



## Fear of *Hygge* and Working-Class Social Capital

Posted on July 3, 2017 by Jack Metzgar

One of the contenders for the Oxford Dictionaries' "word of the year" in 2016 is the Danish word *hygge* (pronounced hoo-guh). As defined by Oxford, it denotes "a quality of coziness and comfortable conviviality that engenders a feeling of contentment and well-being." According to *The New Yorker*, *hygge* has "made inroads with an international audience" because it is often seen as the source of Denmark's ranking as among [the happiest places on earth](#) in international surveys.

I sought to find out about *hygge* because various references to it seemed similar to my sense of key aspects of American working-class culture - namely, the priority given to the pleasures of simply "hanging out" with friends and family or, more broadly, what Barbara Jensen decades ago called a working-class preference for [belonging vs. becoming](#). Based on the handful of articles I read, I wouldn't push this analogy between Danish national culture and American working-class culture too far. But the anxiety *hygge* seems to generate among middle-class professionals for whom striving to achieve is the very core of life seems to confirm the stark opposition between working-class and middle-class cultures that Jensen laid out in [Reading Classes: On Culture and Classism in America](#).

*Hygge* is wonderfully difficult to define, at least for the American and British writers I read. It is strongly associated with certain physical objects like fireplaces, cocoa, old shirts, and candles. But it is primarily an attitude of appreciating what some writers call “the small things of life,” not just a hot cup of cocoa by a fire in winter, but the “comfortable conviviality” of “relaxation with close friends or family.” Some call it “the art of creating intimacy” or “coziness of the soul.”

The panicked reaction to such an attitude is typified by [\*The Atlantic\*](#) headline: “The Danish Don’t Have the Secret to Happiness: Something Is Rotten in the State of Denmark.” The writer, Michael Booth, would not be happy in Denmark because it is too orderly and boring there - no street food or graffiti, no homeless people panhandling, and insufficient numbers of visible poor people to add spice and variety to urban wandering. (In fact, [5% of Danes are poor](#), including nearly 3% of children, not nearly as spicy as our double-digit rates, with 20% of American children growing up in poverty.) Booth is cagily over-the-top with this complaint, but all the writers endorse the satiric anti-individualist “Laws of Jante” as accurately describing Danish social norms. Most of the laws counsel an egalitarian ethic similar to the one I heard growing up in a working-class family a while back: “Never think you are better than anybody else or that anybody else is better than you.” Similarly, they counsel not to expect too much of yourself and to have generally modest expectations of life, while appreciating and making the best of what you have, above all, your family and friends. Most Anglo-American writers find this stifling, a recipe for mediocrity, self-satisfaction, and complacency. Life for them is a “journey,” always striving for self-improvement.

[The Laws of Jante](#) were articulated by a Danish rebel against the *hygge* culture, and many Danes dispute their sardonic exaggeration of Danish conformity. A more positive version of *hygge* is articulated by Danish philosopher/psychologist Svend Brinkmann in [Stand Firm: Resisting the Self-Improvement Craze](#). Without ever mentioning *hygge*, Brinkmann argues against individualist self-absorption and for a Stoic sense of character based on one’s obligations to others, advocating that “we forego our desperate preoccupation with the internal and self-development, and instead learn to connect in more appropriate and meaningful ways to the pre-existing relationships in our lives.”

Danish *hygge* in this version is not so much about coziness and relaxation as it is about centering one’s life around and giving priority to “pre-existing relationships,” what Jensen called working-class belonging in contrast to middle-class striving to *become* something bigger and better than you are so far. Jensen sees [Robert Putnam](#)’s distinction between a *bonding social capital* and a *bridging social capital* as a class-cultural difference. Bonding is “the kind of social capital that is at the heart of working-class communities - deep, loyal, we-are-part-of-one-another bonding.” Middle-class bridging social capital, with its skill at

networking, is “less personal” and more superficial, but “it can unite many people across wide differences,” and it “invites individuals into new communities and experiences.”

As Jensen suggests, both kinds of social capital have value, with both strengths and limitations. *The Economist*, for example, was quick to point out that *hygge*, with its preference for bonding, makes it harder for strangers, like immigrants, to make friends and to feel welcome in Denmark, concluding: “If cultures are obsessed with the joys of relaxing with old friends, perhaps it is because they find it stressful to make new ones.” It likewise could be said that those “obsessed” with networking among people they hardly know and have no intention of ever knowing very well may have a fear of intimacy.

Bonding and bridging are not incompatible with each other. A person can bridge all day and then bond in the evening, as so many of us do. But the dismissive defensiveness against *hygge* of Anglo-American writers indicates a cultural anxiety that fears relaxation itself as threatening the constant striving to perfect one’s self and to outperform others. *Hygge*, I imagine, is relaxing not because of cocoa and fireplaces, but because you are with people who know you so well that you don’t have to bother with presenting yourself, with hiding what you perceive as your weaknesses and disabilities and “putting your best foot forward.” It’s relaxing because you can just be yourself, warts and all, and still be accepted, still belong. That this is seen as a threat to achievement, a dangerous siren call to complacency and self-satisfaction, suggests a professional middle-class culture that has lost confidence in itself and, as a result, is becoming more narrow, rigid, and cramped in its insistence that, in the words of Frederick Winslow Taylor, there is only one right way.

Then, too, much of the fear of *hygge*, as Anna Altman in *The New Yorker* points out, may be based on the “American” rejection of Denmark’s “high taxes and socialist ideas.” Before snarkily dismissing it, Altman cites an alternative point-of-view:

“Perhaps Scandinavians are better able to appreciate the small, *hygge* things in life because they already have all the big ones nailed down: free university education, social security, universal health care, efficient infrastructure, paid family leave, and at least a month of vacation a year. With those necessities secured, according to [Meik] Wiking, Danes are free to become ‘aware of the decoupling between wealth and well-being.’”

The American working class does not have these big things nailed down, and their preference for belonging is more likely influenced by the fact that it’s cheaper and doesn’t

require cash or a credit card. In addition, in a belonging culture that is better at bonding than bridging, “pre-existing relationships” are not “the small things of life” but the big ones.

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