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Benefits and pitfalls of Denmark's high-trust society

Raihan Alam

Denmark exhibits some of the highest levels of trust in the world. Many attribute the country's social and economic successes to its citizens' strong trust in its institutions and in other people. However, the socioeconomic costs of such high levels of trust have been less explored. This article reviews both the benefits and costs of Denmark's high levels of trust and discusses ways the country can make the best use of this crucial resource.

Introduction

Denmark is known as the “land of trust.” It is hard to understate the value of this nonmaterial resource in Danish society. Many social scientists have argued that Denmark's robust response to the COVID-19 pandemic, low levels of crime, high levels of happiness, gender equality, economic cooperation, and support for green reforms are all products of the Danes having high levels of trust regarding both individuals and institutions (Andreasson, 2017). Trust can be divided into two categories: social trust and institutional trust. Social trust generally refers to the level of trust people are willing to extend to those individuals outside their own social circles, while institutional trust usually refers to trust of specific institutions like the government and other civil society organizations. The role of the media in Denmark and the nation's response to the COVID-19 health crisis are particularly revealing of this phenomenon of trust; however, even though the benefits of trust are important and generally understood, there often are unstated pitfalls that are less well understood.

Social trust

The European Social Survey is one of the largest cross-national attitude surveys that measures social trust (European University Institute, 2022). Since 2001, thousands of citizens from 32 European countries have responded to the European Social Survey question, “generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people? Please tell me on a score of 0 to 10, where 0 means you can't be too careful and 10 means that most people can be trusted.” Compared to the rest of Europe, including their Scandinavian neighbors, Danes have the highest levels of social trust, averaging a score of 6.9 (Tingaard, 2020).

Benefits

Social trust provides Denmark with many economic benefits. For example, researchers have conceptualized Denmark's high level of social trust as “an absence of the need to verify other people's actions” (Andreasson, 2017). Such an absence means a business environment with fewer legal and formal hurdles to conduct economic transactions, which saves both time and money. Such trust has also been associated with increased foreign investment (Zak & Knack, 2001). Some researchers have gone so far as to argue that for every 10% increase in a society's level of social trust, a 0.5% increase in the country's economic growth can be expected (Bjørnskov, 2005).

Beyond economic benefits, social trust is a strong basis for psychological well-being. There is a strong, established relationship between social trust and individual happiness. Rodriguez-Pose and von Berlepsch (2012) examined this relationship in over 48,000 people from 25 European countries. They found that social trust was a significant predictor of subjective happiness, even when controlling for sociodemographic variables, such as education and marital status, as well as macroeconomic variables, such as inflation and income inequality. This effect was largest for Scandinavians. Research has also found that individuals with high levels of social trust feel more hopeful about their future and believe they have greater control over their lives (Rothstein, 2013). These positive feelings may be because in high-trust environments people can live their lives confident that other people around them are honest and share prosocial tendencies (Radcliff, 2022). Conversely, in low-trust societies, people must constantly be on guard and are suspicious, looking out for the possibility that someone may exploit or deceive them, thus expending their emotional resources on monitoring their everyday interactions. In high-

trust societies, cognitive and emotional resources can be better spent elsewhere, directed at other parts of their lives, such as families and careers.

Costs

Aside from its great benefits to Denmark, scholars have identified costs associated with Danes' high levels of social trust. For example, the highest levels of undeclared work, or informal work, in Europe are found in Denmark (*Special Eurobarometer 284, 2007*). Undeclared work refers to employment that is not disclosed to the government. A 2010 survey of at least 2000 Danes revealed that more than half of them had paid for undeclared work within the past year (52%) and over one-quarter of them (28%) would do so if they had the chance (Rockwool Foundation, 2010). Research has shown that the patronage and approval of undeclared work in Denmark are significantly associated with Danes' high levels of social trust (Sørensen, 2011). This association was found even after controlling for political orientation and institutional trust for Danish parliamentary, public, and legal systems.

