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A Matter of Definitions: The Profiling of People in Italian Active Labour Market Policies

Carlotta Mozzana*

Abstract: »*Eine Definitionsfrage: Die Profilierung von Personen in der aktiven Arbeitsmarktpolitik Italiens.* The article explores the implications for public welfare policy of the current reliance on quantification tools to assess both people and programs. In this context, profiling has recently acquired a key role in active labour market policies, because it allows policy administrators to distinguish among different levels of risk in individuals approaching the labour market. After discussing the issue of the deployment of numbers in policies, I present and contextualize a recent case study: a national profiling system adopted in Italy in fulfilment of Youth Guarantee, a European public policy whose aim is to support young people entering the labour market via dedicated services. In the second part of the article, I outline how the profiling system was devised and how it works, going on to report a qualitative study on the implications of using the Disadvantage Index - the core of the profiling model - and how it was modified after an initial test phase. The research findings suggest that, in contradiction with the Index' original goals, it has ended up screening out the more disadvantaged NEETs, with the risk of perpetuating their disadvantage. In the conclusions section, I return to the role of numbers and indicators in governing public policy, as well as their contribution to the depoliticization of public action.

Keywords: Profiling system, sociology of quantification, active labour market policies, Youth Guarantee, public action, depoliticization, Italy.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the appeal to indices, indicators, and numbers has, in general, been strongly on the rise everywhere, and quantification is now a pervasive feature of contemporary society (Bartl, Papilloud, and Terracher-Lipinski 2019, in this issue). Within this broader trend, quantification tools are widely applied in public welfare policy to assess both people and programs. Several factors have contributed to this phenomenon: first, the spread of an audit culture and New Public Management (NPM) logics (Power 1997; Clarke and Newman 1997) to welfare services, resulting in a profound reconfiguration of

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social rights as needs and means of satisfying them via a process of moralization of the recipients' deservingness (Doyal and Gough 1991). Second, the consequent reduction in public spending on welfare has been exacerbated in recent years as the socio-economic crisis has pushed decision-makers to introduce a system of constraints. This was accompanied by the paradigm of universal rights shifting to that of conditional rights, and ultimately to that of balanced budget extremism (Sen 1997), with balancing public expenditure taking precedence over the provision of social rights. Third, and more generally, a growing demand for accessible and comparable knowledge in the form of quantitative evidence, which "is seen as essential for developing reasonable policy at local, national and international level" (Rottenburg and Merry 2015, 1). Numbers have thus become relevant to all phases of policy making, largely because they are viewed as a transparent, synthetic, objective, and neutral instrument for assessing policies and people (see also [Bode 2019](#), in this issue).

While quantification (and subsequently its role in contemporary society) has become a key field of inquiry within sociology (Porter 1995; Espeland and Stevens 2008; Lampland and Star 2009; Desrosières 2011; Rottenburg et al. 2015; Espeland and Sauder 2016) and the use of quantification tools to inform public action and policies has been widely acknowledged since the advent of NPM to public administration and services¹ (Busso 2015; Bifulco 2016), the implications of adopting these instruments to manage access to public services has received far less attention. In Italy, while forms of quantification are widely used to assess the social, economic, or political impact of public policy, Youth Guarantee (YG) is the first national programme that has used a profiling system to control access to a public service. Launched in 2013 in response to an EU directive to help young people who are not in education, in employment, or in training (NEET) enter the labour market, YG is a programme that aims to fill gaps in young people's educational and professional experience: EU Member States were therefore invited to identify a strategy for offering youth under 25 years

a high-quality offer of work, further education, apprenticeship or traineeship, or other training interventions within four months of unemployment starting or leaving the formal education system. (Italian Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan, 2013)

Access to YG is regulated by a profiling system applied by social workers in local employment services to evaluate the level of disadvantage presented by potential participants in the scheme. The profiling is linked to a system of fixed refunds compensating the participating agencies for the mix of the services provided to the young people enrolled in the programme. As shall be claimed

¹ Although quantification in the realm of public administration and services already existed prior to the rise of NPM, there was previously less (or no, as in the case of Italy) emphasis on the evaluation of outputs (Bifulco 2016).

later, profiling people is not a neutral action. Originally a law enforcement strategy deploying scientific methods to monitor individuals with a view to preventing crime (Molteni 2011), profiling is now used in public welfare as a tool for defining personalized programmes allocating jobseekers to different intervention streams (OECD 2014a). But this shift, as we shall see, has consequences for people and policies.

The article begins with an overview of concepts and approaches that allow us to investigate the role of numbers in the profiling tools used to determine eligibility for support services under active labour market policies. I then present a case study, the above-mentioned profiling system used in Italy to regulate access to YG, in an effort to analyse how the system was devised and how it works. I enter into some detail about differences in how it has been implemented locally and how altered expectations about its functioning have resulted in the exclusion of the more disadvantaged youth from the programme. Finally, I return to the role of numbers in governing public policy, as well as their contribution to the depoliticization of public action.

