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# THE FIGHT AGAINST CORONA FROM A DANISH CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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## Abstract.

This is the first article in a series with the overall aim to examine how culture and specifically cultural values are associated with the strategies and measures adopted in response to the Coronavirus Pandemic by different countries. In the present article, the attempt to change people's behavior to minimize the spread of infections by one country (Denmark) is addressed in terms of three aspects, i.e., 'trust', 'nudging' and 'social control'.

**Keywords:** Pandemic, Coronavirus, COVID-19, Culture, Cultural Dimensions, Culture Clusters, Mental Images, Denmark

## Introduction

The Coronavirus Pandemic has left the world in turmoil and has resulted in unprecedented human and economic consequences. Since its outbreak in Wuhan, China, currently believed to be December 2019, "*severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)*" (Chu et al., 2020, p. 1) has spread rapidly, exposing populations throughout the world to serious risk of infection, disease and ultimately death. As of June 10, 2020, 7,357,243 confirmed cases and 414,474 deaths from COVID-19 have been reported across 213 countries and territories, leaving only a handful of countries and territories unaffected by the Coronavirus Pandemic (Worldometers, 2020).

Systematic variation has been observed among countries in terms of e.g., risk assessment, prevention, response, detection, mitigation and control. Furthermore, measures put in place have varied in degree of strictness. While a variety of factors plays a role in how countries have responded to the Coronavirus Pandemic, e.g., demographics, geography, economic resources, health care capacity, culture has also been suggested to play an important role in the strategies and measures adopted. In other words, culture is believed to have modified the way different countries have responded to the Coronavirus Pandemic in significant ways, not only in terms of how authorities have responded, but also in terms of how populations have responded to measures, which have been put in place (Wursten, 2020).

## Culture

Culture has been defined in a myriad of ways in the literature. For instance, Hofstede (2001, p. 9) has defined culture as the "*collective programming of the human mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another*". Matsumoto (2000, p. 24), on the other hand, offers a more fine-grained definition and defines culture as "*a dynamic system of rules – explicit and implicit – established by groups in order to ensure their survival, involving attitudes, values, beliefs, norms and behaviors, shared by a group but harbored differently by each specific unit within the group, communicated across generations, relatively stable but with the potential to change across time*".

Common for most definitions is that culture is seen as formed over long periods of time (e.g., Hofstede et al., 2010; Taras et al., 2009), relatively stable (e.g., Hofstede et al., 2010; Minkov, 2013; Taras et al., 2009), and shared within a group (e.g., Hofstede, 2001;

Hofstede et al., 2010; Minkov, 2013). Furthermore, common for most definitions of culture is that the basic, central, essential, innermost and core element is seen to be made up by values (e.g., Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede et al., 2010; Kluckhohn, 1951). Hofstede (2001, p. 5) has defined a value as “*a broad tendency to prefer certain states of affairs over others*” to which strong emotions are attached. Minkov (2013), on the other hand, offers a more pragmatic definition, i.e. referring to a value as whatever people describe or select as personally important, for instance, religion, work, leisure, family and friends.

Values are related and form systems of values (Hofstede, 2001). At the societal level, such value systems are often referred to as cultural dimensions or cultural value dimensions (Hofstede et al., 2010). The most well-known cultural value dimensions are those identified by Professor Geert Hofstede, i.e., Power Distance (PDI), Individualism vs. Collectivism (IDV), Masculinity vs. Femininity (MAS), Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI), Long-Term Orientation (LTO) and Indulgence vs. Restraint (IVR) (Hofstede et al., 2010). For the reader, who is unfamiliar with the six cultural value dimensions, the dimensions are defined as follows:

Power Distance refers to “*the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally*” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 61).

Individualism refers to “*societies in which the ties between individuals are loose; everyone is expected to look after him- or herself and his or her immediate family*”, whereas Collectivism refers to “*societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty*” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 92).

Masculinity refers to societies “*where emotional gender roles are clearly distinct: men are supposed to be assertive, tough and focused on material success, whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender and concerned with the quality of life*” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 140). Femininity, on the other hand, refers to societies where “*emotional gender roles overlap: both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life*” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 140).

Uncertainty Avoidance refers to “*the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations*” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 191).

Long-Term Orientation refers to “*the fostering of virtues related towards future rewards – in particular, perseverance and thrift*” whereas Short-Term Orientation refers to “*the fostering of virtues related to the past and present- in particular, respect for tradition, perseverance of ‘face’, and fulfilling social obligations*” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 239).

