

DENMARK

DANES ARE THE HAPPIEST PEOPLE IN THE WORLD: TRUTH OR MYTH?



It is no secret the Danes are the happiest people in the world. This is confirmed by numerous and various ratings. One of the most influential is the World Happiness Report recently published under the UN auspices. Its authors are distinguished economists from Columbia University John Helliwell, Richard Layard, and Jeffrey Sachs. The happiest trio are Denmark, Finland, and Norway. Sweden comes seventh, the United States occupies the 11th place while Great Britain is 18th. The "unhappiest" are Togo and Benin who at the bottom line of the list. Russia is 76th out of 156 countries.



Exciting optimism of the Danes is confirmed also by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Gallup Institute and other more or less known public opinion services. The OECD used a 1-100 point scale in its poll held in 140 countries. The average figure was 62.4 percent while in Denmark - 90.1.

The Danes have been constantly leading such polls since 1973 and the scholars of the world have been unsuccessfully trying for over three decades to comprehend the secret of Danish happiness by advancing different hypothesis and arriving at contradicting conclusions. Mild climate, healthy way of life, strong economy, or generous social budget?

It is true the country boasts one of the highest GDP in the world and one of the lowest unemployment rate. On the other hand, Denmark has relatively low longevity and high taxes. Hard

drinking and crime are spreading, the number of divorces and suicides is on the rise. It looks as if there should be no specific happiness.

Epidemiologist Kaare Kristensen said the Danes are satisfied with their life due to high consumption of alcohol. Former Editor-in-Chief of the Politiken newspaper Theger Zeidenfaden suggested the Danes eat more sugar than other people in Europe. A group of researchers offered an explanation saying the victory over the German team in the European Football Championship in 1992 triggered nationwide euphoria in Denmark which continues to manifest itself.

Maybe the Danes have not lost a taste to simple pleasures? They mostly treasure time spent together with the family and close kin. "Happiness means to cook a tasty dinner, apply a match to candles, and dine with friends. Or drink hot coffee at a fireplace in cold winter,"

said Camilla Bek Heg who returned to Denmark after five years in Paris.

You can rarely see expensive clothes or luxurious cars in Copenhagen streets. But there are no hungry poor as well. Experts agree that Denmark is one of the most egalitarian societies in the world. Research shows that inequality and resulting atmosphere of mistrust are a major reason for dissatisfaction. Therefore, many researchers explain general Danish happiness by a high level of trust which they often call the main national value.

The Danish tradition of equality and trust is unprecedented in the world. Only here the head of a company and a security guard communicate as equals. "In Denmark people consume relatively equal shares of the wealth they create and believe each other", Reuters reported adding that in other countries people are more cynical to authorities, business and each other.

"It is hard to say how the trust emerged", said economist Christian Bjornskov from Aarhus University. "Most likely it formed during numerous generations beginning from Vikings". But even today Danish peasants leave berries they collected on the roadside and nobody would ever eat them without leaving some money in exchange. The scholar said the descendants of the Scandinavians who emigrated to the United States in the XIX century are the most trustful and at the same time most trustworthy Americans. During the current economic crisis Denmark was one of the first countries to announce unlimited guarantees for bank deposits, Bjornskov recalled.

"The Danes do not view the state as an enemy," said political scientist and sociologist Peter Gundelak. He believes it may be due to the small size of the country and homogenous population. Anyway, the Danes regularly pay the

highest taxes in Europe and are convinced they do it for the better.

There is also an historic explanation: Denmark used to be a northern empire and was at war with Prussia and Austria in 1964 and suffered a crushing defeat. The Danes were undermined economically and morally but due to incredible effort succeeded to rebuild the country although national conscience was deeply hurt. Since then they had to adjust to a new situation. They do not set excessive aims and pin no major hopes. They learned to enjoy trifles. Thus, according to research, Danish happiness is a kind of self-hypnosis. "If the Danes are the happiest that is because they have less expectations than others which means less disappointments as well", said Peter Gundelak.

John Helliwell is convinced that choir singing and common laughter at frequent parties are a major source of happy feelings among the Danes. Incessant toasts and songs at Danish weddings offer a collective therapy and a way to happiness, he believes.

The Danes are rather reserved and never complain. It means they are ready for misfortunes, do not expect gifts from the future and are surprised if everything goes well. It is evident from newspaper headlines - "We are the happiest, so far". The Danes thus confirm the Taoist wisdom voiced by ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi - happiness is when you do not go to attain happiness.

Scholars made numerous interesting discoveries when they began to examine Danish happiness in detail. It turned out, for example, that it is subject to seasonal changes: in winter the Danes seem to stop being the happiest people in the world. The gloom and boring days of the season result in the so-called "winter depression" or the Seasonal Affective Disorder / SAD/ syndrome.

According to the Danish Psychiatry Fund, close to 200 thousand Danes suffer from chronic depressions while 15 percent of the population or every seventh resident experienced depression at least once in his life.

In Denmark SAD is described as "episodes of depression taking place in a certain season, mostly in winter". The risk is considered to be

the highest in northern countries with long winter nights, such as Denmark. The symptoms include bad mood, tiredness, stress, and the feeling of helplessness and hopelessness.

Psychologist Martin Morsing believes that if "winter depression" is ignored, it can develop into a real depression which demands psychiatric treatment. "The syndrome is specifically dangerous for elderly people. They rarely go out while loneliness promotes depression," said psychiatrist Sarika Staflund.

