

Some Factors Related to Norwegian Stereotypes of Americans¹

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Americans, particularly in this cold war era in which they have chosen to compete for allies around the globe, are greatly interested in knowing what foreigners think of them. In many ways, we feel insecure of our standing in the international community. We would like to be admired, but we are not certain how to go about it. We do not know if our present efforts are bearing goodwill fruit. Most often, in our quest for reflections of ourselves abroad we have had to rely on the reports of visitors who have published their impressions of America after visits here, or we have had to accept the interpretations of persons abroad who are presumed to be in a position to gauge accurately the pulse of their countrymen. The inadequacies of such methods are all too obvious.

Only recently have we begun to apply the techniques of indigenous public opinion developments to foreign areas (1, 2). The field is fertile, and has barely been worked. The present paper is an attempt to delve into a minute segment of this vast area.

During April, 1952, the writer was able to obtain, as the result of face-to-face interviews by trained workers, responses within a 212-person random sample in Oslo, Norway, providing an adjectival estimate of "typical Americans." This paper is the summary of these responses, broken down according to three basic census-type identification characteristics: sex, age, and education.

Each person was asked the following question: "As you know, it often happens that newspapers use different words and expressions about people from different countries. Now I am going to read off some such words for you two times. The first time you can just listen; the second time please pick out the three words which you think give the best description of typical Americans."

The check list included twelve adjectives, chosen after pre-testing to correspond to what appeared to be common stereotypes of Americans held in Norway. Favorable, unfavorable, and neutral categories were represented in about equal proportions.

These were the results:

Total Response. Two of the traits on the list impressed the Norwegians as peculiarly American. Sixty and fifty per cent respectively included *capable* and *efficient* (*effective*) in their answer.² The distinction between the two adjectives, *capable* and *efficient*, appears primarily to be one of language usage rather than of basic attitude nuance. Some individuals felt more comfortable semantically with *capable*; others with *efficient*.

Clustering together were what might be called secondary American traits in Norwegian eyes. These, with the percentage of respondents indi-

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² The translation of the Norwegian words into their most apt American equivalents was done by Einar Haugen, Thompson Professor of Scandinavian Languages at the University of Wisconsin.

cating each, are: *nice* (fun to be with, enjoyable), 31 per cent; *frank*, 28 per cent; *uninhibited*, 28 per cent; and *friendly* (kind, courteous), 26 per cent.

At the bottom of the list, less than one respondent in five believed that the following designations are among the three most significant characteristics of Americans: *nationalistic*, 20 per cent; *lacking in culture*, 15 per cent; *naive* (childish), 13 per cent; *wasteful*, 12 per cent; *drink a lot*, 6 per cent; and *brutal*, 3 per cent.

Sex Differences. Most striking of the differences between the estimates of Americans by Norwegian men and women is the higher percentage of women who regard Americans as uninhibited. Thirty-four per cent of the women as against 24 per cent of the men indicate this term. Contrasts in cultural sex roles may account for a large part of this variation. Norwegian women probably think of American women when they answer the question, and Norwegian males, in the same manner, think in terms of American males. To the relatively staid Oslo male, the American male could well appear to be uninhibited; to the rather sexually-unrestricted Oslo female, the American woman might seem to be less correctly characterized by the adjective.

There is a wide difference in the use of the terms *capable* and *efficient* by each Norwegian sex. About 48 per cent of the men and 62 per cent of the women name *capable*, while 63 per cent and 38 per cent respectively use *efficient*. Two explanations of this result suggest themselves: first, capability is more of a feminine trait, and efficiency a male trait. Second, the Norwegian word for "clever" is a standard part of the everyday vocabulary of the less-educated, while "effective" is more restricted to the better educated. Norwegian women, as their American counterparts, receive less education than the men.

In addition to the above variations, there was a considerably higher proportion of *friendly* and *nice* answers by the women. Males were significantly more inclined only toward *efficient*. Females in Oslo, we may conclude, are more favorably oriented toward Americans than males, insofar as the rough index employed is capable of discerning this attitude differential.

Age Differences. Age variation had only a comparatively slight effect on adjectival portraits of typical Americans. Two age groups were differentiated: one ranging from 15-30 years and the second including persons 31 years of age and older.

The most notable contrasts appeared in places where only a small proportion of the respondents had chosen terms. In these areas, it is the younger group whose judgments are more severe toward Americans. More than twice as many of the 15-30 bracket, for example, find that Americans drink too much (9% versus 4%), and three times as many believe they are brutal (6% versus 2%).

Both groups are close to the sample mean in mentioning "efficient," though the 15-30 class indicates "clever" more often than the older persons (67% to 57%). In all, by present measurements, the older persons are more favorably oriented toward the typical American.

Educational Differences. Three educational sub-groups were set up, conforming to the major breaks in Norwegian school progress. The divisions and the percentage of respondents fitting into each were: up to and including eight years of school (32%); more than eight, but not more than twelve years (50%); and more than twelve years (18%).

All but three of the adjectives—*uninhibited*, *nationalistic*, and *brutal*—followed a steady progression either up or down through the three educa-

tional levels. In the case of *uninhibited*, to look a little more closely at one of the deviants, 31 per cent of the least educated and 32 per cent of the best educated mentioned the term, while only 24 per cent of the middle group indicated it. The most likely explanation appears to be that these educational groups used persons of their own schooling level as referents in answering the questions, and that the percentages reflect the well-known social and moral conservatism of the middle classes, a phenomenon as prominent in Norway as in the United States.

Some answer variations among educational levels are quite broad. Running from the least educated to the best educated, we can cite the percentages for: *clever* (78:58:37); *efficient* (31:50:71); *nice* (39:34:8); *lacking culture* (12:15:21); *naive* (3:17:18); and *wasteful* (9:15:15). There appears to be no doubt, again assuming the reliability of our measuring apparatus, that Norwegians with a lesser amount of education are more favorably oriented toward Americans, and those with a greater amount of education are less favorably inclined.

CONCLUSIONS

Two major items stand out: The first is that a very large percentage of the Oslo sample finds two traits that it feels distinctively characterize typical Americans: They are *efficient and capable*. That these words are associated with Americans is not surprising. Williams, for instance, has noted that "American emphasis upon *efficiency* has consistently impressed outside observers. The Germans even coined the term *Fordismus* to refer to the standardization, production, and "streamlined" efficiency of American industrialism (3). The present study shows, however, not only that these traits are associated with Americans, but also that they are decisively preferred over ten other items which run an approval-disapproval gamut.

The second conclusion is of a negative nature. Many observers have claimed that Americans are regarded abroad as wasteful, brutal, heavy-drinking, and culture-less individuals. While this may possibly be partially true, it appears evident that other Americans traits, at least in Oslo, dwarf these items into insignificance.

The census-type comparisons may be summarized by noting that it is among the least-educated and female group that Americans find their greatest admirers. Age seems to be of lesser importance in contributing to the structuring of stereotypes of Americans, though the older persons appear to be more favorably inclined. It is the best-educated and male population segment that holds the least favorable impressions of Americans. It is this last group, of course, which supplies most of the national leaders, so that the finding carries overtones of a practical nature.

Among other things, it remains to explore the relationships between American activity and Norwegian stereotypes of Americans. Policy makers in the United States are coming more and more to rely upon national public opinion field research to guide decisions and to evaluate operating programs. That complementary efforts should be developed along international lines is the underlying assumption of this paper.

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