Indulgence refers to “*a tendency to allow relatively free gratification of basic and natural human desires related to enjoying life and having fun*”, whereas Restraint refers to “*a conviction that such gratification needs to be curbed and regulated by strict social norms*” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 281).

### **Culture Clusters**

Countries, which share similar cultural value profiles, are typically grouped together. Within a specific group, countries tend to share a similar ‘mental image’ or understanding of what society and organizations should be like (Wursten, 2019). Fundamental values are similar, and the small differences in the mental programming between the countries within such a group, should typically be interpreted as nuances, which nevertheless, can translate into

different ways of doing things between the countries, as for instance currently observed in the different responses to the Coronavirus Pandemic by Danish and Swedish authorities.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Danish Culture**

Similarly to the other Nordic countries, Denmark falls into the culture cluster, which Wursten (2019) refers to as the 'Network Cluster'. Common for the countries in the Network Cluster is that countries are characterized by low Power Distance, Individualism, Femininity and weak to medium high Uncertainty Avoidance. Denmark, specifically, is characterized by one of the lowest Power Distance scores in the world (PDI=18). In other words, the Danish society is characterized by a high degree of equality. Although Denmark, in a similar way to the other Nordic countries, is often erroneously assumed Collectivist, Denmark is an Individualist country (IDV=74); the most Individualist country in the Nordics. The people- and relationship-orientation observed in the Nordic countries does not originate in Collectivism, but instead in Femininity; Denmark is a country characterized by Femininity (MAS=16). Denmark is also characterized by a weak Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI=23) and finally, Denmark is characterized by Short-Term Orientation (LTO=35) and Indulgence (IVR=70) (Hofstede et al., 2010).<sup>2</sup>

### **The Danish Approach**

The Danish response to the emergence of the Coronavirus Epidemic starts out relatively relaxed. From January 28, 2020 until the end of February, the Danish Health Authority assesses the risk of Coronavirus spread within Denmark to 'very small' (Danish Health Authority, 2020c). The first Danish COVID-19 case is confirmed February 27, 2020 (Danish Patient Safety Authority, 2020). Patient zero, an employee with the Danish television station TV2, falls ill after returning home from a skiing holiday in Lombardy, Northern Italy. (Danish Patient Safety Authority, 2020). As his symptoms are considered mild, he is requested to isolate at home.

March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declares the Coronavirus Epidemic a Pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020) and the situation proves more serious as the number of confirmed cases in Denmark has increased to 514. (Statsministeriet, 2020). Since it is no longer a question of whether Denmark will be affected or not, but rather how the crisis should be handled, Danish authorities act quickly and resolutely. The same day a press briefing is held, during which Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen emphasizes the seriousness of the situation and as one of the first leaders of government in Europe, announces a series of emergency lockdown measures (TV2, 2020).

The decision is based on what is generally known at the time regarding the burden of Coronavirus disease, infection rates in addition to experiences from abroad (Danish Health Authority, 2020a). Danes tend to base decisions on facts and figures and the strategy applied, furthermore, is based on empirical research into what appears to have worked in practice, which is typically the case in weak Uncertainty Avoidance cultures (Hofstede et al., 2010; Wursten, 2019). Weak Uncertainty Avoidance in combination with a Short-Term Orientation results in a pragmatic, action-orientation approach with a strong emphasis on fast intervention, as the following statement by Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen illustrates, *"it is our firm conviction that it is better to act today than regret tomorrow"* (Statsministeriet, 2020). As is typically the case in Network Cultures, Danes feel relatively comfortable acting without complete information and gradually adapting as new information

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<sup>1</sup> Cross-cultural differences in the fight against Corona are addressed in a forth-coming article, in which a large number of countries are elaborately examined.

<sup>2</sup> Scores can also be viewed at [www.hofstede-insights.com](http://www.hofstede-insights.com).

becomes available. Changes due to emerging insights are acceptable (Wursten, 2019) and the way the Danish authorities have and continue to manage the Coronavirus Pandemic is constantly adjusted (Danish Health Authority, 2020b).

