Social workers and numbers- everyday interactions around numbers in the social services

Hjärpe, Teres

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Teres Hjärpe  
PhD-candidate  
School of Social Work  
Lund University

Short introduction and background information

I have chosen to present some themes that I am currently working on for one empirical chapter of my monograph thesis in social work. I am grateful for any kind of theoretical input from the perspective of sociology of professions. Please note that since the language for the thesis is Swedish, selected parts have been translated for this occasion. Thus, the text has not been language edited.

The purpose of my thesis is to explore the role and functions of numbers in social work, with an extra focus on numbers as tools for governance. I am working with (still broad) questions such as: When do interactions and negotiations around numbers appear in social work practice and how do they play out? What different functions and uses of numbers can be identified as important for social workers? How do numbers work in everyday interaction used as governance tools in social work? How does governing by numbers work in micro interaction in social work? How are social workers governed by numbers and how do they simultaneously use numbers themselves for different purposes?

I have taken inspiration from writers arguing that even though numbers and statistics have played a leading role in trends such as “knowledge-based governance” or different New Public Management reforms, their actual role, function or meaning is something that is “socially achieved” (Töndel 2014:17, Saetnan et al 2011:11). What becomes of such initiatives, often implemented “from above”, is a result of negotiations, adjustments and translations to local practices, as well as there can be resistance and countermoves. As Timmermans & Epstein (2010) have pointed out, no matter how much power the one setting the standards (numerical or not) has, their real impact depends on if and how they are being implemented (ibid: 79). Standards need to be “plugged in” into a physical and cultural infrastructure already occupied by practices, people and other standards that might not be compatible, or easy to translate into a given practice.

To be able to study such practices and interactions unfolding around numbers I have conducted ethnographic field work (participant observations, interviews, documents and photographs) for about two years at social services’ offices in five different municipalities in Sweden. I have shadowed managers participating in leadership-courses (arranged by Swedish national authorities) on how to use measurements and statistics, and I have observed and interviewed social workers, administrative staff and managers during “ordinary” work days.
In the collected data I identified different and specific number “contexts” or “concepts” (I cannot find a better word here) characterized by the fact that they caused practices, negotiations and tensions around numbers. One was statutory time frames for completing child and family investigations (in Sweden 120 days since 1998). Another one was age limits on welfare and other kinds of social assistance and public aid. A third one was the rankings and ratings connected to the national statistical database Open Comparisons. Digitalized performance management systems being implemented in all the municipalities was a fourth one and finally there were the “pulse boards” - a technique stemming from Lean management. Those might seem different and disparate and are so indeed. However, they all have in common that numbers are used with some kind of intention of affecting and governing the direction of the social work, although in quite different ways. They therefore offered good opportunities to study how governing by numbers work at a micro level.

My idea is to write one chapter each about those “contexts”. For this paper I have been working on the chapter about pulse boards.

**Pulse Boards**

*Lean Management, Pulse Boards and the role of Numbers*

At one social service unit where I conducted fieldwork the social workers’ main task was to investigate and decide upon users’ (normally elderly, disabled and very sick people) rights to assistance in terms of home care activities (cleaning, shopping, help with showering, going to bathroom etc) or shorter or longer stays in nursing homes.¹ About a year before my fieldwork the management had taken inspiration from “Lean management” to streamline and speed up the work of the social workers. According to the managements’ accounts the problems motivating the new model was high caseloads for the social workers which created long waiting lines for the users. The social workers struggled with completing required documentation on time and they often had to push planned follow up visits into the future. Thus, granted assistance could go on for years without anyone checking if the user still had the same need. The management mainly, but also some social workers, often talked about an earlier “ineffective” and “old-fashioned” working culture where the professionals worked independently and watched their own territories instead of collaborating in an efficient way.

Very briefly, Lean management is an efficiency model increasingly being used in public service organisations where inspiration comes from efficiency success within the car industry (Petersson et al 2012:14). It seeks increased productivity through the identification of “time thieves” and is constantly striving for the most resource efficient way to complete the tasks without negotiating with the quality. Standardisation of time-  

¹ In Sweden, social workers with such tasks are called “biståndshandläggare”. They only work with the assessments of the needs, and not with the actual care activities. Once they have granted the assistance, other social workers take over.
frames, caseloads, activities et cetera is the main strategy used to stimulate what is called “the flow”- referring to a case’s way through the organisation. If the “line of production” within the car industry goes “from order to a delivered product”, the corresponding course in this specific social service unit would be “from application to denial or approval of assistance”. In both cases the ideal of a smooth course where all moments and passages runs as quick as possible is central. Lean has been increasingly used in Swedish public organisations during the last 10-15 years, mainly in health care but also to some extent in the social services (Rognes & Svarts 2012).

