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Preface

Not long ago, 81-year-old Walter Savage stumbled into the emergency room of a hospital. He had fallen and broken several ribs. After a brief examination, the doctor on duty concluded that he needed to be admitted immediately. In addition to his rib fractures, he was malnourished and dehydrated. Hospitalization was necessary for a speedy recovery, a second doctor agreed. Enough beds were available. But the hospital administration refused to admit him.

How could this happen?

Walter lives in Oregon, where patients rate hospital quality by giving one to five stars. The reward a hospital director receives at the end of the year depends on this rating: more stars means a higher bonus. Therefore, hospital administrators adopted a policy of admitting fewer complicated patients who need a lot of care. This way, the hospital would have more time and resources available to help the already admitted patients and thus get better ratings. And indeed, by cherry-picking patients, the quality rating of the hospital rose from one star to two, and the hospital director received a year-end bonus of some $8,000.[1]

We measure more than ever: we count our steps, record all kinds of activities and achievements in apps, and measure our popularity by the number of likes and followers. Measuring gives us some knowledge about how well we are doing and

allows us to track changes. Moreover, performance measures are often motivating. Reaching a measurable goal can give a huge boost. *Yes! Thirty push-ups done! Yes! Landed ten new clients! Yes! Got an 'A' on my midterm!* Then we compare our score to others, create rankings — in our heads or on paper — and adjust our behavior accordingly. We go to restaurants and hospitals with good reviews, buy books from bestseller lists and reward our children for good grades.

But sometimes it backfires. Then we get lost in what we are measuring and lose sight of why we are doing it in the first place. By focusing so heavily on measurable performance, we increasingly find ourselves in constant competition with everything and everyone. This comes with a myriad of negative consequences. For instance, we may become so overly focused on striving to overtake those we are compared with that we burn out.[2] It might even seem that what is not expressed in a number is either unimportant or does not exist. This is a problem.

Let's turn back to what happened at the hospital. Patient assessments were probably once developed with the best intentions, but then they backfired. While they were meant to increase the quality of care in the region, that quality of care was actually lowered. Indeed, a patient who needed to be admitted was simply refused admission. At the same time, official figures painted the picture that the quality of care provided by this hospital was improving.

This contradiction intrigues me. If it turns out that quantifications of quality and performance can have this kind of negative effect, why do we allow them to permeate every corner of our society? How do our measurement practices affect our own lives and relationships, both privately and at work? These questions have triggered me as a researcher for

years. The search for answers led me to schools, service engineers, multinational corporations, philosophers, desk clerks, politicians, sociologists, doctors and bookshelves filled with academic studies. What have I discovered? Measurement is often presented as a panacea to solve a problem, such as a lack of knowledge, understanding or motivation. However, little attention is paid to its limits and negative consequences. With this book, I hope to change that. I do so by shedding light on the undesirable side effects of measurement practices, and by illustrating how they can make us hit the target but miss the point. But I will end this book on a positive note by exploring how we can achieve a healthier attitude toward measurement.

Berend van der Kolk, Amsterdam, 2024

Introduction

Since the 2009 Apple commercial with the slogan *"There's an app for that,"* the number of apps you can use to measure yourself has skyrocketed. Strava records your cycling performance, Step Counter records your walks, Goodreads tracks the books you've read, and MyFitnessPal helps you log your daily calories. But why subject yourself to so many measurements?

The international leaders of this self-monitoring organized themselves into the *Quantified Self* movement in 2007. This movement consists of people who collect measurement information about themselves in order to learn from it. David de Souza, a young Internet entrepreneur from North Carolina, is one of them.

Since 2016, David has been the proud owner of *The Dashboard of My Life*. The dashboard contains all sorts of data about himself: from hours of sleep, pages read, the amount of alcoholic beverages consumed to the number of push-ups performed and miles run each day. He came up with the idea to accurately measure his life and accomplishments after he failed to fulfill one of his new year's resolutions — to run a marathon.

"I find it interesting that businesses have dashboards which help keep them on track in reaching their profit forecasts," he states, "but when it comes to our own lives, we don't really have dashboards." An overview like this with a variety of

indicators can help you gain insight into yourself and achieve goals, according to David. "I think simply measuring something already helps you to be more mindful." A programmer has translated David's idea into an online dashboard that partly automatically collects data from his smartphone and smartwatch, after which he only has to enter a few details every day.

The data obtained provided David with a variety of insights, he explained at a conference of the Quantified Self movement in Amsterdam. For example, the data taught him that there was a correlation between his alcohol consumption and the city he was in. He drank a total of 449 alcoholic drinks in 2016. His personal record (10 drinks) fell on November 24, Thanksgiving: "I had a lot to be thankful for." He also learned that the number of hours of sleep per night and his productivity were related — fewer hours of sleep and lower productivity went hand in hand. "I didn't think [sleep] affected me until I saw the data." In addition, the measurement information taught him that Tuesday was his most productive day. The knowledge gained about his own performance helped him see what worked well to achieve his goals; for example, he set an alarm clock for 9:30 p.m. to remind him to go to bed on time. The result? The following year, he ran the New York Marathon.[1]

David's example illustrates how today we can use technology to measure all sorts of things at the micro level. However, measuring performance is not new. Especially in the context of organizations, performance measurement — how fast you do something, how much work you do per day — has quite a history.

