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Hjärpe, Teres

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

“Commensuration” as an analytic framework for studying the expanding measuring culture in social work

*Teres Hjärpe, PhD, Lund University, School of Social Work,
teres.hjarpe@soch.lu.se.*

My PhD-project in social work deals with measurements and statistics as knowledge base and source for governance of social work activities. Social workers are currently experiencing the measuring and ranking of the quality of their work according to quantitative indicators, to serve the request, typical for our time, for better knowledge about the actual effects of the services delivered by the social workers.

As a participant observer, I have shadowed a management team of a child- and welfare unit during a year when they, encouraged by the participation in a state-sponsored management course, were involved in the adaptation of national indicators. The ethnographic data identified a paradox with the status of the numbers as “truth speakers” on the one hand, and reluctance and confusions when applied to practice on the other, along with different kinds of implications for social work. Situations played out where misunderstandings of numbers lead to conflicts, where statistics were being manipulated, where problem areas were given lower priority because of immeasurableness and where the need to show satisfying statistics changed the content of the work. Situations when figures became important ammunition for more resources and influence were also identified.

This presentation explores how sociologists Espeland & Stevens’ conceptualization of “numbers that commensurate” can be used to analyze the foundation and construction of modern governance tools in order to illuminate the socially transformative potential of quantification. I wish to discuss how this framework can guide me in further exploration of the identified paradox.