
Evidence-Based Approaches in I–O Psychology Should Address Worse Grumbles

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Many people grumble about evidence-based approaches, describing barriers to their successful implementation, giving reasons about why they won't ever work or are wrong for other reasons (Learmonth, 2006; Morrell, 2008; Reay, Berta, & Kohn, 2009). Thus, proponents of evidence-based practices such as Briner and Rousseau (2011), in this article, and elsewhere (Briner, Denyer, & Rousseau, 2009) write papers that defend evidence-based approaches and emphasize how the appropriate use of evidence would enhance practice.

Rather than adding a(nother) defense of the evidence-based approach, I want to ponder the grumbles that Briner and Rousseau discuss. In 1971, Abraham Maslow published a book entitled *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* in which he distinguished between low grumbles, high grumbles, and metagrumbles. His focus largely centered on how grumbling was carried out in workplaces, and he argued that "if the level of complaints is studied in the industrial situation, it can be used also as a measure of the level of health of the whole organization" (p. 240). Maslow described *low-level grumbles* in work settings as about falling short of basic needs. These may include firing without notice, arbitrary treatment from supervisors, and

indignities employees have to take on to support their families. *High-level grumbles* are "mostly at the level of esteem and self-esteem, where questions would be involved of dignity, of autonomy, of self-respect, of respect from the other" (p. 241). Finally, metagrumbles address a person's "meta-needs for perfection, for justice, for beauty, for truth, and the like [which] show themselves in the industrial situation" (p. 241). Maslow concluded that we should "never expect a cessation of complaints; we should expect only that these complaints will get to be higher and higher complaints, i.e., that they will move from the lower-grumble level to higher-grumble levels and finally to metagrubble levels" (p. 242).

Maslow's argument suggests that one way to assess the "health" of evidence-based approaches is by exploring the levels of the grumbles about the approaches. Low-level grumbles would primarily be about how much evidence-based approaches address basic needs. High-level grumbles would be mostly about how much they affect respect and esteem. Metagrumbles would mostly be about how much they express high-level ideals.

There has been evidence for decades of multiple deficiencies with Maslow's motivation theory, especially his rigid hierarchy (e.g., Soper, Milford, & Rosenthal, 1995; Wahba & Birdwell, 1976). Even so, he does make some interesting points about grumbles. Clearly, not all complaints are equal.

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Table 1. *Grumbles About Evidence-Based Approaches*

Grumble #	Grumble	Level of Grumble
1	The practice of industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology could be improved considerably if it were based on evidence.	Metagrumble
2	Practice is ahead of research in many content areas; furthermore, in I–O psychology scientists and practitioners each prize their own knowledge sources over the other's, raising concern regarding the quality of the interface between the two.	High-level grumble
3	Sometimes I–O research does not address the real needs of practitioners but is carried out solely for a scholarly audience. Academics and psychologists are not mingling in I–O journals. Rather, academics are writing for each other.	High-level grumble
4	There are academic-practitioner knowledge transfer problems; it isn't always clear to practitioners how to apply what is learned in research.	Low-level grumble
5	There is, on the whole, little practitioner access to systematic reviews.	Low-level grumble
6	There is an apparent lack of demand from our clients for evidence-based I–O psychology.	Low-level grumble
7	Many practitioners have a limited understanding of research, a limited capacity to access new evidence, and lack the skills to conduct their own systematic reviews let alone primary research.	Low-level grumble
8	Scholars may sometimes be reluctant to acknowledge the limits of evidence available at this point.	High-level grumble
9	Evidence is not free of politics.	Low-level grumble

In this short response, I'm attempting to cull from the Briner and Rousseau paper the primary concerns they are addressing. I'll then suggest some of the levels of grumbling that I believe are reflected in the expressed concerns. The primary concerns I see expressed in their article about evidence-based industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology, along with the level of each concern, are shown in Table 1.

This table shows an imposing list of grumbles. Only the first one deals with the problems to which evidence-based approaches might respond. The others deal with why such approaches may not be helpful or why, without being addressed, they will likely not succeed.

