

THE EMOTIONS AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Alaka M. Basu, Cornell University

Abstract

It is surprising that social demography, the one research discipline in which you would expect head-over-heart matters to be a central feature of the behavior it seeks to explain, has so little to say about the emotional basis of behavior. This disinterest is especially intriguing when the discipline is now actively engaged with direct questions of reproductive health and the 'unsafe' sexual behavior that underlies so much of poor reproductive health in developing societies. The disinterest is also odd at a time that even the most 'rational' of the social sciences, Economics, has also begun to look at the role of emotions in economic behavior.

The central proposition of my paper is that emotions are particularly important for understanding the problems of reproductive health and for promoting better reproductive health. This understanding can feed into policies for reproductive health that incorporate the usual questions of access to knowledge or services or personal autonomy, but also go beyond these to take into account the fact that much sexual and reproductive behavior is motivated by emotional states that can suppress prior knowledge, services or agency.

The paper draws upon the emerging theoretical literature on emotions in the disciplines of sociology and anthropology to explore the role of emotions in what demographers call 'healthy sexuality' in particular and reproductive health in general. I focus especially on the cultural meaning, the ideal, and the experienced reality of the emotion of 'love'. In turn I look at two categories of love – maternal love, and conjugal or romantic love – to discuss some of the implications of both the ideal and the reality of such love for women's reproductive and sexual health.

This is a difficult subject to study because it is not amenable to standard social survey methods. Moreover, in the context of reproductive health, one is interested in the emotional landscape of traditionally 'muted' groups – groups that are not used to shouting to be heard, that are conditioned to downplay the expression of and often even the cognitive experience of emotions. Women are an important part of such groups because such socialization of the emotions is universally gendered. However, there is a slowly growing qualitative literature in demography that has important leads on this subject; in addition there is some excellent reporting by activist NGOs working on women and reproductive health; and then there is much to be learned, especially on the ideal of maternal or conjugal love, from the fictional and non-fictional literature addressed to women. The paper draws on all these sources.