The Danish authorities are especially concerned about events, which have been unfolding in Italy; a health care system under immense pressure and rapidly approaching its breaking point. Denmark ranks 8<sup>th</sup> on the Global Health Security Index, which measures a country's health security and related capabilities (GHS INDEX, n.d.), and is considered to have a high quality health care system (GHS INDEX, n.d.). However, at the same time, Denmark is the country with the second lowest number of hospital beds relative to population size in Europe (The World Bank, n.d.). Smaller hospitals have been replaced by so-called 'super hospitals' focused on delivering specialized and faster treatment. Patients without the need for medical treatment or care are instead transferred to the responsibility of local government (municipalities). However, more lives will be lost without enough capacity and especially hospital capacity "*to deliver critical care in intensive care units (ICU) with ventilators*" (McKinsey, 2020, p. 1). To avoid a health care system collapse, an important objective thus becomes to attempt to influence the evolution of Coronavirus infections in Denmark. As a result, the Danish government puts in place a series of measures to try to delay and minimize the peak of infections. It is believed that by flattening the curve precious time is gained, which will allow for expanding health care capacity, reallocate resources, and train specialized health care staff etc. (Danish Health Authority, 2020a).

## **Trust**

As has been the case with respect to many governments around the world, one of the most important tools of the Danish government to flatten the curve has and continues to be 'social distancing'. Social distancing, i.e., physical distancing, has been found to be associated with a large reduction in infections (Chu et al., 2020, p. 10). Social distancing helps to break the chain of infection because "*SARS-CoV-2 spreads person-to-person through close contact*" (Chu et al., 2020, p. 1). Social distancing, however, requires people to change their normal behavior. In order to accomplish such a change in behavior, the Danish authorities have to a relatively large extent relied on trust rather than on enforcement. In other words, the authorities have trusted citizens to change their behavior as needed and the result has been a less strict lockdown in Denmark compared to what has been observed in many other societies.

Such an approach has been feasible in part because Denmark is a high trust society. Denmark is the most trusting society in the world (Tinggaard, 2018). More than 3 out of 4 Danes trust other people (78%). Such trust is also referred to as general social trust, i.e., "*trust in strangers you have not met before*" (Tinggaard, 2018, p. 13) and implies general confidence in others to interact and behave decently (Tinggaard, 2018). Denmark is also the most trusting country in the world with respect to institutional trust. Institutional trust refers to "*people's confidence in formal public bodies such as the courts, police and administration*" (Tinggaard, 2018, p. 14). According to Tinggaard (2018), 84% of the Danes have been found to trust the government, legal system, police and bureaucrats. Trust in such institutions is a typical characteristic of low Power Distance societies (Hofstede et al., 2010). Furthermore, trust is a two-way street; power holders in such societies also tend to place their trust in citizens.

High trust in a society has important societal implications, not only in general, but also with respect to crisis management. Trust implies that certain expectations regarding behavior may be held (Tinggaard, 2019). When a certain behavior can be expected, cooperation becomes easier (Tinggaard, 2018). In a high trust society, citizens trust and expect power holders to act in the best interest of society (Tinggaard, 2018). Citizens are

therefore more likely to respect the law (Tinggaard, 2018) as well as comply with requests and guidelines. According to Elinor Ostrom, power holders also trust citizens and expect them voluntarily to cooperate through self-enforcement (Tinggaard, 2018). As a result, the Danish approach to the Coronavirus Pandemic to a substantial extent has rested on voluntary cooperation and self-enforcement rather than enforced cooperation, although the latter has also been the case when deemed absolutely necessary. For instance, in Denmark people have been asked voluntarily to isolate if they feel only mild symptoms and only to contact the health care system if symptoms become more severe. Furthermore, while all public sector workers have been sent on leave and all private sector workers (except for key workers) have been advised to try to work from home as much as possible, the requirement to stay at home has been less strict in Denmark than what has been the case in many other countries. Citizens have been requested to stay inside as much as possible and only venture outside their own homes to run necessary errands such as grocery shopping or visiting the pharmacy. In other words, citizens have been strongly urged, but not ordered to stay at home. Furthermore, no police officers or armed guards have inspected people's motives for venturing outside<sup>3</sup> and special permits have not been required, as has been the case in, for instance, France or Italy. In addition, while hours of operation have been substantially reduced, public transport in terms of trains and buses has not been closed down. People have been strongly urged not to make use of public transport unless absolutely necessary, however, people have not been banned from using public transport. Similarly, Danish citizens have not been banned from travelling to other countries, but instead strongly urged not to do so. If they have travelled to other countries, however, they have been expected to self-quarantine for two weeks upon returning home. (The reason why the Danish borders have been sealed to non-Danish citizens, people without a residence permit or other legitimate reasons, has been to avoid new infections from abroad).