Researchers have theorized that this relationship between social trust and high levels of undeclared work can be explained by the fact that such work involves social cooperation: it requires an informal agreement of individuals to buy and sell labor without disclosure to the government. Undeclared work, in 2009, was estimated to account for almost 3% of Denmark's GDP (€6.2B) (Hvidtfeldt et al., 2010). Although this percentage may seem trivial, undeclared work is a particular harm in Denmark, given its extensive welfare state. Undeclared work diminishes tax revenues earned by the government, and high tax revenues are a necessity to fund Denmark's expansive, and increasingly expensive, welfare state, which covers broad sectors of society, including health care and education. (For further information on Denmark's welfare costs, see Duffany's article on health care and Erdman's article on education in this volume.)

Social trust can contribute to a stressful workplace where trust must be constantly maintained. Researchers have argued that there is often a deep sense of obligation felt by workers to reciprocate trust from supervisors through overworking, in order to prove they are worthy of such trust (Knorr, 2018). Most importantly, trust can be the basis of excluding others, particularly minorities, in the workplace. For example, Denmark's white and Christian identity can be a basis of trust in the workplace, creating a corporate culture in which trust between ethnic Danes is taken for granted, leading to the exclusion of mi-

norities who do not look or behave like ethnic Danes. In one Danish company, data show that over 90% of employees from minority backgrounds were not promoted from their positions despite having the necessary educational and competency requirements. Such exclusion was associated with lower levels of motivation and commitment to the company from minorities, with many of them even leaving the company (Knorr, 2018).

Indeed, a global survey of expatriate life has shown that Denmark is one of the toughest countries for expatriates to settle into, which may be attributed to tight-knit social networks based on high levels of interpersonal trust (InterNations, 2022). Generally, immigrants are defined as people who move to another country to live there permanently, whereas expatriates are people who move to another country for a limited or undecided amount of time. Denmark has ranked in the bottom 10 in the Ease of Settling in Index since 2014. This ranking is based on a variety of factors, including how friendly and at home expatriates feel in their nonnative country. Expatriates in Denmark have the hardest time finding friends, one of the most consistent and important predictors of happiness (Saphiré-Bernstein & Taylor, 2012; Malvaso & Kang, 2022). The index showed that 66% of expatriates find it hard to make local friends, which is 30 percentage points above the global average. In terms of friendliness, only 46% of expatriates find the population to be friendly, which is 23 percentage points below the global average. Most expatriates indicate that they do not feel at home or have difficulty becoming accustomed to the local culture. Denmark is a small, tightly connected society, one that makes it harder for expatriates to find access to the social benefits Denmark boasts.

Institutional trust: The case of media

Beyond social trust, Danes have very high levels of trust in their media institutions. Denmark has two highly trusted public television stations, DR and TV 2, which are trusted by 80% and 78% of the population, respectively (Schröder et al., 2022). They also have multiple national newspapers, with the largest *Politiken*, a political print newspaper. Most Danes trust *Politiken* (70%), and even more (76%) say that the news media adequately reports on important events (Harrie, 2018). Approximately 70% of Danes believe that the media do a good job at being politically neutral and at investigating their government. Overall, 58% of Danes trust their media, a stark contrast to the skepticism in the United States, where only 36% of Americans trust the news media (Brenan, 2021).

Benefits

Danish media exhibits high levels of political independence. In 2021, the Media Pluralism Monitor examined potential risks to media pluralism in the Danish media landscape. They classified the Danish media environment as only a low risk to political independence, meaning that, for the most part, media coverage is politically neutral. DR and TV 2 are funded based on public service contracts, which are renewed by Parliament every four years. These renegotiations have in the past ordered unbiased and politically impartial news coverage. Debates in the 2000s and 2010s about the presence of left-wing bias in DR media coverage prompted the station to promote more representative programming of political parties during their national Parliament election. This promotion included the representation of political parties from the far right. Studies on DR media coverage in the 2000s have found no such political bias in their news network (Santon Rasmussen et al., 2022), and recently, research has suggested that political bias in Danish media coverage was not a driving factor in exposure to political party leaders (Wallberg, 2019). Political impartiality is an important value. In a politically impartial environment, people can take control of their opinions by deciding for themselves how they feel about the news. Politically impartial news can also reduce social polarization, because citizens are exposed to the reasons behind alternative views, which may help avoid the conclusion that political opponents are evil and stupid (Mazor, 2019).

