Can we use emotions as an indicator for public decision-making?

Linnéa Sandström, an MSc student at LSE's gender institute, discusses the emotional and the rational in public decision-making and asks if there is any room for emotions in public decision-making.

Recently, Lord Professor Layard and Lord Professor Skidelsky engaged in a public debate at the LSE over whether happiness was a good measure for social progress and, as such, should we use it as a basis for planning social policy? The debate was highly interesting and it got me thinking about gender, as everything does nowadays.

While Lord Professor Layard argues from a utilitarian perspective that we ought to maximize happiness in society because it is an intrinsic good, there is also a gendered dimension to the current debates on how public decision-making should be conducted – and it is all tied to reason and rationality.

It seems to be generally agreed that in order for anyone to engage in public decision-making, they have to have the capacity for reasoning and rationality. Rousseau talked about faculties of reason (or in the case with women, he argued, the lack thereof), and Mill about the need for education and information in order to ensure a good, democratic society. The political theory tradition is heavy on the importance of exercising your reason, or being rational. Even if such philosophers thought of women as capable of rationality (as in the case of Mill and Wollstonecraft), women have historically been assumed to be at a disadvantage in the field of rationality in the form of their emotions.

Emotions are gendered. Women are seen as being more emotional than men, and this is seen as a negative thing. Often emotions are juxtaposed with rationality, as if the two were antonyms. The dichotomy between emotions and rationality has helped ensure that emotions stay in the private, because if it is the opposite to rationality, it does not belong in the public. As the opposite to rationality, emotions must (logically, no?) hinder rational public decision-making. But does there have to be a juxtaposition?

Measurements such as GDP are useful for indicating the general well-being of a country, but they are not flawless. The overall economic prosperity of a country does not mean that the people of the country are well. GDP does not take into account income gaps, equality gaps and overall health. Happiness is not a flawless measurement for a country's well-being either, because of the definitional difficulties in deciding what is happiness, and also because of the difficulties measuring it, as Lord Professor Skidelsky pointed out. But is there really no room for emotions as an indicator of how social policy can be decided?

Emotions are primal indicators of what we perceive as wrong and right. They are part of our moral compass, and they are impossible to avoid. Contrary to what seems to be the assumption, they do not make our reasoning capacities weaker but can instead add to them. The bad feelings that result from leaving a relative who needs care to her own destiny can lead to us ensuring they get the care they need. These emotions can lead us to campaign for better services provided by the state, greater compassion from healthcare professionals, or the right to dignity in care homes. They can help guide and change social policies, and they have. With women entering the paid labour force, the care traditionally provided by them needed to be provided by someone else. Children needed kindergartens, elderly relatives needed facilities where they could be cared for, and education hours needed to be extended to facilitate women's work. Leaving people to care for themselves when they cannot is morally wrong, and with the free care provided by women being taken away, alternatives needed to be found.

Emotions have long dictated our public decision-making. There is no separation of emotions and public decision-making. Emotions dictate our values, and our values dictate how we legislate; conservatives constantly talk about family values. We can rationalize emotions in order to justify why we make the decisions we make, but this would mean that emotions cannot be the antonym to rationality and that the dichotomy is false. The emotional is no longer private, it is public, and it always has been.

What needs to be done is to stop shrinking away from the emotional as something that inevitably will weaken our capacity for reasoning and instead embrace it. If sympathy and empathy can lead to a progress towards a more equal society, perhaps it should be listened to. Asking people how they feel about certain things may lead to policies being constructed according to the people's needs and not according to a theory detached from those whom it will affect the most.

The association of emotions as something undesirable in the public decision-making process needs to be changed. If the status of emotions (which are associated with the female) in the public decision-making processes changes, perhaps the appreciation of women as public decision-makers will also change? There will be less of an inclination to see women as fickle, unruly and guided by emotions and therefore less capable of good public decision-making.

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