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Respect and Dignity: essential guides to successful public sector innovation.

Séamus O Tuama
Senior Lecturer
Department of Government
University College Cork
Cork
Ireland
Email sotuama@ucc.ie
Tel +353 21 4903238

Introduction

Respect is an essential variable in appraising the success of public sector innovation. By contrast taking too instrumental an understanding of innovation pushes analysis in the direction of neo-liberalism. Neo-liberalism and innovation are distinct and are neither mutually exclusive nor mutually dependent.

To understand innovation, we need, borrowing a managerial phrase, to think outside the box. The box in this case is a neo-liberal new public management [NPM] one. Wayne Parsons is critical of anointing NPM as a creed, dependent on belief, with little tangible proof that it actually delivers salvation.

Frost and Egri (1991) separate innovation from binary definitions emerging from economics. The binary construct makes innovation easily measurable, projecting it onto a stable polar calibration, contrasting profit-loss and by consequence good-bad. Public policy is not just a question of binary equations. Both Marx and Bentham, from entirely different perspectives, realized that government is essentially about the good life. While Bentham adhered to Smith's vision of the market, he was able to distinguish between 'sinister interests' and the proper function of government to deliver the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Like Marx he agreed that life is about 'justice, freedom, harmony, beauty and self-fulfillment'. The terminology may have been different, but emerging from the quintessential liberal and the quintessential socialist is that economic activity is a 'means' and not an 'end'.

The greatest innovatory task in public policy is to define innovation in terms of real human values, not just in an ever-revising menu of services. It is about engaging citizens in a meaningful process by which they can play a role in both society and state. It is in reimagining the state and the citizen in the context of a changed and changing civil society. This is not about stripping citizens down to customers or consumers. Innovation needs to be measured not just in terms of a binary code of delivery or value for money, but also in the very old fashioned notions of Bentham and Marx. It is not just about questionnaires and quality reviews. It requires a deeper qualitative analysis and openness to spontaneous popular concern and genuine needs of citizens. A critical aspect of this is respect for individuals, even prior to their citizenship.

Respect and disrespect are not just labels, they are (often neglected and misrepresented), concepts and analytical tools for measuring public sector innovation. Honneth (1994) defined human disrespect as violations of notions of justice associated with feelings of dignity, honour, and integrity. Human identity depends on social recognition; its denial — disrespect — threatens the loss of personality. Being innovative in these terms is about value for humans. And efficiency while recognizing the imperatives of value for money needs to be utilitarian too about human happiness and respect.

This discussion revolves around a number of key issues, each of which needs to be illuminated in order to indicate their place in the debate and how they interact. What is at stake is a public service that delivers for citizens and a political system that is still potent and not merely a customer service department.

Respect and Recognition

I will briefly address three related themes arising in the work of Axel Honneth—recognition, respect and individualization—in order to flesh out some of the discussion points raised above. The first two terms, recognition and respect, will form the main trust of this section, where I will attempt to illustrate their importance vis-à-vis citizenship and rights. The topic of individualization I will link in with the subsequent discussion on framing citizens as customers.

I hold that all of these elements are closely tied in with the predominance of Neo-Liberalism as the ideology of our time. Innovation in public policy has very much been driven, measured and described within this ideological frame, what Fountain describes as

> '… government's fascination with measures and indicators at the expense of structural, design, and process improvements to administrative systems' (Fountain, 2001: 63).

We could add to this: 'at the expense' also of clear thinking policy options that do not undermine the terms of citizenship so hard won over the centuries.

Miller (2001) draws out the intrinsic centrality of respect and disrespect as they apply to public policy with reference to their impact on the individual. He points out that when individuals receive less resources than they anticipated their indignation is not so much addressed at receiving less as much as it is about a direct assault on their self-worth, their feelings of prestige and status.

> The fact that the perception of distributive fairness often has less to do with an outcome's exchange value than with its symbolic or status value (Miller, 2001: 530)

He also points out that '[T]he most commonly reported experiences of everyday injustice involve some form of disrespectful treatment' (530). The sorts of issues reported from the empirical research he cites has to do with mundane acts of disrespect. The point quite simply is that in terms of justice and rights the terrain of violation is often closer to our everyday lives than we either imagine or care to admit.