Metagrumbling

Grumble 1 in Table 1, which argues that the practice of I–O psychology could be improved considerably if it was based on

evidence, is likely a metagrumble. The expressed aim of those who have developed evidence-based approaches (Briner et al., 2009; Rousseau, 2006; Rousseau, Manning, & Denyer, 2008) has been to improve organizations through sound evidence. The metagrumble nature of the desire to use evidence is shown in, for example, Briner and Rousseau's discussion of the value of avoiding pop-psychology approaches whose claims are questionable because evidence is available in many areas and can improve practice much more than faddish approaches. It is also shown in their discussion of one of the purposes of evidence-based management as bridging research–practice gaps.

High-Level Grumbles

Some of the grumbles revolve around respect and being valued. These have to do

with relationships between academics and practitioners, relationships that are central to evidence-based practice. Desires for respect are implicit, if not always explicit, in statements that practice is ahead of research in many content areas (#2) or that practitioners sometimes feel that academics don't respect their knowledge but only respect very narrow ways of accumulating knowledge even if these do not correspond with practitioners' real needs to act in situations when pertinent evidence is not available (#3). The fact that scholars are sometimes reluctant to acknowledge the limits of the evidence available (#8) may reflect similar anxiety.

Low-Level Grumbles

Although the expressed concerns about evidence-based practice do not reflect basic life needs as Maslow depicted lower level grumbles, there are some grumbles that reflect fundamental concerns that, if not met, negatively affect the entire evidence-based enterprise. If practitioners have no idea how to apply findings (#4), if there is little practitioner access to systematic reviews (#5), if practitioners don't have the skill to conduct systematic reviews or know how to use research findings (#7), or if they are anxious about how the use of evidence sometimes may be part of a political battle (#9), then there is very little chance that evidence will be used in effective ways. These concerns may all contribute to the relatively small demand on the part of clients for evidence in I-O psychology (#6).

Rethinking Grumbling

The low- and high-level grumbles suggest the presence of uncertainty and anxiety about the use of evidence. The low-level concerns express how, for a variety of reasons, it is difficult for practitioners—consultants, managers, and others—to apply academically derived evidence, especially when they don't understand its

derivation, how to collect it, or what to do with it.

Implicit and sometimes explicit in the high-level concerns are issues of respect. How can practitioners' practice-based knowledge be respected more fully? Can academics take the chance that even if knowledge pertinent to a particular practice is not entirely developed it (and they) will not be dismissed out of hand?

The major metagrumble, that evidence is helpful, does not directly address these affective issues. It does not speak to the "how tos" of working with evidence, to the dynamics of complicated relationships that may be evoked by evidence, or to differences in interpretation of and affective responses to new ideas. Rather, it expresses a somewhat abstract ideal that skirts over experiences of people in difficult interactions. (Rousseau, in press, addresses issues like these in other places, but that work is not referenced in the article here.)

Table 2 in the Briner and Rousseau paper, for example, describes a series of characteristics indicative of the presence of evidence-based practice in I-O psychology, but there is little explicit human interaction in that table, especially little proactive initiative on the parts of practitioners and clients. Rather, the characteristics are presented as an almost ideal evidence-based world that does not link directly with the individuals and groups implementing them.

Explicit attention to high- and low-level grumbles and not only to high ideals would likely lead to a different type of, or at least an expanded, Table 2. This table would explicitly include references to practitioners and clients taking active initiative, engaging with each other and with academics about evidence. It would include acknowledgement of the kinds of anxieties that evidence-based approaches may evoke and how to respect and address them. It would include suggestions for dealing productively with the complications and conflicts associated with implementing evidence.

If the grumbling is to improve (including the grumbling of critics of evidence-based management), if evidence-based I–O psychology is to be increasingly “healthy” (Maslow, 1971), it will be necessary to incorporate emotion and relationships, including difficult ones involving low- and high-level grumbles, much more integrally into discussions of the use of evidence. These cannot be skipped if ideal manifestations of practice based on best evidence are going to be actualized. Such actualization would likely include metagrumbles not only about how evidence-based approaches may be helpful but also about the relational issues involved in their use.

Maslow’s vertical ladder undoubtedly does not reflect an exact sequence from low-level grumbles to metagrumbles. Regardless, it is helpful in identifying the need for scholars proposing evidence-based practice to address not only high-level ideals but also what might appear to be the less glamorous, grittier aspects of interactions with others that are required for high level ideals to be accomplished. These have, understandably, not been entirely addressed to this point, but they are appropriate next steps in the implementation of evidence-based approaches in I–O psychology.

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