

# Why Rankings Appear Natural (But Aren't)

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## Abstract

Rankings have dramatically proliferated over the past several decades. An often-overlooked impact of this proliferation is that it has facilitated the institutionalization of an imaginary of the modern world as a stratified order, whose actors are imagined as continuously striving to perform better than others. To better understand this impact, we need to take a closer look at rankings' premises and the way these resonate with the broader institutional environment of which rankings are a part.

## Keywords

impact, institutionalization, rankings

In January 2021, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, an Australian think tank by the name of Lowy Institute (n.d.) published its Covid Performance Index. The index ranked 98 countries on how they responded to the pandemic in the 36 weeks after recording their 100th confirmed case. Its release was widely reported: “New Zealand, Vietnam top COVID performance ranking; U.S., UK languish” (*Reuters*), “Revealed: USA ranked as having 5th worst coronavirus pandemic response in the world” (*The Irish Post*). The style of reporting was typical for the media coverage of various indices, which often resorts to the vocabulary normally found in the sports commentary: top performers, best and worst, winners and losers, leaders

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and laggards, and their respective performances, compared and ranked (Brankovic, 2021).

Among the usual sensationalism and spectacle-making accompanying this type of news, the index itself has been largely *taken for granted*, not only by the media but also by politicians, experts, and general public. With “taken for granted,” I do not mean in the sense that few questioned whether New Zealand or Vietnam deserved their respective high ranks, or whether the methodology Lowy Institute used was sound. Rather, taken for granted in the sense that even in the circumstances of a raging pandemic, seeing countries pitted against each other over “pandemic management” did not seem strange to anyone.

This seemingly trivial example, however, points to a deeper condition. Be it development, happiness, corporate social responsibility, excellence, or freedom of the press, it is nowadays perfectly normal to think of and talk about countries, organizations, and individuals, in terms of “precise” performance hierarchies—which instill a sense of worth and encourage aspirations to “rise.” Out of this condition, a cultural imperative emerges: to perform *better than others*.

## Enter Rankings

On mentioning rankings, most people in academia think about university, school, college, department, or journal rankings. Although these are likely the most studied of all, academic establishments are far from the only ones whose performances are routinely subjected to the rank-ordered type of comparison. As the title of a forthcoming volume suggests, modern society encompasses *Worlds of Rankings* (Ringel et al., 2021). The Covid Performance Index is only a recent example among hundreds of nation-state rankings, many of which have been published repeatedly over the years and with much success, if we consider the attention they attract. Many of them are well known to government officials, civil society organizations, investors, customers, or experts. Rankings of companies, cities, restaurants, and artists, to name a few notable examples, lag in neither number nor variety.

The dramatic proliferation of all kinds of rankings over the past several decades has further helped institutionalize the imaginary of the modern world as a stratified order, whose actors are imagined as *continuously striving* to overtake those they are compared with. In this imaginary, we are constructed as competitors in the purest sense (Werron, 2015). What we all compete for is the favor of those who produce rankings and their audiences—the favor which is, as a rule, scarce and therefore never equally distributed: In a ranking, there can only be one best, one second-best, and so on. What follows from this is that, in principle and in practice, no matter how well everyone

performs in absolute terms, there will always be the same number of positions available from one ranking cycle to the next. It is precisely the zero-sum aspect that separates rankings from ratings, standards, benchmarks, and other methods of evaluation and comparison.

In reality, things may be—as they invariably are—different: Reputation, or worth in the broadest sense, of one actor does not normally come at the expense of everyone else. However, the allure of the alternate reality suggested by rankings can sometimes cut so deep into the social fabric that it becomes almost impossible to ignore it or even see beyond it. It is probably for this reason that much of the discussion on the subject revolves around how particular rankings are made, their implicit biases, methodologies, and effects. The very exercise of ranking and the assumptions thereof are, meanwhile, rarely made an object of interest—even by scholars studying them.

