



# *Business Ethics and Quantification: Towards an ethics of numbers.*

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# *What is Quantification*

- “the production and communication of numbers” (Espeland and Stevens 2008, p. 401).
- Involves rendering experiential or social phenomena as numbers
- Involving aspects of measurement/reporting, « audit culture », ranking and evaluation, mathematical/statistical analysis
- Distinct from but related to datification



# Why is Quantification Important?

Increasing importance of quantitative description/evaluation: Higher Education, Social/environmental activities/reporting, professional activity, psychosocial experience, leisure activity

- Prevalence of algorithmic systems, big data and AI narratives, “surveillance capitalism”
- Emergence of new forms of markets and valuation
- Provenance of social and environmental goals through standards, reporting, ranking
- Increased self-understanding through numerization of the self in terms of quantifiable traits and activities

*All of these phenomena raise issues around the role of numbers in generating knowledge, driving behavior, and establishing new social forms*





# Quantification as Capture

- Capture involves a moment in which social experience is transformed into numerical values
- Quantification as “extraction” (Sadowski, 2019), “life mining” (van Dijk, 2014), “communicative capitalism” (Dean, 2006)
- Ethically, capture presumes a pre-existing lifeworld of social experience, which may or not be the case (e.g., happiness versus GDP).
- Qualitative versus quantitative capture (i.e., naming versus measuring)

*The ethical stakes of quantitative capture involve the question of when actors are/are not justified in bringing social experience into numerical form.*



# Quantification as Specification

- Specification involves HOW capture results in specific numeric objects, “transforming different qualities into a common metric” (Espeland & Stevens, 1998)
- The question of inclusion/exclusion both at conceptual level (e.g., what counts as a concept) and political level (e.g., who counts as a member)
- Examples: Education metrics at UNESCO- attainment/cost vs access/expenditure (Cusso, 2016), estates versus social classes (Desrosieres, 1993), faculty/staff salaries in rankings (Espeland & Stevens, 1998).

*The ethical stakes of specification involve the inclusion/exclusion of elements with the spaces created by metrics. These spaces are both conceptual and political, and determine who or what “counts”.*



# Quantification as Appropriation

- Appropriation has to do with what happens to number *after* their creation, who controls them, profits from them, is able to access/use them
- From properties in the epistemic sense to “property” in the economic sense
- Data production versus data control/ownership. Quantification as “primitive accumulation” (e.g., social media, IoT, surveillance data, health data). Numbers as capital.

*The ethical stakes of appropriation involves questions of data justice and distribution as well as the consequences of large accumulations of de-contextualized data.*



# *Conclusion: Doing Numbers Ethically*

- Reflecting on the relation between metrics and lived experiences
- Paying attention to who is included/excluded when a metric is made
- Paying attention to who designs, collects, and own quantified metrics
- Distinguishing between using number as ways of knowing, and forms of governing:

“when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be useful as a measure.”

Greenfield, 2015, p. 205