Management scientist Frederick Taylor, for example, wrote

about it back in 1911.² He argued that accurately measuring the duration of processes in factories could lead to more efficient organizations, wealthier owners, and motivated, happy employees. According to him, the worker should be "able to measure what he has accomplished and clearly see his reward at the end of each day if he is to do his best." Although we no longer see people walking around at work with stopwatches as often as in Taylor's time, invisible systems keep a multitude of data about our actions. *How long, on average, are help desk workers on the phone with a customer? How many billable hours are made by consultants?* Such measurements are processed into colorful graphs or tables and used to make decisions, motivate employees and create rankings.

Measurement systems are also increasingly playing a role in the public sector. Although evidence suggests that some sort of performance measurement took place in the nineteenth century at British public schools, measurement practices in the public sector really took off from the 1980s onward.³ At that time, management practices from business were introduced *en masse* in the public sector in several Western countries to increase efficiency. Governments had to become more business-like, and less bureaucratic. This movement is referred to internationally as *new public management.*⁴ Central to this movement was the measurement of performance. Quantified information about performance would contribute to better, *economically rational* decisions. The old bureaucratic focus on rules and procedures was to be replaced by result orientation, preferably in combination with measurable targets. The idea was that quantitative information on efficiency, costs and service quality would then make it easier to recognize where improvements could be made.

Looking back on the introduction of all those measure-

ment systems in the public sector, I think that the high expectations they came with were not realized. Or rather, only partially, and at considerable "cost".[5] The desire to express everything in measurable indicators, for example, has also contributed to more fiddling with figures — from professors who cheat just to publish their target number of articles to police officers who manipulate crime figures just to look good.

Furthermore, with all this measuring and comparing of performance, we have entered a never-ending competition. This competition is fueled by lists of "the best hospitals" and "the best performing colleagues" and thus takes place not only between organizations, but also between individuals. Increasingly, our obsession with metrics influences reality — and sometimes we don't even realize it. We all care about the number of likes received on LinkedIn and Instagram and compete for the attention and appreciation of others. Because we can now easily compare our "performance" with anyone in the world, the bar is raised ever higher. The increased pressure to perform has led Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Han to refer to our society as *the burnout society*. Our desire not to be inferior to others in terms of performance, combined with the idea that we can freely choose to go the extra mile, can lead to self-exploitation. We force ourselves to go beyond what is good for us — until we burn out.

The little prince

Anyone who starts paying attention to our obsession with numbers will make surprising discoveries. It is striking that in well-known stories counting is often an activity of miserly

figures, while more sympathetic characters are often not that interested in numbers.

In *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, accounting is the main occupation of the efficiency-minded miser Scrooge in his "counting" house. Because of his focus on counting and measuring his wealth, he has no regard for other matters. He treats his employee Bob unkindly and forgets the importance of social gatherings that do not produce immediate financial results, such as a dinner with friends.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in *The Little Prince* also introduces a character obsessed with numbers. Of course, this is the businessman. This businessman is so busy that he hardly looks up from his work. "I have so much to do! I am concerned with matters of consequence. I don't amuse myself with balderdash [...] I am accurate." It soon becomes clear that the businessman is mainly busy counting objects, without knowing exactly what he is counting. "Those little objects," he said, "which one sometimes sees in the sky." He was so busy he didn't pay much attention to what he was counting: stars.

In the novel *The Childhood of Jesus* by Nobel laureate John Maxwell Coetzee, we see just the opposite, a character's refusal to count and add up. The story follows an extraordinary boy who sees the world differently than those around him:

> "Put an apple in front of him and what does he see? An apple: not *one* apple, just *an* apple. Put two apples before him. What does he see? An apple and an apple: not two apples, not the same apple twice, just an apple and an apple."

In the story, it appears that the boy, to the annoyance of his teacher, is incapable of simple arithmetic. He refuses to see a number of apples, seeming to affirm the uniqueness of each individual apple. It is as if he wants to say: everything we see is special and I do not want to strip all these different objects of their uniqueness by simply adding them up. With his unusual observations and behavior, the boy demonstrates a deeper awareness of the implications of quantification than his teacher.

Several stories thus suggest that counting, measuring and quantifying are not as neutral and innocuous as they initially appear. All the more reason to take a closer look at what exactly happens when we try to capture something in a number.

A "complete" picture of each child

To measure something, you need to quantify. When a meal in a restaurant is no longer "spicy," "flavorful" or "original," but simply "four stars out of five," quantification has taken place. This makes a complex reality immediately understandable in a form we all recognize. Another implication is that you can suddenly compare previously incomparable things by comparing their scores. The more stars, the better. It is as if this gives you a better grip on reality.

Numbers seem to have something magical about them — for example, we are quickly impressed when someone can quote statistics about one thing or another. It suggests that they are well informed about what is going on. Using statistics to convince someone is a common rhetorical trick for good reason. You don't see an election debate anymore without numbers and statistics being used to support various