Measuring Social Work

Quantity as Quality in the Social Services

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Abstract
Social workers are increasingly having the quality of their work ranked according to quantitative indicators, based on the conviction that only measurements provide objective evidence regarding social interventions. This paper analyses the challenges that arise when recent performance-based endeavours of Swedish authorities meet everyday social work practice. Ethnographic fieldwork at a social service office revealed tensions between the confidence in measurements and situations unfolding around numbers in terms of misunderstandings, manipulations, conflicts, and disregard for problem areas perceived as immeasurable. These tensions can be understood from the sociology-of-knowledge perspective that numbers interact with the social context. As the quantitative logic of state initiatives collides with the qualitative practice of social work, further dimensions are added to the clarity that numbers are expected to bring about. The present findings add to previous research explaining why social workers seem to be uncomfortable within modern organizations in their current form.

Introduction

This paper addresses the collision between "quantitative logic" and "qualitative practice" that occurs when governmental initiatives to measure, compare, and rank social work engagements meet everyday practices at a social services office.

Social workers today are increasingly having the quality of their work evaluated and ranked using quantitative indicators and performance measurements. For example, the extent to which a social worker employs standardized assessment tools may serve as a "process indicator" of the quality of the child and family investigation, and a social worker's productivity may be assessed based on the time taken to complete an investigation. The average costs per child in institutional care who has completed secondary education may be used as an "effect indicator" (National Board of Health and Welfare 2014.a: 6; RKA 2012: 4). The development of such national indicators, along with several recent initiatives to support "evidence-based practice" and "good quality" within the social

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services, indicate growing reliance on measurements and figures. Statistical data, systematic measurements, and standardized and comparable information are often considered the key to progress within public service organizations (National Board of Health and Welfare 2012, 2014.b; SALAR 2009, 2013, 2014).

A focus on measurement is considered a distinguishing feature of modernization (Liedman 1997: 519; Timmermans & Epstein 2010: 74; Shore & Wright 2015: 22), with some authors stating that quantification is a constitutive aspect of modern life in which "The real easily becomes coextensive with what is measureable" (Espeland & Stevens 2008: 432). With the earliest roots in the Enlightenment's ideals of precise, objective, rational, and comparable knowledge (as opposed to speculative, intuitive, and traditional knowledge), continuous development in many domains of modern life has favoured "knowing that" over "knowing how", theory over practice, and objective quantitative data over experience-based or intuitive qualitative knowledge (Liedman 1997: 517; Johansson 1997: 15).

In particular, professional and organizational life is increasingly characterized by standard procedures and demands for measurable outcomes (Rose 1991: 674; Shore & Wright 2015: 23). In the field of social work, at least two parallel developments reflect an elevated importance of statistical and measured data compared to other kinds of information, with a distancing from things that are "traditional", arbitrary, less transparent, or non-scientific. One of these currents, referred to as the evidence-based practice (EBP) paradigm, began as a disciplinary discussion about whether social workers' methods actually impacted the clients. This was followed by requests – largely from the government – for systematized working methods, structured documentation, and evidence, often defined as measured effects of the social workers' interventions (Gambrill 2011: 27–33). In this context, social workers who allow practice-based knowledge, experience, intuition, and flexibility to guide their work are often viewed as an ethical risk, with the potential for arbitrariness and extensive exercise of professional power (Cumming et al 2007: 239).

The other development has involved changes in the management of public organizations, including social services. Emerging ideas about professionals' ineffectiveness, extensive personal discretion, and a lack of transparency within public organizations have fuelled an influx of corporate management models from the private sector, first appearing in England and North America during the 1980s (Hood 1995: 93, 99) and in Sweden during the 1990s (Forssell & Ivarsson Westerberg 2014: 204). Such management models include controlling and assessing work efforts, applying an economic cost-efficiency rationale. The replacement of qualitative and implicit standards and norms with formal quantitative standards and measures of performance is a key feature of what is now known as the New Public Management (Hood 1995: 96). Moreover, a controlling function was built into administrative routines, including the introduction of a new kind of administrator – the manager – with the task of covering and auditing the routines. This emerging "management bureaucracy" has created new positions, functions, and even professions for administration, planning, controlling, auditing, and accounting. The focus has partly shifted from the task for which the organization was founded, to their rules, routines, and auditing (Hall 2012: 18–27).

Critics describe such developments as linked to a novel form of state control, with key elements including *auditing* (Power 1999: 91–93), *performance* (Svärdsten Nymans 2012: 16, 61), or *transparency* (Levay & Waks 2006: 19, 103). Such elements are proposed to be tools serving a neo-liberal form of governance in which the government indirectly influences how organizations and people think, function, and act. Theoretical approaches – such as *governmentality* (Foucault in Dean 1999), *technologies of government* (Miller & Rose 1990), or *audit society* (Power 1999) – each refer to a strong yet indirect or "hidden" form of governance. The government may typically establish measurable or standardized goals for an organization, but give the responsibility for achieving these goals to local rather than governmental actors (Svärdsten Nymans 2012: 61; Shore & Wright 2015: 22).