Numbers have a distinguished role in Lean management in the way that the work is described quantitively and measured against quantified goals such as percentage rates to be acquired or standards for how much (for example time) or how many of something (meetings, cases) the professionals are expected to “produce”. Numbers are used to visualise how the staff, on an individual basis, is performing in relation to the goals and standards decided by the management. The main tool used for this purpose is the pulse board, described in Lean-literature as a ”visual protocol of taken decisions and ongoing activities” (Petersson et al 2012: 51), a kind of position mark for the staff to relate to. The pulse boards are strategically placed and located in a central place where staff naturally passes and where they can easily gather for daily pulse meetings.

What is measured and visualised on the pulse board varies according to the tasks being executed at the office or for the specific team. Caseloads, number of meetings, home visits, follow ups, documentations load are some examples.

Taking the pulse of the social workers
Every morning at 8 am, the five different teams at the social service office gathered around five different pulse boards for a fifteen-minute short meeting, standing on their feet: “sitting down would make the staff to comfortable”, one manager explained to me. For one of the teams the board looked like this (after my reconstruction):
In the first column from the left, the social workers of the team are listed with their names, followed by a row where they account for the activities and meetings scheduled for every day of the week. For example, Eva, who is listed first, will have two meetings on Monday at the same time that she is covering for Stig who is ill. Cecilia has planned to finish the documentation of two investigations and Viveka is going on a home visit. The second column from the right indicates "lag" representing the number of assistance decisions that the social worker has made and executed but where the documentation of the investigation is not finished. A standard had been decided by the management that the social workers could have maximum 15 investigations "lagging" before the managers would actively "take action". Finally, the last column to the right states how many "follow-up-meetings", out of the planned for the month, that the care manager has had time to realize so far.

Next to every social workers name you can also find a coloured dot and some “sticks” (as the participants calls them). The colours represent the social workers “rating” of their previous week work experience, where green means “good”, red means “bad” and yellow something in between. The colours become numbers when the management count the number of dots in different colours and put them in relation to a percentage goal for staff satisfaction (for example 75% of the dots should be red). The sticks represent the number of days one has covered for a colleague who is ill or had to take on an urgent matter. The visualisation of the covering rate with sticks was an initiative from the staff, and not a part of the initial pulse board logic. I will write more about this act later on in the paper (page 9-10).

The pulse meetings are led by a front-line manager with the intention of “taking the pulse” on the social workers. The manager asks every social worker individually, what she/he is going to do during the day, what their “statistics” look like and how they are performing in relation to the standards, and if they need any help from anyone. One
purpose of scrutinizing the individual schedules collectively is for the manager to overview that the work-load is equally distributed between the social workers. If one of them has a “calmer” day the manager can actively engage them in helping a colleague that has more tasks for the day. This in accordance with one of Lean management’s central messages that in Swedish makes a catchy slogan “laget före jaget” (the team before the ego, putting the team first).

*Numbers and self-technologies*

Looking for clues on how numbers work in governing situations at the micro level, a first observation is that already in the interaction between the observer appears thoughts and ideas about what should be done by whom. The numbers on the board seems to give silent instructions to actions.

Even without knowing much about the specific work tasks, from a quick look at the board, even an outsider can get some sense of what should be done by whom. Taking a look at the reconstructed pulse board on page 3, you might note that Cecilia should work on her “lag”, and Karin with the follow-up visits. Stig, on the other hand, is in good course and can feel satisfied at the moment. For the social workers at the department who has more information about the work might read something else out of the board. Putting together different numbers into an overall work description, and connect this to the standards and goals, the picture becomes a bit more complex. They might conclude that Viveka is behind in her own cases because she has covered four times for a colleague, and that even Lotta is close to the standard limit. In any case, the result is a conclusion of who needs to do what and in what order. When the social worker looks at the board and starts comparing themselves with their colleagues, certain emotions are created which is reflected in the following quote from an interview with case workers Jeanette and Margareta:

> If you yourself have 0 cases lagging it makes you happy. But if your colleague has 0 while you have 20, then it doesn’t feel that good (laughs a little). Then you feel like… damn it!… (Social worker Jeanette)