In terms of realms of injustice or disrespect Miller indicates three areas in which individuals feel they must be acknowledged. They are '*voice*'— that is the right to be allowed speak in ones own defence or to explain; '*interpersonal sensitivity*'—that is the right to 'polite and respectful treatment'; and '*accountability*'—that is the right to be given explanations and accounts for those actions or decisions that have personal impact on them (531). This too is an area explored by Seyla Benhabib (1998) around inter-personal power relations operating outside the scope of enforceable rights. We could count love, respect, or affirmation as instances of inter-personal regard capable of limiting the effectiveness of an individual to interact socially and materially both in the private and public domain. As such they impinge upon a set of rights unenumerated, largely unenforceable and currently outside the ambit of rights provisions in a liberal framework.

Not only does this open up important issues vis-à-vis the idea of citizen rights, but it also opens up very serious issues around the notion of customers. As Fountain points out making procedures less formal opens up possibilities too for inappropriate interactions of the nature discussed here.

> …greater discretion offered to empower public servants to provide higher quality service actually may lead to poorer service quality. More importantly, it may lead to de facto restriction of rights and services provided by law (Fountain, 2001: 63).

It seems very old fashioned now to bring Max Weber into the equation, but perhaps it is worth reflecting back on his ideas. He was sceptical of the possibility for rational justice under these kinds of conditions: '... every sort of intensive influence on the administration by so-called public opinion crosses the rational courses of justice and administration' Weber, 1991: 221). In terms of public sector innovation this presents serious challenges. We need to be sure that innovations are aimed at a better level of delivery and recognition rather than fulfilling some ideological imperative.

Mutual recognition is essential to participation in society. It is the essential building block of human society being at once the means by which we participate socially and develop our self-image. Through the process of mutual recognition we come to understand the nature of human interaction, we develop concepts around rights and responsibilities initially at the level of our everyday interaction with others. This needs to be understood at all levels, including the domestic, our day-to-day engagement with others from infancy, prior to any theoretical abstraction around such concepts or indeed their legal status. Honneth, who has been at the fore in clarifying the meaning of recognition and respect, outlines the key significance of recognition:

> … "recognition" serves to designate the mutual respect for both the particularity and the equality of all other persons (Honneth: 1997, 17)

He essentially works with the young Hegel's 'three modes of recognition—love, rights and solidarity' (Honneth, 2002: 501). Through this triumvirate we begin to see the levels at which recognition operates and how it underpins the very essence of human society. Although it receives scant attention in public policy theory, it is essential to how we can construct a society that has meaning for citizens.

Where does this lead us in the current discussion. I don't want to engage too deeply into the meaning of recognition, nor lead off into too dense an abstraction. It is however important that we appreciate the essential connection between recognition and how we shape society. Ultimately this goes to the very heart of what it is to be a citizen as well as what it is to be a human being. As Honneth points out, a person can only be called free 'in the full sense of the word' where she knows that she is recognized by others in a way that she can rationally reconcile with her own self-concept (Honneth, 2002: 509). In terms of policy this has profound importance, especially if we claim to value a society based on equality, democracy and rights. This latter point of course raises many other issues. I will leave them in abeyance for the purposes of this article and instead accept as given the almost universal recognition of such principles in national constitutions and international conventions like the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *European Convention on Human Rights*.

Honneth's discussion on social disrespect sheds important light on the meaning of rights and indicates a key component for individual recognition often neglected or misunderstood in discussions on rights. Very much like Miller, he says individuals encounter one another in contexts of normative expectations, which are repeatedly disappointed.

> People may not always be able to articulate what their entitlements are in any particular relationship, but they know when a sense of rightness has been violated (Miller, 2001: 532)

These issues have profound importance not just for how we relate to individuals, but to how we construct public policy. It has direct relevance for what we understand as a public good. It is central to how we approach public sector innovation, this should be obvious when discussing frontline personal services, but it is just as important at the level of macro public policy making.

Honneth draws on the empirical evidence of social protests by marginalized groups in society, he concludes they are driven not by positively formulated moral principles, but by violations of notions of justice associated with feelings of dignity, honour, and integrity. Both the individualistic (NPM) and the solidaristic (Welfare State) models are culpable in their neglect of those who are at the bottom of the pile – the very ones who depend most on public services. Because of feelings of powerlessness, vulnerability, lack of capacity to articulate pre-political issues, and in consumption terms lack of spending power they remain outside the loop. Perhaps the issue is one of slippage and double standards. Those with the capacity for self-maximization can be consumers or citizens as best fits their particular needs. In an honest appraisal of our public services and especially on those services on which those at the margins depend, we need to truthfully reflect on what we are achieving and in whose interests we are being innovative.

