

MONEY CAN'T BUY ME *HYGGE*

Danish Middle-Class Consumption, Egalitarianism,
and the Sanctity of Inner Space

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Abstract: In this article, the style of social interaction known as *hygge* is analyzed as being related to cultural values that idealize the notion of 'inner space' and to other egalitarian norms of everyday life in Scandinavian societies. While commonly experienced as a pleasurable involvement in a social and spatial interior, *hygge* is also examined as a mode of withdrawal from alienating conditions of modernity. In spite of its egalitarian features, *hygge* acts as a vehicle for social control, establishes its own hierarchy of attitudes, and implies a negative stereotyping of social groups who are perceived as unable to create *hygge*. The idea of *hygge* as a trait of Scandinavian culture is developed in the course of the interpretation, and its limitations are also discussed against ethnographic evidence that comparable spatial and social dynamics unfold in other cultural contexts.

Keywords: atmosphere, consumption, egalitarianism, family, home, *hygge*, interiority, sociality

This article is concerned with the social phenomenon of *hygge*, which in Denmark has an almost iconic status in representing a style of being together that 'ordinary people' often consider to be distinctly Danish. The phenomenon of *hygge*, described here more comprehensibly than has been done so far, is interpreted as located within central aspects of Scandinavian culture and everyday life, such as egalitarianism, home-centeredness, middle-class life, romantic and religious ideals, and concerns for 'inner spaces'. I also problematize the popular perception of *hygge* as being a trait that is exclusive to Danish culture, discussing its core analytical aspect of 'interiority' as a cross-cultural recurrence rather than an example of local particularity.

Hygge is interpreted here as a carrier of normative meanings and cultural assumptions by which people can evoke the concept in order to valorize a range of different (mainly inter-) actions, rendering them performatives of this cultural



idiom. Analytically, *hygge* indexes a category of practices that, in various ways, entail the creation of temporary 'shelters' against social stratification, competition, and the market.

Emphasizing how the normative charge of *hygge* as a cultural concept plays into social distinctions among social classes, the present account of *hyggelig* sociality might contribute a new angle on the question of what people in Scandinavian societies actually do when they practice egalitarian social patterns in their everyday lives and the wider societal ramifications thereof. One such ramification involves the social hierarchies and boundaries that are reproduced when an individualist, subjectivist Scandinavian orientation to self and society unfolds along with egalitarian social controls that manifest themselves in interactions where social sameness is displayed and signs of difference are suppressed.

The fieldwork for this study was carried out among four middle-class Danish families in Copenhagen. The focus was mainly on practices of consumption and the way that these shape everyday relations among family members, their social imaginary of what being a family means, and their perceptions of other families. Like other Scandinavian anthropologists writing about Scandinavia, such as Marianne Gullestad, I supplement my fieldwork with my own native experience—in my case, as someone who was born and brought up in Denmark, although actually being a Swedish citizen with a Danish father and a Swedish mother. Some of my semantic mapping of the meanings of *hygge* draws on my native proficiency in Danish and my lifelong experience of Danish forms of interaction, from which I will try to distance myself for the purpose of anthropological analysis. One possible benefit of being a native ethnographer is to have a heightened awareness of the political repercussions of cultural concepts within the realm of one's society, having been exposed for years to the public debates in which they figure and having witnessed the political changes that actualized them. The concept of *hygge* often features in public debates about economic issues and the political role of Denmark in the world.

Taken in isolation, several of the points made here about *hygge* have already been discussed by insightful and polemical Danish commentators. If nothing else, I aim to present an interpretation that weaves together these different elements more coherently than has been done before and that provides them with a sense of cultural resonance and historical continuity.

The Concept of *Hygge*

The concept of *hygge* can be introduced by looking at a range of cultural meanings, both negative and positive, and at everyday habits that pertain to it. *Hygge* is an emic Danish term for a certain quality of sociality, its etymological origin lying in the Norwegian language (and, further back, Old Norse). References to its meaning in eighteenth-century Norwegian center on such connotations as the safe habitat; the experience of comfort and joy, especially in one's home and family; a caring orientation, for example, toward children; a civilized mode of behavior that other people find easy to get along with, one that soothes them

and builds their trust; a house that, while not splendid or overly stylish, is respectably clean and well-kept (Aasen 2003; Knudsen and Sommerfeldt 1983; Nielsen 2004; Nilsen 2007; Vikør 2005).¹ The meaning of *hygge* can be approximated through English words such as cozy, homey, informal, sincere, down-to-earth, warm, close, convivial, relaxed, comfortable, snug, friendly, welcoming, and tranquil. A German term often mentioned in this regard is *Gemütlichkeit*. *Hygge* is both a noun and a verb. As a verb, it denotes the activity of being together in a certain way, usually in the reflexive form *at hygge sig* (to *hygge* oneself/themselves). It also has the adjective form *hyggelig* (*hygge*-like).

Hygge signifies a safe, low-key, intimate form of socialization. For many people, the notion of having 'a *hyggelig* time' would refer to being with good friends or with one's family or partner, having fun in an easy-going yet not overly exciting way (not a party, as such), talking and telling jokes in a relaxed manner, or perhaps watching a movie together or playing a board game. The home seems to be the most common setting for *hygge*, although social encounters in other locations can also easily be seen as *hyggelig*. People experience a sense of closeness, often based on sharing food and drinks (with or without alcohol). An example would be the occasion when I dined with a group of neighbors in Måløv, an upper-middle-class satellite town west of Copenhagen, where I had met a family in the course of fieldwork. This organized body of neighbors was responsible for making several decisions about keeping the neighborhood clean, such as regularly repairing or painting things together. They also much appreciated meeting for meals once in a while. This enabled them to become better acquainted and added a dimension of everyday friendliness, without which their neighborly relations would feel too distant. To them, *hygge* marked a form of sociality that could counter the tendency of their social organization to become overly formal and instrumental, with neighbors confining their social life to private homes.

An important facet of *hygge* is the ubiquity of the concept. From native experience, any Danish speaker will recognize the widespread, habitual, and often ritualistic use of the term. A customary farewell greeting after an informal get-together with friends is "That was *hyggelig*!" Even social interactions that are experienced as quite tense will end with this mutual reassurance. A related custom among Danes who encounter a friend or colleague with whom they have shared an informal gathering is to refer to that event by first saying "Hello" and then "Tak for sidst" (roughly, "Thanks for the last time we were together"), to which the most common reply would be "Yes, that was *hyggelig*." This everyday ritual often strikes foreigners as quite odd—indeed, "Tak for sidst," like *hygge*, has no immediate translation into English, which suggests the particular cultural concern in Denmark with a safe, balanced, and harmonious everyday sociality that this article probes. People are directly concerned with *hygge*, and it is quite commonplace to say things like "Now we are going to *hygge*." Yet for most people, its nature is hard to specify other than by its absence. *Hygge*, says Judith Hansen (1980: 206), is a valued way of being together that is not, in itself, an implicit cultural value but rather represents implicit cultural values, such as balance and moderation. This

presence in the foreground of everyday awareness makes *hygge* a fruitful subject for studying a concern for sociality.

