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Research paper

Administrating disability: The case of “assistance need” registration in Norwegian health and care governance[☆]

Administrer le handicap : le cas de la mesure du « besoin d’assistance » dans la politique norvégienne du handicap

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Abstract

The use of quantitative measurement is a widespread method in public management to govern at distance. However, this governance may cause conflict, due to the statistics themselves. In Norway, measuring disability for governance purposes has created a controversy about the status of disability in health and care administration. The debated object is a concrete form of Norwegian health and care policy, a registration system called IPLOS. It measures assistance needs based on, among other criteria, functional disability levels. Authorities deem it a necessity for future planning and organization of municipal health and care services. However, organizations of and for the disabled hold that IPLOS communicates a discriminatory view on disability. They have used the controversy to confront authorities’ practical politics of disability, and to promote their own. In this article I explore the controversy surrounding IPLOS. I focus on the relationship between number and person that IPLOS requests, and the organizational and symbolic aspects of number production. Due to the importance such measurement tools are given, we need a further understanding of

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what the concrete use of these statistics implies both for the counted disabled and for the public authorities' way of managing disability.

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Résumé

Les statistiques sont aujourd'hui communément utilisées en gestion publique comme moyen de gouverner à distance. Cependant, il apparaît qu'elles peuvent aussi être la cause de l'échec de la gouvernance qu'elles rendent possible. En Norvège, leur introduction à la gestion des handicaps par le biais d'un nouveau système de registre appelé IPLOS a créé une controverse à propos du statut de ceux-ci dans l'administration des soins et de la santé. Alors que ce système, qui mesure le besoin d'assistance selon différents critères, est considéré par les autorités comme un outil nécessaire à la planification et à l'organisation future des services municipaux de soins et de santé, des associations de personnes handicapées le perçoivent quant à eux comme le véhicule de vues discriminatoires à l'égard du handicap. Dans cet article, j'explore la controverse qui s'est développée autour d'IPLOS, en me concentrant particulièrement sur la relation que ce système suppose, entre « personne » et « nombre », et les aspects symboliques et organisationnels de sa production. Compte tenu l'importance et l'attention donnée actuellement à ce type de système, il nous paraît essentiel de chercher à analyser les implications que l'utilisation concrète de ces statistiques peut avoir, tant pour les personnes handicapées comptées, que pour la manière dont les autorités publiques gèrent les handicaps.

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Keywords: Disability; Statistics; Measurement; Management; Controversy

Mots clés : Handicap ; Statistiques ; Mesure ; Gestion ; Controverse

Background: a Norwegian conflict in a global context

“. . . in the quantification oriented society of today it seems a good citizen is a citizen who can be well counted, along numerous dimensions on demand. . .” (Bowker and Star, 2001, p. 423).

The use of large data sets and quantitative measurement is a widespread method to facilitate governance at a distance in public management. Technically, the use of this method generates a multiple repertoire of numerical information collecting tools, such as statistical registers, classification systems, and software programmes. Often, these work behind the easily recognized scenes in the fields that are measured. For instance, in Norway statistical registers are treated as ordinary technologies which the general public seldom questions, even actively accepts. The registers' employees are often proud of the statistics and the (purported) knowledge they produce. On the basis of this trust, statistics are ascribed many different roles in public sector: to gain an overview of the given field, to monitor production levels and quality, to assess and plan budgets, as decision-making support amongst service providers, politicians, and the public; to orient the public on available services; and to report and archive service history.

From 2006 it became obligatory for Norwegian municipal health and care services to report what central authorities term “assistance needs” and “functional disability levels” of every person who applies for or receives assistance from these services. These reports shall be collected from below by health personnel with documentation duties, e.g. nurses and occupational therapists. The reports shall be structured and systematized according to a technical tool called IPLOS, which

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