

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Espeland, Wendy Nelson and Michael Sauder. *Engines of Anxiety: Academic Rankings, Reputation, and Accountability*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2016. \$35.00, paper (978-0-87154-427-8)

Measures are useful. They allow us to represent the world and intervene in it. We often believe measures to be objective representations that inform us of a reality, but seldom do we consider how these measures also make the very phenomena to which they refer. Espeland and Sauder's *Engines of Anxiety* examines this fact. In their 14-year study of law school rankings in the United States, they expertly describe how measures enter the day-to-day lives of students, parents, academics, and administrators showing how these have important consequences. Rankings are engines that drive change across law as a profession and educational realm rather than a mere image of law schools that outsiders can use to increase their understanding. The authors demonstrate well Marilyn Strathern's (1995) maxim that, "measures cease to be good once they become targets" (p.4).

Espeland and Sauder advance several unique empirical and theoretical contributions that derive from patient and detailed study. Their research is the first of its kind in that it was conducted over many years with a specific focus on change in the legal field due to rankings. They demonstrate how rankings promote a single definition of what counts as a good school, thereby rewarding those who fit well with that system of counting and punishing those who do not. They describe three particular types of transformations: power relations within and between schools; day-to-day practices within particular organizations; and the ways in which opportunities are distributed. They build a powerful case on a wealth of evidence collected from 200 interviews with deans, professors, career service and admissions staff as well as other stakeholders in the legal field, analysis of media, online message boards, law school statistics and documentation. Such comprehensive examination allows them to make rankings and their measures transparent. This makes their study a case in point for one of their primary arguments: measures often make organizations and individuals opaque. It is only through examining their production and consequences that we can know the reality of what the measures represent and the effects they have. Investigating how people

make sense of, give meaning to, and work with these measures allows the authors to develop theoretical contributions regarding how measures make up social worlds.

First, Espeland and Sauder argue the mechanism by which rankings have their effects is *reactivity*, the notion that rankings do not merely reflect an underlying true hierarchy, but create that hierarchy by changing how people think and act in regard to law schools and legal education. They posit that reactivity is a characteristic of all social measures and this is the cause of unintended consequences in diverse domains where they are deployed. Second, they advance the concept of *selective accountability* as the type of accountability that public measures create. Measures hold people and organizations accountable for some dimensions while further obscuring other important characteristics. Such biases have salience because they reduce complex realities into simple interpretations and are given significant cultural authority. Their third broad theoretical contribution is in regard to the morals that come to be contained in measures and the ethical dilemmas that these can create for the people who are tasked with managing them. Because measures are based on assumptions of what is worthy of counting they hold those assumptions within them and impose their judgments as to what is a good school, a bad student, or productive employee upon those to which they refer. In doing so they also change perceptions of what an education is for, how people are classified and evaluated, thereby eroding professional authority and judgment. Finally, they also contribute to organization studies by demonstrating how organizational change can happen as measures come to have effects on behavior, policies and strategies. Measures can limit symbolic responses to protect core organizational practices and values by facilitating outside scrutiny and shifting authority to observers. Organizational actors may also begin to internalize the identities that measures impose, making rankings simultaneously coercive and seductive.

Engines of Anxiety proceeds with an introductory chapter that articulates the authors' primary contributions and gives an overview of the book. Chapter Two reviews research and theory across the social sciences on accountability, transparency and reactivity demonstrating how measures do not merely reflect a reality they are designed to report on, but also intervene in and create that reality. The remaining chapters focus on the perceptions and work of actors within the field of legal education and practice.

Chapter Three engages with law school forums and student interviews to demonstrate why rankings have such broad appeal—they simplify complicated decisions. Because they are useful for students and law schools are dependent on students to attend their programs it is difficult

for schools to resist rankings. Chapter Four shifts focus to admissions officers who are tasked with identifying suitable students for their programs, but are also responsible for ensuring that the selectivity measures used by the rankings are such that the school will rank well. This leads them to betray personal and professional values, but makes their careers precarious since the measures are often beyond their control. Rankings also change deans' relationships with peers, employers, and alumni. Such transformations are the topic of Chapter Five which is particularly illustrative of how rankings shift power relations and weaken professional autonomy. Deans are accomplished individuals with significant influence and authority yet find themselves powerless to escape the effects that rankings have on their jobs and their professional field. The final constituency whose work Espeland and Sauder describe are career services personnel. Career services have traditionally been designed to support students to develop job search skills and find good placements once they complete their degrees. Chapter Six illustrates how these jobs have become more focused on tracking students over time so that schools can have better data to report to rankings regarding student job placements. The chapter also discusses how rankings have changed employer's hiring practices.

In the seventh and final chapter, Espeland and Sauder demonstrate the relevance of their findings in other domains such as health care and policing. For example, in the 1990s the New York City police adopted Compstat, a crime measurement and accountability system used to strategically deploy police officers and hold district chiefs responsible for crime statistics. Two dubious practices (of many) these measures have encouraged are for police to intimidate victims so that they do not report crime or to re-categorize crimes as lesser offenses. Where measures refer to people and have consequences for them the values, morals, or ethics of individuals and organizations that the measures were created to support become lost in a concern to be well-counted. Accountability becomes confused with accountancy. Measures may be useful, but their consequences have considerable moral and ethical implications. Espeland and Sauder want their readers to consider whether mere utility is worth the price that measures can impose.

Engines of Anxiety is an outstanding contribution to cultural, organization, education, surveillance, quantification, valuation, and critical accounting studies. It is also accessible and engaging. Students, parents and scholars who are curious about rankings and higher education must read this book. It will also be a useful resource for people involved in any organization that imposes or is subject to accountability measures to consider the potential consequences of their work.

REFERENCES

Strathern, Marilyn. 1995. *Shifting contexts transformations in anthropological knowledge*. London, UK: Routledge.

University of Alberta

Gary RS Barron

Gary Barron is a doctoral candidate whose dissertation examines performance metrics, rankings, and governance in universities as a window into understanding information infrastructure, competing rationalities, culture, and organizational practices. He has broader interests in the politics and organization of knowledge, science and technology studies, health and illness, social theory, and research methods.

grbarron@ualberta.ca