While Gullestad (1992: 79) mentions *hygge* briefly, she does not relate it to the values of Scandinavian culture that she is known for analyzing, such as equality or peace and quiet. Some of these connections will be drawn in this article. What Gullestad does say about *hygge* indeed resonates with several other authors, namely, that the term implies "ideas of beauty, warmth, emotional closeness, feelings of solidarity, and relaxation from work. If we keep to the furnishings, a cozy home has a wealth of textiles, potted plants, souvenirs, paintings, and photographs" (ibid.: 80).

The particular mode of interaction that characterizes *hygge* is described by Stephen Borish (1991: 276) in his ethnography of Danish sociality:

Hygge as practiced by Danes has special characteristics. First, it depends on the complete and positive participation of all present in the encounter.... Second, it requires an evenness of flow, a sustained back-and-forth dance of involvement that encourages and even demands this level of participation. And third, the achievement of these goals is made possible by a range of positive social skills, including teasing (a national pastime), quick repartee, the telling of stories and jokes, patience, sensitivity, and the ability to be an enthusiastic audience as well as performer. The ability to participate easily in social encounters that bring this principle to life is a part of the Danish heritage that others can well regard with envy.

Besides bringing out principles that I agree are central to *hygge*, the quote also exemplifies the idyllization of Danish society and sociality (with *hygge* as an icon) that is often undertaken by both Danes and foreign observers. Americans, for example, as Jonathan Schwartz (1989: 37) notes, "never seem to tire of hearing about *hygge*."

The cultural relations by which *hygge* connects to egalitarian values have been briefly suggested in the existing literature, if never thoroughly analyzed. As Hansen (1980: 167) says, *hygge* does not permit any participant to take center stage or to dominate a situation for very long. *Hygge* also represents an inward-looking and somewhat careful tendency in that these "interactional bubbles" are "dependent upon participants' cooperative efforts to avoid thorny topics or divisive issues" (ibid.: 42). Instead, *hygge* is charged with a strong orientation toward the present, "a readiness to commit oneself to the experience of the moment" (ibid.: 36).

The Middle-Class Worldview

The analytical resonance between *hygge* and middle-class culture is illustrated in empirical data on middle-class existence in Denmark. Victor and Lone are a couple in their early fifties. They have been together for six years and have bought an apartment, where they live with Victor's 18-year-old daughter and his two sons aged 15 and 8. Victor's previous wife, the mother of his three children, fell ill and died eight years ago. Lone has no children of her own.

In terms of their financial capabilities and a home that is well-stocked with prestigious consumer goods, one could claim that Victor and Lone are part of the upper class. But this is not how they present themselves:

JTL: What would others say about the way that you, as a family, spend your money?

Victor: I believe that there are two camps. One would think that what we do is too boring. That with our incomes, we should buy more expensive cars and glamorous forms of vacation. Go to cafés more, eat out every day. And then at the same time, there are those who think we live too extravagantly—expensive paintings, Piet Hein tables we don't really need, etc.—and that we could get by with less.

When considering how their household is positioned within a larger social landscape, Victor and Lone present themselves in a way that resonates with what Liechty (2003: 63) refers to as “hanging between the high and the low”: the phenomenologically attuned conceptualization in which the term ‘middle class’ denotes a certain self-ascription and layering of the social imaginary, rather than objective economic characteristics.

The anthropological record shows that this ‘we are in-between’ middle-class worldview is prevalent in Scandinavian societies and also that it is not of recent origin. In his classic work on the small community of Bremnes in western Norway, J. A. Barnes (1954) conceptualizes this social imaginary: “It is, in fact, the familiar egocentric three-class system, with ego in the middle class. Class here is a category of thought” (ibid.: 47). Somewhere above “plain ordinary people like ourselves,” the upper classes “live in big houses in the towns, talk a different language, and have different religious beliefs” (ibid.). Directed upward is a more or less explicit accusation of materialism and urban decadence, of people losing local authenticity as they orient their tastes and allegiances abroad, while the lower classes are disparaged as “people who wander about ashamed, living on charity and scorning the aspirations of respectable citizens” (ibid.).

Orvar Löfgren (1987: 79) shows that in Scandinavia this ‘in-between’ middle-class worldview is rooted in the early nineteenth century, when the emerging bourgeoisie experienced “a battle waged on two fronts. The new class had to define itself not only *vis-à-vis* the old gentry but also *vis-à-vis* the common people.” In her work on inter-class imaginaries in Denmark, Stine Faber (2008: 100) confirms that the ‘in-between’ middle-class worldview prevails when contemporary Danes describe their place in the social world. She also notes that, to Danes in general, class is a highly embarrassing, unsettling subject (ibid.: 88). There are actual class differences among Danes, for example, in terms of how the disposition for ‘social winners’ to acquire an education and to appropriate cultural capital is passed on from parents to children. And Danes do perceive a clearly stratified pattern of lifestyles existing around them to which they ascribe moral differences. Yet everyone is loath to classify him- or herself as anything but middle-class. From an objective point of view, quite a number of Danes are ‘class deniers’. The ‘I am in-between’ social imaginary is pervasive and is repeated at all social levels.

The Construction of Family *Hygge* through Everyday Consumption

The analytical link between *hygge*, middle-class values and the thrift-luxury opposition is made clear to me one day when Victor tells me that he and his family plan to go to Berlin: “[W]e have found a sensible hotel. It’s no use going for an eight-star Hilton, that I have to say, then I get cheap! I like it to be a little *hyggelig*.” The cultural assumptions behind this usage of *hygge*, implying that it is antithetical to luxury and the seeking of prestige, resonate with another remark Victor makes. On an issue closer to home, he and Lone tell me that their children have regular household chores to carry out, including taking turns in cleaning the apartment:

Victor: It’s a shared project, cleaning these 200 square meters, but if we all do it together, it is over in two hours. If Lone and I do it on our own, it takes all day.

JTL: Why not get a cleaning lady to do it?

Victor: We could, but no. There is that [educational] project with the kids. But it actually also becomes really *hyggelig* when we all do it together.

Hygge also lies opposite to such acts as traveling to exotic destinations far from home. Lone and Victor talk about experiences from their own childhood, when children would be taken to museums, not on charter trips. As a current example of family *hygge*, they mention the outing when they went to Dyrehaven (a recreational park and forest area nearby Copenhagen) and the boys fed chocolate cake to a mouse. This example of *hygge* is directly contrasted to the excess of certain modes of family travel. As Victor puts it: “So rafting on the Mekong River is probably great, but if you do it twice a year, and you also have to go on a ski trip and do lots of other wild things—I mean, I think it will be demeaned, I think it will go wrong [meaning that people will progressively perceive such experiences as less exceptional and intense]. What, then, is one to offer next time? Now we have tourists flying in space. As a parent, you can become all desperate. What are we to offer our children?”

