



The ‘logic of escalation’ in performance measurement: An analysis of the dynamics of a research evaluation system

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Abstract

This paper makes a conceptual contribution to the understanding of the ‘alternative logics’ (Pollitt) occurring in performance measurement systems in crucial public policy domains. The major focus is on what has been referred to as ‘logic of escalation’ (Pollitt) that manifests itself where performance measurement is strongly geared toward quantified performance indicators. What characterizes this logic is the unfolding of a peculiar dynamics through which performance measurement becomes increasingly expansive and technical (and hence costly), and, in political terms, control-focused. Drawing mainly on the conceptual resources of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological philosophy, as well as on Michael Power’s work on (performance) measurement, it is shown that this sort of dynamics is linked to the constitution of quantitative performance measures as ‘abstractions from abstractions’. In addition, I highlight some of the organizational dimensions of the ‘logic of escalation’. I use the current Australian research evaluation system as a paradigmatic case to exemplify and ground my major conceptual points and observations.

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1. Introduction

In the scholarly literature, there has been increasing recognition over recent decades that there is a complexity to performance measurement that defies the straightforward view that such measurement essentially constitutes a politically neutral, rational instrument facilitating the effective monitoring, and ultimately managing, of performances. Yet at the same time, the latter, straightforward view of performance measurement still continues to be highly influential in various domains of public policy – although in some countries more than in others.

Against this narrowly rational view of performance measurement, researchers such as Christopher Pollitt have been stressing that real-world performance measurement regimes often involve an “‘alternative’ logics” (2013, 347) that runs counter to the purportedly clear-cut instrumental logic of performance measurement. In the same vein, a range of scholars have drawn attention to the strange resemblance existing between a range of contemporary, consequential performance measurement regimes more recently established in so-called ‘neo-liberal’ countries such as the UK and

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Australia, and the centralized performance measurement and management regimes that existed in the Soviet Union under Stalin (Bevan & Hood, 2006; Hood, 2006; Smith, 1995).

Particularly intriguing in the context of these more critical engagements with performance measurement has been the view repeatedly advanced in the literature that in various domains of public policy, performance measurement regimes frequently have had not merely intended but also a range of unintended effects (see, e.g., Hood, 2012; Pollitt, 2013; Power, 2004). There exists some agreement in the literature that such unintended effects mostly concern the proliferation of strategic ‘gaming’ responses to performance measurement regimes that individual and organizational actors may resort to (Bevan & Hood, 2006; Hood, 2006; Pollitt, 2013; Smith, 1995) – although the extent to which such responses occur and actually effect performances has remained a point of contention.¹

This paper makes a conceptual contribution to the aim of better understanding some of the specific roots and dimensions of the ‘alternative logics’ occurring in performance measurement systems. Rather than focusing on these ‘alternative logics’ more broadly, this paper specifically addresses what Pollitt in his recent paper analyzing the multiple ‘logics of performance measurement’ refers to as the “logic of escalation” (2013, 353). The notion of a ‘logic of escalation’ refers to a peculiar dynamics that have been commonly observed to occur once a system of quantified performance indicators has been established, and which seem to occur in particular if such sort of performance measures are applied in complex and politically charged policy domains such as education or health (Pollitt, 2013, 353). What characterizes this dynamics, among other things, is, first, that performance measurement becomes increasingly technically complex and expansive (and hence ultimately costly), and second, that performance measurement itself becomes increasingly control-focused and, ultimately, consequential.

Drawing mainly on the conceptual resources of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological philosophy, as well as on Michael Power’s work on (performance) measurement, it is shown that the ‘logic of escalation’ in performance measurement can be linked to the constitution of quantitative performance measures as ‘abstractions from abstractions’. It is shown that the use of such measures is attractive in making performance measurement, at least initially, more rational and economical – yet that it also tends to come at the cost of a regression in the capacity of public organizations to be reflective of the limitations and ultimate purpose of performance measurement.

The key conceptual points made in this paper will be exemplified through reference to the governmental research evaluation system for university-based research activities currently existing in Australia. The same system will also be used as a case for highlighting some of the wider organizational dimensions of the ‘logic of escalation’.

The analysis presented in this paper lends additional support to what Jenny Lewis in the introduction to this issue refers to as the “realistic-political” (2015, 18) view of performance measurement. This is achieved through illuminating some of the specific ways in which performance measures “take on a life of their own” (Lewis, 2015, 15) once formally established. Moreover, this paper also shows that some of these developments have their roots in the ways in which performance measures are constituted in the first place even if this constitution is itself entirely consistent from a rational-scientific perspective.

My discussion in this paper is structured as follows. In the following section I introduce and discuss the major theoretical concepts and ideas informing my analysis, linking Husserl’s account of the formation of formal-symbolic conceptions of number to Power’s conception of secondary measurement in the process (Section 2). Subsequently, I introduce the empirical context to which these concepts applied to, namely the major governmental research evaluation system currently existing in Australia, and highlight some of this system’s distinctive features (Section 3). Building upon these discussions, and using the Australian case as an example, I then present my analysis of the ‘logic of escalation’ in performance measurement, paying heed to both epistemic and organizational dynamics (Section 4).

¹ For example, there is overall no general agreement whether the rather consequential performance measurement regime imposed on the public health sector in England has had widespread dysfunctional consequences or not, with Bevan and Hood (2006) and Kelman and Friedman (2009) making their cases for and against the systemic occurrence of such consequences. Without delving further into this particular case and the involved complexities, it is obvious that the determination of the extent of gaming responses is particularly challenging if the alleged dysfunctional effects concern qualitative aspects such as the diminishing quality dimensions of outputs (see Bevan & Hood, 2006; Holmstrom & Milgrom, 1991) that are inherently difficult to quantify.

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