2. Numbers and Policies: A Toolbox for Critical Analysis

In recent decades, there has been a substantial increase in practices and laws based on standards and numbers, whose aim is to assess and orient human action (Desrosieres 1993; Porter 1995; Power 1997; Espeland and Stevens 2008). Investigating the ways in which numbers are produced, communicated, and practiced, the consequences in terms of how modern life is organized and shaped, and the social implications of the phenomenon (Espeland and Stevens 2008, 402) sheds lights on the ways in which we organize, define, and give meaning to the world, because numbers, in short, “do things”. They are used to transform differences into quantities, via a process that requires huge social and intellectual investment to define a standardized and recognizable form for representing a specific difference (Thévenot 2009). At the same time, numbers can have multiple purposes and meanings, which are established through use (Espeland and Steven 2008, 405) and may differ from those originally intended.

Furthermore, numbers act on the world they contribute to describing. On the one hand, they modify power relations by influencing the distribution of resources, knowledge, and opportunities (Espeland and Steven 2008), taking on a regulatory function previously conferred on the law (Supiot 2015). On the other hand, numbers can induce reactivity, causing people to think and act in a different way (Espeland and Sauder 2007) and “making up people” (Hacking 1986) by creating or reinforcing the categories used to think about human beings. Furthermore, they are easily circulated and lend themselves both to excluding and to integrating information, making it easier to understand reality.

However, measures may also have the capacity to discipline and to make reality more governable by defining what is to be considered appropriate or normal, translating statistical normality into a moral aspiration² (Espeland and Stevens 2008). Thusly, numbers bear the performative potential to fabricate reality: thanks to the parsimony with which they describe phenomena, numbers provide a precise account while establishing what is to be viewed as relevant knowledge with regard to a specific phenomenon; and thanks to the standardization they imply, quantitative data save on plural interpretations and representations as well as voices and conflicts, ruling out differences and plurality.

When numbers make their appearance in public policies, they become tools³ of public action. And as part of the instrumentation of government, “they are bearers of values, fuelled by one interpretation of the social and by precise notions of the mode of regulation envisaged” (Lascoumes and Le Galés 2007, 4).

Via the representations and meanings they encourage, the ways in which they are constructed, and the choices underpinning them, they effectively organize relations between the State and those at whom they are directed (Lascoumes and Le Galés 2007, 4), producing effects and playing a role in the process of political change. Furthermore, the numbers used in public policies have informational bases of judgement embedded in them: a concept developed by Amartya Sen (1992, 1990) within his capability approach framework, an informational basis of judgement may be defined as “the information on which the judgment is directly dependent [that] determines the factual territory to which justice considerations are directly applied” (Sen 1990). It thus comprises those items of information and knowledge that are viewed as salient to the policy-making process and which have to do with the value judgements inherent to the policy, service, or program. Identifying the informational bases of judgement is key to marking out the “factual territory” of political choices about justice, that is to say, the types of information in which political decisions are grounded. It makes explicit the link between the cognitive and normative dimensions of public policies, pointing up what knowledge is viewed as salient to (political) choices about how to design and implement public policies (de Leonardis 2009). In this respect, it is important to establish whether they resemble, to borrow a metaphor from Bruno Latour, a black box that hides the

² Normality is primarily understood here in the statistical sense, that is to say, as the tendency for incidences of a phenomenon to be arranged around their average value in a bell curve. However, as Espeland and Stevens have claimed following Foucault, “it is easy to conflate normal in a statistical sense with normal in a moral sense [...] and measures easily become (moral) aspirations” (Espeland and Stevens 2008, 416).

³ As Lascoumes and Le Galés have argued, the difference between a tool and an instrument is that the former is a micro device within a technique (such as a statistical category within a statistical nomenclature), while the latter is a social institution (such as a policy) (Lascoumes and Le Galés 2007).

process of compromise, choice, and negotiation that led to their definition (Latour 1987) or whether, on the contrary, such processes remain visible and accessible to public discussion and modification (de Leonardis 2009). Although informational bases are often implicit and not immediately recognizable, they offer a key to understanding policies in action, beyond the discursive rhetoric that accompanied their design (Monteleone and Mozzana 2009).

3. Methodology

The data reported are drawn from a broader research project entitled “Quantification in public policies: forms of knowledge and public decision-making in active labour market policies in Italy” (Mozzana 2015). The main aim of the research was to examine the role and use of quantifying instrumentation in public policies in Italy and its effects in terms of depoliticization and transformation of social citizenship. The project’s leading case study was Youth Guarantee, an EU programme launched on 22 April 2013 by the European Council to address youth unemployment and the high rate of NEETs all over Europe: the European Council made dedicated funds available to help young people enter the labour market and each Member State was required to provide youth with support and services in continued education or vocational training, apprenticeships, or traineeships, employment and financial support for self-employment⁴.

