).

You usually just make phone calls to somebody who's got a better skill, it's sharing between ourselves really and drawing experience from that (Constable FG4, p. 3).

We're in a system where you rely on your colleagues, you rely on your knowledge, you find somebody (Constable FG4, p. 3).

Domestics ... it all has the same title but the jobs are always different, nothing is ever the same so you get your textbook answer, it's not going to match up with those jobs, because everything is different (Constable FG4, p. 8).

The quotes are becoming repetitious and we fear we are stating the blindingly obvious. However, it is necessary to court the dangers of repetition and stating the obvious because the sheer volume of quotes is important. It demonstrates the centrality of experience to the work of the officers.

Although experience has much tacit knowledge, if it is to be shared, then it must become explicit. There must also be some awareness of its limits. The focus groups were aware of the limits of their reliance on local knowledge: *'you're continually reinventing the wheel'* (Sergeants, FG5, p. 13), and *'we won't know everything'* (Sergeant FG2, p. 15). To avoid such dangers, they tap into experience more formally than a chat on the telephone. Debriefings after an incident are seen explicitly as a form of criticism and learning.

*I also do some of the debriefs and we talk about evidence based and learning and that, and I do debriefs on incidents on motorways, different counties, different areas and effectively the same things have happened, the same problems, so we develop a product and give it back and nine months later we do a debrief and it's a completely different set of officers and the identical things come back again, so where does that organisational learning go? We sit through the same thing again and again and sometimes these jobs have fatalities and things, it's the same as six months ago where we suggested certain actions, so there's elements of that, internally you don't get much more evidence based than debriefing actual live incidents and deciding from there what you would do differently or definitely do in the future **but we never share that with people not in the room.*** (Inspectors FG6, p. 11, emphasis added)

So, debriefing may share experience about managing a major incident but that sharing talks place in a risk-averse culture. To identify publicly mistakes or errors of judgement is to court blame, even punishment. So, learning takes place in a circle of trusted colleagues.

Weaving

We started with research-based and political knowledge to ensure they were not seen as after thoughts; incidental to the main game of local knowledge. Our point throughout this paper is not the primacy of local knowledge but the importance of recognising the several sources of knowledge and the need to weave them together. We give priority to this weaving as did many of our respondents.

It's a combination of both. We need to take on board what we're told from research [about] what works but put that together with what we know from our past experiences (Constable FG1, p. 13).

[We need] a mixture of academic research and practical application' (Inspector FG3, p. 1).

In sum, we have described the craft of policing and shown that police officers draw on political knowledge and local knowledge as well as research-based knowledge in their everyday lives. We have argued that EBP ignores the limits to social science knowledge, and that 'evidence', whether evidence-based or experiential, is constructed in an organisational and political context that selects the facts and their relevance. We suggest that no one source of knowledge should be accorded priority. Rather, we need to weave them together and in this process local knowledge, or experience, can not only count as evidence but it is also essential and inevitable given the limits to social science knowledge. Too often the different kinds of knowledge are set up as opposites; research-based *versus* local knowledge. Demonstrably the police draw on any source of information available to them, and use their experience to determine the information they will act on. In this weaving, priority will be given to political knowledge because a political decision is the essential prerequisite for solving any problem. Thereafter, choice will be dictated by availability. Is there any research-based knowledge? It will be evaluated using the officer's own experience. If there is no research based knowledge,

then experience is all there is. Its use is both essential and inevitable. The issue becomes what are the limits to this craft and how do we tackle these limits.

Conclusions

The limits to experience

March (2010: 3-4) identifies two traditions in the analysis of experience; the rational deductive, and the storytelling. We discussed the limits to rational, social science knowledge, in the first section so, here, we focus on the limits to the latter. Experiential learning in government is commonly incremental or trial and error learning. As in policing, government looks to the past to find successful examples. There are some obvious problems with this approach.

First, history offers no easy lessons. Ask any historian and she will tell you that history is complex, unpredictable, uncertain and contingent. Ask any bureaucrat and she will struggle to find relevant examples because there are too few examples that fit.

Second, as March (2010: 45) suggests, a story explains history by turning the ambiguities and complexities of experience into ‘a form that is that is *elaborate* enough to elicit interest, *simple* enough to be understood and *credible* enough to be accepted’ (emphasis added). So, if we do find a relevant example, we do not know why it worked last time. Moreover, the more novel and complex the problem, the less relevant are the lessons of yesterday. The point of stories is to simplify. They employ simple explanations, and limit the information considered. They are an example of what Simon (1956) called ‘satisficing’; that is, decisions that are satisfactory rather than optimal and they are satisfactory when they meet the inherited, agreed standards of the departmental philosophy.

