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WHO ARE WE, WHAT ARE WE DOING, WHERE ARE WE GOING?

A PERSPECTIVE ON THE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT COMMUNITY

Már legalább három évtized telt el azóta, hogy elkezdtek megjelenni azok az írások a közszolgálatról foglalkozó, európai és észak-amerikai könyvekben és tudományos folyóiratokban, amelyek a teljesítmény-indikátorokkal és a teljesítmény-menedzsmentel foglalkoztak. A kormányzati teljesítménnyel kapcsolatos gyakorlati problémák legalább olyan régiek, mint a kormányzás maga, de az öntudatos „szakértők” kölcsönösen kommunikáló közössége ebben a tárgykörben legfeljebb egy vagy két generációra tekinthet vissza. Ma a közszolgálati szektor teljesítményével foglalkozó szakirodalom az Atlanti-óceán mindkét partján virágzik. Az érdeklődés mértéke és ideje alapján hasznosnak tűnik az áttekintés, amire ez a tanulmány vállalkozik.

INTRODUCTION

It is now nearly three decades since the first articles began to appear in European and North American public administration books and scholarly journals specifically concerned with performance indicators and performance management (e.g. Cave, Kogan and Smith, 1990; Charlton et al., 1983; Donabedian, 1983; Perry and Pearce, 1985; Pollitt, 1985, 1987; Wholey, 1986). A practical concern with government performance is as old as government itself, but the existence of a self-conscious, mutually communicating community of 'experts' on the subject is just a generation or two old. Today the academic literature on public sector performance continues to flourish on both sides of the Atlantic (notable recent contributions include Bouckaert and Halligan, 2006; Boyne et al, 2006; Holtzer and Lee, 2004 and Talbot, 2005). In the UK academics are in the middle of a major, multi-million pound research programme entitled The public services programme, which includes a number of projects specifically focusing on performance measurement and performance management (www.publicservices.ac.uk). *Közgazdaság* itself published an important overview article in its first issue (Bouckaert, 2006). Given the strength and length of this interest, it may be useful to attempt to put together a general overview of the sub-field and its trajectory of development.

PAST AND PRESENT

The most obvious difference, to compare the mid 1980s with today, is that the community of 'performance experts' is bigger. A performance management 'industry' has grown up, fuelled not only by pure scholarly interest, but also by the plentiful demand for advice and consultancy work from public authorities in many

countries, anxious not to miss out on the hugely politically popular idea of a more performance-oriented public sector (see, e.g. Ministry of Finance, 2006; OECD, 2005, chapter 2).

Intimately connected to this, of course, has been the tremendous spread, in almost every public sector, of the practices of performance measurement and the construction of performance indicator sets. Performance measurement has surely become more intensive, more extensive, and more closely integrated with other management processes and functions (Bouckaert and Halachmi, 1996; OECD, 2005, chapter 2). The following words from the 2003 Volcker Commission in the United States could have come from any one of a hundred government publications in somewhere between a dozen and 20 countries:

'The government we envision would be organized around critical missions, with management keyed to performance' (National Commission on the Public Service, 2003)

A short anecdote may illustrate how pervasive the performance paradigm has become. For it is not only secular governments that seek the services of our community. Lourdes is the most popular shrine in the Roman Catholic church, currently receiving around 6M pilgrims each year. However, since the Virgin Mary appeared to Bernadette Soubirous in 1858, there have been depressingly few additional audited miracles. Depending on your point of view, this is either bad for business or inappropriate use of an unduly narrow indicator. Many of the 'results' achieved by pilgrims, although apparently adding value, do not meet the extremely strict and extremely old criteria for a full-blown Roman Catholic miracle. Therefore in 2006 Bishop Jacques Perrier proposed to introduce a new measurement category, translated as 'authentic healings'. This will catch the dozens of sub-miraculous pilgrims who leave Lourdes each year nevertheless convinced that their serious conditions have been improved (Chrisafis, 2006).