The research was divided into two phases, both using qualitative research methods (e.g., interviews, participant observation, documentary analysis). The aim of the first phase was to analyse the policy at the national level with a special focus on the profiling system, using documentary analysis and interviews with opinion leaders and policy makers, while the second phase was focused on the local implementation of the policy in the context of three regional case studies (Lombardy, Campania, and Emilia Romagna) using mainly participant observation and in-depth interviews with project managers, social workers, case managers, and beneficiaries of the YG services. The present article is based on the data from the first phase of the research project and only partially on data from the second phase, comprising the analysis of twelve in-depth interviews with national and local (Lombardy and Campania) project managers and opinion leaders, legal documents, and support materials produced nationally and locally for the Italian Youth Guarantee programme.

⁴ See the next section for a broader explanation of the programme.

4. The Setting up of a National Profiling System in Italy

The past decade has seen a substantial increase in the unemployment rate, especially among young people and in certain regions of the European Union. This phenomenon has gone hand in hand with the emergence of a new category of young person, the so-called NEETs, or youths who are no longer in the education system and are not working or being trained for work. In 2016, the average percentage of NEETs in the European Union was 15.6%, but with significant variation across countries, ranging from 7.2% and 7.9% respectively in Sweden and the Netherlands to 25.6% in Greece and 26% in Italy (Eurostat 2017).

Although the situation is more critical in some countries than in others, the European Union views the NEETs as a major concern. Thus, on 22 April 2013, the European Council issued a “youth guarantee” to address the issue by making dedicated funds available to help young people enter the labour market. Each Member State committed to drawing up its own National Implementation Plan following the Open Method of Coordination. Though the devised schemes and implementation systems were allowed to differ from one country to another, they were all required to provide youth with support and services in the following areas: a) continued education or vocational training; b) apprenticeships or traineeships; c) a good quality offer of employment; and d) financial support for self-employment.

The Italian Implementation Plan became operative on 1 May 2014, with a budget of €1.513 billion: €567 million from the Youth Employment Initiative, €567 million from the European Social Fund and €379 million in national co-funding. Different services are envisaged under the plan: after an information phase that is open to all, the young person may be redirected towards education programmes or towards profiling and initial orientation services. Once this phase has been completed, there may be a second-level orientation phase or the beneficiary may be immediately directed towards one of the available training or employment options (e.g., vocational training, traineeships, apprenticeships, job offers, forms of support for self-entrepreneurship, regional civil service).

One of the major innovations introduced with the Italian YG is the adoption of a national statistical profiling system. The use of profiling systems in employment services is recent but not brand-new: introduced in the 1990s in the United States, profiling has since become widely used in this field (Koning 2007; OECD 2014a) to analyse and segment the demand-side of employment (OECD 2014b). Profiling systems are usually based on quantitative data used to classify people into a limited number of categories in order to develop more tailored projects and provide additional support for those who need it most (OECD 2014a).

In the case of Youth Guarantee, the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policy commissioned a group of economists and statisticians from Isfol (a

public research institute) with the task of developing a profiling system, including an index to be used specifically for profiling purposes (the so-called ‘Disadvantage Index’ (DI)). The system comprises two tools: the DI and the Personal and Professional Data Sheet (SAP). It “assigns to each young person taking part in the Plan [...] a ‘Disadvantage Index’ score that is a measure of his/her labour market challenges” (Isfol 2014, 1)⁵, thus regulating access to the YG services and schemes. More specifically, the DI indicates, for each young person enrolled on the programme, the level of disadvantage that he or she faces in accessing the labour market based on a set of parameters defining the characteristics and circumstances of the young person and determining his/her eligibility to proceed to the orientation interview. Depending on the DI value obtained, the young person is assigned to one of the four “Disadvantage Classes” (DC) that the plan envisages: each of the classes is in turn associated with a fixed reimbursement system and a policy for encouraging companies to hire young people, known as the employment bonus. Both reimbursements and bonus vary in size as a function of DC: the more a young person is disadvantaged, the greater the amount of support given. The employment bonus, to provide an example of the policy’s underlying logic, varies as reported in the following table:

Table 1: Amount of Employment Bonus by Disadvantage Class and Type of Contract (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy 2015)

	Disadvantage Class of the NEET			
	Low	Medium-low	Medium-high	High
Fixed-term contract lasting 6-12 months	-	-	€ 1.500	€ 2.000
Fixed-term contract lasting over 12 months	-	-	€ 3.000	€ 4.000
Permanent employment contract	€ 1.500	€ 3.000	€ 4.500	€ 6.000

5. Access by Numbers: Informational Basis and Policy Decision Making

Given that the SAP is based on the information summarized in the DI (Mozzanna 2015), I focus here on the latter. The DI, as stated, regulates access to the Italian YG while estimating the relative difficulty that a specific young person will encounter in accessing the labour market (Isfol 2014, 1). But how is the DI structured? And what role does it play in this phase of the scheme?

