

Nordic Positive Ritual: What's Hygge Got to Do with It?

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of Nordic positive rituals and subjective well-being (SWB), examining how cultural practices from the Nordic countries can enhance individual and collective well-being. The Nordic countries tend to rank at the top of the list in the annual World Happiness Report. Drawing from personal experiences with Sámi reindeer rituals and the principles of positive psychology, the paper highlights the significance of concepts like *hygge*, *fika*, *friluftsliv*, *lagom*, *njuta*, *sisu*, and *þetta reddast* in promoting happiness, social cohesion, and resilience. Practical applications are proposed for developing positive rituals at both individual and collective levels, including morning mindfulness routines, workplace breaks, community gatherings, and cultural festivals. The integration of these practices can lead to improved mental health, stronger social bonds, and a more balanced and fulfilling life.

Keywords: Nordic positive ritual, subjective well-being (SWB), positive psychology
hygge, fika, friluftsliv, lagom, sisu, þetta reddast, mindfulness, resilience

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citizen-Soldiers of the MNARNG. Suffice to say, I am honored to have had the chance to serve, and this experience remains a significant part of my personal identity. One of the greatest gifts of my military service was the chance to train with the citizen-Soldiers of the Trøndelag HV-district 12: Rapid Reaction Force Rype of the Norwegian Heimevernet, or “Home Guard”. These experiences brought me closer to my own ancestral heritage and gave me life-long friendships that have changed my life.

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“To the last man!”

-motto of First Minnesota

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Nordic Positive Ritual: What's Hygge Got to Do with It?

Introduction

It was a clear, crisp winter day, and our white uniforms blended seamlessly with the snowy clearing. When the Sámis arrived, we eyed them curiously. Their *nutukas* (traditional boots), with pointy, curved toes, looked warm and comfortable, as did their *gáktis*, a "jacket-shirt" they wore as an outer layer. Even their traditionally decorated hats seemed from another time and place.

Our attention soon turned to the small reindeer they brought along. The Sámi tending to it held firm with a great deal of care. He explained the symbiotic relationship between the reindeer and the Sámis, highlighting how their survival depends on each other. The Sámis rely on the reindeer for food, clothing, and other essentials, while in turn they protect the herds from predators and disease. Norway only allows those of Sámi descent to engage in this legally protected practice of reindeer husbandry, so among the tribal population of Sámis in northern Norway, there's less than 3,000 people moving and living with these herds.

He detailed the ritual of harvesting the reindeer, emphasizing the importance of a quick and humane process to honor the animal. As he selected a knife, he swiftly severed the reindeer's spinal cord, ensuring a painless death. We quickly lined up to drink the reindeer's blood, a ritual meant to respect the animal's life force and strengthen social bonds within the community. The blood, rich in minerals and nutrients, tasted surprisingly mild as it passed my lips.

The Sámi then demonstrated how they field dress the reindeer, ensuring every part of the animal is used. As the Norwegian Soldiers set up cooking tripods, the tantalizing aroma of reindeer stew filled the air. Later, we enjoyed the delicious meal, feeling honored to be part of this ancient ritual.

What I have just described to you is one of the most interesting and eye-opening experiences I was privileged to have while training with the Norwegian Heimevernet, which is quite similar to the National Guard in the United States. Established in 1974, the Norwegian Reciprocal Troop Exchange (NOREX) is the longest-running military exchange partnership between two nations. The Minnesota Army National Guard (MNARNG) and the Norwegian Heimevernet are strong training partners, and I was extremely fortunate to be part of this incredible opportunity three different times in my military career; most Soldiers in the MNARNG never get the chance to participate in this exclusive training adventure. These encounters exposed me to variety of rituals and traditions, from the one I described above, to rituals and traditions the Heimevernet observed, to being hosted in a local ancestral Norwegian home for a traditional Norwegian dinner replete with toasts of aquavit and singing traditional songs. As a result, I became fascinated with rituals and how people gather to observe them. As the Nordic countries are often recognized for their high levels of well-being, this got me curious to explore Nordic positive ritual and how to apply some of these principles to my own life or to help others be able to do the same.

Part I Foundations of Positive Psychology

Introduction to Positive Psychology

While the example in the introduction doesn't appear geared towards well-being, it is an example of some ways of using ritual in a traditional way to solve problems and find flourishing in life, such as the Sámis and their ancient traditions in reindeer husbandry, or the MNARNG continuing the ritual and tradition of a cooperative training exercise to build social cohesion. The present-day world has much more grave and exigent challenges, from the ongoing genocide in Gaza and the invasion of Ukraine to the looming threat of climate change. With this grim backdrop, the pursuit of human well-being and flourishing may seem like a fool's errand. However, it is precisely during times of crisis and adversity that the principles and tools of positive psychology become most crucial and relevant to both maintaining resilience and rising to the challenges at hand. The thread that pulls these examples together is the resilience of the human spirit, and the capacity to maintain optimism and build self and collective efficacy to rise to the occasion.