Customers and Citizens

While the rolling back of the state has been very much the agenda of the neo-liberals, the process of transforming citizens to customers has a longer lineage. What Honneth describes as '… the creeping metamorphosis of the whole society into a market'

(Honneth, 2004: 475). A consumer focus suited the original intention of reducing the onward march of collectivism (Hayek), and the mantra of ‘greed is good’ served to focus on individual choice making, however it also hastened the hollowing out of a central aspect of the liberalism—of a strong citizenry. It also indicates the dynamic nature of change and potential unintended consequences of innovation.

Fountain (2001) associates the emergence of a service management culture within the public sector to a wider transition in the economic activities of developed countries that saw a major shift towards services. In tandem with this shift in economic activity there emerged a service management body of theory and practice within the private sector. In turn these ideas and practices migrated into the public sector most notably through the emergence of New Public Management.

Taking a step further back Campbell makes the point that consumerism is driven by individuals: ‘devoting more and more of their energies to indulging in self-illusory hedonism’ (Campbell, 2004: 793). This he points out is not the result of ‘any rational decision-making process’, but owes its origins more to a reaction against rationalism within the Romantic movement. Honneth (2004) draws on Campbell’s theory that the roots of consumerism emerge from a Calvinist belief that ‘an uncommon state of emotional excitement was taken to be a sign of God’s goodness’ (Honneth, 2004: 469). Once this had been stripped of its religious connotations, the feel good element could be initiated by consumer goods. In western societies in the latter half of the 20th century the process of individualization was shaped by consumerism and a loosening of behavioural mores. Thus the process of individualization became tailorable in ways not previously possible. This allowed individuals ‘to regard life as though it were an affair of experimental self-realization’ (Honneth, 2004: 470) a process that can be shaped through consumption. In turn this fits with the neo-liberal drive towards the individual and away from the collective— towards customers (individualized consumers) and away from citizens (solidaristic political actors).

NPM acts as a mask, behind which the neo-liberal orientation is almost invisible. It resonates with the language of innovation lionizing efficiency, cost effectiveness, delivery of service, greater organizational flexibility, mission statements, customer charters, quality, and private sector managerial culture, philosophy and structure. These in turn promise public goods like: value for money–reduces the call on tax revenue; greater efficiency–saves money and delivers the service more quickly; transparency of service–democratization and equity of delivery; respect for customers–the sort of respect and service one might expect in a good store. This list could continue.

In these terms it is assumed everyone gains. Those entitled to the services get them in time, they are delivered within budget, the frontline deliverers feel positive about their roles, and governments can cut taxes and still deliver better services. The value of the NPM mask is that many of these assertions are verifiably true. The problem is that the cost is being borne by what were the staples of the welfare state like solidarity, democracy and a commitment to public service. The cost-benefit analysis is being placed

in very narrow economic confines to the detriment to the wider societal domain, it is a classical case of what Habermas classically described as the colonization of the lifeworld.

We cannot conflate the meaning of citizen and customer, to do so would undermine much of what has been achieved in western civil society over the centuries towards the evolution of citizenship. In shorthand a customer is a person who buys goods or services. On the other hand a citizen is a member of a political community, the membership of which carries both rights and responsibilities—and some notion of solidarity. They are not mutually inclusive. A customer has rights, provided he or she has the wherewithal to purchase the service. Without the ability to pay the customer effectively has no rights at all. The responsibilities of a customer do not extend much beyond basic civility and the requirement to fulfill his or her side of a contract.

In attempting to disentangle the two concepts it is useful to make some initial points. In a general sense customers are treated as though they are citizens, although of course they may not in fact be citizens at all. An example of this might be customers of an airport duty free shop. In so far as a citizen is a customer it is only when she or he is currently engaged in a transaction or is still contractually still connected to one or more transaction. It is also a linear bipolar relationship in that it concerns only the vendor and purchaser. Even if the transaction is conducted in a legal framework, there is no assumption of a sense of solidarity or mutual responsibility between customers. The nature of the market is that the one who is prepared to pay the price gets the good, as the race for bargains at a sale illustrates perfectly.

Customers have rights and indeed at times responsibilities, much like a citizen. A customer is obliged to pay for the service. In some circumstances the customer may have to fulfill certain obligations in order to complete the transaction. A customer might have to provide evidence that he or she is entitled to complete the transaction, for instance purchasing prescription medicines. The key point is that a citizen is always a citizen within the political community and a customer is only a customer when they are engaged in a transaction. A citizen has a fuller set of rights and obligations, even if they apply only to a given geographical space. On the other hand a customer's rights and obligations are restricted to the transaction being undertaken, but in theory at least money or tradable commodity is all you need to be a member of the club. Both clubs have rules and benefits of membership, but they are not synonymous.

