

Danes Who Rock the World

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Why Danish smokers have such a hard time quitting

By Poul Høi hoi@berlingske.dk

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Marie Helweg-Larsen could not get into a psychology program in Denmark - so she went to the United States. Now she is a well-known psychology professor at an American university, and she researches, among other things, differences between Danes and Americans. For example, why do Danish smokers doubt that smoking is dangerous? And why are young Danish men not afraid to be feminine? And why it is not a problem to have two homelands.

She is a professor at one of the oldest American universities, and she can explain to anyone anywhere why smart people do stupid things. But in Denmark there is a further reason to be interested in Marie Helweg-Larsen's research, because it gives us an idea about why Danes are the way we are. And we are unique.

That's what we're discussing here.

Marie Helweg-Larsen is a social psychologist and professor at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania in the United States, and she researches why smart people have sex without a condom, return to a violent partner, or smoke.

She is a prolific and frequently quoted international psychologist, she has been awarded some of the most prestigious US research grants, and for the next two years she will be living in the United Kingdom as the director of her university's scientific student exchange program.

And then there is Denmark.

Not only is Marie Helweg-Larsen Danish, but her research also brings her to Denmark frequently - often because she compares Americans with Danes - and therefore since 1994 she has created a social psychological profile of us.

Danish smokers

You say your research attempts to understand why smart people do dumb things. What do you mean by that?

"Most people perceive themselves as sensible people, and when they do something foolish, they make a mental automatic risk minimization. For example: "I ride without a seat belt, but it's not that dangerous,

because I drive carefully and slowly." Or: "I do not need a bicycle helmet because..." It is a typical psychological mechanism.

My research focuses on how we explain these decisions to ourselves and others, and what influence it has on our feelings and behaviors."

And what does that have to do with the Danes?

»Smoking is a good example of how smart people can do stupid things, and the Danes are interesting in this regard. Both Danish and American smokers say that it is dangerous to smoke, but at the same time they all underestimate and explain away the danger. But the Danes do it to a much greater extent, my research shows, and this is mainly because Denmark is a smoke-friendly country. It is easier and relatively cheaper and more acceptable to smoke than in many other similar countries such as the US."

"The number of smokers in Denmark is now increasing, and today there are more young smokers than earlier, and that is quite remarkable compared to many other countries. What is going on?"

»My research shows that Danish smokers see themselves as considerate smokers who do not bother others with their smoking, which they also do not see as particularly dangerous - in fact, they perceive the danger of passive smoking as a bit exaggerated. They think that some smoking restrictions are OK, but also that smoking is a private matter.

So one factor is that Danish smokers underestimate the dangers of smoking, which is definitely associated with less interest in quitting.

Another factor is the lack of political will. Danish politicians could do much more to limit smoking, but they will not go against the tobacco industry. Many politicians consider the tobacco industry as any other industry and not as an industry that kills.

The price of cigarettes is a good example. In relation to purchasing power, cigarettes in Denmark have never been cheaper - and that price is politically decided. Thus, the politicians decided that Denmark should be a smoke-friendly country, and more people therefore have easier access to tobacco.

Social norms are a third factor. After all, smokers are in the minority, and they are dependent on non-smokers accepting their smoking.

What message does it send, for example, when your colleagues can stop working and go outside to smoke every two hours? That suggests social acceptance. But there are also changes on the way in Denmark such as municipalities that have introduced smoke-free workplaces, and shops that now hide cigarettes from view. It is - if you want to reduce smoking - a positive development. "

So Denmark has a problem, and what should we do about it? In your latest research, you investigate whether stigma helps smokers quit ... »

Yes, smokers in both Denmark and the US feel that they are looked down upon and considered stupid, disgusting people because they smoke. I'm interested in how smokers respond to reminders of their devalued status. Therefore, I have researched whether it helps them to quit smoking because they want to leave the devalued group. Or if it stops them because you stress them out, and therefore they seek out tobacco and the social bonds with other smokers. "

And does stigmatization work?

"No. In short, we found, as expected, that smokers moved toward less interest in quitting smoking when we reminded them of their stigmatized status as smokers. This pattern was not so strong among Danish smokers, who have more support for their smoking in everyday life and to a greater extent see the stigma as unacceptable. "

Not a man-child

I want to talk about some of your latest research, which involves Denmark. Namely about fragile masculinity. You are co-author of an interesting study on precarious manhood, and you and your fellow researchers ask young men in the US and Denmark to describe their masculinity...

»There are actually striking differences in how young American and Danish men see themselves and their masculinity. One of the most illustrative is how they define manhood. Young Americans perceive a man in contrast to a woman - you are a man because you are neither a woman nor feminine. Young Danes, on the other hand, perceive manhood in contrast to childhood. You are a man because you are no longer a boy or an immature man.

"How does the difference manifest itself concretely?"