Analytically, these comments represent a complex of cultural and social meanings around *hygge*. *Hygge* figures as a marker of ‘real’ family togetherness, which is opposed to experiences that are either exotic and dramatic or luxurious and characterized by some degree of upscale formality. The realm of the exotic and luxurious is presented as ‘overdoing it’, as something that goes beyond what is necessary or ‘enough’ for enjoying close, *hyggelige* social relations and, indeed, makes a *hyggelig* atmosphere less likely to arise. Thrift or ‘getting cheap’, as Victor puts it, is a way not only to save money but also to remain at a level where things and relations are ‘real’, with *hygge* as a marker of this ‘real-ness’. This suggests a connection between the middle-class morality described above and a powerful normative notion concerning *hygge*—that the latter decreases with the attainment of material wealth and high prestige, which, in the social imaginary of the middle class, is what the upper classes seek.

From a consumption perspective, the idea seems to be that *hygge* can be attained or secured by *not* purchasing certain things, for example, by *not*

employing a stranger to clean one's home. In such resisting or ritual translating of market meanings before they enter the home, *hygge* seems to express the general opposition that pits family relations and 'home-made' things against the meanings of the market (Curasi, Price, and Arnould 2004; Moisio, Arnould, and Price 2004; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). Therefore, the notion that 'money can't buy me *hygge*', while not an emic formulation, summarizes central insights of this study. I will develop this point in the following by grounding it in more empirical examples as well as in previous works on class in Denmark and on *hygge*.

Small Means Facilitate Hygge

Several Danish authors have remarked how the *hygge* mood is "a fickle guest" (Tove Ditlevsen, cited in Hansen 1980: 79) that leaves if things become too high-strung, manipulated, or status-oriented. In reviewing descriptions of *hygge* among Danish authors and in magazines, Jørgensen (1996) finds examples dating back to the nineteenth century where the focus is on *hygge* as something sincere that provides pleasure, rather than having a representative, status-enhancing function. Thus, while in Danish society many people currently live lives characterized by material abundance and high levels of private consumption, the cultural values of simplicity and 'making do' show continuity, to this day, in the way that they apply to symbolic practices of consumption in everyday life. As my informant Victor suggests above, and as Hansen (1980: 214) also notes, *hygge* is antithetical to excess. There may be no showing off in relation to *hygge*, which also places certain requirements on the role of the host. The appearance of people and the physical space, along with elements such as food and drink, should not be elaborate or appear overly planned. The host should demonstrate an attitude of "relaxed thoughtfulness" (ibid.: 164) and should not be too eager to control the course of the interaction.

Maintaining Hygge by Withstanding Symbolic Distinction

As we have seen, the spirit of *hygge* goes together well with small means and resonates with a distancing from excessive consumption. I argue that *hygge* carries cultural meanings that amount to a critique that is aimed upward in social space by those who see themselves as middle-class. Luxury is construed as inauthentic, and the 'fine people'—whom middle-class people imagine to exist as a social class above themselves—have allegedly lost the sense of sympathetic, honest immediacy to social interaction that *hygge* represents. *Hygge* thus acts as a vehicle for the exercise of social control in an egalitarian culture.

An example arises when Lisa, an 18-year-old daughter in another informant family, tells me that the act of eating sushi cannot be *hyggelig*. I ask why, and she replies that, well, sushi is modern, cool, and very urban. Maybe eating sushi can be *hyggelig*, she says, correcting herself, but that requires certain conditions to be fulfilled. The situation that occurs to her is one that involves herself and her boyfriend: after they had bought sushi, they sat down and ate it outdoors on a flight of stairs in the middle of Copenhagen. That was

both *hyggelig* and romantic. In this situation, in order for eating sushi to be considered *hyggelig*, elements of spontaneity and intimacy and the youthful appropriation of a marginal urban space counteract what could be considered a calculated gesture of communicating social status.

My argument is that people perceive the status-oriented, aesthetic, and symbolic side of consumption as detracting from *hygge*, which they idealize as belonging to the realm of the 'ordinary'. This is confirmed by Faber's (2008) fine analysis of class distinctions and performances in Denmark, in which she shows many of the strategies by which working-class people idealize their status as ordinary and place a distance between themselves and the middle classes. An informant of hers mentions that having 'ordinary *hygge*' at a dinner with friends means that matching napkins and fine cutlery will be absent and that what will be served is basic food that is inexpensive "but which also tastes well" (ibid.: 177). This mode of interaction is contrasted with the more rigid, self-conscious manners of the middle classes. Here *hygge* resonates with the immediate bodily sensation of the taste of the food, disregarding the symbolic aspects by which food signals social status.

Victor performs the same unmasking of consumption when he criticizes the non-existent category of the eight-star hotel. He presents a similarly prudent approach toward a range of other decisions facing him (e.g., buying art or purchasing a new car) by making a virtue of withstanding desires for superfluous symbolic distinctions that seem to represent a level of consumption that goes beyond 'enough'. In such a realm of the symbolic and snobbish, phenomena do not serve needs for practical functions but exist solely to create hierarchy. I believe that *hygge* and 'middle-class-ness' in general are closely related from the perspective of normativity, which is also reflected when Victor and Lone depict *hygge* as attainable through thrift, while pointing their finger at the transgressive consumption practices of families who spend more than they do. A similar example can be seen in one of Faber's (2008) cases. A mother with very limited financial means says that while other parents with more money are able to take their children on trips to faraway holiday resorts, "we don't need that in order to have a *hyggelig* time together" (ibid.: 188), implying that overworked middle-class parents compensate for their lack of genuine family life through excessive consumption. *Hygge* also carries strong normative meanings when working-class mothers portray themselves as having prioritized their parenthood over having a professional career and denounce career-conscious middle-class women for their priorities: "In earlier times, the mother would be at home with the kids, and there would be *hygge* with the kids" (ibid.: 214).

We see here how *hygge* can be closely connected to an upward-facing stereotyping of social classes whereby people imagine the lifestyles that are lived on a level above their own. When well-to-do people engage in luxury consumption, they are believed to do so purely for reasons of symbolic distinction. They are denied both the innocent desire and the human ability to engage as immediately and sensually as ordinary people do with objects and experiences that provide enjoyment. This critique is expressed by suggesting that the upper classes have lost *hygge*. Furthermore, the upper-class lifestyle is claimed to lead to a situation

in which *hygge* is absent where it should be essential—namely, within the realm of the family. Both my upper-middle-class interviewees and Faber's working-class informants adopt the normative perspective that families who engage in expensive, high-status consumption risk losing an important mode of being together as a family: they lose *hygge* by compensating for 'real' togetherness through the consumption of expensive, prestige-seeking exotic dramas in faraway places. It need not confuse us that sometimes this critique is leveled against the middle classes by the working classes (in Faber's material) and sometimes by the middle classes and upward (in my data). It demonstrates how the middle-class worldview described previously pervades Danish society at all levels.