In putting the terms consumer or customer to compete with citizenship the neo-liberals are attempting to counter the collectivist excesses of the welfare state while simultaneously relabelling aspects of citizenship that underpinned it. It is at that end of the spectrum there is greatest contestation. I will address this with reference to four descriptors of citizen rights. For classical liberals citizenship was tied around the first two dimensions of citizenship outlined in T.H. Marshall's famous essay *Class, citizenship, and social development* namely *civil-legal* and *political* rights. Those two rights clusters are essential for liberalism of all shades. It is against what Marshall described as *social* rights and a fourth area of rights that Talcott Parsons later described as *cultural* rights that the neo-liberals most stringently object. Both of these latter two are about currency—the

necessary currency to engage in society on something approaching equal terms. Another word for currency in this context is obligation, it is about whether or not we are obligated to each other in a commonwealth. It is here that citizens become customers for the neo-liberals. It is the divide between formal equality (civil-legal and political rights) and factual equality (social and cultural rights). In this way the focus on a consumer ethic is about stripping citizenship of definitions that emerged from the end of the 19th century through to the heyday of Keynsian economics in the 20th century. It is about couching certain rights as consumables or dissected-rights, that is rights that have lost their obligatory dimension. If you have the currency you may purchase as a customer, but that does not entail an entitlement rights. Certain services may be available pro tem, and the state may even support certain customers to purchase them, but they are not rights on the order of rights in the two primary clusters of rights from the neo-liberal perspective—civil-legal and political.

While the use of the term customer may at face value appear egalitarian or giving additional entitlements to citizens, that should not be allowed obscure its role in a wider political project. The social democratic state was engaged in the project of factual equality, which extends beyond the tightly defined equality of classical liberalism and later neo-liberalism. John Stuart Mill realized this in the 19th Century and until the late 20th Century the project continued in this trajectory, not without many objections and problems of course. In Britain the election of Margaret Thatcher advanced the liberal project once more and effectively gave renewed vibrancy to the rational choice free-market at the expense of a more solidaristic paradigm. Thatcher after all pronounced the non-existence of society. There is little doubt about the innovatory aspect of Thatcher's programme, nor that of the broader neo-liberal programme. Neither is there doubt that many of the innovations were necessary and have greatly benefited the common good. It is also true that some of the innovations acted against the common good, either by design or default. A further outcome of the shift to the customer paradigm has been to undermine the two aspects of citizenship most cherished by liberals—civil-legal and political.

For Neo-Liberals the chief evils of government are its capacity to interfere with the market and to engage in processes of a collectivist nature—Hayek the iconic figure of the Neo-Liberals was particularly adamant on this latter point. This might be rational if the market could in fact steer all aspect of life, if in fact all citizens had equal opportunities and needs, if risk or contingency were not issues, and if continued economic growth and resource exploitation were limitless. This sort of free-market utopia does not exist. If we hold democracy as the best road to good government in this context, then we need to address the fundamental unit of the citizen–without citizens there can be no democracy.

NPM is based on a utilitarian philosophy or in Aberbach and Christensen's words it is orientated more to the 'aggregate' common good in a manner like that espoused by Bentham rather than the 'integrative' common good of the civic republicans, the welfare liberals and the social democrats (2005: 234). They outline four dimensions of this orientation. Firstly that the offer of greater consumer type choice means that the individual has less need for civic engagement and in fact from a rational choice perspective would be wasting his or her time. The citizen can maximize self-interest

through exploiting existing rules and regulations rather than through advocacy. Thirdly education can be perceived as an individualized consumer good rather than a collective common good. The fourth point is that the citizen can choose where and when to avail of public services, this implies that one follows the best service. It relates to the notion of flexibility discussed by Honneth (2004) and the whole process very clearly links into the process of individualization.

Aberbach and Christensen(2005) also challenge the political efficacy of the 'consumer concept' of politics with reference to Lasswell's questions about the meaning of politics. They conclude that the concept

> '… glosses over some of the most fundamental issues in politics, issues with implications for the distribution of power and benefits… replacing them with a simple slogan such as putting customers first' (236).