There is controversy regarding the extent to which "qualitative" human service activities can be quantified and described using the commonly requested types of measures. Some scholars are convinced that this can be accomplished as desired (Antilla 2007: 3; Elg, Gauthereau & Witell 2007: 114, 137). Others highlight the complexity of such tasks and the need for caution when translating human service activities into numbers (Levay & Waks 2006: 12), and some are highly sceptical of the very idea of quantitatively capturing social engagements (Liedman 2011: 59). In contrast with the more technical knowledge collected by specific measuring activities, some prefer to apply Aristotle's concept of *Phronesis*, referring to a practical wisdom or "judgement ability", and concepts such as *tacit* or *intuitive* knowledge (Svenaeus & Bornemark 2009: 39, 55).

Extensive research has focused on the implications of the "modern" prerequisites for human service professionals, among which a preference for measurements is only one part. Julia Evetts (2009, 2011) described how the social work profession is challenged by the organization itself when traditional "occupational professionalism" is supplanted by an "organizational" form of professionalism. Partnership, collegiality, professional discretion, and trust are diminished by the heightened emphasis on governance, standardization, and auditing (Evetts 2009: 249). When a framework for the social worker-client relationship is constructed based on organizational goals, the social workers' professional judgment is questioned and their discretion is eroded (Rogowski 2012; Ponnert & Svensson 2015). Some authors lament the disappearance of the moral character that previously distinguished social work (Clark 2006).

Both new public management and evidence-based practice are associated with professionals being required to complete more administrative tasks, such as documentation, reporting, meetings, and information production. Tasks specifically related to measuring activities are exemplified by the production, updating, and reporting of statistical data to various stakeholders (Carlstedt 2015; Hjärpe 2015) and to management (Hall 2012: 27). Consequences include less time with clients, unnecessary "just in case" documentation, and increased stress levels amongst professionals (Forssell & Ivarsson-Westerberg 2014; Light 2015; Thelander & Jacobsson 2016). Recent years have witnessed great discontent and even cynicism amongst social workers, and an exodus from organizations of authority-based social work, in direct response to the "bureaucratic" turn of social work (Kullberg 2011; Tham 2007). Rules, regulations, administrative requirements, and specialized organization forms have directed the work far from the social worker-client relationship and from the overall perspective on clients' situations that comprise the core of social workers' educations (Perlinski 2010; Pettersson 2014).

AIM AND PURPOSE

While previous research in this field has addressed the bureaucratization of human service professionalism in general and of social work in particular, our present paper focuses on the encounter between quantitative logic and qualitative practice and how this transpires in the field of social work. This work was inspired by prior studies of how "laboratory logic" collides with the "logic of care" when applying standardized assessment tools (Björk 2013) and of how assessment tools both structure the client meeting as well as interrupt the social worker's contact with the client (Martinell Barfoed & Jacobsson 2012). Similarly, our present study aims to explore the roles and potential influences of the use of numbers, indicators, and measurements to increasingly reflect and guide social work activities.

Despite the slightly different emphasis in the paradigms of evidence-based practice (measuring for knowing) and new public management (measuring for control of effectiveness), they both represent "cultures of objectivity" (Power 2004: 779). Compared to other kinds of information, numbers are viewed as objective and rational reflectors of reality, and are granted a higher status as pure facts, i.e. information free from human interference (Hall 2012: 37–38; Rose 1991: 674; Hammersley 2005: 86). Thus, the use of numeric data and transparent accountability are expected to "shape up" the practice. Such expectations are directed towards many different professional practices within the public sector, and recent reports describe some consequences for schoolteachers, judges, and academic faculty (Ahlbäck Öberg et al 2016: 102–105). It is of particular interest to examine this issue within social work, as it is one of the so-called "semi"-professions, distinguished by an unclear or broad knowledge base that has been questioned for its reliance on "intuition", experience-based methods, and tacit knowledge (Brante 2014: 226, 239). Our present paper addresses the question of what happens when initiatives to measure, compare, and rank are applied in an on-going social work practice.

The analysis will highlight dimensions of measuring activities in social work drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork at a social service office where the management was adjusting and applying performance indicators. First, the story of measurements in relation to management and evidence-based practice will be outlined as a framework to understand the hopes and expectations attached to numbers. Subsequently, the data from a Swedish social service office will be analysed.

Measurements in organizational and professional context

NEW ORGANIZATIONS, NEW MEASUREMENTS

Measurements are not a new phenomenon in social work, but were rather a prerequisite for its emergence as a profession. In contrast to traditional poverty aid, social work developed as an independent discipline as the population became a measurable unit during the early 19th century. Extensive demographic studies of population growth and child mortality formed the basis for national preventive health programmes and child and family policies in which social workers played important roles (Sunesson 2006: 272). The fields of public insurance and public health emerged directly due to statistical descriptions of society, and knowledge about life and death regularities (Power 2004: 766).

Statistical representation also grew to be important in the construction of nation states during the 19th century, when new media forms stimulated public debate and national identification. New media enabled the spread of statistical data about a country's condition, including social and health aspects, with the intention of strengthening peoples' identification with their nation and creating public awareness and engagement in social problems (Höjer 2001: 249).

