Quantification, administrative capacity and democracy

Andrea Mennicken and Martin Lodge consider the implications of ‘governance by numbers’ for public services

The business of government is increasingly run with a calculator to hand. Policymaking activities and administrative control are progressively structured around calculations such as cost-benefit analyses, estimates of social and financial returns, measurements of performance and risk, benchmarking, quantified impact assessments, ratings and rankings, all of which provide information in the form of a numerical representation. Through quantification, public services could be said to have experienced a fundamental transformation from ‘government by rules’ to ‘governance by numbers’, with the aim to produce a self-regulating human society (Miller and Rose 1990; Supiot 2015).

There are signs everywhere that this ‘quantitative turn’ is making a profound impact on the way essential public services are organized, controlled and delivered. This quantification has fundamental implications not just for our understanding of the nature of public service itself, but also for wider debates about the nature of citizenship, democracy and the state, as well as for understandings of public administration. Research associated with quantification is used in the definition and determination of public service success and failure; decisions concerning the rationing of public services (e.g. rationing healthcare or limiting access to study programmes); and the realization of aims of ‘economy, efficiency and effectiveness’. How are boundaries between the public and the private redrawn through processes of quantification and economization? How interlinked are quantification and economization, given that instruments of quantification (e.g. performance ratings) have also been called upon to mediate between conflicting values in the public services (e.g. objectives of economy and quality)?

Secondly, we investigate cross-sectoral and cross-national similarities and differences, i.e. the implication of quantification in different ‘governmentalities’. Despite the spread and growing influence of calculative infrastructures across public services, relatively little systematic attention (in the form of cross-sectoral and cross-national comparative analysis) has been devoted to the ways in which tools and practices of quantification and calculation have travelled across different sectors and countries, and how they have altered modalities of governing in the organization and delivery of public services in this process. In doing so, we need to be less focused on ‘constraints’ of national context and more sensitive to the dynamics evolving between and across different states and public service sectors, triggered e.g. by the adoption of similar new public management instruments (such as benchmarking, performance measurement, quality management, rankings, ratings, and impact assessments). Research activities most often are either nationally focused or concentrated on one particular public sector (such as healthcare, higher education or the prison service). Scholars at bring together and confront different strands in the literature on public sector reform and the so-called New Public Management that have, as yet, mostly received siloed attention in the literatures in political science/public administration, accounting, sociology and law.

Instruments of quantification, such as the balanced scorecard, performance ratings and rankings, have travelled across the public sector (and the world) as standardized, universalized tool, yet their day-to-day operation, uses and effects depend on the institutional structures, administrative capacities (e.g. analytical capacities and enforcement capacities) and the cultural specificity of the contexts within which they are put to use. At the same time the quantification instruments themselves affect the contexts they pass through. New (accounting) entities are created via quantification (e.g. cost centres). New infrastructures are built around quantification instruments, which challenge and change existing organizational structures, working arrangements and political visions. New calculative expertise enters the public services (via accountants, financial advisers), which redefine existing working routines and understandings, including concepts of quality and associated notions of professionalism.

Distinct national public management styles are challenged by increasing cooperation among (public) management experts across national borders, and standardization at supra-national level.
level. Public sector governance can no longer be treated as a predominant-
ly national affair. There has been a growing evolution of internationally
operating private providers in the pub-
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(such as ratings, rankings and other performance measures) be called upon to mediate between conflicting values and rationalities engrained in public service governance (mediating between objectives of economy and values of fairness, equity, and public welfare)? What roles do they play in processes of inclusion and exclusion, political deliberation and participation?

By exploring these questions, our research responds to key claims, namely (a) whether quantification is a universal, converging trend, (b) whether quantification is leading to homogenizing pressure on public administration in the form of administrative capacities, and (c) whether quantification is associated with changes in understandings of subjectivities, personhood and citizenship. Questioning the (extent of the) transformative character of quantification in public service therefore offers the potential for contributing to debates about the future of public services in the context of competing reform doctrines, growing exposure to demographic and environmental change, and continued financial austerity in many OECD and non-OECD countries.

References


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