

FOCUS GROUP: THE WORLD OF SOCIAL NUMBERS

Andrea Mennicken reports on a research initiative hosted by the Institute for Advanced Study in Berlin.

In the academic year 2013-14, a focus group of nine fellows from various disciplines is studying the power of numbers in economic and social life. They have convened at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (Institute for Advanced Study Berlin) under the leadership of Wendy Espeland, a sociologist from Northwestern University in the US.

Numbers produced through practices of quantification play a central role in regulation. Whether in the private or the public sector, regulatory activities are increasingly structured around calculations. Cost-benefit analyses, estimates of social and financial returns, measurements of performance and risk – all of these provide information in the form of a numerical representation.

Quantification is often associated with objectivity, precision, and rationality. It is also associated with accountability and efficiency. But why do we think numbers have these qualities? What kinds of expertise and resources are needed in order to make credible numbers? What powers do we attribute to numbers and how do they interact with other kinds of authority? And in what ways have numbers changed how we engage in politics?

In order to examine these questions, the focus group brings together international scholars from different fields such as accounting, anthropology, history, history of science, sociology and statistics, to study the production and uses of numbers in different institutional contexts.

The unique value of this group lies in the variety of topics it covers. For example, Tong Lam from the University of Toronto analyses the roles of numerical practices in transforming Shenzhen from a fishing village into a “Special Economic Zone”. Instead of considering China’s high-speed growth as a reversal of the socialist revolution, Lam highlights the continuity between the socialist and post-socialist periods, tracing numerical practices in China from the first national census in the 1900s to assessments in recent years of something called *szuzhi*, which translates roughly as “human quality”.

Alongside this case, Wendy Espeland is investigating how quantification and commensuration have contributed to the creation of new kinds of people. She is examining Alfred Kinsey’s measures of homosexual behaviour and the roles that numbers played in the formation of the gay rights movement in the US.

The research in the group also spans a range of historical periods. Theodore Porter at UCLA is investigating asylum statistics and studies of human heredity in asylums since 1789, while John Carson from the University of Michigan looks at the rise of the category of “unsoundness of mind” in Anglo-American Common Law in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

In contrast, Emmanuel Didier a CNRS researcher in Paris, examines the roles of benchmarking and crime statistics from contemporary French police. My principal research is also on a contemporary site. In England and Wales, I am examining the “decency agenda” that emerged in the UK’s prison service from 1999 onwards.

In the prison service, numerically expressed key performance indicators or prison ratings, are not only used to increase administrative efficiency and reduce costs. Numbers “moralize” prison management by including measures of decency, dignity and rehabilitation alongside measures of security and cost in assessments of prison performance.

Costs, inmates, assaults, escapes, and instances of re-offending are no longer the only things that get counted. Attempts have also been undertaken to quantify prisoners’ experience through “quantitative measures of qualitative dimensions of prison life”.

To calculate these new numbers, calculative expertise must compete and cooperate. To produce statistics about the likelihood a person will re-offend or estimates of an offender’s dangerousness, private sector accounting practices for budgeting and costing are combined with criminological and actuarial measurements.

The academic literature has shown how actuarial risk assessment breaks the individual up into a set of measurable risk factors. Calculation has replaced individually oriented treatments and rehabilitation with a technocratic and calculated system of governing inmates. But this shift has not yet been matched by appropriate ways of “delivering” penitentiary services. Prisons, for the most part, still operate at the level of individuals.

There is still much that remains unknown about how private sector accounting instruments will intersect with more traditional treatment oriented approaches to penology. In Berlin, my research project is but one among many others, that explores the rise and spread of numbers in remediating the relationship between economy and morality.



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