⁵ All citations drawn from Italian documents/interviews have been translated into English by the author to facilitate comprehension for the readers.

Let us start from the beginning. Statistically speaking, the DI indicates the level of disadvantage that a young individual faces in approaching the labour market in light of both individual and territorial factors. The variables included in the model and their estimated weights were defined using a statistical criterion: they are the factors that explained variance in a logistic regression model on the expected probability, between 0 and 1, that a given young person would have NEET status as opposed to being in employment. The regression was conducted for a representative sample of the population eligible for YG, based on data from the ISTAT (the Italian National Statistics Institute) Labour Force Survey. As stated in the documents outlining the profiling system,

a principle of parsimony should be brought to bear on identifying the characteristics accounting for NEET status, which means using the model with the least amount of information to explain the phenomenon. (Isfol 2014, 2)

Thus, the index comprises eight variables of two different types: five individual variables (age, gender, years spent living in Italy, level of education, and employment status a year prior to enrolling on the YG scheme) and three territorial variables (variation in the unemployment rate of 15-29 year olds at the provincial level, risk of family poverty, and entrepreneurial density at the regional level)⁶.

Once the DI has been calculated, the NEET is assigned to one of the four DCs envisaged in the plan (high, medium-high, medium-low, low disadvantage), each of which is associated with different services and levels of support according to the severity of the disadvantage due to the presence of a fixed refund system. In other words, the DI defines the amount of support that may be drawn down for that specific young person, establishing clear financing limits to what may be done for that person, what is appropriate and normal or inappropriate and inapplicable (regardless of the individual's actual circumstances, desires, or abilities) and to what is actually done by the local agencies. In a word, in setting the economic limits of the available support, the standard refund system connected with the DI functioned to define "normality" by supporting precise types of NEET, then regulating and defining *ex ante* the constraints on their pathways through the programme.

In addition, the index is calculated based on a small number of relatively general variables. While parsimony is a valid statistical principle that should be respected when explaining or predicting a phenomenon, the situation is different when the function of an index is not to describe reality, but to regulate it, effectively serving to unlock (or block) access to employment support schemes. Viewed from this perspective, the DI relies on a very poor informational basis, both quantitatively (only eight variables are included in the model) and qualita-

⁶ The Disadvantage Index is as calculated using the formula: $p = \frac{e^y}{1+e^y}$, where y is the statistical combination of the individual and territorial variables and their estimated weights.

tively (the variables are very general and cannot fully capture and represent the situation of the participants in the scheme) because the NEET population includes young persons with fast-changing lives in vastly different circumstances and systems of opportunity (Furlong 2006; Yates and Payne 2006). In this case, statistical parsimony seems to be more hindrance than a help in directing recipients to adequate services: even in the social workers' words, "the DI does not help me to understand the young individual I meet... It just sets out what I can do with her" (Interview 12).

Furthermore, the profiling system does not include⁷, beyond the statistical tool, other forms of knowledge and relative information that are known to be helpful in identifying the barriers a young person might face in approaching the labour market and directing him or her towards an appropriate set of services and support, as caseworkers are trained to do⁸ (ILO 2017). Defining individual interventions on such a meagre informational basis risks generating projects that do not meaningfully impact on the situation of the young NEETs because too little is known about their actual circumstances, desires, and aspirations. In place of personalized paths, the use of this kind of profiling tool prompts standardised responses to young people, going in the opposite direction to what is stated in the plan, which aims to provide "tailor-made paths that will be locally designed for each individual youth, while taking into account the characteristics of the target population" (Italian Implementation Plan of the YG, 14), and which describes the index as a "suitable instrument for ensuring the construction of an individual path consistent with the personal, educational and professional characteristics of the user" (Implementation Decree 23 January 2015, Art. 1).

The provision of tailor-made services is one of the main features of active labour market and social policies (van Berkel and Hornemann Møller 2002). While more inclusive and sustainable policies view collecting information on the beneficiary (and especially from him/her) as essential to designing tailor-made intervention (de Leonardis 2012), those that adopt a workfare approach to activation have struggled to generate employment for the most vulnerable unemployed (Ellison and van Berkel, 2014) (and young NEETs are vulnerable unemployed⁹) while producing growth in insecure, unpaid, and poor-quality

⁷ In 2018, the profiling system was changed slightly and is now complemented by a qualitative assessment conducted by the social workers during their initial interviews with the young people. Nonetheless, the considerations outlined above about the mode and duration of contact between beneficiaries and Public Employment Services staff remain valid (in the majority of cases, only one, extremely brief, interview is held).

⁸ Caseworker-based client segmentation is a method used in Austria, France, and Slovakia, in which experienced caseworkers combine qualitative tools (e.g., interviews, tests, own judgement) to profile the recipients of a public intervention (ILO 2017).