Costs

In contrast to their general political neutrality, Denmark's news sources have been culpable in the development of anti-immigrant sentiment in Danes by contributing to prejudiced public discussion of ethnic minorities. Immigrants are often presented as a threat to Denmark's economy, culture, and security. Researchers at Norway's University of Bergen conducted content analyses of over 4000 articles about immigration in prominent Scandinavian news articles from 1970 to 2016 (Hovden & Mjelde, 2019). Overall, they found an increase in threat-related framing of immigration in Denmark. Denmark was distinct from Sweden and Finland in that approximately one-half of all Danish articles related to immigration contained some form of reference to threats. One-third of these threat-framed articles discussed immigrants in relation to crime, presenting them as a barrier to public order and security. And since 2020, around one-half of all Danish articles have applied this security-threat framing of

immigrants and immigration. Economic and cultural threat frames are also present in more than 10% of these articles. Furthermore, communication research has shown that Danish media stresses differences in culture and religion in their reporting of virtually all immigration-related issues (Yilmaz, 2016). Indeed, immigrants are referenced in Danish cultural journalism in terms of their religion twice as often as in neighboring Scandinavian countries. Some research even suggests that Danish media openly stigmatizes Islam, as its culture, values, and behaviors have been consistently stereotyped. (For further information on anti-immigrant sentiment in Denmark, see Ayambem's article in this volume.)

Such media reporting may be related to the underrepresentation of non-western media sources in Denmark. For example, non-western immigrants make up only 4% of news sources despite constituting over 12% of the population. In fact, unlike specifications about adequate media representation of the disabled, Danish public service contracts have not incorporated rules about racial and ethnic minority representation in the media (Santon Rasmussen et al., 2022).

Negative depictions of immigrants have been associated with a host of pejorative attitudes, including high levels of ethnic prejudice, stereotyping, and support for anti-immigrant policy stances and parties, the last viewed as the most able to deal with the perceived issues of immigration (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009; Eberl et al., 2018; van Klingeren et al., 2015). Beyond far-right attitude shifts, such coverage has implications for immigrants themselves. For example, anti-immigrant stigmatization has negative affects on the mental health of immigrants (Morey, 2018). And experiencing prejudice and discrimination are barriers for integration, which can further heighten negative attitudes toward immigrants (Dahl & Jakobsen, 2005). A vicious cycle can then be created in which prejudice demotivates immigrants from integrating, and a lack of integration further promotes Danish prejudice. This dynamic may partially explain why Danes have some of the most negative views of Islam in Europe, with one-third of Danes believing that Denmark is at war with Islam (*I in 3 Danes...*, 2016). Despite this level of prejudice, 42% of Danes believe that racism is a major problem in their country (Buttler, 2021), which suggests that some accommodation, if not resolution, needs to be found.

Social and institutional trust come together in response to COVID-19

The benefits related to Danes' high levels of social and institutional trust are best exemplified by Den-

mark's rapid and robust response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Denmark became one of the first countries to remove all COVID-19 restrictions. Despite this remarkable achievement, the country's approach to the pandemic came with costs, which highlight some of the issues related to high levels of institutional trust.

Benefits

The Danish government was one of the first to announce major lockdown measures, on March 13, 2020 (Stephensen & Hansen, 2020). During the first two weeks, the lockdown measures included sending home all noncritical public sector employees to quarantine; restricting visits to nursing homes and hospitals; and shutting down schools, universities, gyms, libraries, and daycare for at least two weeks. In the third week, the government closed shopping centers and close-contact businesses (such as hairdressers, cafes, and nightclubs) and made it illegal for more than 10 people to gather in public (Mansø et al., 2020). Violation of these restrictions was associated with a fine of 1500 kr (around \$140). With certain exceptions, Denmark also closed its borders from March to April of 2020 (Møller, 2020).

Unlike countries such as the United States, Denmark's temporary but major lockdown measures were not met with significant backlash (Adler-Nissen et al., 2021). Indeed, this acceptance can be attributed to the astonishing fact that more than 90% of Danes had moderate to high levels of trust in their national health authorities during the outbreak of the virus (Behsudi, 2020). Such high levels of institutional trust were again crucial when vaccines became available in the country, and most Danes became vaccinated.