### **Nudging**

Trusting people to behave responsibly is not always enough, however, because human behavior and decision-making by nature are characterized by bounded rationality (Hansen, 2016). Another tool, which has been made use of is 'nudging'. According to Nobel (2020), nudging is particularly relevant in times of Corona. Originally, a term coined by Thaler, "... *a nudge is any factor that significantly alters the behavior of humans*" (Thaler & Sunstein 2008 cited in Hansen, 2016, p. 5). Although governments and private actors around the world use nudges in an effort to change behavior (Nobel, 2020), nudging is a typical governing principle in Network Cultures (Wursten, 2019). A nudge implies an attempt to "*influence people's choices and behaviors through subtle changes in the environment or context where decisions are made*" (Nobel, 2020). In other words, an attempt is made to influence behavior change through indirect encouragement and enablement rather than through enforcement (Wursten, 2020) or mandates (Nobel, 2020). In Denmark, examples of behavioral 'nudges', for instance, refer to the Health Authority's advice in relation to preventing the spread of infection; i.e. washing hands often or using hand sanitizer, coughing or sneezing into a sleeve, avoiding handshakes, kisses on the cheek and hugs – limiting physical contact, cleaning thoroughly – both at home and at the workplace, as well as, keeping a distance and asking others to be considerate. Another example of a Danish nudge is a text message sent to all mobile users in Denmark March 22, 2020 by the Danish Police reminding everyone to keep a distance from others: "*Message to all mobile phone users in Denmark. Coronavirus is spreading in Denmark. Keep your distance and show consideration – also when the sun*

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<sup>3</sup> The only cases, where specific documentation has been required and inspected, have occurred in relation to Denmark's borders.

*shines. Otherwise, we will not be able to slow the spread of the disease. Enjoy your weekend. The Police.”*<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, in supermarkets, marks on the floor have been introduced to nudge customers to keep a distance from each other and in a Danish park; markings in the grass have been introduced to nudge one group of people to keep a distance from another group (Nobel, 2020).

### **Social Control**

Influencing behavior through implicit societal control has also been relied upon throughout the Corona Pandemic. Implicit social control is an important tool carefully to balance the interests of the society and those of the individual in a culture like the Danish, in general. Originating in the cultural value profile with respect to the six cultural dimensions, the Danish culture is characterized by a concern for the individual and the community at the same time, which sometimes results in a tension between what the individual prefers and wants, on the one hand, and what is seen as best for the community or the greater good of society, on the other hand. While Danes experience a high degree of both objective and perceived freedom and autonomy (Bjørnskov, 2019 cited in Lykkeland?), such freedom comes with the expectation that individuals will take personal responsibility for their actions and show solidarity with others. One way to influence people to change behavior in a Network Culture is to develop and emphasize a sense of shared interest (Wursten, 2019) and responsibility through implicit social control. For instance, March 11, 2020, Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen starts to emphasize the need for individual and shared responsibility, as evidenced by the following statements: *“As Danes, feelings of togetherness come natural to us. Now we must stand together by keeping a distance from each other. Public spirit is needed as well as helping each other. Many people already demonstrate excellent public spirit. You have to continue to so. Because this is what works. And with respect to the challenge we are currently facing a big part of the solution rests with the Danes.”* (Statsministeriet, 2020). Furthermore, in a nationally televised address by Her Majesty Queen Margrethe II of The Kingdom of Denmark, March 17, 2020, Her Majesty The Queen calls for individual and social responsibility, as well as, public spirit and reprimands those who do not comply, as witnessed by the following statements: *“Not complying with social distance requirements is simply not right, “It is thoughtless and first and foremost, it is reckless”, as well as, “In times of danger we unite. It comes natural to human beings. It also comes natural to people in our country. This time we need to show solidarity through keeping social distance.”* (Kongehuset, 2020). As is typical in Network Cultures, a strong need for belongingness as well as not standing out by behaving differently than others, result in a situation in Denmark, where shame and pride become effective means to influence people’s behavior (Ferguson, 2019 cited in Lykkeland?).

As pointed out by Nobel (2020) and Wursten (2020), in the present situation softer approaches such as nudging, however, are not enough. A number of measures with health-, economic- and other implications need to be carefully considered (Nobel, 2020). This is also the case in Denmark where borders have been sealed and schools, shopping malls, restaurants etc. have been closed temporarily as well as gatherings of more than 10 people have been prohibited. All such interventions have been made possible by an amendment to the ‘Danish Epidemic Act’, *“authorizing the Minister for Health to take measures to combat the COVID-19 epidemic in Denmark”* and through which *“a large number of restrictions and orders on citizens, associations as well as private and public institutions etc. in respect of internal and external activities”* may be temporarily imposed” (Gorrisen Federspiel, 2020). Nevertheless, in a culture like the Danish, direct orders will only be used when absolutely necessary and

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<sup>4</sup> Message received by author March 22, 2020.



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