While statistical data was rooted in the very foundations of state-organized activities and of public mobilization to address social problems, the penetration of measurements into organizational and professional life is a more recent phenomenon (Shore & Wright 2015: 23). Recent decades have seen increasing requests within public sector organizations for measurements of social interventions, professional engagement, interhuman relations, and social processes with regards to effects, results, or outputs (Hood 1995: 94; Svärdsten Nymans 2012; Clarkson 2010: 171; Power 2004: 766). The social services are among the public organizations in which this development has been observed (Bergmark et al. 2008; Perlinski 2010; Berg et al. 2008).

Power (2004: 766) explains that ever since their appearance at the start of the 20th century, large formal organizations have faced challenges regarding management and administrative control and the need for performance assessment. However, as stated by Meyer and Zucker (1989: 136–145), public agencies serve a variety of mixed interests other than profit, and have thus traditionally been judged on (or maintained by) ideals and processes – such as their intentions or how well they serve the commonwealth – rather than by using performance measures. According to Hood (1995: 94), the new public management appeared during the 1980s, as public accountability and public administration started along a new path and parallel projects were initiated across the European and northern American countries as a reaction against a former "ineffective" administrative doctrine (public policy and management; PPM). Paving the way for the NPM doctrine were critical ideas illuminating the ineffectiveness, extensive power, and discretion of the professionals as well as the lack of cost transparency (ibid.: 94). New accountability regimes inspired by private models placed important value on numeric data due to their perceived neutral, standardizing, and comparative features. Doctrinal components of NPM include replacing professional discretion with rules and measures and the practical implication of audits (ibid.: 96). NPM is often associated with the idea that anything can be measured and monitored (Bergmark et al. 2008: 40, Hanberger 2012: 12). The introduction of NPM initiatives to the Swedish public sector can be partly explained by the economic crisis in the 1990s, which prompted the import of cost-effective alternatives to reduce public spending (Forssell & Ivarsson Westerberg 2014: 206).

MEASUREMENTS AND EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE

The evidence-based practice movement began within the medical discipline in the early 1990s (Hammersley 2005: 1), reaching social work several years later (Rosen 2006: 247). Critiques of reliance on routine and inflexible working methods (Sunesson 1985:8; Börjeson 1984, 2006:40) led to increased demands, not least from the government, that work methods should be supported by scientific evidence (Tengvald 2001: 23, Rosen 2006; 230). Eileen Gambrill (2011) explains that EBP arose as an alternative to an authority-based practice in which decisions influencing people's lives were made based on tradition, anecdotal information, and a search for consensus within the profession rather than on documented research-based evidence of effectiveness. This resulted in great variations between professionals who treat similar problems differently, and clients not always being offered the most effective interventions (ibid.: 27). Evaluations, monitoring, documentation, and structured forms are required to distinguish and disseminate practices with proven effectiveness (Gambrill 2011: 33).

What comprises evidence remains a matter of debate between researchers, authorities, and practitioners (Rosen 2006). However, the request that judgements should be based on neutral and objective information is often interpreted as a requirement for measured, standardized, and comparable evidence. The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare (2015) distinguishes between evidence-based and knowledge-based practice, stating that the former has a higher scientific status, including reference to measurements and a quantitative research design. Studies indicate that the introduction of "evidence-based" standardized assessment tools has been furthered by parallel professionalization strivings among social workers (Martinell Barfoed & Jacobsson 2012).

MEASURING SOCIAL WORK IN SWEDEN

Several current state initiatives in Sweden show increased emphasis on accountability, transparency, comparison, and ranking. For example, since 2011, the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare has required that every municipality elaborate a *Quality Management System* to organize the planning, guiding, controlling, monitoring, evaluation, and improvement of their activities. This includes requirements for continuous delivering of statistical reports, and accounting for working methods and routines as "process maps" and in other standardized forms (National Board of Health and Welfare 2012). Documents on municipality web sites nowadays provide numeric data about the organization's performance – for example, the number of reports and applications from the unit this month, the number of "re-actualizations", the number of assessments per social worker employed at the unit, whether investigations were performed within the statutory timeframe, how long a user must wait for attendance, and the satisfaction rate among clients.[1]

Another initiative is the construction of national and regional statistical databases – with names such as Open Comparisons and Kolada – that can be used to compare the quality and performance of social and health services by applying measurable indicators. Such databases have gradually been developed following the release of an interim report from the Swedish government (SOU 2005: 110; SOSFS 2011: 9) emphasizing that municipalities should identify and use key indicators and comparative data to share knowledge and "good examples", as well as for obtaining data for prioritizations.

The elaboration of "national indicators" of quality within social services is an on-going project that is executed with cooperation between state authorities and local managers. The "Handbook for the Development of Indicators" (National Board of Health and Welfare 2014.a) states that indicator-based comparisons and evaluations should be used to support decision-making at various levels (ibid: 9). The handbook also explains the distinctions between *structural* indicators, *proces*s indicators, *result* indicators, and *effect* indicator – which must all be measurable (ibid.: 11–13). Indicators already in use include the home service hours per user, the costs of disability-related interventions according to the Social Services Act, and the average duration of child and family investigations (RKA 2014, National Board of Health and Welfare 2014.a).