This field of positive psychology, rooted in the scientific study of what enables individuals and communities to thrive, offers hope and a pathway to boost resilience and better enable the collective efficacy the world so desperately needs. This period in time might be described as VUCA—Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (Gerras, 2010; Jacobs, 2002), and during times like these it is urgent to leverage the insights and practices of positive psychology to cultivate the inner strength, optimism, and collective spirit necessary to overcome obstacles and create a better future. The Nordic countries, which consistently rank among the happiest nations in the world despite facing their own challenges, provide unique cultural perspectives that can serve as an inspiration for the rest of the world to consider. Their emphasis

on social support, work-life balance, and a deep connection with nature serves as an exemplar of the power of positive rituals and mindsets in fostering well-being.

Definition and Scope of Positive Psychology

Positive psychology is a relatively recent branch of psychology that focuses on what makes life worth living (Seligman, 2011a). This field of study looks at positive emotions, character strengths, and factors that contribute to human flourishing and well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Traditionally, psychology was focused on what was wrong with people, rather than what was right. In fact, since World War II psychology was predominantly focused on curing mental illness. This new field contends that the absence of illness doesn't guarantee health, and aims to shift the focus of psychology from merely treating mental illness to also enhancing the positive aspects of life; indeed, to help people flourish (Seligman, 2011a).

Positive psychology studies positive experiences such as happiness, joy, alertness, and pleasure (Peterson, 2006). This isn't the same as just thinking happy thoughts or forcing oneself to feel positive emotions while avoiding negative emotions, which one might consider *hedonia* (Deci & Ryan, 2008). *Eudaimonia*, on the other hand, is focused on a life lived fully and in a deeply satisfying way (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Positive psychology then focuses on a mix of eudaimonic and hedonic well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). There are several concepts and frameworks that help to explore this intersection.

PERMA

One of the most widely recognized is Seligman's PERMA model (Seligman, 2011a, 2018). While this doesn't necessarily cover everything that could fit under the umbrella of positive psychology, it is a helpful way to think about the avenues of application and impact of the tools available from this field of study. PERMA is an acronym, that stands for:

Positive Emotion. Experiencing joy, gratitude, and other positive emotions.

Engagement. Being deeply involved in activities that use one's strengths.

Relationships. Having meaningful and positive relationships.

Meaning. Finding purpose and meaning in life.

Accomplishment. Pursuing and achieving goals.

Historical Background and Key Figures

While positive psychology as a distinct field of study began in the late 1990s, some of its core concepts have ancient roots in various philosophical and spiritual traditions around the world. The ancient Greek philosophers like Aristotle explored ideas related to eudaimonia, sometimes translated as “human flourishing and living a virtuous life” (Nagel, 1972). Eastern spiritual traditions like Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism emphasized concepts like mindfulness, harmony, and self-realization that align with positive psychology principles (Schlamm, 2020).

The humanistic psychology movement of the 1950s-60s, led by figures like Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, laid important groundwork for positive psychology (Angyal et al., 1981). Humanistic psychology championed a holistic study of human potential, motivation, and growth, moving away from just treating mental illness. Maslow first used the term "positive psychology" in his 1954 book *Motivation and Personality*, criticizing psychology's limited focus on the negative (Maslow, 1954).

Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) spearheaded the formal establishment of positive psychology as a field in the late 1990s. In 1996, Martin Seligman became president of the American Psychological Association (APA) (Feen, 1996). In his 1998 APA presidential address, Seligman highlighted psychology's neglect of human potential and called for a "positive psychology" focused on building the best qualities in

life (Seligman, 1998). In 2000, Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi published an article in the journal *American Psychologist* that described this new field and its origins (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi also pioneered research on the concept of "flow", a state of optimal experience and engagement. His work significantly shaped positive psychology's emphasis on cultivating strengths and positive experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Other prominent figures include Ed Diener (subjective well-being), Barbara Fredrickson (broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions), Christopher Peterson (character strengths and virtues), Sonja Lyubomirsky (hedonic adaptation and happiness interventions), Carol Dweck (growth mindset), Jonathan Haidt (moral psychology and elevation), and Todd Kashdan (well-being, curiosity, meaning), just to name a few ("List of Positive Psychologists," 2024).