Trust is a crucial component of vaccination compliance. Research on vaccine hesitancy shows that lack of trust in authorities, such as government officials, local leaders, and health experts, is one of the main reasons people refuse to get vaccinated (Lindholt et al., 2021). This refusal was uncommon in Denmark. By the fall of 2021, 86% of all eligible citizens received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, and 95% of all people ages 50 and older were fully vaccinated (Petersen & Bor, 2021). Additionally, during the height of the pandemic, over 60% of adults were tested for COVID-19 each week (Behsudi, 2022).

Due to their successful lockdown measures and high rates of vaccination, Denmark became the first country in the European Union to lift all COVID-19 restrictions (Mclean et al., 2022). On September 10, 2021, the government announced that the COVID-19 pandemic would no longer be categorized as a "criti-

cal threat" to Danish society (Ministry of Interior and Health, 2021). At the time, the country could boast an infection rate of 89 cases per million people and a death rate of 0.5 per million people. In comparison, the United States at the time had an infection rate of 440 cases per million people and a death rate of 5 per million people (Ritchie et al., 2020).

After the government lifted all coronavirus restrictions, there was an uptick in daily infections. In response, the government reinstalled vaccine and immunity passports to enter crowded venues as well as face mask requirements. There was no backlash against these newer measures; over 90% of Danes supported these measures (Adler-Nissen et al., 2021). Social trust was important in this pandemic mitigation context because it allowed for behavioral changes without the pressure of strict laws. Without the need to enforce very strong measures due to high levels of voluntary compliance, the country saved resources, which permitted a focus on other mitigation efforts such as vaccine rollout. Such high levels of trust in others may be a reason why most Danes dealt with the pandemic calmly, trusting that their institutions and other people would fulfill their responsibilities in mitigation efforts (Tingaard, 2020).

In fact, when it comes to institutional trust, there is evidence that Denmark is the only country in the European Union where trust in the national government actually increased during the pandemic (Wagemaker, 2021). One reason for such high levels of trust may be the compromise-oriented and depolarized political system. The Danish government created large-scale economic legislation in response to the pandemic. In April of 2020, Parliament uniformly passed several economic relief packages aimed at aiding businesses and citizens, including compensation for lost revenue, income, wages, and fixed costs (Boesen, 2020). For their wage compensation scheme, the state was slated to cover 75% of workers' salaries, with companies covering the remaining 25%. These comprehensive economic aid packages were supported by all parliamentary parties, which may partially explain why 80% of Danes initially felt that their leaders were united in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic (Petersen & Bor, 2021).

Aside from compliance with pandemic mitigation efforts, trust may have played a role in the country's inoculation against conspiracy theories. Denmark did not experience a rise in conspiratorial beliefs during the COVID-19 outbreak. Researchers have found that although conspiracy theories were present in Danish social media, specifically Facebook, their prevalence and influence were quite limited. They found this to be true even for Facebook pages and

groups that were most likely to spread such content during the pandemic. Researchers also found that the spread of conspiratorial content was uncommon on Danish social media. A study examining over 9000 Danish tweets about COVID-19 and facemasks between February and November of 2020 found that only 5% of the tweets spread misinformation and that Danish tweets spreading misinformation were only *slightly* more common than tweets that rejected misinformation. Conspiratorial thinking seems to be very low in Denmark, and polling data show that most citizens neither believe conspiracy theories nor are anxious about their presence, which may be because of the high level of trust Danes have in their traditional news and media institutions (Bengtsson, 2021).

Costs

Unfortunately, Denmark's highly supported COVID-19 containment policies were not without costs. The country faced significant declines in GDP. In 2020, during their first lockdown in the second quarter, GDP fell by as much as 6.7%. Then, in the first quarter of 2021, after the introduction of another set of containment measures, GDP declined again by 1.5% (Pedersen, 2021).

The impact of Denmark's lockdown policies was especially hard on workers in the informal economy. According to estimates from the World Bank, Denmark's informal economy is responsible for upwards of 17% of their GDP, approximating \$61B (Elgin et al., 2021). On top of the loss of income informal workers faced from lockdown policies, they were excluded from receiving the state's financial aid packages, as tax payment was made a precondition for receiving aid, unlike in Sweden, where social welfare was distributed based on residence (Lind, 2020). This disregard for informal workers in relief packages seems inconsistent, given that many Danes have reported paying for under the table work (Rockwool Foundation, 2010).

