New public management and discursive regulation: From doing work to communicating work in Swedish public institutions

Joel Rasmussen
Örebro University, Sweden

This paper explores the effects of the emergence of a new form of governing of public institutions. The so-called new public management, taking principles from the private sector, requires employees not just do their own job but to regularly communicate about doing it to a more removed form of management who may not be specialists in the specific kind of work tasks. And this reporting is done through a generic language designed by consultants or at the policy level, deploying a discourse of ‘targets’, ‘strategies’, ‘risk’, and ‘commitment’. But how does this new form of communication affect the work of employees in the public sector? Drawing on critical discourse analysis and the concept of governmentality, this paper gives a review of the literature arguing, among other things, that this leads to competent professionals transforming what they do and why they do it into a different set of priorities and, worst, that time and energy shifts away from core tasks towards meeting abstract criteria that are remote from the concerns of the professions. The consequences of such changes could be substantive for those citizens who rely on policing, who need healthcare or whose children rely on professionally operating teachers. Little is known, however, about the consequences of this form of governing for public sector employees in Sweden, a country that has been internationally heralded as a model of excellence in public services. Therefore, the paper outlines a study of the nature and consequences of imposed forms of communication on the work of employees in schools, policing and health care in Sweden. Its tradition of transparency and well-developed infrastructure for employee involvement and communication may provide venues for resistance of employees, or perhaps more likely monitoring and agreement.

Keywords: Discourse, New Public Management, Governmentality.