The second objection they raise is that while citizens are supposed to be equal, there is no such assumption about consumers, those willing to pay higher prices can get better services. Is it acceptable for a consumer-citizen to pay a premium to the public sector vendor for a better service — to jump to the head of the queue or to get a better product. What if the consumer has already paid in his or her view through high taxation because of high income. Should that person in Aberback and Christensen's words be entitled to a 'gold card'. Although they do not refer to it *per se*, this is already the case in many developed countries vis-à-vis health care. There are differentials between 'public' patients and those availing of private insurance in terms of quality of service. Those 'consumers' in greatest need of the health services may be those with the shallowest pockets. Should high tax paying consumers, who rarely resort to the public system, simply say: It is a waste of my tax money, I already pay for health care through a private insurer'. Even within the private health insurance sector this raises itself in questions about 'community rating'.

In both the NPM model and solidaristic systems the public service has ultimately to implement policy. It is not simply a case of politicians setting policy as issues like lack of motivation or hostility to a programme can derail it. Successful innovation then is possible only through some level of common goal setting. In favour of the NPM model is that it shortens the chain between the consumer and the service and also applies pressure on the public sector to deliver, given consumer demands, quality reviews and the public sphere. While we can see clear correlation here between the neo-liberal agenda and the atomizing of citizenship, we can also see the influence from the left of the political spectrum in the shape of new social movements. New Social Movements have driven an agenda of accountability too. The motives may be almost polar opposites, but in this regard at least they hit some of the same buttons. The liberals are more interested in liberalizing and marketizing the public sector, part of that project is making the system more transparent so that monopolistic and restrictive practices cannot hide. In line with classic and iconic thinkers like Adam Smith, Hayek and Bentham, the best way of achieving that is through the decisions and actions of the public—further fuelling the love affair with the idea of customers as opposed to citizens.

Campbell (1997) makes the claim that we have entered a cycle of 'ratcheting down the objectives of governance' (Campbell, 1997: 84). He sees this operating in the relationship between the executive and citizens in the framework of 'Boutique Government'. He sees on one side a citizenry who have become sceptical about the nature of the state. The executive deal with this by diminishing the goals of governance, which in turn delivers a less than adequate response to real societal needs. This further feeds public sceptism. This ultimately leads to a situation where citizens act like customers in a boutique. They support (purchase) those things that they see as being beneficial (desire) and reject those which they do not see as benefiting them. This process is one of transforming citizens into customers, not necessarily through a grand design, but almost by default. It ties in very closely with Honneth's account of individualization and Campbell (2003) account of the emergence of consumerism.

Campbell is not overly optimistic that this trend can be reversed:

> Only the exceptionally skilled executive leaders will be able to motivate citizens to engage in a refashioning of the role of the state so it might better meet the social challenges of our age. (Campbell, 1997:

This is somewhat of a double edged sword as his own analysis of what he terms the five Anglo-American states indicates. Having pursued this particular tack it is not easy to chart a new course. The root cause of this cycle may be more deeply embedded than Campbell acknowledges. However new paths are invariably forged in times of crisis and this appears to be an era beset with current and impending crises, most evidently in ideology and environment.

Conclusion

It has been a rallying call for the neo-liberals that the rising tide raises all boats. The theory is that through innovative public policy collectivists tendency can be reversed, government rolled back, regulations reduced and in total create a friendlier environment for business with less taxes for citizens and more choice. With all ideologically driven grand theories problems arise in the implementation. Innovations are unpredictable and dynamic, unexpected benefits sometimes arise as do unexpected disbenefits.

From a liberal perspective the biggest longterm costs of the neo-liberal project are borne by the citizens in all four dimensions of citizenship as discussed above. From a liberal perspective the highest ostensible cost is in relation to *civil-legal* and *political* rights. That this is unintended by those who cherish the rich heritage of rights delivered by liberalism is a tragedy, made more poignant by a reluctance to acknowledge the symptoms. Many liberals eschew both *social* rights and *cultural* rights for not being rights at all and often argue that they undermine the true rights contained in *civil-legal* and *political* rights. Their arguments are becoming increasingly exposed not by their traditional adversaries the socialists, but by the communitarians. The essential point of the communitarians is that society needs a glue to hold it together—a sense of solidarity—many of today's problems are being placed at the door of the Neo-Liberal agenda for its denial of the need for solidarity. In its desire to eliminate collectivist tendencies it has also begun to undermine some of the fundamentals on which liberal society rests.

Liberalism can only exist in a civil society. Once the fundamentals of civil society are undermined, liberalism itself suffers subsidence. In a bid to reinforce its foundations, liberalism will have to reexamine its own dogma. It is not possible to have individual rights without individual respect and dignity, it is not possible to have civil society without solidarity.

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