A second change is that the growing community now includes a wide range of disciplinary approaches. Our community of discourse contains inter alia political scientists, public administrationists, generic management specialists, sociologists, economists, accountants, operational researchers and statisticians (and I have probably missed some out). Whether these sub-groups talk to each other very much is another question – my impression is not much, but I have no hard data about this.

Today's foci of interest have also broadened. They range from high level studies of how politicians use performance information, through middle level accounts of how managers address frameworks of performance indicators (Pollitt, 2006b) to detailed studies of how staff may game and pervert - or suffer stress and alienation from - PIs (Hamilton, 2005; Pitches et al, 2003; Stacey and Griffin, 2006; Van Thiel and Leeuw, 2002). They include highly technical studies of validity and reliability and highly philosophical studies of the meaning of measurements and the rhetoric of performance (Kurunmäki and Miller, 2006). They also stretch from rather prescriptive advice on 'how to do it better' to highly detached academic interpretations and deconstructions. It would be very difficult for any single individual to command expertise right across this tremendous panorama of literature.

A fourth, and highly significant change has been that in the information and communication technologies which support and sometimes shape performance management. The first set of UK National Health Service performance indicators in the Autumn of 1983 took the form of bulky grey books which seldom got beyond the offices of a few senior managers and their assistants. Twenty years later any British citizen could sit at home and download detailed 'scores' for their local hospital, and could compare these with other hospitals in the region and/or the country. This IT revolution has prompted at least two kinds of work from our community. First there are studies of how new ICTs may facilitate the collection and dissemination of performance information (Benyon-Davies, 1994). Second there are studies of how to measure progress with, and the effects of, ICTs themselves (Welch, Moon and Wong, 2006). Clearly there is much that remains to be done here, especially with respect to the identification and measurement of the final outcomes of ICT innovation.

A fifth change is that, whereas 20 years ago we had rather few studies of measurement in action, now we have amassed a good deal of this kind of material. The early articles tended to analyze performance indicator sets 'cold', by counting and classifying the different types of measure and the logical relations (if any) between them. But now we can complement such studies with field studies of how indicators are actually used (or not used) in by practitioners (e.g. Bevan and Hood, 2006; Chang, 2006; Ingraham, Joyce and Donohue, 2003; Pollitt, 2006b).

So we can do more and there are more of us to do it, but have our foci of interest really changed that much? Looking through a sample of recent articles and books I see that our community today is absorbed with a number of important topics. These begin with the simple need for better measurement - more valid and reliable measures of more important dimensions (Boyne et al, 2006; Kelerman, 2005; Klitgaard, Fedderke and Akramov, 2005). They also include the need to shift from process measurement to output measurement and, beyond that, to outcome measurement, and to citizens' reactions to those outcomes, in the form of satisfaction and/or trust (Bouckaert, 2006; Kurunmäki and Miller, 2006). It is also worried about the perverse incentives which performance management systems can inadvertently create, and the gaming which takes place around these systems (Bevan and Hood, 2006; De Bruijn, 2001; Halachmi, 2005; Smith, 1995). And it is often concerned at the merely spasmodic or downright eccentric use which politicians and the mass media make of the performance information which has been so carefully and expensively produced for them (Bogt, 2004; Johnson and Talbot, forthcoming; Pollitt, 2006a).

Although sometimes one or more of these topics is described as 'new' or 'at the cutting edge' or 'the next stage of performance management', I am afraid such descriptors are inaccurate and ahistorical. All these topics can be found in the literature of two decades ago, in some abundance (e.g. Charlton et al, 1983; Donabedian, 1983; Pollitt, 1985; 1986, 1987; Cave, Kogan and Smith, 1990). In these areas today our community is wrestling with hardy perennials not new green shoots. Indeed, some of these topics were debated even longer ago - when attempts to install performance related pay and other forms of performance indicator were made in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. This is not, of course, to say

that such concerns are worn out and lacking value. On the contrary, their evergreen nature probably signals that these are, so to speak, genetic problems of performance measurement, chronic conditions that require continuing careful management rather than one-off but illusory solutions.