Excluding from the *hygge* of ordinary people those who act pretentiously resonates with what Gullestad (1992: 174) calls the principle of "equality as sameness," according to which "[e]galitarian ideals are maintained by avoiding unequals." *Hygge* is then a vehicle for inter-class critique, a discourse that not only approves of certain ways of being together as genuine and real, but also points a critical finger upward in terms of social class, implying that cold, market-like relations dominate the social lives of those on a higher level. In this social imaginary, *hygge* emerges at several analytical levels. Normatively, it serves as a marker of good, proper *hyggelige* forms of interaction in close social relations and points to what can be lost if one indulges in excessive consumption. At the level of practice, it involves a particular social and material set-up of good but simple food, casual dress, and so forth. This facilitates an informal and intimate mood of sociality in which people experience a real-ness distanced from the status games of the exterior world and from the hierarchies in which luxury goods represent purely relative, symbolic meanings. The findings presented on how *hygge* is seen as more or less present in some people's lives and is used to condone certain social spaces and interactions suggest that the concept is employed in daily inter-class relations as people compete to define the proper values and norms by which to live.

Values Surrounding *Hygge* as a Vehicle for Social Control

This section emphasizes the strong relationship between *hygge* and family life. It also expands on the notion, introduced above, that *hygge* acts as a symbolic vehicle for people's criticisms of other people's way of life. This facet of *hygge* in fact facilitates the day-to-day exercise of social control.

The Healing Home: Intimacy and Wholeness

Hygge is important to Danes at a normative level, and its absence can be critical. Clearly, some forms of social interaction have not unfolded in the appropriate way if they cannot be experienced as, or at least presented as having been, *hyggelig*. As we have seen above, this pertains especially to relations associated with care and intimacy. A paramount example is family interaction while on vacation or during the Christmas season. To say of such social settings and

their ritual expressions that they have not been *hyggelig* is a powerful critique that is seldom heard.

The experiential qualities that *hygge* offers are crucially positioned in relation to the modern family's moral duty to provide a haven of intimacy that will 'heal' each family member in his or her ongoing encounters with the world. "The home has become a place for intimacy, integration, and wholeness," writes Gullestad (1992: 51), while neighborhood and society have lost these qualities, she believes. The family's house becomes a home by virtue of a special kind of togetherness that is lacking in the modern public sphere, to which it acts as a countermeasure.

Considering family togetherness seems promising for understanding *hygge* in its most basic form and its meaning when applied to social groups and practices. The concept of *hygge* has the family as its ultimate reference, and when it refers to social interaction outside home and family, it confers upon those other modes of togetherness some meanings and ideals of intimacy that refer, ultimately, to what an idealized family life might be like. Thus, when we refer to *hygge*, we are using the concepts of home and family to think with. *Hyggelig* social company has a quality that is family-like, and *hyggelige* settings have something home-like to them. This association with home and family charges the concept of *hygge* with strong cultural meanings as a setting in which people can and should be not only close to each other but also whole—that is, not acting strategically by guarding or keeping distant certain sides of themselves.

A Model for Home Life

In Denmark, people seem to be greatly concerned with how families interact, with regard to both their own family and other families whose lives they encounter or imagine. As an example, on one of many Web sites that I decoded for *hygge* discourses, ordinary Danes were exchanging views and experiences regarding the issue of divorce, including to what extent one should struggle to make the marriage work for the sake of one's children.² The prevailing notion was that while one should indeed attempt to save the relationship, if it had deteriorated to the point where no *hyggelig* atmosphere could be found in the home, then a divorce was the only solution—not least for the sake of the children, who should not grow up in cold, non-*hyggelige* surroundings.

Evidently, the notion of *hygge* carries strong normative meanings for proper relations in the home, and to present one's children with a *hyggelig* home is critical. The context for this normativity of family life is that, in the Western world, the child has taken center stage culturally and become elevated into a sacred object (Howell and Melhuus 2001; Miller 1998). The child's happiness and welfare are beyond negotiation, legitimizing, among many different social phenomena, historically unseen levels of public scrutiny of relationships within the home (Howell and Melhuus 2001). Notions of *hygge* foreground these values and act as vehicles for social control, not only against conspicuous consumption, but also over home life, the two being intertwined in the critique of upper-class families who have allegedly lost *hygge*.

Let me be clear about the analytical relation between three main elements of my analysis: family life, *hygge*, and middle-class-ness. *Hygge* is not a middle-class 'virtue' in the sense that attributes such as orderliness, punctuality, and self-discipline have historically been considered (Frykman and Löfgren 1987), nor is there any reason to see the actual practice and experience of *hygge* as particular to the middle class. But the normative associations around *hygge* fit perfectly with middle-class stereotypes of class 'others'. The meanings of present-day *hygge* show a structural continuity with the eighteenth-century cultural battle between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, during which elite culture was pictured as "shallow in its social life" and "the bourgeoisie emphasized a new intimacy and a familistic life-style ... along with the stress on emotional involvement between spouses, parents and children, as well as between friends" (Löfgren 1987: 79). The bourgeoisie took over as the dominant culture (*ibid.*), but the elite culture of the aristocracy may have remained as an imagined social other, which is implicit in the idealization and sheltering of *hyggelige* social spaces.

Egalitarianism from Peasants to the Middle Class

The Danish concern with sociality unfolding in a *hyggelig* way can be contextualized by considering the historical continuities between the middle-class worldview of the present and the peasant culture of the past. The historian Henrik Stenius (1997: 83) finds the peasant to be no less than a historical prototype of the Nordic citizen. Both Stenius and Gullestad refer to Nordic peasant culture in arguing for its continuity with present-day egalitarian norms about not 'sticking out'. A strong dynamic of mutual social control is rooted there, such as the belief that "the good life is a life lived in conformity" (Stenius 1997: 77; my translation). One side to this dynamic of control, says Stenius, is that there is very little tolerance of part-cultures, and people expect and desire everyone else to subscribe to the same set of social rules (*ibid.*: 85).

Gullestad (1992) contends that the norms of conformity in peasant society were a way for people to manage the economic inequalities encountered in everyday life. In Norway, to an even greater extent than in Denmark, those inequalities were usually related to matters of personal skill and luck, unlike in more highly developed systems of land ownership in which individual fortunes tended to be determined by the workings of an overall system (*ibid.*: 39). The fact that aptitude and good fortune could affect one's social standing intensified the need to downplay signs of inequality in everyday interactions; otherwise, one would encounter the hostility of others less fortunate.

Kirsten Hastrup (1992) argues that in Nordic culture envy has always been perceived as a dangerous force to be avoided by not flaunting one's luck. The quest for happiness was always believed to be a zero-sum game: one could attain it only at someone else's expense. Thus, one was threatened both by the happiness of others and by their envy at one's own. Other people's envy would inevitably spur magical practices, aimed at stealing one's luck and happiness, or even more dangerous sanctions, such as accusations that one was engaged

in destructive witchcraft (ibid.: 248). Along with an everyday interaction in which social conflict and economic differences are downplayed, there is a realm of intense envy, fear, suspicion, and countermeasures, which to a large extent derive from the idea that happiness is a limited good, itself grounded in the closeness of social networks and restricted economic mobility.

