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Pop psychology? Searching for evidence, real or perceived, in bestselling business books

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INTRODUCTION

Evidence-based practice in organizational settings, known as evidence-based management, involves professional decision-making based on more than individual preferences or haphazard experience. Instead, evidence-based management enhances the judgment of managers in the workplace with *scientific evidence*; which Rousseau describes as evidence that “can be graded from weak to strong, based on rules of scientific inference, where before-and-after comparisons are stronger than simultaneous correlations— randomized, controlled tests stronger than longitudinal cohort analyses”, and so on.

Scientific evidence is abundant and embodied by more than 50 million scholarly research papers, with more than one million additional papers published annually. Published research dates back to the year 1665 and is found in more than 23,000 peer-reviewed journals, at least 1,300 of which focus on business, management, and accounting disciplines and span topics from organizational behavior to human resources, marketing, strategy, and innovation. Yet, scholarly research papers fail to garner widespread utilization, reflecting a gap between knowledge and practice in the business community.

Researchers estimate that less than 18% of research is easily accessible to the public, while fewer than half of published papers ever receive a single citation. Moreover, journalists and scholars point out that many professionals do not use scholarly research because it is time consuming and difficult to understand. This divide is heightened when it comes to business disciplines, as business is commonly considered an experience-related profession for which scientific information is not useful.

If scholarly research on business topics is hard to find and interpret and considered of little use, popular business books

abound. McKinsey & Company, the global consulting firm, recently published “What CEOs are reading”, a piece highlighting books that corporate leaders had read to inform their personal and professional lives. Additionally, *Inc.* offers the “Top 10 ‘Start Your Own Business’ Books of 2015”, *Business Insider* espouses “10 books every new grad should read”, and *USA Today* promotes “The 12 Best Business Books of all time”. Such business books are undeniably popular, with more than 17 million books sold annually. Executives recommend books to shape firm culture, parents gift best-sellers to their kids at college graduation, and managers swear by the tales of their business heroes.

For many in scholarship, however, popular business literature is inferior to the works of academia. When scientific research is utilized at all, critics claim, authors of popular business books “cherry-pick science” and present “correlations as causations” to back up creative stories. Yet, despite the criticism, what we know of the evidence-based nature of knowledge in bestselling business books is scarce.

This raises two important questions. First, “Do readers of popular business books perceive the books to be sources of authoritative information?” and, second, “Are popular business books a consistent, quality source of evidence-based claims?” To answer these questions, we used the widely-known *New York Times*’ and *USA Today*’s book lists to select and examine the five bestselling business books for the year 2014: *Lean In* (Sandberg, 2013), *Outliers* (Gladwell, 2008), *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Kahneman, 2011), *The Power of Habit* (Duhigg, 2012), and *#GIRLBOSS* (Amoruso, 2014).

What is Evidence?

Much has been written in the scientific community to define and categorize the relative strength of different types of

evidence. For example, it has become generally accepted that empirical results from a carefully controlled study of participants over multiple points in time exhibit greater validity than a simple survey given to a convenient group of participants at a single point in time. Academic journals generally *require* that claims of causality be accompanied by some form of evidence presented by researchers. Further, the likelihood of a study being accepted for publication increases as the strength of this evidence increases.

The paradigm is entirely different in popular business literature. A popular nonfiction book may be clearly designated as a “Business” book by its publisher, by *The New York Times*, and by the local Barnes & Noble bookstore, but lack any indication that the book will impart reliable *evidence* to the reader. If a popular business book does include author claims directed to readers, there is no indication of the frequency of those claims. Finally, there is no scale by which a potential reader could consider the knowledge ROI (return on investment) of one popular business book compared to another.

Having recognized this disparity between research papers and popular business books, we began our work by viewing business books through a particular lens. Initially, this involved grouping content into just two conceptual categories: content that directly stated or clearly implied claims to knowledge that a reader might be expected to use in their own lives, and content that did not (background information and narrative storytelling). From here, we began to identify consistent themes emerging from the content containing author claims. Specifically, claims coalesced around the ‘messenger’ helping the author deliver their claim to the reader.