⁹ In fact, young NEETs are not a homogeneous group but, due to their condition, they risk labour market disadvantage and social exclusion, and some subgroups are even more prone

jobs (Dean et al., 2005; McQuaid and Lindsay 2005; Salognon 2007)¹⁰. Since its launch, the Italian version of YG has seemed more in line with this second version of activation: during the YG profiling phase, the beneficiaries' voices are lost because they are not viewed as sources of key information to be taken into account in defining either their own individual programmes or the strategic priorities of the scheme more generally. This happens not only because the system collects very little information, but also because profiling is, by its nature, a tool designed to serialize rather than personalize: it treats youths as belonging to one of a number of set types, in which personal characteristics and peculiarities diminish in importance, rather than approaching them as unique individuals with specific characteristics that differentiate them from one to another. Thus, the adoption of a profiling system such as the one analysed seems to move in the opposite direction to the delivery of tailor-made services and support for young people.

Indeed, given its explicitly declared function of regulating access to the YG scheme in Italy, the risk that profiling will generate standardised, inadequate, and poorly personalized responses to the needs of young people is not only caused by its inadequate informational basis. The choice to use a number as the beneficiary's 'identity card' for accessing employment services itself moves in this direction. First, because it limits the spaces available for listening to young people's concerns, desires, and abilities, undermining their capability for voice (de Leonardis 2012) and consequently their capacity to aspire, that is to say, the ability to imagine different future conditions for themselves while managing and addressing present situations (Appadurai 2004). By virtue of the supposed information value of numbers (Porter 1995), the risk is that employment agency staff will view the DI as a sufficient basis for defining programmes to support candidates' entry to the labour market, as reflected in the words of one social worker:

During the interview I just confirm with the guy/girl whether the information [needed for profiling] is correct, what I can do with the Disadvantage Class s/he is in [in terms of the available resources] and what available opportunities I can offer, at that precise point in time, with that Index. (Interview 11)

Furthermore, it is the case in some Italian regions that the initial interview with the young applicant is not even refunded because it is viewed as a duty of the local agencies. This is the case in Lombardy for example, where a candidate's first contact with the YG is a brief and superficial interview with the sole pur-

than others to unemployment, discouragement, and inactivity (see Isengard 2003; Russell and O'Connell 2001, and Eurofound 2012 for further background).

¹⁰ Furthermore, the welfare systems that best support inclusive and sustainable growth (as defined in the Europe 2020 strategy) are those that foster social protection and equality as well as providing employment and vocational training services (Morel, Palier, and Palme 2012).

pose of calculating the DI and assigning a DC. In most instances, this is the only occasion in which the young person will be involved in defining his/her Personalized Action Plan, the instrument that specifies the services that will be activated for him/her. Yet the interview is treated more as a formal bureaucratic requirement than as an opportunity to collect information about the young person and his/her situation (Interview 10). This leads to the development of highly standardised interventions following a path dependency logic that emphasizes using up the available resources and services rather than designing *ad hoc* activation pathways.

However, even in other regions such as Campania, where the first interview is covered by public funding and local public employment services are assigned the task of conducting it, the index tends to work to the disadvantage of those in the most vulnerable conditions because it masks differences: given the small amount of time available to social workers to devise a tailor-made plan, the hard cases tend to be underrated because they are condensed into a number and not described in all their complexity:

It has happened to me to have two guys in the same class [the same Disadvantage Class], but one needed major support because of his origins and educational background, while the other one only needed some quick help with his CV... but the class was the same, and the Disadvantage Index was very similar! (Interview 8)

By simplifying and integrating information, numbers make individual conditions comprehensible and even comparable, but at the same time they hide variety and flatten the situations of young people: the same DC encompasses individuals with very different circumstances, abilities and desires, and these differences cannot be detected by social workers nor truly personalized intervention designed if the only information available is the DI.

Furthermore, similar index values can correspond to very different situations at both the individual and territorial levels. As pointed out by Monteleone and Mozzana (2009), the risk of using standardized instruments that are not complemented by spaces for listening, integrating, and widening the informational basis of judgement (which in this case is predefined and shaped by the DI), is that the resulting interventions will not be truly personalized and relevant to young people. And in the case of vulnerable NEETs, this can leave them even worse off than before going on the scheme. With an inadequate personal plan, young people cannot live up to their expectations and capacities and, in some cases, this can have a negative effect on their motivation, personal beliefs, and attitude towards the labour market:

Given that only a few of them manage to get a permanent position by the end of the project, and these are the less disadvantaged ones, the greater part remain jobless and with slim chances of getting other work experience because the jobs market is so problematic here [Campania Region]... so they feel disoriented and believe that they will never get a job. (Interview 11)