Mission and Goals of Positive Psychology

The mission of positive psychology is to understand and propagate the factors that allow individuals, communities, and societies to flourish (Fredrickson, 2001; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Put another way, it is the study of what makes life worth living (Peterson, 2008). Some of the ways this can be accomplished include increasing happiness and well-being by promoting positive emotions like joy, contentment, and gratitude (Fredrickson, 2001). Additionally, these goals are enhanced through building strengths and resilience by identifying and nurturing positive individual traits like optimism, courage, and self-regulation (Seligman, 2011b). Furthermore, quality of life can be enhanced by cultivating positive experiences, positive relationships, and a sense of meaning and purpose (Fredrickson, 2000). Nurturing healthy and fulfilling environments like families, schools, workplaces, and

communities that allow people to thrive also further the aims of positive psychology (Keyes, 2007).

Importance of Studying Well-Being and Happiness

As stated in the introductory paragraphs, the world is facing many substantial and significant challenges. Using the tools available from positive psychology, opportunities to face these challenges become clearer. The World Happiness Report (WHR) 2024 outlines some of these avenues in greater detail (*World Happiness Report 2024*, 2024). In fact, the WHR (2024) considered many aspects related to happiness and age, including studying well-being at various stages of life, from childhood and adolescence to aging adults. What follows in the next few sections are key insights from the WHR (2024) that make clear the relevance and importance of studying well-being and happiness, and suggest policies that could foster the improvement of well-being.

Understanding the Factors That Contribute to Life Satisfaction and Flourishing.

The report analyzes various factors like income, social support, freedom, generosity, and healthy life expectancy that influence people's evaluations of their lives. This helps identify policies and interventions to improve well-being. For instance, policies should aim to provide equitable access to education and health care. This includes increasing access to safe public spaces for physical and social activities, health screenings, and affordable and effective healthcare services. Such policies ensure that individuals have the necessary resources to maintain their well-being and health, resulting in widespread benefits for dementia prevention. As the WHR (2024) considered support of well-being for aging populations, dementia is a factor that can have dramatic impact on life satisfaction.

Collecting high-quality data on the well-being of individuals living with dementia is crucial. Policies should aim to increase access to and affordability of assistive technology and paid care partners, allowing more individuals to remain at home. For those who cannot live safely at home, assisted living facilities should create home-like environments and implement activities to enhance well-being. Interventions such as social support groups, cultural arts, physical activities, and multisensory environments can significantly enhance the well-being of people living with dementia. Additionally, intergenerational programs that bring together different generations through combined activities, such as intergenerational classrooms and choirs, can also enhance well-being among older adults and promote social connection and relatedness.

Looking at younger populations, policies that integrate a child-centered perspective into all government policies are effective in promoting child well-being. An example is South Korea's initiative to make children's happiness a national priority (*World Happiness Report 2024*, 2024). The #BeeWell program in the UK is another example where academic expertise, policymakers, and local organizations collaborate to improve adolescent well-being through data-driven approaches.

Monitoring Global Trends.

By ranking countries annually based on life evaluations from representative samples, the report tracks how happiness levels are changing over time across nations and regions. This allows for assessing the progress of societies, and allows for an understanding of how societies are evolving in terms of well-being and happiness.

The report highlights changes in happiness from 2006-2010 to 2021-2023. It notes that seventeen countries have seen significant increases in average life evaluations, while seven

countries have experienced substantial declines. Eastern European countries are among the largest gainers, with notable improvements in their happiness scores. In contrast, countries like Lebanon and Afghanistan have seen their life evaluations halved from their base values, indicating significant declines in well-being.

Inequality in the distribution of happiness has increased globally by more than 20% over the past dozen years. This increase is reflected in the growing disparity between the happiest and least happy individuals within countries. Western Europe is an exception, where happiness inequality has remained relatively constant. In other regions, such as Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), inequality has increased significantly, particularly among older adults.

Global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have also had profound impacts on societal happiness. The pandemic has led to increased negative emotions and changes in social interactions, affecting overall well-being globally.

Investigating Differences Across Demographics.

The report examines how happiness levels vary by age groups, gender, and generations. For example, it finds a general U-shape in happiness over the lifespan, with a mid-life dip. Understanding these patterns can inform policies benefiting different population segments. As mentioned previously, those living with dementia are an area of particular focus. Policies designed to increase well-being may lower dementia risk, resulting in a happier and healthier older adult population. These include increasing equitable access to education, safe public spaces for physical and social activity, health screenings, and affordable and effective health care.