Hastrup's analysis provides an understanding of why, in the Scandinavian world, a fear of strong social sanctions might endure as a cultural pattern that people encounter when they challenge egalitarian norms such as equality as sameness. The historical disposition toward mutual social control is strong in today's social imaginary of the Danish middle class. This is my interpretation of the pervasive critique of the pretentiousness and coldness that people at all levels of Danish society imagine exist further up the social ladder and of the idea that *hygge* is absent in the lives of the upper class. The moral equation behind the Danish middle-class worldview still follows a zero-sum logic: if you live for achieving high social status in the public sphere (the motivation that people assume is behind other people's consumption of luxury), then you lose out on *hygge*. A central cultural dynamic here, which I will return to, is the dichotomization in which the 'inside' of social space or individual subjectivity is romanticized, while the 'outside' or public sphere is seen as morally inferior.

Hygge as the Subject of Critical National Self-Reflection

Since my analysis presents *hygge* as both an inside-oriented disposition in Scandinavian culture and a mode of egalitarian social control, I should acknowledge the fact that this understanding of *hygge* is already part of a popular debate on Danish *hygge* and national character that contributes to the everyday discursive construction of the national community. Several commentators have already associated *hygge* with egalitarianism, criticizing that dimension in polemical, politically charged terms.

One derogatory representation of *hygge* is to use it to designate an alienated, fearful, and introverted reluctance to be involved in the world. A poem written during World War I by the famous Danish novelist Jeppe Aakjær compares Denmark to a little child who is cozying up and enjoying *hygge* under the covers "while the whole world burns around your cradle." Another example that hits a sore spot in Danish identity and history is the Danish government's surrender to Germany during World War II without putting up any armed resistance worth mentioning, to which a Danish commentator refers by saying, "We chose the *hygge* model."³ Here we encounter the allegation that the Danish national character is disposed to seeking and maintaining *hygge* to the extent of sidestepping necessary conflicts.

Hygge can also be presented as opposed to the rawness of authentic metropolitan space. A case in point is when the gentrification of previously working-class neighborhoods in Copenhagen is criticized for creating a petit bourgeois space, one that accommodates only middle-class families and their preferences for *hyggelig* enclaves, which are safely sheltered from drug users, traffic, noise, and other features of urban density.

Danish society has traditionally allowed people to just *hygge* (to use the verbal form) for parts of their lives, both normatively and economically, a choice that is made possible by support from the welfare state. Jonathan Schwartz (1989) says as much when he points to the freedom from the demands of the grown-up world that is traditionally offered to young Danes in the form of the *folkehøjskole* (community college) as a space for experimentation and undirected personal growth. However, an important observation for grasping the full picture is that an ideologically charged 'cultural battle' is—and always has been—waged around this permissiveness. That battle itself seems to be a deeply established part of Danish political culture, and this is where the critique of *hygge* often figures as a form of national self-criticism in which the Danish nation is depicted as a naively sleeping child who does not face up to the world.

In the context of this cultural battle, both shopping and habits of everyday family life are criticized, often sarcastically, by artists, academics, and other commentators for absorbing people in a petit bourgeois pattern of repetition, allowing them to dodge opportunities and risks that might be occasions for individual or collective growth. To them, *hygge* means evading conflict and not tackling issues that need to be confronted. It is used to characterize groups of people who pretend to be united in agreement and shared experience, while shying away from discussions that would be painful if actually existing differences and repressed conflicts were brought out into the open.

A closely associated fixed point in the Danish national imaginary, which people almost invariably refer to when I say that I am studying *hygge*, is the well-known Jante Law. Drawn up by the Danish-Norwegian author Aksel Sandemose (1899–1965), its ten rules express the social forces of envy and consensus seeking by means of which the Danish community allegedly keeps the individual under control, sanctioning thoughts and behavior that commit the pretentious sin of aspiring to 'something bigger'.

Perhaps the most common everyday critique of *hygge* pertains to the sphere of work and professional, hierarchical relations. One allegation is that Danish professionals are culturally ill-equipped to function in international corporate cultures that are structured around stricter hierarchies than exist in Denmark and that have clear and effective chains of command, with less informal *hygge* between managers and their employees.⁴ In a newsletter published by an influential Danish think tank, an article by a psychologist (entitled "Turn Down the Hygge") warns workplaces against allowing close personal relationships to develop. The article asserts that when managers and employees "become too familiar as opposed to collegial, they focus to a much greater extent on protecting each other against changes than on dealing realistically with the actual reason for their presence at the workplace, namely, that someone is paying them to do a job" (Birkemose 2006; my translation). As a result, dissent is suppressed and "the individual taken hostage" (ibid.).

In the examples mentioned above, we see that many dimensions of *hygge* with which my analysis is concerned, such as consensus seeking, sheltering, and introversion, are already on the table in discussions that refer to *hygge*. They are central elements in a social imaginary of the Danish nation and Danishness

that are presented both by foreign observers (often quite fondly) and, much more polemically and self-critically, by Danes themselves.⁵

Mind, Home, and Country: The Interiorities of *Hygge*

I suggest that the analytical metaphor of 'the shelter' captures central aspects of what *hygge* is all about. When people *hygger*, they engage in a mutual sheltering of each other from the pressures of competition and social evaluation. In the following, some of the spatial, social, and normative dynamics of that sheltering will be analyzed and, to some extent, separated analytically, even if they shade into each other through the cultural relations that connect them. The analysis of *hygge* is hereby used to propose something general about both Scandinavian culture and the status of the home in modernity.

Small Spaces and Centripetal Tendencies

On various levels, from national identification to everyday sociality, there is a link between *hygge* and small spaces that deserves to be brought out further. In the passage cited above, Aakjær contrasts *hygge* (symbolized by the nation cozying up inside the cradle) with the surrounding world being on fire. Hansen (1980: 159–160) analyzes the centripetal movement by which *hyggelige* settings tend toward spatial encapsulation and interactional clustering around common, central points, such as the light cast by a lamp, a television screen, or a fireplace. The theme of the safe, enclosed space seems essential to *hygge*. As a male informant in his late forties told me, "Hygge cannot be in a big open space. Then there would need to be small enclosed spaces within that room." *Hygge* always seems to be connected with smallness of scale and to involve the social construction of spaces bounded from an exterior realm. This experiential quality is effected through various social and material means. *Hyggelig* spatiality is often described with reference to particular kinds of lighting that create a warm yet dim light, such as antique lamps. As noted by Bille and Sørensen (2007: 276 ff.), in accomplishing the atmosphere of *hygge*, forms of lighting are used actively to create a certain perception of space. Other observers of *hygge* have pointed to a feature of 'living' light (e.g., the light cast by fireplaces) that facilitates *hygge*. People can manage their distance to each other by 'hiding' in the shadows and, by directing their gaze toward the flames, can avoid direct eye contact that may feel too intense (Jørgensen 1996: 43).