Third, we have only limited capacity to store and recall history and government is losing that capacity; institutional memory is under threat. Pollitt (2008: 173) gives his recipe for losing institutional memory: rotate staff rapidly, change the IT often, restructure every two years, reward management over other skills, and adopt each new management fad. All three departments in Rhodes' (2011: chapter 7) study of British government met most of these criteria, reporting poor record keeping, the annual postings of fast streamers, and high staff turnover. Add internal reorganisations, managerial reform, especially the successive waves of the delivery agenda, and it can be no surprise that ministers complained about the loss of memory. And ministers come and go, rarely lasting more than two years.

If turnover or churn is a problem for institutional memory in the public sector, it is especially a feature of the police. The haste and busyness of a pressured work environments lead people to attempt to cope with impossible work demands by taking shortcuts. So, they 'leave things aside or out'. They are selective, focusing only on 'headlines', with bad results for memory. In such work places, remembering may be seen as 'a time-consuming activity and not appreciated, or maybe not functional' (Pollitt 2008: 208).

Fourth, stories are biased and to make matters worse we are often uncertain about the nature of that bias. In part, they are biased by our faulty memories. We selectively recall the past. Memories are not facts but constructed stories we tell ourselves about our yesterdays. When we construct our memories, we are framing them, often tacitly. Our stories are sensitive to such framing and there are many available, contesting frames and no obvious way to choose between them beyond the persuasive abilities of the storyteller. As with social science knowledge, stories are limited by incomplete information and our cognitive skills. We do not fully understand complex problems, so we leave out what we cannot explain or we simplify complex causal relationships or, all too often, we do both. We prefer our existing beliefs and

practices. We are reluctant to give them up. So, we bend inconvenient ‘facts’ to fit our preferences. We are small ‘c’ conservatives. Stories are ‘implicitly hostile to novelty’ [reform] because of their familiarity. Their shared frames make them endure. Stories assimilate experience. The new is filtered out. We accept what we can assimilate to existing stories (March 2010: 77).

Fifth, managers and researchers alike are uncomfortable with the notion that stories are akin to fiction. They want the certainties of science even though science cannot deliver those certainties. Such doubts are misplaced:

The stories of novelists and social scientists are judged, in part, on whether they are credible, and it seems unlikely that the assessment of credibility is enormously different in the two cases’ ... [and] there is by no means general agreement that stories and models of [social scientists] are any more (or less) credible than the stories of novelists’ (March 2010: 68-9).

Both the stories of experience and the models of social science invite confrontation with evidence (Fleming 2015b). Thus, stories based on experience are judged by the forensic interrogation of rival stories by both researchers and practitioners. We prefer stories that meet established standards of evidence and reason; that is, they are accurate, comprehensive, and consistent. We reject the illogical, the inconsistent and the manifestly partial. We accept the story with the best available evidential base whether that evidence is rational-scientific, political or local (and for a more detailed account see Bevir and Rhodes 2003: 38-40).

Sixth, just as we have argued there are limits to social science knowledge, we must also accept there are important limits to experience. As March (2010: 51) argues there is a:

fundamental circularity of learning from experience. Humans are urged to lean from the experiences of history, but the experiences of history are encapsulated in the frames invented by humans.

In sum, stories about experience are ‘profoundly believed and widely shared’ but that does not make them valid because ‘the world is too complex and experience is too meagre’ (March 2010: 63).

Finally, all knowledge – EBP and experiential - is political in that it involves conflicting definitions of problems, the selection of data by stakeholders, and the use of that data in both an organisational and a larger political game. Decades ago, March (1962) described organisations as political coalitions with contending, bargaining stakeholders (see also Pfeffer 1993; Perrow 2014). So, the difference between organisational politics and policy making by British central departments is one of degree. The politics of buy-in is the politics of implementation writ small. Whether the site is the force headquarters or the Home Office, advocates of EBP are partisan evidence experts and those arguing from experience are conservators of the tradition. Neither are neutral. Neither has privileged access to the truth whether with a lower case or capital ‘t’.

Where to From Here?

Experience becomes evidence when it is made explicit and systematic. For example, Bayley and Bittner (1984: 53-5) argue for: bringing the reality of the field into the classroom; using master craftsmen as teachers; instruction in the field; separating teaching and evaluation; continuous learning throughout an officer’s career; and rewarding good craft skills. They want officers to be socialised more effectively into the traditions beliefs and practices of their employing police organisation. As, Bittner (1990: 59) observes:

The expectation of success under conditions of autonomy, without any indications that the work of the successful craftsman is based on an acquired preparedness for the task, is ready-made for failure and malpractice.

In short, how do we know when officers are successful craftsmen? Unless we are explicit about the craft, and master craftsmen train the apprentices, we do not know.

Rhodes (2014) suggests three ways of finding out what we do not know about the craft of the practitioner. First, ethnographic fieldwork is well suited to the task of identifying craft skills. It asks the simple questions of ‘how do things work around here?’ and ‘how do you do your job?’ Participant observation is the best method for answering these questions.