That such emotions are, or at least can be, converted to initiatives to act is apparent in Margareta’s posture later in the same interview. When I asked her if there were many negotiations between the social workers, for example regarding who’s turn it is to cover for a sick colleague, she immediately answered: ”No, that is not necessary, it is visible on the board”, and later on in the interview she said that:

> You take a look at the pulse board and you see that someone else has covered two days for someone, and you know that you haven’t covered yourself, it is natural to take the step and volunteer to cover the next time. (Social worker Margareta)
When Margareta compares herself with another social worker who has covered two times more than her she draws the conclusion that it is her time to volunteer. The examples above shows how the numbers on the board creates both emotions and actions, something that Foucault (1988) and his followers (see Rose et al 2006:89) might call governing through self-technologies. Some selected and measurable aspects of the social workers’ performances have been visualised on the board. Between many different imaginable ways of describing social work activities, quantification has the advantage that the information can be reduced and put in relation to other things that has been measured in the same way from the same principle. Once the performances of the social workers are compared in this way a valuation or a rating can appear. This is the force behind what Espeland & Stevens (2008) call ”commensuration” and it is the explanation of why they consider quantification a socially transformative process. The fact that this can be purposeful in the governing of professionals is reflected in the following quote from an interview with case worker Lisa. It seems as she almost automatically, and by herself, draws the intended conclusions from looking at the board:

Now I want to put an emphasis on the follow up meetings, now they are so visible, I mean, I knew before that I didn’t keep up with them but I pushed that stress away, I could forget about them, but now they are so visible and you see it every day… so, now I want to perform and finish them. My priorities have changed, I don’t know how to explain it, but now I want to put emphasis and be on time with what is visible on the board. Earlier I didn’t see it, and then I would prioritise according to what I thought was the most urgent matters… (Social worker Lisa)

The respondents’ reactions in the last three quotes we could call “conform”. They get stressed when they are supposed to, and they act according to the managements’ intentions, although the message is delivered by the board. Margareta, Jeanette and Lisa all possess the ability to compare and calculate around their own and others’ performances, what Kurunmäki & Miller (2006:88) call ”calculating selves”, postures that modern organisations seeks and values. The numbers communicate a message in a simple and clear way, and the board is to be read exactly as those social workers seem to do. You could say that the governing with numbers went smoothly, and the active functions of the numbers can be described as visualising and comparing.

However, during the fieldwork, it was not always the case that the social workers acted in this conform way, and the front line managers had to take on the role as mediators of the numbers. This is the theme for the next section where social worker Vera tries to argue against the message of the pulse board.

When numbers need a spokesperson
Social worker Vera did not seem to be governed that easily by the instructions on the pulse board. She didn’t seem to feel stressed by the numbers indicating that she was far
behind in her documentation work, and she didn’t want to hand over some of her cases to a colleague to get some space to fulfil the administrative requirements. In the following I present a quite long field note which reflects a conversation between front line manager Pelle and social workers Vera and Allan during a pulse meeting. I have chosen to present the fieldnote as a whole, despite its length, because I want to show how Vera in several different ways tries to argue against Pelle, who keeps on referring to the numbers on the board in order to make her change her prioritizations. In italics I have marked some parts that I want to highlight in the light of my interest in how numbers can work in social work interaction:

Pelle: It looks very good Allan, and Vera, you have chosen a yellow dot, did you have a stressful week?

Vera: Well, I don’t know if stressful… I don’t sense stress in that way, but it was messy somehow, many new cases coming in and all the paperwork…

Pelle: Mm…mm… but when it comes to documentation Allan has 0 lags and you have 10 Vera (Pelle points hard at the number 10 on the board, making a sound)

Vera: Yes, and the investigations I finished last week, I have to finish writing today, or I’ll be lagging even more.

Pelle: Yes, yes. I am thinking that all the new cases coming in should be Allan’s, since you have 19 ongoing cases and, Allan has 16, and on top of that you have 10 documentations lagging.

Vera: But I gave you one case right? (turning to Allan).

Pelle: Vera, you need a plan for how to catch up here, and you two (Allan and Vera) were supposed to talk to each other about it.

Vera: Yes, and so we did!

Pelle: And what did you decide?

Allan: I have offered to write some of her documentations today. But then she has two closing meetings today, so we don’t have time to do the briefing and to hand over information necessary in order for me to do that.

Pelle: OK, but some other day this week you can do it right?