What is more, the DI and its use are characterised by ambiguity. Not only are conflicting goals underpinning its definition, it also appears to fulfil different aims: on the one hand, it describes candidates' situations while, on the other, it regulates their access to services. Another purpose becomes clear when we consider the application of the profiling system in practice, a purpose that implies a shift in its meaning. In addition to the reasons stated in the official documents, the ministerial policy-makers also introduced a national profiling system to facilitate the uniform evaluation of young people all over the country and eliminate the discretionary component implemented by street-level bureaucrats in traditional social services that usually mediates access to welfare policies (Interview 1). With this objective in mind, the political priority was to devise a quick and easy-to-use tool that could be understood by everyone so as to minimize problems during the implementation phase (Interview 2) because, amongst other reasons, public and private employment services operate across very different regional and local contexts. As emerged from the interviews conducted with some of those involved in defining the DI:

it was important to ensure a certain uniformity throughout the country in the assessment of the risk and needs profile of individual users, to remove the discretion of employment service staff at this stage and therefore prevent inequalities among users (Interview 1)

and again

The four-class division was chosen because it was more easily understandable and immediate, the other options (ten classes or combined with the use of another statistical tools) would have led to confusion about how they related to the index and how to apply them in practice. (Interview 2)

Hence, yet another objective came into play addressing a traditional and hotly debated issue about street-level bureaucratic action: the index was required to ensure the absence of personal or group bias (Rottenburg and Merry 2015), that is to say, to eliminate the discretionary component from decisions about how to support young people and because tools based on numbers have this precise aim¹¹.

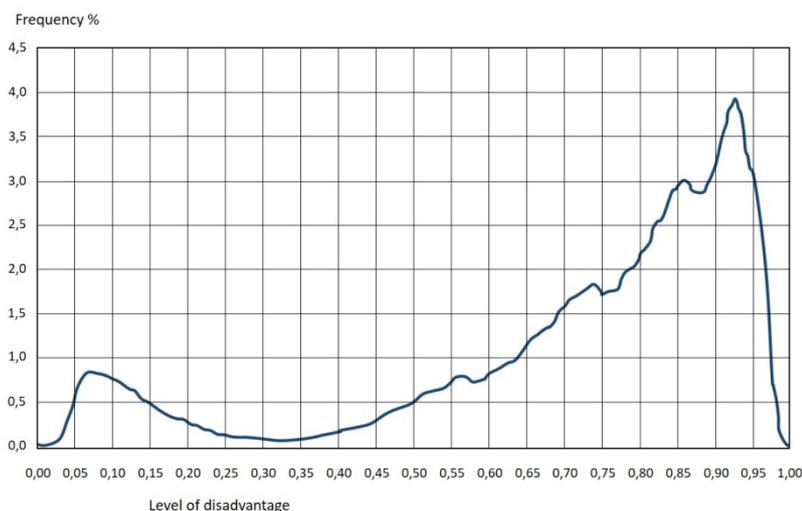
¹¹ Nevertheless, total control over the actions and decision-making of street-level bureaucrats in the public service is known to be unattainable: several authors have argued that an "irreducible core of autonomy" remains even after a rigorous standardization process has been implemented, as has been the case since the advent of NPM (Kirkpatrick et al. 2005).

6. What Can We Expect? By Changing the Index, We Change People

Following the pilot phase, in January 2015 the four DCs were modified. But what had happened? Why did they change?

Again, let us go back to the beginning. Initially, the four classes were defined using the quartiles for the observed distribution of the DI in a representative sample of the YG-eligible population drawn from the Istat Labour Force Survey. Scores were significantly skewed to the right of the distribution, indicating that a large proportion of the young people who were potentially eligible for YG were strongly disadvantaged on entering the labour market (Isfol 2014, 6), as Figure 1 makes clear.

Figure 1: Distribution of the Level of Disadvantage in the Target Population (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy 2015)



Predicting that the actual YG population would share this pattern of distribution of the DI, the policy-makers opted to define the four DCs to reflect the occurrence of disadvantage in the benchmark population, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Disadvantage Classes and the Associated Disadvantage Index ranges for the Period 1 May 2014 – 31 January 2015 (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy 2015)

Disadvantage Index	Thresholds for the Disadvantage Classes expressed as ρ values	
	Min	Max
1 - Low	0.000000	0.650716
2 - Medium-low	0.650717	0.805638
3 - Medium-high	0.805639	0.897500
4 - High	0.897501	1.000000

The rationale for this decision was that it would allow most of the resources to be allocated to those who were in the most adverse situations, or rather, to the most fragile NEETs. This was confirmed by the Isfol statisticians:

Initially we proposed dividing the four classes to reflect the distribution among the quartiles [...] This was with a view to giving most of the resources to the young people who needed them the most, that is to say, those with the highest levels of disadvantage and therefore the greatest difficulty in entering the labour market. (Interview 2)

However, following the pilot phase (May 2014 - January 2015), and based on the actual applications received in the first six months of implementing YG, it was decided to modify the division of the DCs, as shown in Table 3:

Table 3: Disadvantage Classes and the Associated Disadvantage Index Ranges for the Period 31 January 2015 to Date (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy 2015).