Schuessler and colleagues (2022) found that many Danes supported restrictive policies focused exclusively on the unvaccinated, such as the withholding of wages from public employees during obligatory isolation periods and lowering their priority during hospital bed shortages. Individuals who were most trusting of institutions like Parliament were actually more supportive of these restrictive policies compared to their less trusting counterparts.

There is also evidence that Denmark's discourse around the pandemic was one-sided, rather than pluralistic. Baekkeskov and colleagues (2021) researched the media discourse surrounding the gov-

ernment's COVID-19 response policies for the period March 1 to April 4, 2020. Examining over 100 articles, they found that most of the discussions on policies like school closures and crowding limits were in favor of the government's policies.

This one-sided discourse extended to the government. These same researchers found that political leaders were uniform in their support for the nation's policies on school closures and crowding limits, advocating for few to no alternative policies. They even found that recommendations from experts like those in the Public Health Agency were selectively applied, if applied at all, noting that government border closing policies and stay-at-home orders went beyond the recommendations of the Agency (Baekkeskov et al., 2021). Public Health Agency Director Søren Brostrøm even criticized the border closing policy publicly, calling it "a political decision with no scientific merits" (Mølgaard, 2020). Rather than bolster the scientific expertise of Director Brostrøm, voices of politicians like Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen were more prominently echoed by the media. Between January 8 and June 15 of 2020, Frederiksen was represented in four times as many articles than was Director Brostrøm (Baekkeskov et al., 2021).

In sum, the discourse surrounding COVID-19 management policies coming from Denmark's media and elected officials was one-sided. Narrow discourse of this kind can discourage the deliberation of better, alternative policies proposed by experts outside the government. Such discourse prevents citizens from being exposed to diverse and balanced perspectives regarding the government's policies. It can also disempower citizens, by becoming a barrier for individuals to reason for themselves regarding whether certain governmental policies are appropriate (Fishkin, 2018; Neblo, 2015). Government compliance based on monotonous discourse of policy can be a sign of blind faith in institutions on the part of citizens, which can hinder the ability of citizens to engage in democratic deliberation.

Recommendations for Denmark's future

If Denmark desires to be a model of egalitarianism for the world, it must expand its circle of trust to expatriates and immigrants. Without such a change, Denmark cannot be a model for other countries, as their unique source of trust may be based on their racial and cultural homogeneity and, therefore, cannot be extended to the vast and diverse world.

Given that Danes have high levels of trust in their institutions and political leaders, such a shift is pos-

sible. First, institutional elites and political leaders should encourage an expansion of Danes' circle of trust. Researchers at Stanford have shown that exposing Republicans to videos showing Republican elites affirming the legitimacy of the 2020 election increased the extent to which the ordinary Republicans perceived the 2020 election as legitimate. Exposure to such elite signaling also increased trust in the American electoral process (Clayton & Willer, 2021). Fortunately, Denmark's political system is much less polarized; hence, its leaders may have more influence over the citizenry. Therefore, Danish leaders publicly encouraging an expansion of trust to expatriates and immigrants, while simultaneously condemning anti-immigrant sentiment in their country, might positively shift attitudes.

Second, Denmark should include racial, ethnic, and religious minority representation in future public service contracts. This is not a radical policy; current public service contracts already have explicitly ordered more representation of disabled people (Santon Rasmussen et al., 2022). Media representation can positively influence intergroup attitudes. For example, public opinion research in the United States has shown that positive media representation of the LGBTQ community has helped change public opinion toward LGBTQ people and increase support for their rights (Adamczyk & Liao, 2019). In 2004, only 31% of the American population supported same-sex marriage. In just 15 years, this figure increased to 61% (Pew Research Center, 2022). There are a host of factors behind this positive attitude shift, but many studies suggest that positive media coverage of LGBTQ individuals played an important role (Johnson, 2012). Given the high levels of trust Danes place in their traditional media institutions compared with Americans, the media may have an even more influential role in ushering positive attitudinal change toward immigrants and may have the ability to do this at a faster rate. Failing to take full advantage of this opportunity means Danish society will only succeed in undercutting its global reputation for egalitarianism.

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