Another example of the link between *hygge* and small-scale phenomena relates to children and childhood memories. When discussing *hygge* with one of the families I interviewed, the 18-year-old daughter related that the first thing that comes to mind concerning *hygge* is eating *småkager* (dry sweet biscuits often served with coffee or tea) at her grandparents' house. Several Danish writers have also associated their own childhood memories of 'hiding under mama's skirt' with *hygge*, and some even play with the notion that the fetus in the womb enjoys some sort of arch-*hygge* (Jørgensen 1996).

But Is It Danish? Hygge-Like Dynamics in Other Cultural Contexts

Since several of the values, moods, and social-material dynamics described so far are recognizable in other cultural contexts, it seems reasonable to consider the cultural particularity of *hygge* and to ask the question that is often raised by Danes: is it actually something particularly Danish? *Hygge* can probably be conceptualized, and several aspects of it studied, in a more universalist light by seeing the construction of *hyggelig* spheres as a general human capability that is realized under different circumstances. The tricky anthropological question, of course, centers on the similarities and differences among those circumstances and among the actual lived worlds of *hygge*—or whichever word people use when referring to that quality of social interaction.

Clearly, the ethnographic record offers examples of similar social, spatial, and symbolic dynamics unfolding in other cultures and forms of society. One can regard Scandinavian *hygge* as one particular manifestation of the widespread tendency to turn the home into a sheltered sphere that resists the alienation of modernity in large-scale societies, focusing on the spatial dynamics and interpersonal structures that facilitate this experience. Based on observations and interviews in Toronto in the 1980s, Grant McCracken (1989) describes hominess in a way that resonates deeply with Scandinavian *hygge*. Similarities include the diminutive aspect; the penchant for natural materials and family heirlooms, which implies a resistance to mass production and functionalist architecture; and the “homey environment [that] presents a face that is deliberately without defenses or pretenses in order to reassure the occupant that he or she may forgo defenses and pretenses of their own” and that opposes the “inauthentic styles [of] high status individuals” (ibid.: 174). McCracken also invokes the principle of “the embracing property” by which “the surfaces of the homey environment exhibit a pattern of descending enclosure” (ibid.: 172). His analysis of this informal, shell-like, anti-system home dynamic makes it clear that the material and moral structuring of the home to achieve *hygge* is not limited to the Scandinavian context.

Instead of focusing on the home, one could take the family and find many of the same sheltering, encapsulating dynamics that sacralize domestic space as supremely authentic. It is not only in the context of Scandinavian *hygge* that family togetherness acts as a social barrier to the forces representing modern society. Several works on symbolic consumption and family life show that the market is experienced globally as a profane sphere that confronts the sacred realm of home and family. The value of many home-made products lies in their symbolic opposition to their commercially produced counterparts on the market (Curasi, Price, and Arnould 2004; Moisio, Arnould, and Price 2004; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). We have seen in the examples above that *hygge* (when traveling or cleaning one's home) captures family togetherness and opposes ideas such as competition, money, and pretentiousness. *Hygge* might be one vernacular term for the universal symbolic marking of boundaries between household and market.

Taken by themselves, the egalitarian norms central to *hygge* might also exemplify the sociological concept of the commune as a social union in which

people “may be enjoined to opt out from the ‘rat race’ and enter instead a group in which all members are equal, no one wishes to stand above the others, and relations are based solely on mutual intimacy, sincerity and trust. Members are normally also asked to turn their backs on the attractions of consumerism and reconcile themselves to a life of modesty and austerity” (Bauman 1990: 76). Undeniably, this description evokes measures of social control that seem similar to those that, I have suggested, *hygge* facilitates.

The Interiority of Hygge

Faced with cross-cultural indications that the normative, social, and material underpinnings of *hygge*—if not the specific experience of Danish *hygge* (as some would surely claim)—are at work elsewhere in the world, one might wonder what it is that *hygge* signifies: is it a common concept, of which these empirical examples may be seen as local and historical manifestations? A crucial cultural issue regarding *hygge* seems to be the relation between inside and outside. I suggest that in terms of the central and interrelated tensions in Scandinavian culture, we should be attentive to this relationship, along with the other main contrasts identified by Gullestad (1992: 181): independence versus community, hierarchy versus equality, being in control versus moral slippage, peace versus conflict.

The concept of interiority allows for analyzing *hygge* at a more general level with a focus on the inside-outside aspect. Interiority points to the subjective experience of a presence that is bounded from an exterior. As Christine McCarthy (2005: 112) puts it: “*Containment, confinement, enclosure, imprisonment, privacy, protection, security, shelter*: These are words to which understandings of interiority adhere” (italics in original). In addition to the sense of safety and privacy and the dynamics of sheltering that the phenomenon of *hygge* affords, McCarthy points to its emotional flip side, that is, the longing for escapades in a less familiar exterior and the sense of boredom or claustrophobia that arises in the interior—a common accusation against family *hygge* because interiority always relies upon something repetitive, such as routine behavior (ibid.: 116). McCarthy also notes that interiors are often sacralized as having a higher level of realness and authenticity than exteriors, which creates a yearning for access to the interior from the exterior: “Differentiation from outside (considered as a public and universally accessible exterior) locates the interior as an exclusive, restricted, and private space; a repository of privileged information (carnal knowledge, initiation, the password, or a secret handshake) available only to those admitted” (ibid.: 121).

A Scandinavian Ambience

What struck American anthropologists and became central to their definitions of *hyggelig* interaction were the effortless interactional flow in which no one took center stage and the balancing of involvement with some sort of lightheartedness. If it is the case that this is *hygge*, I believe that it manifests

values of sincerity and authenticity, as well as practices of sheltering. These in their turn are predicated on a dichotomous split between inside and outside that stems partly from ecological conditions, partly from national history, and partly from the sanctifying and protecting of inner space that arises out of the convergence of romantic and religious thought with social structures, such as the welfare state.

The Romantic tradition in Western thinking insists on the existence and primacy of an inner space inside people and things, wherein their spirit resides and in which their preferences, intentions, and actions in the outer world are supposed to originate if they are to be considered genuine (Taylor 1992). Central elements of *hygge*, when seen in isolation, can thus be found in many non-Scandinavian contexts; however, a distinct ambience may be present in their particular cultural interrelation in Scandinavia. According to Jonathan Schwartz (1989), there is a strong romantic and even childlike longing for the 'safe home' in Danish culture. He notes that the English term 'trust' has a close etymological affinity with the Danish *trøst* (both deriving from the Old Norse *traust*): *trøst* refers to comforting a sad or unhappy person and especially to consoling a crying child. Schwartz describes Danish society as being generally child-centered, with "a strong functional coherence between the forms of child-raising and the society-at-large," a society where authorities aim to be "child-friendly" and where people care about "cuddling and caring for small creatures" (ibid.: 45).

