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UNDERSTANDING AND MEASUREMENT: THE CASE OF SEGREGATION INDICES



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When scientists develop new ways of measuring a phenomenon, they frequently improve their understanding of that phenomenon. Despite this, little philosophical attention has been devoted to the intersection of understanding and the epistemology of measurement. In this paper, I argue that even the theories of understanding that (initially) appear among the least likely to afford insights into measurement—namely those that claim understanding requires explanation—illuminate how new measurement techniques improve understanding. Using the refinement of segregation indices in the late 1980s, I suggest four ways that measurement improves explanatory understanding. I conclude with further suggestions as to how the philosophical literatures on understanding and measurement might mutually benefit each other.

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