

The U.S. could learn from Scandinavia

By Robert Shuter

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The United States is plagued by systemic and exploding inequalities in wealth, education, housing, employment and health care, all fueled by rampant vertical individualism. This vertical perspective of people and performance pervades American life and thought. Consider the phrase "the best and the brightest," the accolade du jour in America.

A recent Google search uncovered more than 44 million references to "the best and the brightest" in U.S. culture, including the best and brightest schools, movies, companies, presidents, leaders, politicians, hospitals, physicians, scientists, pharmacists, therapists, chefs, teachers - even dogs! The phrase captures the society's vertical individualism, where performance in all sectors of U.S. culture is ranked on a hierarchy from best to worst, brightest to dimmest.

Even the discourse of Americans reveals their vertical individualism. For example, the language of praise and criticism, which plays a role in all societies, has a distinctly American twist because of the assortment of superlatives used and their vertical arrangement. Americans are inclined to use superlatives such as "awesome," "outstanding," "wonderful," "tremendous," "delightful" and "great" to describe people, behavior or objects. They are just as apt to use the opposites of these words: "terrible," "disgusting," "garbage," "loser" and "junk" - to name a few. The U.S. language of praise and criticism travels vertically along an emotional register, from highs to lows.

Unlike the U.S., Sweden, Denmark and Norway are founded on horizontal individualism, which they call the Law of Jante, and it emphasizes equality, community and modesty, resulting in sky-high taxes. Their brand of individualism has made Scandinavia among the most economically successful and egalitarian societies, leaders in workforce employment, gender equality, democratic institutions, quality of life, educational achievement, environmental stewardship and digital access, as reported by 2011 World Economic Forum.

Coined by Aksel Sandemose, a Norwegian author, the Law of Jante affects all aspects of Scandinavian life, from social relationships to business communication. At work, for example, managers in Scandinavia are considered "first among equals" and communicate on an egalitarian basis with employees, who are neither reticent nor

intimidated by them. Scandinavian praise and criticism - which tends to be emotionally flat, bereft of superlatives and modest - are carefully crafted so as not to inflate and diminish egos or create false expectations.

The inherent conflict between the Law of Jante and the best and the brightest - two brands of individualism - is captured in a story that was told to me by a Norwegian businessman, who had been living with his 12-year-old daughter and wife in the U.S. for several years and decided, quite suddenly, to return to Norway. What finally convinced him and his wife to depart the U.S. was their daughter's announcement that she was an "outstanding" writer. When they asked her how she knew this, she said, "My teacher told me so." They both instantly realized it was time to return to Norway.

Scandinavians who hear this story quickly understand the parents' decision, while Americans are left dumbfounded by the narrative. They can't understand why this type of praise, so common and so desirable in the U.S., would cause anyone to leave the country. From a Norwegian perspective, praise such as this violates the essence of the Law of Jante by seriously inflating their daughter's ego, which, in the parents' view, potentially hinders her re-entry to Norwegian society. Before she became too egocentric, too American in their eyes, the parents decided it was time to leave.

So what's to be learned from these different and conflicting brands of individualism? In my view, what the world needs is less American vertical individualism and more equality, community and modesty at home, work, in government and international affairs - a Jante world. Scandinavia's unique brand of horizontal individualism has the potential to solve many of the world's most intractable vertical problems, from income and gender inequalities to disparities in education and employment. It's time the world learned the secret of Scandinavian success.

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