Schwartz (1989) also sees *tryghed* (safety)⁶ as a central value in Danish society and—like Richard Jenkins (2006: 373) in his ethnography of the Danish town of Skive, and like Gullestad in her descriptions of Norway—perceives a marked longing in the Danish mentality for the local face-to-face qualities of *Gemeinschaft* (Tönnies [1887] 2001). Schwartz (1989) connects this longing explicitly to *hygge*. There is an idealization of the home, the romantic *Heimat*, as something "secure and restful, warm and congenial—precisely what in Danish is known as *tryg*, *trivelig* and *hyggelig*" (ibid.: 21). Schwartz describes the Danish mentality as not only child-centered but to some extent childlike itself, as revealed in the national identity whereby 'being Danish' is historically negatively defined in terms of its smallness (ibid.: 40). In an almost Barthian dynamic of boundary-located identity work (see Barth 1969), being Danish means *not* being Roman or German or American or whichever large-scale power is currently figuring as the counter-image in the construction of national identity (Schwartz 1989: 40).

A historical condition that can be seen as underlying this pattern of identification is that of the Danish nation gradually losing territory. After being 'cut down to size', having previously ruled over large parts of Scandinavia, and especially after losing Norway in the nineteenth century, mountains and waterfalls suddenly became features found only in foreign landscapes, with the result that, as Schwartz (1989: 22) explains, "Danish identity could not only 'make do' with its gentle forms. It came to idealize them." His conclusion that Danish culture places a romantic emphasis on "the significance of 'inner space' as reality in its own right, and not simply the lack of something" (ibid.: 48) resonates directly with the interiority aspect of *hygge*.

I see a cultural connection between this centripetal spatial dynamic and the normative idealization of the diminutive: they merge in the everyday social practice of *hygge* and its predilection for small means and also in the way that the term *hygge* is used derogatively when characterizing someone as introverted. Through this merging of cultural and historical connections with everyday practices and discourses, the Danish culture of *hygge* is connected both to major Western currents of thought and to the social imaginary of national history.

The result is, I suggest, that while the emotional valence of *hygge* is not necessarily qualitatively different from the American experience of hominess, it is intensified—not all the time or for everyone, but as a cultural emphasis, as Schwartz (1989: 45) formulates it. *Hygge* is a phenomenon that has an immediate presence in everyday awareness. People are able to elevate this notion into an icon of the nation because the country's history lends itself to being represented by it. *Hygge* therefore becomes a cultural reference point that all Danes relate to, even if they disagree about its attractiveness and legitimacy. As we have seen, historical developments and territorial outcomes, along with the concept of *hygge*, are referred to by Danes in their continuing debate on the relation between the nation, its people, and the wider world.

Interiority at Multiple Analytical Levels

I suggest that, at many analytical levels, we encounter the cultural repetition of the encapsulating, subjectivizing, and sheltering tendencies described above. To follow that train of thought, our analytical gaze moves inward from the interiorities of national territory and of the family and home to the interiority of individual subjectivity. A central normative force within the cultural dynamics that are considered here has to do with a tendency to perceive the 'inner' as being supremely 'real'. One might look not only to romantic ideas in this regard but also to religion. Religious ideas are too easily forgotten in the anthropology of Scandinavia (Gullestad 1989). According to Owen Thomas (2000), Christianity, in its orientation toward religious communion, tends to turn inward toward the interior, subjective realm, whereas, for example, Judaism has more focus on bodily celebration in the world. Within Christianity itself, one finds an interiority tradition and an exteriority tradition: Catholicism emphasizes public worship to a greater extent than does Protestantism, the former seeing the rituals as "not the result but the precondition of believing in God" (ibid.: 60). This is unlike the Nordic Lutheran heritage, which Stenius (1997) presents as strongly focused on ideas about the inner 'core' of the individual. In revolting against the established social hierarchies and ritual forms of the church, Lutheranism valorized inner, individual states of religious faith, rather than actions in the exterior social world, as the true hallmark of a proper religious life. According to Stenius (ibid.: 80), doing philanthropic deeds in public space does not enjoy the moral recognition in Nordic culture that it does elsewhere and is not as likely to validate a person's virtuousness. In terms of tracing philosophical currents that set the stage for *hygge*, Lutheran thought might have contributed to the appreciation of inner subjectivity as the more authentic, pure, and elevated

realm and to the skeptical assumption of profane motives behind overt gestures and achievements in the public sphere.

In their different ways, both the romantic and the Lutheran interiorities contribute to a strong subjectivist streak in Scandinavian culture—the tendency to erect moral shelters. One example is how the idea of human worth in Scandinavian culture is marked by an egalitarian resilience to loss of status. In the works of Faber, Hansen, Gullestad, Lien, and Barnes, we see that people present human worth as an inert, resistant quality: in popular discourse, no one person is better than others, people are not to be considered better than others because of their deeds in the outer world, and no one should strive for such a distinction. A cultural orientation seems to be in effect that locates the value of a human being in an inner, enclosed space that the person is imagined to carry around. That space is relatively unaffected by one's actions in the surrounding world, by the ascribed characteristics of one's person, and by any achievements or lack thereof in the course of one's life. Nothing makes one worse or better than others because “no one is worth more than any other as a human being,” as Danes often say (see, e.g., Hansen 1980: 91). While equality may be absent from actual events and relations, the equal worth of persons (*ligeværd*) is not questioned, as Lien (2001) argues in particular.

That perspective connects analytically to the sheltering of inner spaces and the middle-class morality that were discussed previously. Middle-class people protect themselves against the status game by declaring its players to have lost their soul, their sociality—their *hygge*. I agree with Lien that Scandinavians can see and do acknowledge that some people enjoy more prestige or material wealth than others. The point is that this ‘more’ is construed as differences that do not make a difference, to paraphrase Gullestad. As the most desired state of sociality, *hygge* cannot be bought or brought about by striving for respect and admiration. This morality underpins the ‘best-of-all-worlds’ attitude of the Danish middle class.

Some Cross-Cultural Indications

The mode of sociality referred to as *hygge* may be universal, but only one other society that I am aware of has elevated a similar phenomenon of social interiority into an icon of the entire community: in Holland, the term *gezelligheid* has a similar meaning and status. From the sketchy information available on the issue, it seems that the Dutch use *gezelligheid* to refer to equivalent experiences and practices; that they regard it as an exclusively Dutch phenomenon, marking a unique trait of their casual culture; and that they, too, reference the term in a range of everyday speech acts, such as greetings among friends (Kristine de Valck, personal communication, June 2010).

It makes sense that the everyday experience and practice of something like *hygge* would not be reserved only for Scandinavians. And, as suggested in the above paragraph, the national iconicity and everyday ubiquity of *hygge* may not be distinctly Danish either. Nonetheless, these features might still be particular to certain kinds of societies.⁷ The question then arises as to why some

societies nurture the idea of interiority to the extent that they foreground it in, for example, the construction of national identity. As mentioned above, a range of environmental, historical, economic, religious, and political conditions may collectively account for the Danish disposition to nurture the cultural practice of *hygge*. A particularly 'close fit' between Danishness and *hygge* is suggested, I believe, by the wide semantic span with which *hygge* manifests itself as simultaneously a national icon, a contested ideological ground, and a ubiquitous feature of everyday sociality.