PRESENT AND FUTURE

By this readers may be thinking that this is the standard ploy from a scholar in the later stages of his career. This is the "there's nothing new under the sun" line of argument. That is not, however, my intention. Whilst I do occasionally find the historical ignorance of some colleagues disappointing, I also see that new issues, or new forms of old issues, are arising all the time. To address these I would suggest that we will need both a good sense of where we have discovered already and a good helping of intellectual ingenuity to help us fashion novel responses.

Of course, everyone will have their own list of what the most important new issues are. I apologise in advance to those of you whose favourites and pets I have unwittingly omitted from my own agenda, which I will now set before you.

Performance management in networks and partnerships: the rapid increase in the number of occasions in which public authorities attempt to use networking or partnership solutions to their problems has been quickly followed by an explosion of both academic and practitioner literature on these modalities. A number of writers have wrestled with the problem of measuring performance in such complex situations (e.g. Meier, O'Toole and Lu, 2006) but it would be optimistic to claim that any generally convincing or accepted methods have yet emerged. Yet applying performance indicator sets to poorly-designed partnerships or to complex networks is almost an open invitation for buck-passing and attributional ambiguity.

Connecting PM to trust: for reasons that are fairly obvious, many governments on both sides of the Atlantic have become concerned at the apparent decline of citizen trust in politics and politicians. Performance management has been dragged into this because some political leaders have hoped that trust and legitimacy can be restored by proving to citizens that the quality and efficiency of the services they are being offered are improving. It turns out, of course, that the equation is unlikely to be so simple (Bok, 2001; Bouckaert, 2006; Bouckaert and Halligan, 2006; OECD, 2007). Some of the most interesting work on this set of relationships has been undertaken at my own university of Leuven (e.g. Bouckaert et al, 2002). But what this work has uncovered is how many basic questions cannot yet be confidently answered. The topic is wide open for further research, and I would expect a considerable flow of publications on these issues over the next five years.

The end users: it is mildly amazing that, while we have amassed many studies of how managers and professionals use or fail to use performance information, we still have only a few analyses of what the ultimate users - elected politicians and citizens - do with all this material (Pollitt, 2006a). We know more about what managers and professionals do under performance management regimes than what politicians and citizens do. On both sides of the Atlantic we seem to have many prejudices,

dreams and stereotypes about how these end users will react to our carefully-crafted performance data (if they react at all) but not so many empirical studies. Most of the few we do have are not terribly encouraging (e.g. Bogt, 2004; Johnson and Talbot, forthcoming). The research here is difficult but certainly not impossible to do, and its significance in a democratic context can hardly be exaggerated. I therefore hope that we see the trickle of studies we have had thus far soon become at least a vigorous tributary.

International comparisons of state performance: in the past 18 months we have seen a babbling brook of academic papers on international performance comparisons swell into a young river. In December 2005 the UK Economic and Social Research Council organized a timely conference entitled 'Where does Britain rank? International public service rankings'. It revealed at least three things: first that there already exist many rankings, second that some of these are highly suspect and, third, that there is something of a mystery about what they are being used for, and by whom - supply is growing, but where is the demand? (Hood and Beeston, 2005; Pollitt, 2005). All this confirmed pioneering work already undertaken by Steven van de Walle at Leuven (Van de Walle, 2005; 2006). Yet despite growing awareness of the difficulties, both practical and interpretive (OECD, 2007), a number of scholars are confidently - or over-confidently - pushing ahead (Mahoney and Stevens, 2006). This is definitely a patch to be watched.

