

The Good Life in Scandinavia Study Abroad: Summer 2018

STUDY OF SCANDINAVIA'S DATING LIFE

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There are thousands of countries all over the world, with different cultures, traditions, and values. Each is uniquely diverse from another, yet all experience some form of human connection and/or romantic love between its people. Some may even argue that human contact is the key to happiness. So, when I was given the chance to study the good life in Scandinavia, I was fascinated by the differences in dating life there from what I know in the United States. It was because of this that I decided to focus on the dating culture of Denmark and Sweden and how it relates to happiness within those who live there.

When I first set out to study these differences, I turned to Google to find blogs discussing the flirting and dating habits in Scandinavia, for two reasons. I wanted to make sure there was enough existing research to study this topic and ensure I would be interested in learning more to continue further research. I was satisfied with what I found and set out to learn more during my time in Denmark and Sweden. I hypothesized that gender equality and the distribution of power are more equal in Scandinavian relationships, which will lead to more satisfying romantic encounters and have a positive impact in one's overall happiness.

My method of gathering data was informal and varied from place to place. First, I gathered research through my interactions with others by casually interviewing a few people that I met. One was my resident advisor in Copenhagen, who was a female student in her early twenties. Another was a Danish man in his early thirties and the final was a Swedish woman in her mid-twenties. I found the man while walking through the city of Copenhagen and we were able to strike up a conversation. The woman I met while at an outdoor pop-up market in the small town of Hornstull, Sweden. I was able to chat with her for about 30 minutes while eating lunch by one of the food trucks.

The questions I asked were simple ones, yet I was still able to gain valuable insight into the dating lives of Scandinavians. I questioned participants on whether they believe media and pop culture accurately represents their dating culture. In addition, I asked if they were comfortable approaching potential romantic partners to start a conversation. We also discussed how others perceive dating and marriage in their culture. I asked about the different ways in which they flirt with someone they are interested in, and which setting is the best to meet a potential partner. I even went as far as to question why marriage seems to be less common in Danish and Swedish culture. I wrapped up each conversation by asking how confident they are about their dating lives and inquiring about the level of equality between two partners. Lastly, I drew conclusions by asking how everything above related to their overall happiness.

My other method of research falls under the category of observational data. I was constantly on the lookout for material relating to my project. While out walking during the daytime, I noticed how people interacted with one another and I made it a point to jot down how they flirted, as well as how individuals approached each other. I noticed differences during the night as well. The bar scene was an entirely different atmosphere of flirtation and social connection. I was able to witness how people connected and the different ways in which they met new people. Furthermore, I used my own interactions with Scandinavians as data for my project. I was approached by a couple of friendly people on two separate occasions while out with friends. This allowed me to see firsthand what I had been studying.

From the interview process, I was able to gather that Swedes more so than Danes believe that pop culture sometimes overexaggerates their dating life for the purposes of ratings and Hollywood drama. Both countries (especially Sweden) are open when it comes to talking about sex and contraceptives, even at a young age. Because of this, the media may oversexualize

Sweden and present its citizens as excessively promiscuous. It seemed like those I spoke with believe that the Scandinavian dating life can be misrepresented at times. Despite this, people continue to be open to conversations regarding sex and they prefer to keep it that way. This gives teens and young adults the opportunity to ask questions at an early age and may even be the reason for lower rates of teen pregnancy and abortion.

When asked if people were comfortable approaching a potential romantic partner, most seemed to be on board with the idea. Those I talked to were open to starting new conversations, but, were not as likely to go out of their way to talk to people they didn't know during the day. The woman from Sweden suggested it was because people were busy at work or running errands and as a result, were less likely to strike up a conversation. Interestingly enough, she approached a man who was working at one of the food trucks and gave him a hand-written note with her number on it, so she could talk to him at a later time. I observed her confidence and the way in which she took control of the situation. She stated that both men and women were encouraged to go after what they want instead of being confined to a set of gender rules and expectations. She never asked how she looked or if her outfit was acceptable. She just went for it and accepted that it may or may not work out. The fear of rejection did not bother her because there would always be a next time and another opportunity to meet someone.

The concept of marriage was another important topic of conversation. It came as a shock to me when I learned that Scandinavians tend to get married less than what is perceived of them. Those I spoke with seemed to be confused when I asked them why, because to them it was nothing out of the ordinary. Both my resident advisor and the Swedish woman said that people still marry, but that it is not expected of them, which may be why it is not as common of a practice. They seemed to think that most people marry if they want to have children because of

the benefits that it brings about when starting a family. Others do not feel the need to and still manage just fine. I speculated that without the pressure of marriage, Danes and Swedes can take their time when dating and do not feel rushed to find a spouse. This may lead to lower levels of anxiety and stress when it comes to finding a life partner.

When it comes to flirting and talking to others, Scandinavians are direct and to the point. I believe that this makes things easier when trying to figure out if someone likes them. By skipping the games and excessive small talk, they save time and learn quickly whether they want to go out with someone again. I also learned that they don't have to go out of their way to impress someone by dressing fancy or going on an expensive date. This in turn can take the pressure off planning for the perfect moment or spending hours getting ready. Instead, people can focus on each other and what they want out of the potential relationship.