A second way to collect data on the tacit knowledge of an organisation is para-ethnography. It involves a critical reading of official documents to reconstruct a decision. The reading is by both the ethnographer and a key informant as equal intellectual partners. The partners are experts working in technical, professional institutional settings such as a public bureaucracy. The product is a thick description of the tacit and symbolic knowledge in the documents (Aronoff and Kubik 2013: 46-48). For example, Rhodes (2011) describes storytelling by elite public servants in Britain. He notes they use such terms as ‘clever’, ‘sound’, and ‘judgement’ to compare the merits of stories such as policy briefings. These terms encapsulate tacit knowledge. They encode complex meanings that are not obvious to the professional stranger. For example, ‘clever’ does not just mean that a document is insightful. It implies that its author is unsound, as in ‘too clever by half’. This tacit knowledge could be unpacked by working through various policy documents with (say) a retired senior public servant or chief constable, who would be experienced in reading and comparing such stories.

Finally, a combination of ethnographic interviews and focus groups would tease out the tacit knowledge characteristics of all crafts. For Snowden (2000: 151) storytelling circles are composed of ‘groups with some degree of coherence and identity in the organisation’. So they may have worked together on a project or job. The key point is that ‘the community has some common history or reference from which they can draw anecdotes’. The circle lasts a day and is recorded on video so there is both an aural and visual transcript for analysis later. There is a facilitator who is ‘highly tolerant of ambiguity and prepared not to be liked in order to succeed’. The aim is encourage the participants to talk to one another not the facilitator about their practical skills; in effect, to compare notes. We believe our focus groups are a good example of storytelling circles.

Scott (1998: 321) suggests that abstract, universalist, scientific knowledge works best in those ‘spheres of human endeavour that are freest of contingency, guesswork, context, desire and personal experience’. This playing field will suit EBP. However, professions like policing are spheres of knowledge in which practice, experience and local knowledge are at a premium. Policing is characterised by contingency and ambiguity. Local knowledge is ever present and central. We are arguing for a systematic approach to collating such knowledge.

Local knowledge can produce puzzles and plausible conjectures for policymakers, professionals, researchers, and citizens alike. A puzzle occurs when there is a misfit between experience and expectations and the researcher’s task is to infer the best explanation for that puzzle (Schartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 46-49). The process is iterative and the aim of research is complex specificity in context (Wolcott 1995). We strive for plausible conjectures, not generalizations. We make general statements that are plausible because they rest on good reasons, and the reasons are good because they are inferred from relevant information (paraphrased from Bourdon 1993). So, we can derive plausible conjectures from puzzling over

our fieldwork. This claim is modest compared with much else in the social and human sciences, especially when compared with the ambition of EBP. When puzzling, the challenge is to extract ‘the general from the unique, to move from the “micro” to the “macro”’ (Burawoy 1998: 5). No matter that our facts are small; they can still speak to large issues.

So far, we have accepted the prevailing conceptions of experience, which look at its value as instrumental knowledge; its utility for managers and policy makers. Experience need not be defended solely on such grounds. Perhaps more important, experience is also about the fundamental human activity of creating meaning.

Human intellect displays itself through curiosity about the world, through the gossip, conversations, stories, accounts, explanations, theories and mythologies that (a) make existence meaningful in an interesting way ... (b) provide rationalisations for wilfulness,... and (c), exhibit human imagination. Within such a perspective, understandings of experience are not so much instruments of life as they are life itself; ... and the pursuit of meaning is less a method of effective adaption than an essential activity of storytelling human beings (March 2010: 118).

In other words, experience is not about *how* we do something but *why we do it*. It is about glue; holding the organisation together. Policy makers and practitioners are strategic storytellers who tell stories about the inherited beliefs and practices of an organization that form the social glue binding that organization together (see also Fleming 2015b). To call shared experiences a ‘smothering paradigm’ as Sherman does (2015: 6) is to misunderstand completely its fundamental role in creating a meaningful organisation for its members.

Given the weight of criticism, and evidence, the obvious question is why people continue to believe in EBP. The epistemology is flawed, the practice has major limits, and its utilisation depends not on evidence but on its usefulness in a political context it has done, and can do, little or nothing to shape. The answer is simple. First, everyone accepts that more information is for the most part helpful, but it is not decisive; just another input. Second, we have a body of partisan evidence experts and the advocacy of both EBP and the results of specific RCTs is in their economic and professional self-interest. They are willing servants of power with a niche in policy making. Finally, EBP persists because it provides the rationale for decisions made by other means. The imprimatur of science is used to legitimise political decisions. Of course, there are policy contexts that are not highly politicised. Of course, some evidence is better founded and more relevant in some areas than others. But much EBP takes place in charged organisational and political; contexts that ensure the data are always incomplete, always uncertain, and always ambiguous. So, as the epigram from Simone de Beauvoir suggests, the meaning of evidence is never fixed, it must be constantly won. By itself, EBP is not enough. We need the partisan evidence advocates but we need also the other types of knowledge. Craft knowledge, political knowledge, and local knowledge as well as research-based knowledge warrant a place at the table. These several strands need to be woven together, and experience needs to be treated as evidence in this weaving.

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