The very recent initiatives described in this section illustrate how ideas regarding the importance of measurements for increasing efficiency that

1 For example, *Jämförelseprojektet* Vellinge municip. 2015-05-18; *Öppna jämförelser* Avesta municip. 2015-05-18.

emerged during the 1980s and 1990s have been present, and even intensified, in recent reforms in Sweden.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretically, this analysis was inspired by scholars who, in the tradition of the sociology of knowledge, have analysed people's trust in numbers and the perception of numbers as "truth speakers". It is often maintained that even quantitative data – ascribed with objectivity and neutrality – are products of someone's interpretations, choices, interests, and negotiations (e.g. of definitions, measures, selections, category constructions, etc.) (Best 2001: 60–161; Power 1999: xiv; Timmermans & Epstein 2010: 69, 72). In Darrell Huff's classic book *How to lie with statistics* (1954), he discussed the tendency to place erroneous confidence in numbers. This book, as well as Joel Bests' sequel (2001), includes various examples of intended and unintended manipulations, and inappropriate comparisons between different kinds of statistics caused by incompetence or disrespect (ibid.: 62, 113).

Not only are numbers a product of the social environment; they also influence the social environment and impact chains of actions and interactions. Espeland and Stevens (2008) describe the "doing of numbers" and "what gets done by" them (ibid.: 405) and its analysis entails distinguishing between numbers that *mark* (name and classify phenomenon, without measuring) and numbers that *commensurate* (give value to and compare phenomenon, measure). The latter is the more socially transformative form of quantification. Espeland and Stevens (2008: 404) state that "Numbers help constitute the things they measure by directing attention, persuading, and creating new categories for comprehending the words", and call for investigation of quantification in different contexts – such as the social work interventions examined in this paper. Moreover, they identify five primary dimensions that such inquiries might pursue: work, reactivity, discipline, authority, and aesthetics.

Michael Power (2004: 775), and others (Miller & Rose 1990; Rose 1991; Shore & Wright 2015) further argue that numbers are tools of a governing, controlling, and directing practice within public organizations. In their view, performance measurement systems serve to define performance, direct management attention, and induce behavioural change rather than to faithfully represent social phenomena (Power 2004: 776). Moreover, such measurements aim to modify behaviour in the interest of control and "to be legitimate, these numbers must pass themselves off as being about independent reality; they must appear natural" (ibid.: 776). Power also describes a cyclical process in which incompleteness of or lack of satisfaction with a certain measure is immediately followed by a search for a better measure that will eventually be accepted, initiating the cycle again (ibid.: 778).

Within this approach, authors commonly argue that statistics and the urge for better and more precise measurements are an inevitable part of society, and thus one should not aim to get rid of numbers. Rather, authors encourage a critical view on all presented numbers. The purposes and meanings of quantification are established through the use of numbers and what gets done with the numbers. Therefore, a researcher should empirically investigate why, how, and by whom the numbers are being produced. It is also important to discuss the expected and the unintended consequences of different measuring initiatives (Power 2004: 780; Best 2001: 167–169; Timmermans & Epstein 2010: 78).

I additionally draw upon the concept of *pseudo-quantities*, defined by Sven-Erik Liedman (2013: 48) as "a quality that more accurately can be characterised verbally, either by description or by more expressive means" (cf. Power 2004: 776). Pseudo-quantities can be harmless and useful – for example, school grades can be used to acquire an overview of the student's performance. However, a conversation with the teacher will likely provide more precise and nuanced information about the student's abilities (Liedman 2013: 48). Undesirable consequences are possible when pseudo-quantities are gathered in indexes used for comparisons and rankings that can impact the choices and actions of citizens, politicians, funders, and professionals (ibid.: 49). In such cases, the originator of the assessment disappear and the subjective, tacit, and arbitrary engagement distinguishing the practice of deciding grades, choosing indicators, selecting and coding categories or valuing information becomes invisible. Dimensions that are lost in the translation of quality into quantity are no longer accessible to the reader and the information is instead perceived as neutral and comparable (Liedman 2013: 49, 56; Power 2004: 768).

The paradox of pseudo-quantities is that while "illusory exactitude appears to be more reliable than qualified expert judgement" (Liedman 2013: 61), they are actually per definition less exact, and are rather arbitrary descriptions of reality compared to more nuanced statements. Pseudo-quantities confuse rather than clarify the image of an activity (Liedman 2011: 72). Liedman coined the concept of pseudo-quantities as a tool to search for mechanisms and processes underlying an emerging phenomenon (ibid.: 45). Here I will use his concept as a means of illuminating the delicacy of measuring social engagements. While Liedman has demonstrated the relevance of pseudo-quantities in the field of education and research, here I explore how similar processes play out within the social services.

Ethnographic fieldwork of a social services management team

Empirical data were collected through ethnographic fieldwork during fall 2013 and spring 2014. I observed and interviewed the management team of a child and welfare unit within the Swedish social services, and documents were collected. At the time of the fieldwork, the observed management team participated in a national programme, comprising a course on "result-based management" that was executed by Sweden's biggest employers' organization for the public sector (SALAR) and commissioned by the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs (2013). The course aimed to teach methods for constant improvements, EBP implementation, and systematic measuring and monitoring. In 2014, over half of the Swedish municipalities had participated in the course, and new courses had been negotiated for the following year as well as an expansion to other public sector areas. The course can be described as ambitious in the sense that it lasted for a whole year, including monthly seminars and lectures. Participants were expected to select an authentic problem and execute organizational changes applying the methods taught and with supervision by the course leader. Table 1 illustrates the occasions for data collection and what professionals and organizations were represented at these occasions.