The man from Denmark said that he tends not to waste time on someone who is uninterested in him. Instead of spending energy and money on someone who will most likely not change their mind, he moves on to another person. He also discussed how night life is one of the best ways to meet someone. When people are out with friends, they are there to have fun and relax. This carefree attitude puts people in a better position to make new connections with others who are on the same page as them.

Every participant that I spoke with seemed to be fairly confident in their dating life. Danes and Swedes still have reservations just like the rest of the world, but it appeared that they practice less self-criticism compared to what I've seen from Americans. I believe this results in less anxiety and doubtful thinking among Scandinavians and allows them to flourish when meeting new people. I also noticed that people in Scandinavia are generally successful at

gauging people's reactions to certain advances. This is helpful when it comes to rejection and knowing who to ask out on a date.

Furthermore, everyone I spoke with agreed that partners share a more equal 50/50 connection with one another, unlike other parts of the world. One difference is that men are not expected to approach women that they are interested in first. It is expected that women should make a move if they are interested, instead of just waiting for someone else to make the first move. While I can't say for sure what impact this might have on happiness, this may relate to a decrease in unwarranted pursuing by men, which in turn can make women more comfortable in their own sexual advances. Men also don't feel the pressure to constantly make the first move, which means they are rejected less and as a result, may suffer less embarrassment.

In addition, women are not seen as promiscuous if they flirt with more than one guy while at a party, whereas in the US, women tend to be looked down on for similar behaviors. Since women are encouraged to take what they want, they are free to explore their sexual desires without feeling shameful, which may be another positive factor that influences their happiness.

I observed that flirting does not seem to be as common during the daytime and the advances may not be obvious to the person who is being flirted with. I think this allows people to flirt at their own pace and not feel pressured to return another's advances. I noticed small flirtation tactics such as glancing in someone's direction to see if they return eye contact. In semi-crowded areas, a common method of getting someone's attention is to lightly bump a person's arm or shoulder as they walk by to see if they take notice. I never saw flirting habits that were over the top, or any loud public displays of affection for that matter. Scandinavians do not like to show off the relationship or stand out from one another too much. It seems like

people are less focused on what others expect from them and that gives them the freedom to handle every relationship the way they see fit.

A surprising finding from this trip is that Scandinavians do not typically use the word dating to describe someone they are going out with. They are not as hung up on labels and instead prefer to say they are “hanging out” with their significant other or just simply “seeing each other”. However, this does not mean that the relationship is any less valued. Danes and Swedes still practice monogamous unions and consider cheating to be a betrayal of their trust. I gathered that the main focus is on contributing equally to the relationship rather than concerning themselves with how others view it from social media or other perspectives.

To my knowledge, everything I learned about Scandinavia’s dating culture supported my hypothesis that gender equality within Scandinavian relationships leads to more satisfying romantic encounters and an increase in one’s overall happiness. No one gender is expected to introduce themselves first, be responsible for paying for dates, or even provide more financial support than another. It is expected that partners should work out amongst themselves their roles and contributions to the relationship. This equal distribution of power between partners is what I think allows them to feel happier and more appreciated by one another.

My project was limited by time, money and participants since this was an informal method of research. If I was given the chance to repeat my study abroad experience, there are a few things I would do differently. I would include a more diverse population in my sample group, as well as increase the number of participants to a few hundred. By gathering data from people of different ages, genders, ethnicities, and worldviews, I would gain a more accurate representation of Scandinavia’s dating culture. If possible, I would also randomly assign participants to one of two groups; interview or survey. Each subject would be asked the same

quantity and quality of questions, but in a different method. The purpose of this is to save time by having several people complete a survey at once, while still gathering enough insight into dating life. I am also curious to see how much of a difference there is in answers between the two methods of data collection.

My main concern with this type of study is ensuring the privacy of all participants. Each would be responsible for consenting to participate in writing and all would be aware of their right to withdraw at any given time during the study without penalty. My priority would be the confidentiality and comfort of those involved. There would be no identifiable information in the study report and participants' answers would only be disclosed to those involved in the research process. In an ideal world, each subject would be compensated for their time and efforts. However, the benefits of my study would include a greater understanding of one's culture and an increased awareness of one's own social tendencies.

The study would be an experimental design testing whether gender equality in dating life leads to an overall increase in Danish and Swedish happiness. Participants would be randomly assigned to either the interview or survey experimental group and all would be Scandinavian citizens. The only difference within independent variables between the two groups would be the method of questioning. Additionally, I would include a control group made up entirely of American citizens and have the participants complete the same survey questioning their dating life. The purpose of this is to compare responses between the control group and experimental groups to find correlations between Scandinavian and American cultures.

I would expect my results to be similar to the ones found in this paper, but with more concrete evidence as to why those differences exist and how they affect happiness. I know I would not be able to imply definite causation that gender equality creates happier relationships

and leads to more satisfying lives. It is always possible that some unknown, third variable may be the reason for increased happiness. Likewise, it is difficult to measure happiness and my operational definition for happiness may be different from another's. Despite these challenges, I believe that the benefits of my study would outweigh the costs, and therefore be validation for conducting research. The public would have knowledge of another culture's way of life and with that comes greater mindfulness and appreciation of those who are different from us. Citizens would be more open-minded and gain a greater understanding of their own personalities, and that is priceless information.