Nudge, Moral Values, and Public Life

Probably everyone over the age of 10 in the United States recalls the scene from the movie “To Kill a Mockingbird” in which the little girl named Scout disperses an angry mob determined to lynch a falsely accused African American in the rural south by calling out to the individual members of the mob by name, and recalling some incident from their ordinary life. The behavioral idea could be reduction of anonymity, and personalization. But a different way of thinking about this is that it is an example of a certain kind of nudging or behavioral priming. That it is not ripping away the shield of anonymity (or not only that) but instead the invocation of a different moral frame that are within the individuals on the scene, but are currently being suppressed by a different kind of social priming.

This is potentially an important idea in public management. I have been developing a theory in which individuals stand in different relationships to government. Associated with those different positions are different ideas about how the same individual would value government operations both prospectively from the abstract position of voter or citizen as well as retro spectively from the position of a government client.

This is morally important because a liberal society wants to evaluate government policy largely in terms of individual satisfactions with what is being done. Customer focus. Expectation that individuals directly engaged in or represented in public policy debate will choose to advance their own interests. To keep focus on public interest we need laws and experts who obtain their legitimacy from other sources.

It is alos practically important because we often call on individuals to take a social point of view in both their role as citizens, voters and taxpayers who authorize government action for all, and in their role as objects of service delivery or obligation.

If it is true that individuals can be primed to think more like citizens, then that would represent a significant gain in the quality of both public deliberation, and co-production. It also creates an important relationship between the two, and gives some new weight to old ideas about how society and law were supposed to come together through democratic processes, before we learned that it is was both theoretically impossible and practically equally unlikely to develop an articulate collective.