Table 1. Occasions for data collection

Method	**Occasion**	**Organizations and professions**
Observations	Course seminars, 12 full days	Ministry of Health and Social Affairs National Board of Health and Welfare Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions Open Comparisons Social service managements from 11 municipalities: managers at different levels, administrative staff, controllers, Human Relations staff
	Project meetings at Child and Welfare office, 7 meetings	Head of Department Heads of Units, 2 Quality Coordinator Controller
	Team meetings at Child and Welfare office, 9 meetings	Employees at child and family investigation unit, 7 social workers Head of Unit Assistant Head of Unit Quality Coordinator
Interviews	Individual interviews, semi-structured, 5 interviews	Head of Department Heads of Units, 2 Quality Coordinator Controller
	Group interview, semi-structured, 1 interview	Quality Developer Head of Human Relations Finance Manager
Documents	Collected at above-mentioned occasions	

Field notes, interview transcriptions, and collected documents were all in Swedish. For our present analysis, selected extracts have been translated into English.

As a participant observer, I did not strive to be a "fly on the wall" or a fully participating member, which can be considered the two extremes within ethnography (Fine 1993: 281; Emerson et al. 2011: 1–3). At times, I participated in discussions – for example, when the managers discussed measurable goals for their case works (participant-as-observer). Other times, I used a more interview-like approach, asking questions to enhance my own understanding and contextualization (observer-as-participant) (Atkinson et al. 2001: 32). The observations focused on how members interacted in "naturally occurring" conversations and discussions, as well as on how the participants handled various situations (Silverman 2007: 51). I entered the field with an explorative approach and without predefined research questions. In line with what is sometimes referred to as "working backwards" (Becker 2008; Wästerfors 2008), the present findings concern a theme that emerged during fieldwork.

Findings: negotiated yet powerful numbers

In line with the ongoing expansion of measuring culture, the observed course for social service management expressed high expectations for measurements and their potential to solve the challenges facing their organizations. These same expectations were applied to challenges as varied as combating homelessness, improving child and family investigations, and increasing the satisfaction rate of home care amongst the elderly. In the model for "systematic improvement", one key component was the participants' task to elaborate measurements and quantitative indicators for milestones and overall goals for their engagements. The managers were offered workshops, lectures, and supervision in statistics to explore how to better elaborate measures and indexes, what measurements can be used for, and how different kinds of data can be connected to acquire advanced information.

The logic behind both evidence-based practice and new public management was reflected in the course, with often-repeated messages such as "We must *measure* to *know* in order to *govern*" and "When other solutions fail, only measurements remain". At the start of the course, numbers were already assigned a "representative" function as well as an "indicative" function, and were expected to create precise knowledge as well as enable comparisons, prioritization, and standard setting for the social problems in question. Numeric data would counteract inefficiency, arbitrariness, and subjective judgement.

However, the data identified situations and developments pointing in a somewhat different and contradictory direction. During fieldwork, various dynamics played out in relation to numbers, which were marked by unclearness, negotiation, doubtfulness, and even conflict – indicating that even numbers seem to face human and social influences. These dynamics can be better understood from the perspective of sociology of knowledge, focusing on "the doing of numbers", and from analysing the number construction and application.

Four such dynamics will be highlighted below. The first section discusses the representative potential of numbers, and demonstrates the participants' struggles to find satisfactory measures. The second part examines numbers as ammunition, illustrating how they can be effective tools for accomplishing a goal. The third section illuminates a "decoupling" practice, in which publically presented numbers poorly reflected the actual situation. The final part discusses a case that illustrates how governing by numbers can manifest itself in social work at a concrete level. This analysis aims to show the nuances and difficulties that appear throughout the unfolding of intended and unintended consequences of a measuring project within the social services, in parallel to the expectations of the rational and objective numeric measurement approach.

NEGOTIATIONS ABOUT NUMBERS AND WHAT THEY REPRESENT

Scholars have noted that behind the construction of indicators, standards, and statistics lie human choices, preferences, and negotiations – an often neglected subjective aspect (Espeland & Stevens 2008; Timmermans & Epstein 2010). Upon setting a standard, proposing an indicator, or producing statistics, the measurements appear to be objective and producing comparable information. There is a tendency to forget the negotiation processes through which people decided which numbers to use, what they should represent, and how they should be valued against each other. The theoretical separation of "numbers that commensurate" from "numbers that mark" (Espeland & Stevens 2008: 403, 408) serves to highlight the more socially transformative act through which values are selected to describe phenomenon and relationships among objects, as difference is transformed into quantity.