PM and the long term: The final item on my list of 'coming' topics is a hobby horse of my own. It concerns the paucity of studies of performance management over more than a few years. Most of our literature examines the latest set of indicators, or compares results over a few years. Yet we know that many processes in public administration do not come to fruition (whether the fruit is good or evil) over such short periods. Learning curves and the effects of reorganizations typically stretch out over at least three and sometimes five years or more (Pollitt, 2006c). There are sound reasons to expect that performance indicator systems will evolve, year on year, but we have tantalisingly few studies of this up until now. Those that do exist contain some rather provocative ideas and findings. Meyer and Gupta, for example, declare that there is a 'performance paradox', and that most or all indicators, in both the public and the private sector, wear out over time (Meyer and Gupta, 1994; for a recent application to the public sector, see Van Thiel and Leeuw, 2002). Some studies posit an alternation between many indicators, bringing sensitivity but complexity, and smaller numbers of key indicators, bringing apparent clarity but also crudeness and increased risks of gaming (Nove, 1978). Talbot, in his studies of the intensive performance measurement regimes around early Next Steps agencies records that in his sample the 'churn rate' - that is the rate at which last year's indicators are replaced by new ones this year - was very high. Thus even the possibility of measuring progress over a number of years was lost, because the menu of measures was always changing (Talbot, 1996). Something of the same perception can be found in writings about the UK health care and education indicators (Stacey and Griffin, 2006). It seems as though synchronic league tables are somehow regularly privileged over diachronic trends, which, if it is true, has huge implications for the management public service organizations. We need more natural histories of performance management systems.

TRANSATLANTIC?

Perhaps I should conclude by asking whether this story I have told about our field is the same story on both sides of the water, or whether we see different variants in North America and Western Europe? On the whole my impression is that the similarities outweigh the differences. Most of the topics I have cited have been tackled by both North American and European scholars. Quite frequently, indeed, they co-operate (e.g. Bouckaert and Halachmi, 1996; Boyne et al, 2006).

If there is a difference perhaps it is that what I might call the skeptics and the social constructivists are somewhat better represented in the Old World. The skeptics are those who see performance management as a somewhat Faustian bargain, in which bring the up-front appearance of progress and control but, simultaneously, a behind-the-scenes trajectory of the growth of gaming and other distortions, as we over-reach ourselves in trying to encapsulate complexity, diversity and tacit knowledge in a dream - the modernist fantasy of having a few key indicators to steer by. The optimistic rationalists and functionalists are perhaps more to the fore in the New World. Speculatively, one might connect this to the American cultural bias in favour of optimistic 'can-do' attitudes, and to their faith in the powers of new technologies. [It is curious, therefore, that the USA often appears as a rather dismal international outlier in terms of the measured cost effectiveness of their basic educational and healthcare systems, and the very low levels of trust their citizens seem to have in government - Bouckaert, 2006.]

The social constructivists are those who are more interested in the symbolic than the functional role of performance management systems. They are less interested in the validity and reliability of PIs than in questions such as way in which legitimacy is conferred by the possession and deployment of performance management systems, and the ways in which meanings and reputations can be constructed on the basis of often highly fallible statistics and standards, and careers can be built on claims of expertise in these arcane arts. Again, the foremost practitioners seem to be European (Brunsson and Olsen, 1993; Brunsson and Jacobson, 2000; Kurunmäki and Miller, 2006; Stacey and Griffin, 2006).

But even if I am correct to see the doubters as being rather better represented here in Europe, they certainly also exist in North America. So we are a real academic community, with extensive and increasing mutual communication and co-operation, not two warring camps.

CONCLUSIONS

I hope this brief survey has demonstrated the scope and dynamism of academic studies of performance measurement and management. It is a sub-field which exhibits both long-standing concerns and fresh challenges. It is multi-disciplinary and multi-theoretical. It is very probably still expanding. My final point would be that academics working with these topics are not only 'doing science' they are also intervening in a subject which is (potentially at least) of great political and public importance, and which may be highly consequential for the work and careers of

many public sector staff. This means that academics may face strong pressures to accept dominant assumptions (such as that better management is always the key to better performance) and even to avoid awkward questions (such as whether major decisions have really been taken on the basis of performance information, or on other grounds entirely). Performance management is a sub-field where our academic duty of 'speaking truth to power' (Wildavsky, 1979) can be a particularly difficult one to discharge. All the more reason, I would argue, why we should hold to the academic standards of open methods, independently refereed and open publications, and intensive discussion and testing within our own scientific community. There are many things which academics can do genuinely to help practitioners and the wider public (Pollitt, 2006d) but sacrificing our critical scientific independence is not one of them.

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