Disadvantage Index	Thresholds for the Disadvantage Classes expressed as ρ values	
	Min	Max
1 - Low	0.000000	0.250000
2 - Medium-low	0.250001	0.500000
3 - Medium-high	0.500001	0.750000
4 - High	0.750001	1.000000

What happened? The four classes were now made to correspond to four equal divisions of the index itself, rather than to its distribution in the population. Following the NPM logic of effectiveness and efficiency, this change was legitimised by citing concern about the best allocation of resources. In the document produced by the statisticians in charge of modifying the classes to announce the change and explain the underlying rationale, it was argued that change was needed to “obtain a more efficient allocation of resources” because

the analyses show a certain discrepancy between the eligible population, on which the profiling model was estimated, and the subpopulation of persons actually registered on YG: the mean level of disadvantage among those who ap-

plied to join the scheme is lower than the mean level of disadvantage in the eligible population. (Isfol 2015, 4)

What does this mean? It means that the young people registered on the scheme were less disadvantaged than expected and some of the variables used in the DI, such as holding a school-leaving diploma and a high-scoring family profile, proved to be correlated with the propensity to join the YG (Isfol 2015, 5). It appeared that the most disadvantaged young people, who represented a large proportion of the sample analysed to develop the DI, were unable to access the YG services (i.e., they were not even able to apply to join the scheme).

Thus, using a criterion designed to give more support to those who were most disadvantaged did not work at all: the most fragile NEETs had not come forward, or only did so to a very small extent (and with large differences across regions) and a considerable amount of resources, in terms of money and available services, were not being used because the young people that actually registered on the scheme needed less support than expected. But the pilot test was drawing to a close and the available resources needed to be allocated in order to show that the YG scheme was working. Thus, the solution adopted was to modify the eligibility for support criteria in order to more effectively allocate the money among the less disadvantaged NEETs who had successfully accessed the scheme. This implied a political choice that was embedded in the profiling tool, but not clarified in the documents and public political statements about the modification: specifically, to provide the less disadvantaged NEETs with more support at the expense of the more disadvantaged ones who were not even accessing the scheme, in order to prove the effectiveness of the policy:

The cruel thing is that the opportunity to repeat the programme in the future depends on what we do in the present: the capacity to use the available resources, even if it is for less disadvantaged people, is the proof that the policy has effects. [...] At that point it was important to start providing reassuring numbers about the policy's relevance. (Interview 1)

For example, the employment bonus presented at the end of Section 3, which is proportionally related to DC (i.e., the greater the level of disadvantage, the bigger the bonus), was distributed among a population of young people who were less in need, yet who now benefited from forms of support that had previously been unavailable to them or available to a lesser extent. The redefining of the four classes altered the scheme's target population, because it also redefined who was entitled to be given support programs and increased the levels of support to be activated for young people who had previously been classified differently. And above all, changing the target population meant in this case enforcing a sort of "screening out" procedure for the most disadvantaged: instead of using part of the available resources to develop a special policy for reaching out to them and helping them access the YG, they were simply left out. This decision was discursively justified by appeal to typical NPM objectives, both in the official documents and in the interviews conducted as part of

the study, but the exclusion of the most disadvantaged NEETs was only raised as an issue in the latter.

In other cases, the modification was explained by invoking an efficiency argument, in relation for example to companies' reluctance to avail of the employment bonus under the initial scheme:

Companies had no interest in hiring the most disadvantaged youths despite the employment bonus because it was only for the those NEETs with a very strong disadvantage... in short, we were not able to use the available resources. (Interview 3)

However, even after the changes in the DCs, more companies took advantage of the incentive and this reinforced the official explanation. Another factor drove the new pattern of behaviour on the part of employers: in 2014, a larger employment incentive had been offered under the Jobs Act, a law that reformed employment legislation in Italy (Law 183/2014)¹². Initially, the two incentives could not be availed of at the same time, meaning that the YG bonus was left unused until the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy decided to change the criteria:

When we changed the criteria concerning the measures and established that the two incentives could be cumulatively availed of for young NEETs, the companies finally started using the employment bonus together with the Jobs Act incentive. (Interview 2)

The adoption of a quantitative instrument, such as the DI and the correlated DCs led, in this case, to the outcome that the political goals and principles underlying the policy were subordinated to accounting priorities because these two sets of concerns were out of line with one another. This discrepancy was enough to justify overlooking the distribution of disadvantage in the population as initially intended, and shifting away from the original objective of providing stronger support to the most disadvantaged NEETs to that of increasing the number of NEETs enrolled on the programme. However, although the numerical goal was achieved, this obfuscates substantial matters such as the quality of the support itself and the recourse to "pushing up the numbers" (Samuel 2015), a typical trick in "governance by numbers" (Supiot 2015).