Participants in the management course were invited to take part in what can be considered as a national commensuration project of quality measures for the social services. One aim of the course was to encourage the participants to report new standardized data to national statistical databases. The course leader expressed that the social services had ignored the potential of such measurements for too long. A government representative informed the participants that:

> Comparisons and rankings are important tools to illuminate results and differences between municipalities, and to create data as a base for improvements. The government wants to work more intensively with open comparisons as indicators of quality. (Field note, course day 1)

Establishing comparable measurements and indicators for social services is an ongoing project executed by professionals, stakeholders, and authorities. The National Board of Health and Welfare published the first report on "open comparisons" in 2010, and new indicators have been added every year since then (National Board of Health and Welfare 2015). As the course participants elaborated measures for their case works, they were encouraged to find inspiration from already existing indicators as well as to suggest new ones for inclusion among the national indicators. This situation presented a good opportunity to study the processes that lead to the establishment of standards and indicators.

It is a delicate task to identify measures and indicators for social services activities, which was reflected in the participants' ambiguous feelings towards the exercises. On one hand, some expressed positive feelings regarding how they contributed to structure and direction in the work. As Liedman (2013) has highlighted, pseudo-quantities can be appreciated for supplying "informative" and "concrete" information. Along these lines, the participants celebrated the predefined measurements that indicated when they were making progress towards the milestones. On the other hand, participants experienced frustration and struggles when trying to identify satisfying ways to measure the kinds of activities they were engaged in. Some complained that important dimensions were lost in this process. The practitioners expressed a counterpart to the scholarly critique of intentions to quantify "social" or "qualitative" processes (Svenaeus & Bornemark 2009; Liedman 2011, 2013):

> But how do you measure a target such as a reasonable standard of living for all citizens; should we go out on the square and ask? And all the preventive work – how do you measure that? We can only say that it is probably because of what we do that we don't have the same high numbers as another municipality … but we cannot know that this is the cause. There are so many things that interact. (Field notes from group discussion)

Certain problem areas were sometimes perceived as impossible to measure, and therefore disqualified as a "workable" problem. One group chose to work with interventions for acute homeless persons who were already registered in social services databases and, therefore, favoured measurements taken before and after the intervention. Less reachable groups, including second- and third-hand contractors and people relying on black-market housing, were given lower priority with reference to the immeasurability of such cases:

> It is because we cannot measure it/…/It is so difficult to capture it and to get the numbers right. We know that there are many people, especially adolescents, involuntarily living in insecure conditions but they don't contact the social services. Since they have

> housing they are not entitled to welfare, so they have no reason to contact us. There is no use in trying to measure interventions before and after. (Transcription from group interview)

When measurability is the main requirement, there is a risk that items that cannot be measured at that time or by those persons will be excluded from the agenda. This inherent weakness of quantitative methods has been previously discussed by researchers (Pierson 2007). In this case, the prioritizations resulted in acute interventions on behalf of preventive work. This analysis also showed that it is a difficult task to define outcomes or performance measures for social problems, and that some dimensions can get lost or simplified in the process. While this section has illuminated dynamics in the process of number construction, the following sections will discuss situations that occur around already established indicators.

NUMBERS AS AMMUNITION

Joel Best (2001: 6) describes how social statistics play an important role in conflicts over the status of social problems or phenomenon. To demand resources and engagement from politicians and public servants, it is important to have numbers to establish the extension of a social problem. On the other hand, the authorities may use numbers to deny such needs. In a constant battle for resources and influence, charts and diagrams have become the most effective ammunition used by all competing parties, leading the author to name these battles “stat wars”. It has also been described how a crucial historical point in the modern gay right movements was when surveys of sexual behaviour in the United States statistically acknowledged the group as comprising a substantial proportion (10%) of the population (Espeland & Stevens 2008: 413–414).

Similarly, my present data indicated that the staff’s new skills in statistics production had immediate impacts on their work situation. The most impressive example was the unit’s successful negotiation for new positions after producing a chart describing the increase in their workload. The controller explained that:

> We chose to look at the number of investigations opened, which had notably increased by 32 % since last year! And the resources had not been increased at all. This is the reason why we weren’t keeping up with the incoming investigations. We had the same amount of social workers with a lot more cases to handle. After showing this to the politicians, we were assigned three more positions. We haven’t previously had a tradition of showing them this kind of information. It is definitely a consequence of the course we are taking. We would never have produced these statistics otherwise. (Interview with Controller)

The respondent also explained that the management had not previously "ordered" information from him in such a way; he had only provided them with data based on his own judgement. From now on, the management will request information that serves their specific needs. The respondents perceived the training in statistics as the main factor in their success. They had previously tried to argue for more resources several times, without getting any support from the politicians:

> No, it must be made very clear for the politicians; you have to describe that there is a difference in incoming cases using numbers and nothing else. Only then can they understand that the situation isn't durable. When you just say it in words … that we have so much to do … they will just respond in terms of superficial pitying for the social workers. I mean, anything can be interpreted from words, if they are just words. (Interview with one Head of Unit)

When requesting additional resources, statistical data turned out to be successful ammunition to convey the message about an escalating workload. This example reflects the greater status of evidence that numbers have compared to other kinds of information. It also reveals the effectiveness of statistics when directed towards a specific purpose.

