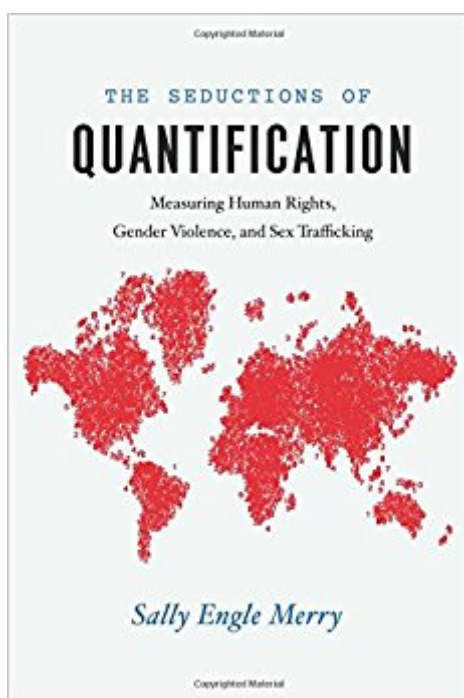


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The Seductions Of Quantification: Measuring Human Rights, Gender Violence, And Sex Trafficking (Chicago Series In Law And Society)



Synopsis

We live in a world where seemingly everything can be measured. We rely on indicators to translate social phenomena into simple, quantified terms, which in turn can be used to guide individuals, organizations, and governments in establishing policy. Yet counting things requires finding a way to make them comparable. And in the process of translating the confusion of social life into neat categories, we inevitably strip it of context and meaning—and risk hiding or distorting as much as we reveal. With *The Seductions of Quantification*, leading legal anthropologist Sally Engle Merry investigates the techniques by which information is gathered and analyzed in the production of global indicators on human rights, gender violence, and sex trafficking. Although such numbers convey an aura of objective truth and scientific validity, Merry argues persuasively that measurement systems constitute a form of power by incorporating theories about social change in their design but rarely explicitly acknowledging them. For instance, the US State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report, which ranks countries in terms of their compliance with antitrafficking activities, assumes that prosecuting traffickers as criminals is an effective corrective strategy—overlooking cultures where women and children are frequently sold by their own families. As Merry shows, indicators are indeed seductive in their promise of providing concrete knowledge about how the world works, but they are implemented most successfully when paired with context-rich qualitative accounts grounded in local knowledge.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

“The Seductions of Quantification is a perfect example of simple yet powerful skepticism. Merry establishes a coherent framework for studying the problem of indicators and applies that framework in a comparative ethnographic study of three important indicator-building projects. This is an excellent book, a persuasive analysis of an important topic that will be new to many readers.” (John M. Conley, University of North Carolina School of Law) “Merry is one of the most distinguished sociolegal scholars of her generation, and *The Seductions of Quantification* is an important book. It advances a strong and compelling argument that the quantitative indicators developed to document relative performance related to human rights around the world are seductive as forms of knowledge, yet they actually construct partial and problematic representations about the world. Merry’s critical lens calls attention to the political process and power dimensions that generate these constructions but remain hidden as they become deployed as truth about what is real. This is a major achievement.” (Michael McCann, University of Washington) “An exceptionally thought-provoking study of the role of statistics and indicators in our contemporary world, a world dominated by a myth of objectivity that holds the truth about most things to lie in numbers, a world that fetishizes figures, attributing to them the capacity to yield real facts about anything and everything that, well, counts—both the pun and the tautology are intended. By showing how those statistics are actually produced, Merry deconstructs the invisible power relations, the unspoken assumptions, the unseen tentacles of governance concealed in the most innocent of quantifacts—quantifacts that, by their very nature, simplify, reduce, and distort the phenomena they are meant to take account of. This is a very important book.” (John Comaroff, Harvard University)

Sally Engle Merry is the Silver Professor in the Department of Anthropology at New York University and the faculty codirector of the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice at the New York University School of Law. She is the author of five books, including *Human Rights and Gender Violence*, also published by the University of Chicago Press.

As a data scientist, I find this book fascinating. Nothing intrigues me more than the ability to learn from and formulate actions/policies from data about poor countries. However, something we sometimes forget, by choice or by accident, is that any analysis done with incorrect data is inherently incorrect. And any conclusions/actions may not have the intended consequences. A great intersection between the world of measurement and analysis.

Excellent research, thoughtful, important new look at old ideas. ...the excellence we always get from Sally Merry.

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