Why is this so? As usually it is the case with widely diffused and “naturalized” cultural artifacts, rankings resonate with the broader cultural and institutional environment. This is an important piece in the larger puzzle of understanding their legitimacy amid much of the controversy surrounding them. The logic of social action embedded in rankings is, after all, of a highly rationalized kind and thus perfectly in tune with some of the best-known “rationalized myths” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) such as progress and development, but also more specific ones, like strategic management, performance indicators, transparency, and social responsibility. Rankings also speak directly to the modern faith in competition—itself often seen as a beneficial thing. That rankings are resonant with the well-entrenched meritocratic ideal of self-making should neither be undermined.

## **The Impact: (How) Do Rankings Matter?**

To understand the impact of rankings, some specification is necessary. First, we need to analytically distinguish between (a) a particular ranking and (b) the vertically stratified order as a legitimate social imaginary. By way of example, the former would refer to how “The World’s 50 Best Restaurants” affects the restaurant business around the world. The latter, meanwhile, would refer to the general belief that a strict hierarchy of the world’s restaurants is possible, or even “naturally” occurring, and that such hierarchy could exist independently of whether we observe it or how we observe it, be it through a ranking, reviews, or a narrative travel guide. Obviously, the two are recursively related: The latter makes the former possible, legitimate, and even desirable, whereas the former reinforces the latter.

Considering the impact of specific rankings, the empirical landscape varies. The aforementioned Covid Performance Index will likely be history once

the pandemic is over. Sooner, hopefully, rather than later. Others, such as the Corruption Perception Index by Transparency International or the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Human Development Index, have been around for decades and their role in world affairs to date could hardly be characterized as negligible. The depth of the "allure of rankings" (Sauder & Espeland, 2009) has been especially far-reaching in higher education, where the impact of rankings on policies, strategies, and decisions—in virtually all corners of the world—has been most thoroughly documented.

However, what all modern rankings have in common, regardless of the domain, is that they promote a model of society made up of actors who continuously strive to improve. The possibility to improve one's performances is integral to modern rankings. The fact that the most influential of rankings are published repeatedly is intimately related to this (Werron & Ringel, 2017). And so is the belief that performances can be measured, with remarkable precision even. The quantification aspect is important because it bestows an aura of objectivity and a kind of quasi-scientific legitimacy upon rankings. In discourses on reputation, therefore, rankings emerge as a "rational" construct that has a tendency to replace other ways of evidencing (read: constructing) the "worth," but also performance and improvement, of individual actors.

The second specification necessary when considering the impact of rankings on society is the distinction between (a) a short-term and (b) a long-term perspective. Historically speaking, quite a few rankings had been published only once and, more often than not, these were quickly forgotten. Others, meanwhile, have persisted over a longer period and this usually means they somehow matter in their respective domains. Take the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) ranking of countries: so profound has its effect been that some countries have organized educational reforms around its triennial assessment cycle (Landahl, 2020).

The long-term perspective also pushes us to look beyond specific rankings and examine the historical trajectories of the phenomenon itself. One important development we can observe is that the more rankings proliferate, the more we are accustomed to their way of organizing social reality in an ever-increasing number of domains, and thus less likely to question the assumptions undergirding them. In many ways, the story of rankings can be understood as a story of historical institutionalization.

## **Challenging the Mundanity**

Although some rankings may enjoy the reputation of being the controversial "engines of anxiety" (Espeland & Sauder, 2016), we tend to overlook another

dramatic aspect of rankings, sociologically speaking: their mundanity. That moment when a new ranking is published and we immediately have an opinion on whether Finland *really* is the happiest country in the world or whether the Cisco Systems *really* deserved its top position in the Gartner Supply Chain Top 25 for 2020. Or, whether New Zealand *really* handled the pandemic better than everyone else.

So, instead of jumping immediately to that opinion, we could pause to ask, “What does it mean, at the bottom of it, to use a *ranking* as a way to frame the conversation on pandemic response, on happiness, or on supply chain management? What is gained and what is lost in doing so? What is the impact of such a framing?” In the short run, but perhaps even more importantly, also in the long run.

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