NUMBERS FAR FROM REALITY

Numbers seemed to show a tendency to "live lives of their own" with a risk of reflecting the situation in focus poorly. Unreliable numbers could result from misunderstandings, conflicts of interpretation, or deliberate manipulations. The participants commonly created coding methods or categories that were too broad or too abstract, leaving the data open to different interpretations. This sometimes resulted in numbers that were meaningless, misleading, or even a cause for infected discussions. On some occasions, conflicts arose due to different interpretations of what a number actually represented. Numbers were also often unreliable when participants searched for information in databases – for example, even if statistics showed unavailable positions at a treatment clinic, the treatment position might actually be available; and data showing a municipality's unemployment rate could not tell you whether a specific person actually was unemployed.

Pure manipulations – what Darrell Huff calls *statisticulations* (1954: 99) – seemed to be difficult to avoid when the course participants were working on their cases. The following example comes from a discussion between three managers, and illustrates how desirable results could be educed by using different measurement techniques. The managers were discussing the statistical data describing the unit's average time to complete investigations for presentation on the municipalities' web sites:

> Manager 1: On average, it takes approximately 90 days to complete an assessment today, doesn't it?
>
> Manager 2: Is it 90 days now? Then it is less than before …
>
> Manager 3: No, it is because we have started to measure in a different way. We used to measure only the completed assessments and we counted the days that they had been ongoing; then the numbers were different from now. The 90 days shown today is the average when we also include ongoing cases. It is a "here and now" number, so to speak. That number is a tricky one … (Field notes, course day 5)

By including ongoing cases and temporarily including the present date as the final date, they could lower the average duration and produce a more favourable number. Such a strategy to elicit a "better" result is described by Huff as a statistical trick: "like the little dash of powder, little pot of paint, statistics are making many an important fact look like what she ain't" (Huff 1954: 14). Such "powdering" of reality is a means of presenting misleading information without qualifying as a lie; and no one can be held responsible for it. According to Power (2004: 774) and Shore and Wright (2015: 26), the audit culture itself opens up avenues for mismanagement and even corruption by creating conditions for strategic management with the exclusive goal of meeting performance targets. Rather than discussing changes related to social workers' prerequisites for conducting investigations, emphasis is placed on changes in measurement techniques. This situation contrasts sharply with the status that numbers seem to have and with the course leader's message that if you just measure, you will *know* the reality better.

NUMBERS AS PROTAGONISTS

The above discussion between managers is an example of the neo-institutional term "decoupling" (Meyer & Rowan 1991; 57–58; Brunsson 1986: 173), i.e. when the actual practice within an organization is decoupled from what is presented to the outside world. This represents a strategy of responding to political ideas and decisions regarding standardization and transparency, and of legitimizing the organization, while simultaneously maintaining the potential for variety and flexibility within the practice. In the presented example, nothing "real" was changed, only the method of measuring the phenomenon. In other instances, data demonstrate how a focus on measurable outcomes influenced an organization's prioritizations and forced work in a certain direction. Fieldwork revealed several examples of how the "governing by numbers" described in the literature (Rose 1991; Power 1999, 2004; Espeland & Stevens 2008; Shore & Wright 2015) can manifest itself, and what this can mean for social work practice at a concrete level. One of those examples will be discussed in the following:

The average time to complete investigations is one of the suggested national key indicators for the quality of child and family welfare units (RKA 2012). Just before the fieldwork started, the Social Care Inspectorate had inspected the child and welfare office where the observations were made. The conclusions of this inspection included remarks about the office's failure to complete child and family investigations within statutory time frames. It was requested that the management improve this situation immediately and, thus, "reducing average investigation time" was selected as their focus during the course. One activity initiated by the management was the involvement of the social workers in constructing a detailed "flow chart" or "mapping" of the working process, with the aim of streamlining this process. The social workers openly protested this activity, and an infected discussion followed. The managers complained about the social workers' inability or unwillingness to "close" investigations. From their perspective, the social workers were too ambitious or "ceremonious" and often investigated circumstances that did not appear in the original report:

> Some investigators believe that they must continue following up the families for a long time. I don't know whether this is due to a lack of faith in the treatment that they have referred them to, or in the schools. Anyhow, they seem to want to control the situation and to keep the case open so that they are entitled to continue calling the family to check that everything is going well. This is not how we should be working; we have to complete the investigations on time. There are only two possibilities: to end it with or without intervention. In case of the former, the full responsibility is passed to the unit that provides interventions. I find it strange if a social worker continues calling the family week after week if she has not found a reason for an intervention. (Interview with Head Manager)

The above quote reveals the management's aim to identify standardized "moments" at which a social worker had done enough, as a means of clarifying when an investigation should be closed. Moreover, management felt that when intervention is suggested, the case should be fully handed over to the unit or institution responsible for the treatment. Shore and Wright (2015) state that within audit culture, the governing body manifests itself through efforts "to produce responsible and calculating professionals who will calibrate their work and worth against their organization's performance indicators" (ibid.: 26) rather than against their clients' needs. The above example reflects an effort to reduce the social workers' uncertainty or ambiguity regarding a family's situation. However, Nigel Parton (1998: 6) describes an *unavoidable uncertainty* that is characteristic in child and family investigations (see also Ponnert 2013: 42–53). In fact, a key component of a social worker's expertise is the ability to ”rest” in ambiguity and uncertainty (Parton 2013:23) with the purpose of reflecting, questioning, and searching for knowledge and more information. Such a working method is grounded in knowledge of the complexity of the client and the surrounding world, which is why *active passivity* can be a fully appropriate strategy of action (Ponnert 2013:53).