In a critical state depression can result in suicide. The Odense Center for suicide research said the number of suicides in Denmark grows 2 percent in October-November and in April-May. "Changes in the duration of daylight hours are the most likely explanation to seasonal fluctuations in suicidal behavior", the research center said.

Naturally, early winter affects depressive people, but why does the number of suicides increase on the eve of the coming summer? "In autumn they lack initiative due to general exhaustion. In spring dark thoughts have not yet abandoned them while there is already enough energy for the lethal step," said research fellow Berge Jensen.

Weather conditions can also promote suicide. "In cold time there are more suicides during fog or rain and less during cold and snowy winter," Berge Jensen stressed.

Winter depression is an old enemy of the Danes and they know how to fight it. The best way is to party with friends and candles. Professionals confirm the efficiency of the "popular therapy". Statistics show the Danes buy more candles per capita than any other people in the world.

Martin Morsing recommends light therapy with special sunlight emitting bulbs to patients who suffer from SAD and depression. 20-30 minutes a day under such light would ease depression symptoms, he believes. "However nothing can replace the true Sun. Therefore be active and go in for sports in the short hours while the Sun is shining", he advised.

U.S. researcher Barry Whitehead studied 30 SAD cases in 17 countries and exposed that only northern US regions and Russia are ahead of Denmark in the syndrome. The average global SAD rate is 5.77 while in Denmark it is 12.4. As a result, happiness indicators among the Danes in winter are much lower than in summer.

Canadian researcher John Helliwell studied the problem from another angle. He noticed that Denmark is always the leader in assessing life in general on the basis of such criteria, as incomes, absence of corruption and the feeling of freedom. However when the Danes are asked: "Did you smile or laugh yesterday?" the rating is much more modest.

Thus, scholars concluded there can be two potential definitions of happiness. One is related to the general sense of wellbeing while

the other - to specific moments of joy. The first definition depends on personal incomes and the wealth of the country while the second one - on satisfaction of personal psychological and social needs.

The commission created by France in 2008 and headed by Nobel Prize winner and economist Joseph Stiglitz determined "a major difference between such social and economic indicators as growth, inflation, and unemployment and the psychological and emotional perception of the realities." The research resulted in two different social and economic indicators: level of life and quality of life.

Although the United States has the highest per capita GDP ratio it occupied only the 16th place in the general wellbeing classification and the 26th place in the rating based on joyful moments in life. Christian Science Monitor newspaper sadly said that the United States is the richest country in the world but the Americans are not the happiest people. Jeffrey Sachs insists popular happiness does not depend on economic development of the country. "The United States has been constantly developing economically since 1960s however

happiness indicators have not changed during the time," he said. The scholar believes social relationship and health are much more important for happiness than economic growth.

"Naturally, wealth provides a feeling of satisfaction however it does not strongly influence your life assessment as many believe," said Ed Diner from Illinois University who participated in the Gallup poll. He pointed at the important role of social relationship and cited Costa Rica as an example as people are quite happy there despite low incomes. "Positive feelings usually emerge when you are respected, independent and engaged in labor of love. In the final end there is no single happiness recipe," he said.

You cannot buy happiness - such is the general conclusion of the Gallup Institute published by the US Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. A fat purse enhances the feeling of satisfaction however high income does not guarantee joy and positive feelings. Therefore, the Gallup Institute provides two different ratings at present.

The Danes were the happiest in the first category while New Zealanders lead in the secondary (Denmark is the 31st by per capita GDP while New Zealand is the 51st).

In the meantime the serene picture of the northern kingdom makes distrustful journalists ask: are the Danes truly as happy as they claim? Many insist the Danish government is inclined to advertise the country and spends much money to promote the image of Denmark abroad.

For many Danes the declarations about incessant happiness are a "patriotic duty", said writer Karsten Jensen and recalled the "idyllic image of a caring country which has to protect





itself from the outside world at any price". Sociologist Peter Gundelak agreed: "Many people would be traitors had they claimed otherwise".

The long-term leadership in happiness seems to have bore to death the Danes themselves. Many of them react to happiness claims skeptically or with an irritated smile.

"Although residents of the country are a little bored in winter they are generally satisfied with life. However they are not big optimists as they would like to pose themselves to the world", said Helen Dyrbye, one of the authors of Those Strange Danes book. "What do they say behind closed doors?"

"Like all Scandinavians the Danes widely take Prozac which treats depressive disorders and the suicide level is high among them," said writer Lars Andreas Pedersen. "It does not look like happiness. The Danes are not happy, but satisfied," he concluded.

Others say the problem is rooted in linguistic misunderstanding as the Danes use the word "happy" when they want to say "satisfied" or "pleased". It is difficult to translate the Danish word "hygge" into any foreign language. It means a feeling of comfort,

coziness, and satisfaction which usually emerges at a party with close kin.

The latest conclusion seems to be true as the Danes do not complicate their life, are skeptical about high-flown words and notions, prefer concrete things and laugh at curious foreigners who want to comprehend their simple and austere way of life.

Foreigners who live in Denmark for a long time and are keen in mysterious Danish soul pay back in their own coin. Englishman Frank Tixton who spent over three decades in Copenhagen bluntly called Danish happiness "complacency". "Open yourself to the world, admit that you are not perfect and you will see how much genuine happiness it will bring to you," he wrote in Copenhagen Post.

It is only natural that each person has his or her own happiness which cannot be exchanged. The Danes do not have more or less happiness than others. Everyone has his own successes and failures, everyone has what to enjoy and strive for. Everyone does it his own way.

Nikolai Morozov,
ITAR-TASS bureau chief in Denmark,
for Amber Bridge

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