Vera: And I wanted to ask Cecilia if I could skip the meeting tomorrow.

Pelle: Yes, talk to Cecilia, because you HAVE TO work on those numbers (points again at her 10 documentations “lagging”), that’s just the way it is!

Vera: Yes, of course, and I will be here all day tomorrow at the office.

Pelle: And if new cases are coming in Vera? What will you do then?

Vera: Well.. we said that… because Allan has already taken one case from me in Viby (part of the city).

Pelle: But Vera, look here, you have 19 cases and Allan only 15, and you have 10 documentations and Allan 0 … I mean we have to look at the numbers and compare.
Vera: Yes, yes, but on the other hand I also have 2 closing meetings today, those cases are to be ended today so that makes it soon only 17 cases for me.

Pelle: I’d rather see the opposite now, that Allan took on more cases than you.

Vera: Well, I understand that Allan wants to help me, but I thought that maybe we can solve this in another way, because I don’t think it’s for the good if we mix the cases between us case workers. The whole idea with us working specifically with those applications was the continuity for the users. If he will start taking cases from me and I from him, we will start mixing and I don’t think it is good for the users, and also not timewise, because I will have to be on even more different places, I will be running around everywhere!

Pelle: Ok, so how are you going to solve it then, because you are not performing well here Vera!

Vera: hm… ok, Allan can take the applications to private nursing homes, I don’t care as much about them.

Allan: Or I could take two cases from you now, just temporary until you have had a chance to catch up. Once you are back in your normal rhythm...

Pelle: I think Allan’s suggestion is good, we cannot just talk, we have to come to action!

Vera: If you take two of my cases you have to stick with them...

Allan: Ok, then so be it….

Vera: Ok, as long as we don’t start mixing the cases it can work for me I guess.

Pelle: Then it is decided, you two have to work out what cases Allan is taking, and I will check tomorrow what you have decided. Ant by tomorrow I want those numbers to be more equal (points again hard on the number indicating their caseloads) Do you feel OK with this Vera?

Vera: Well… I actually don’t want to let go of my cases, I want to be able to make it on my own… (Fieldnote from Pulse meeting)

Pelle takes on the role as the numbers’ spokesperson. Because of Vera’s statistics on lagging cases he wants to make her hand over cases to Allan in order to fulfil the documentation requirements. Vera has another agenda and tries to argue against Pelle in different ways. First of all, she questions the numbers on the board stating that “on the other hand I have two closing meetings today”. This is a way of saying that her statistics are not as bad as they look since two cases will disappear, they don’t mirror her view of her caseload. Later on she invokes the users perspective since ”it is not good for the continuity” if the care managers start mixing cases. At two different places in the conversation she (and Allan) also refers to practical circumstances: “it takes time to hand over cases” and if “we start mixing I’ll have to be running around everywhere”. Finally, towards the end of the dialogue Vera reveals what we could interpret as her sense of professional pride: “I don’t like to let go, I want to make it on my own”.

In at least four different ways Vera tries to argue against Pelle in order to keep on working according to her own plans. Pelle does not respond with counter-arguments in the different substantive questions, but keeps on referring to the numbers, which he uses “factually”, ”I mean we have to look at the numbers and compare”. The numbers seem to
be “above” all other circumstances that potentially can explain why Vera has bad statistics. In that sense the numbers offer a comfortable space, a distance, meaning that Pelle doesn’t have to reply to Vera’s different arguments. It becomes a matter of Vera’s “subjective qualitative arguments” against Pelle’s “objective numbers argument”.

As Porter points out (1994:225); what appears objective always means that someone has to sacrifice some kind of meaning. In this case Vera has to sacrifice the control she wants over the cases she perceives as her responsibility. However, behind the numbers on the pulse board, in the management’s rhetoric and decisions about what to measure and visualise (described earlier in the chapter, but not in this paper) several arguments, values and positions, as subjective as Vera’s, can be found. Just to take one example, managers talked about social workers “watching their own territory” and only “caring about their own cases” which they thought counteracted a fair resource allocation amongst the users as a group. What is really at stake then are different and conflicting views on how to prioritize where one side highlights professional ambition, pride and responsibility, users’ continuity as well as pragmatic reasons for the professional, and the other side represented by the management highlights efficiency and equal distribution of resources on the other hand. The numbers create the gap enabling the conflict never to reach the surface.