The first type of claim involved cases where the author was the only messenger. A claim of this sort might include an author attributing her own good grades in school to sitting in the front row of class, with the implication being that sitting in the front row of class will positively impact readers’ grades, too. The second type we observed involved a ‘generic other’ helping the author deliver the claim. A claim of this sort might include an author describing *her parents’* belief in sitting in the front row of class, implying to the reader that the information is not a singular opinion, but a known recipe or traditional norm for success. The third type involved a ‘legitimate other’ employed by the author. Instead of parents, bosses or other advocates unfamiliar to the reader, this is the realm of quotes from Mark Twain, Benjamin Franklin, and Fortune 500 CEOs used by authors to bolster their claims.

Claim types four, five, and six included numeric information that might increase legitimacy or believability among readers. We called the fourth type of claim ‘generic other with generic numbers’. This type included statements from generic sources and generic numbers such as, “*Surveys show that 45% of teenagers prefer chicken tenders over hot dogs,*” but also unqualified popular sources such as “*a CNN poll.*” These examples suggest that the author’s claim is not theirs alone, nor merely the insight of a family member or symbolic figure, but still lacks any indication of the validity of the information.

The fifth claim type was called ‘legitimate other with generic numbers’, such as, “*According to Harvard Business Review, scientists recently discovered that abusive super-*

vision occurs in 43% of corporate workplaces.” In this type of claim the reader may have some greater confidence that the information being reported comes from a peer-reviewed, evidence-oriented source, whereas the previous claim type reflects an unsophisticated poll run by a media outlet.

The sixth type of claim involved a ‘legitimate other with legitimate numbers’, such as “*Based on research by Brown and Turk (2015), adults that consume turmeric on a daily basis are 13% less likely to contract the common influenza each fall.*” Note that both a purported cause and effect are included, whereas layers four and five merely indicated the occurrence of a phenomenon without any explanation of its cause or its effect.

Note that the claim types described above lend themselves to, but do not precisely depict, an increasing scale for ‘trusting’ author claims. Its primary purpose is to reflect observed similarities in the way author claims were offered to readers in bestselling books and considers the way real people in real settings might attach “weight” to things they read. In other words, how might non-scientist readers of popular literature use claims to infer “truth” (whether or not actual validity is present)?

Consider, for example, the first type of claim; those made by the author alone. At least in comparison with *no information at all*, reading a claim from an individual with a halo of prestige that comes with having a published book in a commercial bookstore could result in what is known as a ‘Matthew effect’; when readers attach validity to an author’s claim based not on empirics but on reputation. Perhaps the receipt of a claim from a source other than the reader’s own perspective is better than no information, but what if the claim is unfounded or untrue?

Studies of misinformation in the media suggest that the motivation and cognitive effort required for weighing the validity of a claim and its source *is greater than simply accepting that claim*. As a result, even a poor source of information challenges one’s own beliefs because it requires work to overcome the conflicting input. Alternatively, confirmation bias suggests that people tend to grant validity to information that confirms what they already believe, whether or not it is true.

Clearly, these tendencies do not explain scientific inferences of actual causality, but they might explain how readers presume a book is a source of evidence-based management practice. In light of the disparity in readership between popular business books and evidence-based research papers, delineating claims could inform the development of a path by which the strongest evidence-based claims flourish the most. With our conceptual claim types established, we next measured their occurrence in bestselling business books.

Book Selection and Analysis

We began by examining two major best-selling book lists: the *New York Times* (NYT) and the *USA Today*. For the NYT, the books listed in the Business category were analyzed by month, and each book that appeared on the list at least once was recorded. Next, books were ranked according to how many months they appeared on the list over the course of the 2014 calendar year. Since the *USA Today* Business list is published weekly, its books were ranked according to how

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