

The Seduction of Quantification: Measuring Human Rights, Gender Violence, and Sex Trafficking by Sally Engle Merry, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2016, 249 pp.

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Indicators are individual credit-scoring variables that provide specific measurements, used to both define and operationalise concepts. They have permeated most disciplines from economics and political science. Two specific strands from this literature are particularly important for what follows here. First, the theoretical thinking on indicators has shifted over the last five decades, away from traditional and positivist perspectives of the world to the wider scientific framing of post-positivist thinking, which understands any reality as socially and politically constructed. Following from this, definitions and measurements of reality cannot be purely objective but, unavoidably, ‘constructed’ or co-produced by those involved and so, shaped by power dynamics. Hence, indicators are likely to serve a certain scope; they are conflictual and can be ‘manipulated’ and ‘manipulative’ (Turcu, 2013). Second, two methodological paradigms dominate the development of indicators. Expert-led processes, also called top-down or government approaches, are based on formal hierarchies and tend to be quantitative and monitor change on an aggregate level. In contrast, citizen-led processes, also known as bottom-up or governance models, are based on the blurred relationship between private and public, and tend to measure issues that are qualitative and contextual, on a more desegregated level (Turcu, 2013, Turcu, 2017b).

‘The Seduction of Quantification’ by Sally Engle Merry makes important contributions to these two bodies of literature. By looking at the social and political life of indicators, the book is firmly situated within the post-positivist school of thought; and explores expert-led or top-down models of indicator development. This, Merry’s latest book, is situated at the interface between indicator, governance, law, gender and human rights studies and so, relevant to audiences from these fields.

The book’s central argument is that theoretical framings and templates by which indicators are organised have a ‘powerful if implicit role in structuring knowledge.’ Indicators are a reflection of social and political contexts and thus, shaped by power dynamics within those particular contexts. They are ‘constructs’, which ‘rather than revealing the truth, create it’ over time. Indicators are powerful and seductive technologies of knowledge and governance. These claims are unpacked over eight chapters.

Chapter 1 and 2 frame the book theoretically and methodologically. Merry builds on the assumption that any form of knowledge is embedded within existing frameworks of power. She draws on Foucault’s work on the relationship between power and knowledge (Foucault, 2012), and Latour’s ideas on the social production of scientific knowledge and ‘black boxing’ (Latour, 1987) – indicators can be conceptualised as ‘black boxes’ that contain invisible social processes of production, difficult to contest and so, gradually accepted. The book uses the genealogical method and looks at indicator development from a longitudinal perspective, over a number of decades and drawing on evidence from three composite indicators on violence against women, human trafficking and human rights violation.

Chapter 3 and 4 explore four parallel approaches to measure violence against women and compares them in terms of theoretical framing, problem definition, type of institutional support and expertise involved. Two of these indicators (UNSC and 'criminal justice') use a narrow definition, are driven by data availability and are backed-up by strong institutions, while the other two ('UNSC feminist' and 'human rights') employ a wider approach and are driven by gender inequality and human rights framings and institutions. The author finds that none of the four approaches is comprehensive, they all find different things and seek different solutions to end violence against women.

Chapter 5 and 6 look at two types of human trafficking indicators: one is statistically-driven and underpinned by a criminal justice framing (TPI Reports); two others are ethnographically-led and underpinned by slavery and human rights framings. The TPI Reports indicator uses tier ranking and has been measured by the US in order to inform its aid policy. Despite being criticised for including 'horse-trading' in the ranking and over-interpretation of data, the author argues that this indicator has been successful in 'mapping' issues and raising awareness, and led to policy changes in some countries.

Chapter 7 discusses the book's last composite indicator: OHCHR's human rights indicator. This indicator is perhaps the broadest conceptually and involved most international collaboration, out of the three. It draws on social change theory from development planning and consists of a large number of indicators. The author argues that despite its breadth and cross-disciplinary framing, the indicator is less effective than the other two indicators. Its 'success' has been undermined by a fragmented approach and unclear theoretical framing; and its presentation which lacks simplicity and public appeal.

Chapter 8 delivers the book's conclusions. Indicators are carriers of knowledge and governance and by looking at their life and politics one can learn *how* and *for whom* they produce knowledge and govern. The author argues that 'successful' indicators are backed-up by strong institutional and financial support; have a coherent theoretical narrative; and focus on issues which are narrower than the wider structural forces of poverty and inequality. Making better indicators means involving more public discussion and debate; avoiding the over interpretation of data; and being transparent about limitations. The book ends on a cautionary note about the 'rise of indicator culture', driven by a modern desire for governance and accountability through systems of performance, monitoring and evaluation: this is 'seductive' and makes things visible and accounted for, but one needs to be aware about its partiality.

This book presents compelling evidence about the life and politics of indicators. However, there are at least three areas that I would like to see further discussed and the author is well aware of them. First, some countries and organisations seem to resist the 'power of indicators.' Why and how is that happening? Second, the book focusses on formal institutions' role on shaping indicators but throughout references are made to informal institutions such as norms and behaviours. This is certainly important. My research looking at the interaction between formal and informal institutions finds that tensions can result from this interaction which in turn can affect power dynamics and so, policy outcomes (Turcu, 2016). Would this explain some of the 'resistance' to indicators? Third, the 'aesthetics of indicators' are important in communicating knowledge. To a certain extent, indicators become artefacts through the process of 'visualisation.' What are the interactions between institutions and artefacts and to what extent this influences the life and politics of indicators?

Finally, the author makes an important claim about the power of indicators to govern and so, 'control' certain groups or areas within our society. Indicators draw on previous models, which are predominantly developed in Western countries and so, perspectives from other countries are little

represented. This leads to a subsequent mismatch between how measures are understood at the macro or global-international level and applied at the micro or local-national level (Turcu, 2012, Turcu, 2013, Turcu, 2017a), and raises another important question. Who are the 'winners' and 'losers' of this 'culture of indicators'? The emerging literature on Big Data offers some interesting starting points on this.

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