

Book Review: The Seductions of Quantification: Measuring Human Rights, Gender Violence, and Sex Trafficking by Sally Engle Merry

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Merry, Sally Engle. *The Seductions of Quantification: Measuring Human Rights, Gender Violence, and Sex Trafficking* (Chicago Series in Law and Society). University of Chicago Press, 2016. 272 pages. Paperback, \$25.00.

Sally Engle Merry, an anthropologist who studies law and governance, turns the critical perspective of her discipline on the process of quantification in the realms of knowledge generation. She delves behind the belief that numbers are objective measurements of truth, outside the realm of human bias. Using the genealogical method which was first employed by anthropologists to understand kinship and ego-based networks, Merry explores the microprocesses that go into the creation of indicators that supposedly measure commensurate phenomena as they are shaped by individual actors with their particular motivations and goals. The major argument of the book is that “those who create indicators aspire to measure the world but, in practice, create the world they are measuring” (p. 21). This “indicator culture” has important implications for governance, from local to global systems.

Using data collected over the span of years from meetings and interviews with U.N. members and U.S. and Indian officials, Merry offers an analysis of three different attempts to “measure the unmeasurable” in the form of the U.N.’s measurement of violence against women, the United States’ annual *Trafficking in Persons (TIP)* report, and the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights development of indicators of human rights. Each of these measurements stem from a theoretical perspective that contains within it the assumed solution to the problem being measured. For example, the measurement of violence against women was driven in part by statisticians who desired discreet, commensurable categories that resulted in a focus on interpersonal, dyadic violence in the form of individual perpetrators’ specific acts. This flattens the cultural and historical context of the violence and ignores the systemic violence that women suffer. The expected remedy for violence is based in a criminal justice model with state protection of women and prosecution of abusers. However, by diving deeply into the process, Merry is also able to depict how, in this case, the theoretical and practical aspects of these indicators were contested. These theoretical perspectives are influenced by who is instrumental in creating the indicators. Merry draws attention to the fact that experts in enumeration often come from the Global North, especially from colonist countries that developed statistics to manage the populations of their colonies. Often the countries or peoples being measured have little say in the development of indicators. The author contrasts the more-or-less collaborative approaches of the U.N. to the unilateral approach of the United States *TIP*. Here, we can see the outmoded influence a powerful (and wealthy) country can have on other countries’ policies. The inclusion of a detailed reaction of the Indian government’s response to the U.S.’s ranking and assessment of their efforts to combat trafficking illustrates the tension that exists between the measurers and the measured.

In an era of big data, we are becoming accustomed to the idea that everything can be counted, and in those counts are meaningful revelations about the human condition. Merry challenges the assumption of objective numbers by focusing on how individuals shape the process of counting and highlight or neglect cultural contexts in the process of creating boxes

that can be checked, regardless of location or context. This is the strength of the book, overall. We have become used to the idea of indicators as a way of holding governments accountable. Are these countries doing well or poorly in respecting human rights? Are governments improving in their response to human trafficking? The author does not neglect the power of indicators to draw attention to important issues but cautions that without good qualitative data informing the creation of indicators, what is measured may have little relationship to conditions in the real world. This is particularly evident in her analysis of the measurement of human trafficking, a bracing reminder that a drug trafficking model cannot be grafted *in toto* onto a complex system of human actors with agency situated in particular places and times. The one aspect of the book I found confounding was the reliance on acronyms. It seems a small thing, but when important distinctions are being made between the UNSC and the UNSD, not to mention the UNECE and UNECLAC, as bodies with important and disparate influence on indicator creation, it becomes easy to lose the thread of which groups hold what positions. This could have easily been addressed by including an acronym appendix (although in the index, organizations are listed by both their full names and acronyms).

On the whole, I highly recommend this book to any researcher or student considering going into research, given the pervasive nature of indicator culture. It may cause quantitative researchers to question the nature and length of interpretative chains that occurred before they received the data they use or to more fully examine the processes that inform the creation of measurements. Qualitative researchers will benefit from both an exploration of the ways their work may be used to examine the supposedly ahistorical and objective enumeration of the human condition and the recommendations for how both camps (quantitative and qualitative) can work together to create effective knowledge generation that informs governance in ways that may not be as pretty as a color-coded map but are less messy than non-generalizable ethnographies.

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