To sum up, the field note shows how difficult it can be to argue against numbers appearing as objective, even though assumptions and preferences always hide behind them. Considering the pulse boards in those examples as Foucauldian ”governmentality tactics” (Foucault 1991:95) or government tools, we can add the dimension that the actual governance is somewhat hidden. That is: it is obvious that a governance is happening, but not as obvious who is governing. The numbers speak for what the managers perceive as a problem and gives them the legitimacy they need. Against this background the numbers appear as a particularly efficient tool for everyday governance of social work practice.

Internalisation and countermoves from the social workers
Apart from Vera’s questioning in the previous section, several varied ways that the social workers related to the pulse boards and the implementation of Lean management could be described (and will be elsewhere). One prominent theme when talking to the social workers was the managers’ total control of their work that the pulse boards opened up for. Some of the social workers seemed uncomfortable with this, talking about mistrust from the managers and less space for discretion, while others seemed to appreciate what they perceived as clear and firm support. The pulse boards also opened up for the social worker’s control of each other, which rather took an expression of them “guarding the chord”, making sure that no too ambitious colleague would contribute to even tighter standards for the whole group.

Another present theme, taking up quite much of the social workers’ time, especially during meetings, were the different kinds of questioning of what the numbers really reflected: “The number of cases does not say anything about the complexity or character of the case” or: “What about the quality of the work?”. The numbers were often perceived as reductive of the complex reality they worked in, something that many critics have
pointed out, not least Sven-Erik Liedman through the conceptualisation “pseudo-quantities” (2013). Many following activities strived at nuancing, completing or covering up for the lack of the numbers. One specific move I found especially interesting in this context was one addition of information visualised at the board on the staff’s own initiative. The following interaction comes from a pulse meeting with front line manager Yvonne and her team:

Yvonne reads out loud what the two social workers who are ill today had planned in their schedule. ”Who can cover for Petra today?” Someone offers to take Petra’s phone but cannot take the home visit she has planned. Someone else offers to do the home visit. Yvonne writes on the board who covers for what parts. She writes a stick next to one of the names. ”Do you get a stick just for one home visit?”, one social worker asks. Yvonne answers “yes, I think so” and the social worker again: ”Well, I just want to make sure we all do the same, because yesterday when I took Leili’s home visit, I didn’t get a stick”. Yvonne changes her mind ”No, that’s right, you’re right” and she erases the stick. After the meeting Yvonne explains to me that the sticks is something that the staff themselves came up with, they wanted it to be visible if someone has helped a colleague out and to make sure this is equally spread amongst everybody. They have defined carefully what activities that qualifies for a stick and when you have four sticks, you have reached a maximum quota for the month. (Field note from pulse meeting)

When the pulse boards had been used for some months, the social workers came with the suggestion that it should also be visualised how many times per month one had covered for a colleague. That this practice is important and has meaning for the social worker is apparent in the way she reassures that Yvonne gives the sticks in the right way. When the activities that the management had chosen to visualise on the board was not perceived as reflecting the work distribution fairly, the countermove was made in terms of an addition to the model, instead of for example resisting or repulsing it. The information on the board was nuanced in order to mirror what was meaningful information for the social workers.

Several authors have expressed and given example of ”what is counted is what counts” (for example Bevan & Hood 2006; Power 2004) and that a good strategy to be listened to or to create reactions serving your own interests is to express yourself in numbers. When what is visualised in numbers becomes important, it also becomes a matter of power and influence to take part in the decisions about what should be measured and how (Best 2001; Porter 1994; Espeland & Stevens 2008). Porter (1994:202) as well as Kurunmäki & Miller (2006) states that there is always someone who loses something due to the way things are measured and that ”success on one register can mean failure on another” (ibid:94), why negotiations always appear.

Bruno et al (2014) call this type of countermove or answer to someone else’s quantification “statactivism” and the social workers’ claim in this case falls within the strategy they call “disclosure”. The purpose of the move is to question or nuance a truth
coming from an authority through numbers. In the present example it is the managements’ truth: “it is the number of cases, lags and follow-ups that best describes the work load of the social workers”, that the social workers want to nuance with the answer “it is also important how many times one covers for a colleague since this is something that can affect your own statistics”. This is a clear example of how negotiations around numbers appears, evidently because it its important what they show, or what part of reality is visualized by them.

It is however worth noticing that even though the example shows that the social workers wants to participate in setting the rules of the game, it is still within a game that the managers have chosen to play. The countermove does not question the game per se, but rather confirms and strengthens it.

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