This example represents as a situation where quantitative logic collides with the qualitatively oriented practice of child investigation. The quote reflects the managers' frustration with social workers who do not close cases despite a lack of evidence that the family requires an intervention or despite the fact that an intervention is ongoing. However, the social workers' views of when a case should be closed are connected to continued uncertainty regarding the family's situation, or a lack of confidence in the treatment or institutions to which their clients have been referred. This uncertainty is incompatible with the organization's need to complete investigations on time, or with the urge to *know* which option is "right" for the family. Thus, the social workers are perceived as insecure and "unable" to end their cases. Social workers' professional discretion is clearly challenged by the organizational logic, as previous research has suggested (Evetts 2011; Ponnert & Svensson 2015). Others have expressed this scenario as one where quality is challenged by quantity (Liedman 2013:61; Shore & Wright 2015: 26).

Summarizing discussion

Recent state initiatives embrace high expectations that measurements, performance indicators, and statistics will solve challenges facing social services and "shape up" social work practices. Influential developments, including evidence-based practice and modern management forms in public organizations, invoke "cultures of objectivity" (Power 2004: 770) including the pervasive view that numbers are rational and neutral.

Previous research shows increased dissatisfaction and alienation among professionals, and highlights the bureaucratization of social work as a possible explanation. To explore this possibility in greater depth, I focused my present research question on numbers. Here I have asked what practices evolve around the initiatives to measure, compare, and rank social work? And how does an emphasis on numbers influence practices at a social services office? From a sociology-of-knowledge perspective, I join other researchers in the tradition of empirical investigation of both intended and unintended consequences of initiatives implemented "from above".

The present ethnographic data revealed tension between the status of numbers as guiding "truth speakers", and the emergence of reluctance and confusion as numbers are applied to practice with various implications for social work. Situations unfolded in which misunderstandings over numbers led to conflicts, statistics were manipulated, problem areas were assigned lower priority due to their immeasurability, and work was forced in a certain direction due to the need to show desirable statistics. On the other hand, situations arose in which figures acted as important ammunition for the management to attain greater resources and influence. Such dimensions are better analysed within the framework of the sociology of knowledge (Huff 1958; Best 2001; Espeland & Stevens 2008), in which numbers are acknowledged as produced in and helping to produce the surrounding social context. Overall, the data reflect how subjects negotiate, choose, define, value, and fail in the very construction of the numbers, in line with Power's statement (2004:770) that "The surface of the measurements is visible and transparent, but in reality it reflects very specific and often transitory communities of practice in which values of measurement, audit, and control converge".

There also appears to be a limited extent to which the quality of a social phenomenon can be quantitatively described, as highlighted in Liedman's (2015) concept of "pseudo-quantities". The present data illustrated how participants struggled to find satisfactory measures for activities generally perceived as "qualitative", and the joint perception that important dimensions would be lost in this process. It can additionally be argued that an account of a child and family investigation prepared by the social worker or client would give superior information about the investigation's quality, rather than focusing the time that it took to complete the case (cf. Liedman 2015). The concept of pseudo-quantities was originally applied in the field of education, and can most likely also be useful for examining the process of creating national indicators for social work.

With regards to the governing or "figurative" (Power 2004: 771) dimension of numbers, statistics could act as powerful tools for directing or "forcing" social work in a certain direction. The intensified focus on completing child investigations within statutory time-frames and the associated repercussions, had implications for both the way an investigation was conducted and for the perception of what constituted a good investigation. In a sense, the new indicator suggests that a good investigation is one that is completed on time, allowing little permissiveness for doubts, ambivalence, grey areas, or insecurity on the part of the social worker. However, handling such nonspecific or insecure situations is a distinguishing feature of the profession of social work (Parton 1998; Ponnert 2013). Thus, the social work practice was affected when statistics (one kind of knowledge) became the main goal, limiting the social workers' discretion and judgement process (another kind of knowledge). The requirement to satisfy new measures and indicators created a tension between what some perceived as good practice and the discretion desired by others. Those observations are in alignment with previous research showing that "organizational" logic can challenge professional discretion (Evetts 2009, 2011; Ponnert & Svensson 2015).

Overall, the present study reveals that the embedment of numbers in human practice adds dimensions beyond the clarity and knowledge that they are expected to bring about. Upon their enactment in everyday social work, such numbers both capture and are captured by the interactions and activities within this practice. New dynamics appear during the acquisition of numbers and as a consequence of numbers, some of which embrace administrative tasks quite distant from the traditional core of social work: meeting clients, approaching problems from an overall perspective, and integrating educational knowledge with practical experience to make well-informed judgements. These dimensions can be understood as a consequence of quantitative logic colliding with qualitative practice. The findings of this study contribute to previous knowledge explaining why social workers seem uncomfortable within the new organizations in which they work.

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