The St. Matthew effect was also at work here, that is to say, "the tendency of social investment policies to favour less disadvantaged groups within a given target population" (Vesan 2014). Indeed, the redefinition of the classes of disadvantage saw all the available resources go to those who had already registered on the scheme, making them "count" more than the more fragile NEETs. In this respect, the Italian YG appears to follow the narrowest approach to activation, subscribing to the idea the NEETs are personally responsible for the

¹² The Jobs Act bonus was for a maximum of €8,060/year for three years, while the maximum value of the YG employment bonus was set at €6,000.

situation they find themselves in: it emphasizes both a candidates' willingness to self-activate and their readiness to access the jobs market via generic work experience, with a view to attaining an oxymoronic "solid adaptability" to the unstable needs of the labour market. But with two effects: on the one hand, the weeding out of the more disadvantaged NEETs; and on the other, risking perpetuating their disadvantage because, as several authors have pointed out (Mozzana and Bifulco 2016; Otto 2015), policies that seek to foster youth employment from a workfare perspective do not create healthy and stable labour conditions (Peck 2001).

7. Conclusions

As stated at the outset, the deployment of quantification tools to regulate access to public welfare schemes is a very recent component of active labour market policies in Italy, even though the use of data, indicators, and numbers is becoming pervasive in the policy-making process and they are used to programme, monitor, assess, and develop tools that on the one hand facilitate the "effective and efficient" allocation of resources and on the other can control this process.

With regard to the tools that govern access to YG services in Italy, the DI makes the status of a young person immediately recognisable and identifiable, while also satisfying the NPM requirement for an efficient distribution of resources. However, the DI offers too little information about the young people on the scheme and forces them into standardised categories that represent more of a limitation than a true resource, both for the participants themselves and for the attainment of the YG plan objectives. The profiling system used by the Italian YG scheme appears to serialize youths, making them into clearly identifiable types. This means that they are incidences of a kind and so are offered standardized treatment, rather than tailored interventions in wide open spaces for listening to peoples' concerns about their lives, desires, and aspirations (Appadurai 2004).

In addition, the DI is not a neutral technology that helps institutions to govern the complexity of the real. Instead, its ambiguity and the continuous shifts in its goals and meanings have contributed to pushing the policy in the opposite direction to that originally desired. The collapse of the normative dimension of law into the cognitive one of knowledge, that is to say, the shifting around of meanings and purposes associated with the use of a statistic tool gives rise to an ambiguous instrument; invented to describe, statistics are here conceptualized and used as a means of regulating and distributing resources and people. Hence, the profiling instrument turns out to be a knowledge technology that controls and disciplines both people and the intervention (Rottenburg and Merry 2015) and the tool itself contributes to this ambiguity. Quantification tends to conceal and camouflage ambiguity while fuelling the collapse of normative

and cognitive dimensions (de Leonardis 2009). The ambiguous nature of the profiling system may be recognised and addressed by maintaining open public debate about such instruments and their workings, with a view to changing, redefining, and adapting them to the different conditions in which they will be implemented, and creating a reflective instrument that may be modified as necessary (Donolo 1997; de Leonardis 2009). Indeed, following the pilot phase, some changes were made to the DI, but the underlying logic was the NPM one: *de facto* letting down the more severely disadvantaged NEETs while the political dimension of this choice through technical adjustments.

Furthermore, the use of instruments based on quantifying knowledge comes from, and at the same time reproduces, the tendency to take sources and results expressed in numbers for granted. Numbers offer clarity, immediacy, objectivity, and neutrality (Porter 1995; Power 1997) because, with time, quantification tends to hide the “theoretical and normative assumption inscribed in [numbers], and the complexities, messiness and contingencies that went into their making” (Rottenburg and Merry 2015), as well as the fact that they are the result of conventions, agreements, and conflicts (Salais 2010; see also Diaz-Bone 2019 and Thévenot 2019, both in this issue). But when the political dimension of a political instrument, such as the profiling system analysed here, definitively disappears, and the DI becomes a rigid and cold tool (a black box, in the terms of Bruno Latour, 1987), it will likely be (even more) unsuitable for regulating young people's access to YG services. The transition from “government by rules” to “governance by numbers” (Supiot 2015) entails risks, including that of obscuring political processes and decision making, which, by their very nature, should remain public and questionable. Transposing choices that are deeply political into numbers (sometimes poorly, as in the case analysed) means depoliticizing the public action via social policies (Bifulco 2016): numbers provide a language for generalizing the economic metric at the core of the neoliberal spirit, “dissimulat[-ing] the normative work they do”, and contributing to vanquishing “the already anaemic ‘homo politicus’ currently being replaced by the ‘homo oeconomicus’” (Brown 2015, 135). The persistent growth of tools that “do politics without saying it”, denying the political core of choices (Burnham 2000) is thus a phenomenon that calls for more in-depth investigation, especially with regard to how the advancement of “governing by numbers” is playing out within the relationship between power and knowledge; an open-ended pathway of inquiry, which is worthy of pursuit.

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