

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 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.

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 numbers convey an aura of objective truth and scientific validity, Merry argues that such measurement systems constitute a form of power, incorporating theories about social change in their design but rarely explicitly acknowledging them. 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.

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