Which Way Is Up? An Ethos of Subjective Happiness

In some of the empirical cases that have been presented, we saw people scorning competitive luxury consumption and presenting themselves as having relinquished claims for high status in the public sphere in order to achieve a subjective experience of satisfaction that is disconnected from recognition due to one's surroundings (but never disconnected from an analytical viewpoint, of course). It is significant that in such cases the interviewees claimed the subjective dimension on behalf of both themselves and others. These are examples of the egalitarian discourse by which people shelter each other. In Scandinavian egalitarian ideology as an ideal type, the inner subjective happiness of a person is where the meaning of that person's life—as well as that person's worth as a human being—is located.

It appears that everyday interactions among people unfold as if they conformed to this axiom: "If there are differences of status among us, these do not determine the extent of subjective satisfaction and meaning that we gain from our lives." Or, to put it in more everyday language as an analytical statement that captures the essence of these protective measures: "You people might have everything we don't, but you've lost *hygge* in striving for it." *Hygge*, with its cage-like quality, connotes a shelter in which people can turn their backs on the hierarchy of social class and regard it as unworthy of attention. This morality is supported by a range of cultural ideas and economic arrangements that award priority to the inner space of subjectivity.

The Hierarchical Egalitarianism of Middle-Class Consciousness

I suggest that in Scandinavian societies there are relatively few external standards to which people can be held, except one: their ability to seem at peace with themselves. The state of calmly *hvile i sig selv* (resting in oneself) is often mentioned by Danes as a highly attractive personal trait. It is viewed as the unassailable condition of people who have supposedly arrived at the point where they mainly care about living up to their own standards and not those of others—notwithstanding the fact that such people usually still behave in a socially competent manner. In everyday parlance, the statement "he rests in himself" comes as close as any to saying "he is happy." Exuding an air of calm, self-assured balance is therefore crucial for sending off cultural signs by which

one is seen as a cool, stylish, and graceful human being. Indeed, in this way, the inner state of subjective happiness, which turns its back on social hierarchy and competition, paradoxically confers status in social space.⁸

This reminds us that egalitarianism contains in itself the seeds of hierarchy. As seen in the idealization of the person who follows his or her own standards and in the assumption that people of the economic upper class have lost essential social qualities such as intimate family *hygge* in their striving for economic gain, the egalitarian ideal is expressed in everyday evaluations of how persons or groups behave and interact, in people's attempts to live up to those norms, and in their shared imaginary of the larger social landscape that extends beyond their own social position. Even if these notions originate in a challenge to hierarchy, they are obviously in themselves hierarchical. Inside space is privileged—it is good, real. Gullestad (1992: 174) also recognizes the inherent hierarchical aspect of egalitarianism in her analysis of equality as sameness when she calls attention to the exclusive pockets of equal social status that individuals create and protect: “[B]y avoiding contact with people about whom one has insufficient information, by an interactional style emphasizing sameness and undercommunicating difference and by avoiding people who are considered ‘too different’ ... hierarchy is also created and maintained. In other words, the idea of equality as sameness is not incompatible with hierarchy.”

The everyday appreciation and sheltering of the inside merges the two cultural and social dynamics that this article has dealt with: the spatial and social distinctions between inside and outside, repeated at multiple levels through homology, and the concerns about status with regard to social class, as manifested in the hierarchical egalitarianism of middle-class consciousness. This analysis proposes that *hygge* represents the merging of these two dynamics, whose temporary balancing is achieved through a properly conducted sociality.

Conclusion

This article has suggested that the experience of *hygge* represents a charging of everyday spatiality and sociality with cultural meanings that are egalitarian in that they work as countermeasures to the hierarchy between social classes. In themselves, however, they are also hierarchical because they sanctify inner space over outer space, including the outward expression of certain inner states. This cultural and social dynamic is rooted in past social forms, cultural ideas about personhood, and well-established constructions of national identity, which play themselves out as social distinctions made through, for example, consumption.

Besides describing the cultural phenomenon of *hygge* more comprehensibly than has been done so far, I hope to have moved anthropology further toward an understanding of Scandinavian egalitarianism by pointing to the cultural sanctifying of the inner sphere of people, places, and things. I suggest that this is the structuring principle of a fundamental moral order for everyday Scandinavian life.

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Notes

1. The term has been moving southwards from its origin in northern Norway to usage in modern Danish. The older forms seem to have a wider and less domestically oriented field of meanings than the more modern, connoting also meanings that refer to intelligence, contemplation, and the mastery of some intellectual issue. The Old Norse form *hyggja* (thought, mind, courage) is cognate with Old English *hycgan* and Old High German *huggen* (to think).
2. See <http://www.skilsmisseklar.dk> (accessed 2 November 2009).
3. The original Web link for this comment, which was accessed on 2 November 2009, has expired. The comment appeared in a blog posting by Center for Vild Analyse (Center for Wild Analysis), a group of Danish academics who regularly comment on political issues, for example, in the Danish newspaper *Information*.
4. See http://asta2143.blogspot.com/2009_04_01_archive.html (accessed 1 July 2011).
5. Let me note that I do not assume in any 'primordialist' sense that national identity and culture are a given feature of human nature or the constitution of society (see Comaroff 1996). Rather, I choose to approach these phenomena as a meaningful reference for people in their everyday lives.
6. In this translation of *tryghed*, I adhere to the terminology with which I have become acquainted during involvement with the field of security studies. The word 'safety' denotes the perceived non-existence of threats aimed at oneself, which is how I understand the condition of *tryghed*, whereas *sikkerhed* (security) points to the perception that one faces immediate outside threats that are actively kept away or deterred.
7. The Dutch case suggests that phenomena like *hygge* are practiced in different cultures and, at least in some local languages, have a specific term applied to them in the way that *hygge* has been applied in Scandinavia. Other national cultures also seem to have monopolized 'their' kind of *hygge*. Besides the German *Gemütlichkeit* and the Canadian 'hominess', other cultural phenomena, which have been suggested to me in personal communications, include the Russian *ujuut*, the Caribbean *irie*, the Czech *pohoda*, and the Irish 'craic'. It would take a comparative ethnography to elucidate the cross-cultural differences and similarities between these modes and expressions of sociality.

8. Happiness (*lykke*) as a cultural concept in many ways seem parallel to *hygge*. Both cultural ideals tend, at different levels, to look inward and turn their back on outside hierarchies of competitive relations, declaring them unworthy of attention. One might indeed consider whether the concepts of *hygge* and *lykke* are expressive of the same complex of cultural values, which *hygge* realizes in a social form and *lykke* in the individual. In any case, the material on *hygge* suggests that the normative sanctifying of the interior is a principle that repeats itself at several analytical levels of Danish culture.

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