

A Campaign for Emotional Literacy

James Park

We live in a world where governments tend to measure their success in terms of economic statistics. Can they deliver steady growth? Where are the inflation figures heading? What is happening to unemployment?

This is despite the fact that the overt purpose behind many policies is to deliver emotional wellbeing or to alleviate social problems. The current Welfare to Work scheme, for example, is designed to remedy the negative effects of unemployment upon self-esteem and the capacity of individuals to experience a sense of connection to the wider community. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of the policy is still likely to be measured in terms of its impact on reducing welfare payments and closing Job Centres.

Crazy as it seems, the sheer quantity of economic data available and the way figures can be bandied about in debate give economics a disproportionate role in policymaking. It was clear, for example, from the confidence felt by many members of the Conservative regime that lower taxes would deliver the 'feelgood' factor, that they really believed the amount of money people had in their pockets was the key to

how good they felt about themselves.

Of course if you are living in poverty, the challenge of feeding and clothing your family can become an emotionally oppressive preoccupation. And it really is very nice to have money and to enjoy the freedoms that it offers. But being able to buy a smarter car or go on holiday to a more exotic location is not likely to make people feel good about themselves and the society in which they live, if the way money is distributed within that society fills them with shame, guilt and self-disgust.

The emotional and the economic are intertwined in ways that are hardly allowed for in current policy thinking. The reason, for example, why populations around the world seem to have rejected redistributive taxation policies (or at least persuaded governments that they have done so) probably has something to do with the anxieties stirred by economic cycles, by changes in the job market, by the vagaries of an increasingly globalised economy. The emotions we experience around money — how much of it we have, where it comes from, what we have to do to get it — drive our economic behaviour, shape policies and are, in turn, influenced

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by what happens on an economic level.

Although such ideas are easily absorbed, particularly by people who spend much of their lives thinking about the psyche, the arguments that arise from them are a long way from achieving parity with the positions put by those who pore over the data emerging from all the economic number-crunchers. As a result, the importance of what happens to people at an emotional level generally loses out to economic charts and tables.

Antidote was set up in early 1995, by psychotherapists Susie Orbach and Andrew Samuels among others, with the stated goal of ensuring that 'emotional consequences' would be taken into account when political and commercial decisions were made. It soon became clear that, in order to do this, we had to find a way of mapping the nation's economic emotions.

We started by developing a research tool that would measure the different ways in which people responded both to the direct impact that the economy has upon their lives, and to a general awareness of what was happening to the economy as a whole. We needed to get behind people's surface thoughts and feelings, to reach the inner conflicts that money provoked in them. In order to do this we gave the interviewees in our pilot programme the space in which to explore these feelings. It would not do to hand out questionnaires asking people to give their top-of-the-head thoughts about how inflation or the national debt impacted upon their inner worlds. Within a series of semi-structured interviews, we explored questions such as:

- What are the emotional factors that enable people to 'feel good' about the

economic system within which they live?

- Why do some people feel that earning a lot of money is essential to their sense of personal security, while others do not?
- What sort of economic arrangements could make it possible for people to enrich themselves emotionally through developing their sense of being connected to the wider community?
- How do people resolve in their own minds the conflict between their desire for tax reductions, and for more money to be spent on services?
- How have people's attitudes to their own incomes been affected by the publicity given to the large salaries paid out to some senior managers, and to the riches garnered by Lottery winners?
- How might the requirements of good economic management be reconciled with some form of democratic participation in the running of the economy?

We needed then to find a way of putting the flood of richly interesting ideas and narratives that emerged into a form that was manageable and meaningful. To do this, we asked a group of people to assess the interview data and to grade the answers that interviewees were implicitly answering by the way in which they spoke. To what extent had a particular interviewee been affected, either directly or emotionally, by high levels of unemployment? How had that impacted on their interest in saving, spending or whatever? In order to create an Index we had to turn the qualitative material we had gathered into quantitative form.

The next stage is for us to make the data usable for our project of mapping the emotional consequences of economic and

social change, together with the economic consequences that flow from these. We intend to do this in three stages, by:

- Establishing a package of economic variables to represent the elements in the economic situation that are most likely to have an impact on people's everyday lives, or on their perceptions of the economy. These will include such factors as income differentials, employment levels, company survival rates, base rates and tax rates.
- Monitoring how these changes in the economy affect the way people feel about themselves, and how their feelings impact upon both their social relationships and their economic activities. What has been the impact on their overall levels of anxiety or confidence, envy or contentment, security or insecurity? And how has this been reflected in their ability to collaborate, connect and express the benevolent aspects of their natures?
- Correlating these figures with data from other sources about the levels of social capital as represented by, on the positive side, indicators such as people's active involvement in community activities and, on the negative side, levels of crime, delinquency, vandalism, school exclusions and divorce. This will then suggest conclusions about economic costs for the justice system, the care system, the health system and for the economy in general.

Once it is fully up and running the Emotional and Social Index will provide valuable information about how the shifts triggered by particular economic policies

combine with the more general process of economic and social change so as to increase, or restrict, possibilities for emotional wellbeing and social cohesion. It will make a powerful argument for all those working to develop people's emotional and social skills, to give them the resources to meet the challenges of social and technological change in creative and resourceful ways. Alongside the Index, Antidote is developing its own programme of work with young people and creating a network of people and organisations working with the young on their emotional literacy — the Emotional Education Forum. This work led to our recently published report, *Realising the Potential: Emotional development and the school curriculum*.

The Index will also give those who make policy — whether for corporations, countries or international organisations — exciting new ways of understanding the emotional factors that underlie our responses to what is happening in the world around us. It will enable them to construct scenarios based on a much wider range of factors than are included in current models, and thereby to address what matters to people in their lives apart from simply the amount of cash in their pockets. It will become possible to see people's hunger for money in the context of their other needs — for self-esteem, relationships, community — and to consider how we might enhance our ability to find a balance between the personally acquisitive and the co-operative aspects of our natures. And we will be able also to explore the various ways in which the pursuit of economic growth can be balanced against measures to develop the nation's social fabric and emotional wellbeing.