

Aarhus University (AU) in Denmark publishes booklets on diverse topics under the rubric *Reflections*, written by experts, yet in a common language aiming for the general public to read. In 2014, two booklets in this series were translated into English, (1) *Trust* by G. T. Svendsen, Professor and trust expert at AU, and (2) *Positive Psychology* by Hans Henrik Knoop, Associate Professor at AU and President of the European Network for Positive Psychology.

Trust

As a visiting student in Washington DC. in the 1990s, Svendsen was repeatedly asked by respected world known economists what he thought might be the reason for “*the Scandinavian puzzle*” (p. 10), that is why the Scandinavian countries were better off socially and economically as compared with other countries. Svendsen was taken by surprise; he was incapable of providing any answer at that time. However, the question motivated Svendsen in searching for explanations and now, some twenty years on, he offers the readers of this booklet the possible answers, which he has worked through the time since passing. *Social trust* is, according to Svendsen, the gold-mine or the raw material of the Nordic countries, and possibly the main reason for their social and economic well-being. In contrast with only trusting people you know (i.e. individual trust), social trust refers to trusting people in general, upon which the social welfare system in Scandinavia is based, as is co-operation in general. Svendsen refers to three possible explanations on the roots of social trust: (a) the welfare state, (b) cultural heritage, and (c) political stability (p. 31), and leaves the question open for discussion whether or not these might be interconnected. The higher social trust measures in a society, the less money is needed for control, and even control of control, as compared to societies where social trust is low and corruption is observed. Not that control and trust are opposites; some control is always needed, according to Svendsen, yet one has to know and remember that “control is good but trust is cheaper.” (p. 55). Close to 80% of Danes trust most other people (p. 17), the highest score of 86 countries around the world. They also score highest on “the two dimensions ‘courtesy and kindness toward others’ and ‘openness to new ideas and opportunities’” (p. 36). However, social trust, as viewed by Svendsen, is wealth which may disappear from society if it is not carefully looked after. Sustenance of that wealth is possible through employment of democratic values, keeping one’s words and a general understanding of everybody’s contribution to the common good.

Positive Psychology

Although rooted in Abraham Maslow's ideas from mid-20th century, the research field of Positive Psychology (PP) was officially recognised less than two decades ago. The purpose of this booklet is to introduce to readers the main idea behind the concept of PP, which is defined "as the scientific study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive" (p. 7). PP was established to stress the importance of research on health and well-being which from WWII up until year 2000 received around 10% of research funding within psychology and psychiatry in the USA. The remaining 90% had focused on mental illnesses and disorders (p. 12). An emphasis on illnesses rather than health is also found in Denmark, since 5% of the health budget is "spent on preventive, health promoting initiatives, the rest is spent on people who are already ill." (p.11). As a consequence, Knoop argues, the knowledge about illnesses is far more substantial than what is known about health. Why might that be? PP's explanation is that humans have not changed biologically since the stone age - and at that time it was vital to be aware of negative events and circumstances. Thus, humans survived in spite of dangers, but did not develop enjoyment (pp.19-22) and might, at our time in history, as Knoop argues, be "genetically predisposed to a kind of chemically determined *happiness set point*" (p.21). Eventually, in Knoop's view, this set point might be affected by material affluence and be viewed as "*happiness set range*" (p.21). Still, the tendency to view the negative experiences over the positive ones is obvious, also in Denmark, where the happiest nation in the world lives, where citizens are economically more equal than elsewhere, where corruption is less than in most other countries and people trust each other (pp. 15-18). In order to change this mind set, humans must learn to be aware and control it. Knoop discusses the importance of individual growth and regulation of self and mentions some methods or practices, such as mindfulness, physical activity and gratitude exercises as self-help tools in gaining and sustaining a positive state of body and mind. In order to *thrive, flourish* and experience *flow* (keywords in PP), one must be active and curious, focus on possibilities, strengths and success, and above all, cultivate an optimistic view and a desire to develop. Knoop sums it up by demystifying and even simplifying this field of psychology as such: "Positive psychology is really just common psychology about feeling good and functioning well" (p.55).

The *Reflection* series contains booklets small enough to fit in your hand and in any pocket, about 60 pages divided in five or six mini-chapters. The layout is convenient, a few highlights printed in different colour, maybe one or two every other page, not much text on each page and your attention is caught! As a curious reader you really want to take one of those into your hand and bring it with you on the bus to read on your way to work. It is often mentioned that universities must reach out to communities, bring their research knowledge to the people. That is exactly what Aarhus University and those two authors have done. Anybody who knows how to read might want to read a *Reflection* booklet like these two. As

compared with published research in peer-reviewed journals within any academic field, these booklets grasp the content and leave out methodological details. If you are academically interested, you might look the authors up (e.g. Google) and read their material published in peer-reviewed journals. If you are not academically trained or interested, yet curious, you may easily grab a booklet and enjoy, participate in discussions and then read more. This non-academic presentation of serious academic material is worth a praise. Thank you.

Share this:

- [Share](#)