'Young American men link their masculinity with strength and especially with sports. Unlike Danes, they define their bodies based on what it can do - not how it is. And an American man should preferably not show femininity. He must be strong and hardworking, he must be a provider and protector, he must not talk about his feelings, and no one should accuse him of being a girl.

... Danish men also perceive the male role as protector, but at the same time describe that it is important as a man to express his feminine side and for example talk about emotions."

Why the difference?

"Danish young men have learned that being a real man does not have to entail denying all femininity."

Happy us

Denmark is not only known as an equal society, but also as a happy society - and you have written popular science articles about happiness, and how it may be connected to words like "hygge" and "pyt." After one of the articles, a major Argentine newspaper described you admiringly as "the guru of the pyt movement..."

»Hahahaha, I'm not a pyt-guru, nor am I a happiness researcher... but as a Dane in the US I hear a lot about "Danish happiness" and "Danish hygge." And it has been interesting - with a psychological angle - to explain these unique words and concepts, also "pyt" for example. I usually write articles for my fellow researchers, and it has been fun to write for non-researchers - and the reach and impact have been completely different.

According to surveys, Denmark is a happier society than the US, and in the US I have often heard two objections to the surveys. First, that Danes do not seem wildly happy. Almost a bit sullen. Second, that the US is only doing worse because the US is a more heterogeneous society with more immigrants... how do you view that criticism?

"I hear the same thing, and I can tell you that happiness research shows that happiness is not about being outgoing and jubilantly happy, but instead about being content with everyday life. The same list of factors contribute to happiness in all countries, namely that happiness comes from trusting each other and the authorities, a sense of security, low corruption and being able to influence everyday life.

Denmark and the Nordic countries score high, while the US, for example, scores somewhat lower – the US was number 19 in one of the most recent happiness surveys. And the explanation resides in part with the welfare state and its social norms.”

And the heterogeneous society and the immigrants?

”There are lots of countries that are as homogeneous as Denmark, and they are not at the top, and immigration has no significance in the long run, researchers say. Immigrants adjust to the level of happiness in their new countries. A Syrian refugee in Denmark is happier than a Syrian refugee in the US. Danish happiness is not genetic or built into us - it is dependent on the society we have created.”

You have lived in the US since 1986, but you have also lived in Denmark for periods of time and researched the Danes... do you ever consider returning home?

»I love Denmark, where I grew up and where my amazing family lives. I am so lucky that I can live and do research in Denmark in the summer. I also love the United States. Diversity and openness is something that I appreciate and I am happy with my career there. I am a Danish citizen and have recently become an American citizen.”So you are one of those who think that you can love two fatherlands? »Can you have two children? And love them both for better or worse? Of course you can. I am privileged and I can enjoy the best of both countries, and I do.”

Poul Høi is Berlingske's correspondent in the UK.

FACTS

Smoking, illness, and excess mortality

Annually 13,600 Danes die prematurely due to smoking.

Heavy smokers die on average eight to ten years prematurely and prior to death can expect 10.5 years of life with a debilitating illness. 320,000 Danes have the lung disease COPD. About 85 percent of COPD cases are smoking-related.

4,500 new cases of lung cancer are diagnosed annually. Between 80% and 90% of the cases are due to smoking.

There are four times as many heavy smokers among the less educated compared to the most educated.

Danish smokers and ex-smokers have 2.7 million additional visits to a general practitioner and 150,000 additional hospital admissions annually.

Source: The Danish National Board of Health

BLUE BOOK

Marie Helweg-Larsen

Born in Valby she graduated from Vestre Borgerdyd High School. When she could not get into a psychology university program in Denmark she instead studied psychology in California.

In 1994, she earned a Ph.D. in social psychology from one of the world's best universities, the University of California, Los Angeles. She has taught at universities in California, Florida and Kentucky, been a visiting researcher at the Danish Cancer Society and the Danish National Institute of Public Health and is currently a professor at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania where she is also holds an Endowed Chair, the Glenn E. & Mary Line Todd Chair in the Social Sciences.

She lives in Carlisle, Pennsylvania and most often spends the summers in Denmark with her husband, Wendell, who is a Spanish professor. Together with her daughter, Sarah DiMuccio, a PhD student in social psychology at New York University, she published the study “A Qualitative Analysis of Perceptions of Precarious Manhood in the U.S. and Danish men.”

BEHIND THE STORY

The article is part of Berlingske's focus on Danes who make a difference in the world.

We present the article as an informative interview that aims to illustrate Marie Helweg-Larsen's research.

To avoid misunderstandings and maintain professional precision, she has had an opportunity to read the draft, and she has in some areas asked for edits and clarifications, which we have completed because they did not change the interview.

We decided the questions, informational boxes, special text, captions, and style and time of publication.

See the earlier interviews in the series »Danes who rock the world« on berlingske.dk
