Emotional Dynamics of Protection and Belonging: Representations, Housing Policy and Forced Migration

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Abstract

Emotions play a central role in how protection is understood, claimed and experienced, and in how social policies are built and legitimised. Drawing on the Protemo project, this communication brings together Social Psychology, Migration Studies and public policy analysis to examine how emotions, protection and belonging shape citizens' expectations of the State and the inclusion of vulnerable groups. It combines several complementary methods. First, a large online survey (N = 12,308) maps social representations of protection. Using Abric's structural approach, data from 10,147 participants in 11 countries are then analysed to identify the emotional components of representations of protection policies. Third, a thematic analysis of 94 Portuguese parliamentary debates on housing policy (2020–2024) examines the emotions policymakers mobilise and how they portray target groups. Finally, more than 50 interviews and 13 focus groups with forced migrants from Ukraine in Portugal, Italy, Germany and Poland explore how belonging is constructed. The results show that protection is understood as multidimensional and negotiated, and depends on context, resources and social conditions. Emotions mostly occupy peripheral positions in representations of protection policies, working as flexible resources that link policies to national contexts. In housing policy, emotional discourse shapes who is framed as deserving of protection. For forced migrants, belonging is negotiated through collective emotions in relation to the nation, Europe and migrant communities. Overall, the findings suggest that emotions structure recognition, trust, inclusion and exclusion. Social policies addressing urban poverty, housing insecurity and vulnerability should therefore take into account the emotional and relational side of protection.

Keywords

Protection policies, emotions, social representations, housing policy, forced migration, belonging.