The COVID pandemic has also provided a natural experiment to capture generational differences in benevolence. Post-COVID increases in benevolence are large for all generations,

but especially for Millennials and Generation Z. Policies should encourage social support and benevolence activities to maintain and enhance community well-being.

Studying Societal Impacts.

Higher well-being is associated with positive outcomes like better health, longer life expectancy, and more pro-social behavior. Studying happiness can thus shed light on ways to build thriving communities. Encouraging active participation in community activities helps foster a sense of belonging and social cohesion. Programs that promote social engagement and support groups are effective in improving well-being by providing opportunities for meaningful social interactions. And ensuring equitable access to healthcare services, including health screenings and affordable care, is crucial. Policies that focus on providing safe public spaces for physical and social activities help individuals maintain their well-being and health.

Shifting Policy Focus.

Traditionally, policies focused on raising income (Agrawal et al., 2024). But much of the happiness research mentioned earlier from the field of positive psychology highlights other crucial factors, like social connections, freedom, and environmental quality. This can reorient policy priorities. In essence, the science of well-being provides an alternative lens to evaluate societal progress beyond just economic metrics. As the WHR (2024) indicates, there is an alternative narrative to the present philosophy of economic growth simply for the sake of growth.

Subjective Well-Being: Defining Key Concepts and Components

Before exploring the topic of ritual, the context of Nordic traditions, and connection to subjective well-being (SWB), a grounding in some foundational concepts is useful. The field of positive psychology identifies the importance of positive emotions, so a way to measure and identify this affect is needed.

SWB is a comprehensive measure of how people experience and evaluate their lives (Diener et al., 2003). It encompasses both cognitive judgements and affective reactions. While the WHR considers happiness at a country and global level, SWB focuses on the individual experience. Using 'happiness' to refer to the individual experience of joy, contentment or positive well-being, combined with the sense that one's life is meaningful and worthwhile, all people fall somewhere on a continuum of subjective happiness (Lyubomirsky, 2010). Using measures such as SWB help provide a baseline from which to consider the impact of rituals, positive or otherwise. And despite these measures of a subjective experience, it is important to remember that happiness is also a process, and not a destination (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008). This process approach further invites the use of ritual to augment happiness. Which in turn provides for the important intersection between the individual and the collective experience, since happiness also requires social relationships (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008).

SWB can be measured in a single-item measure, but this can have issues with variance and internal consistency (Diener, 1984). To get past these issues, Diener (1984) proposes measuring SWB on multi-item scales and considered in three components:

Life Satisfaction

A global assessment of a person's quality of life according to their chosen criteria. This component reflects a cognitive judgmental evaluation of one's life. It involves individuals' assessments of how satisfied they are with their lives as a whole, rather than just a reflection of their current mood or emotions. Life satisfaction is often measured through self-reports where individuals rate their overall satisfaction with their life.

Positive Affect

The presence of pleasant emotions and moods. This component focuses on the frequency and intensity of experiencing positive emotions such as joy, excitement, contentment, and other pleasurable states. Positive affect is not merely the absence of negative emotions but a distinct dimension reflecting the extent to which individuals feel good and experience positive emotions over time.

Negative Affect

The presence of unpleasant emotions and moods. This component deals with the frequency and intensity of experiencing negative emotions such as sadness, anger, anxiety, and other distressing states. Like positive affect, negative affect is considered a separate dimension, meaning that high levels of positive affect do not necessarily imply low levels of negative affect, and vice versa.

In his 1984 review on the SWB research to date, Ed Diener highlights that positive and negative affect are relatively independent components. This means that an individual can experience both high levels of positive affect and high levels of negative affect, though they generally do not occur simultaneously. Diener's definitions of the components of SWB emphasize the subjective nature of well-being, the importance of both positive and negative experiences, and the overall evaluative judgments individuals make about their lives (Diener, 1984). These components together provide a comprehensive picture of how and why people experience their lives in positive ways.

Subjective Well-Being: Historical Development and Key Figures

The historical development of SWB research, as outlined by Diener in his 1984 review, includes several key phases and figures. Philosophers like Aristotle discussed concepts related to

well-being and happiness, considering them as the highest good and ultimate motivation for human action (Nagel, 1972). Aristotle's idea of eudaimonia emphasized virtue and moral living as essential to well-being. However, despite the long-standing philosophical interest, early psychologists focused more on pathology and negative aspects of human experience, largely ignoring positive SWB. In the 1960s and 1970s, the field of psychology began to shift, with researchers starting to focus on positive aspects of human experience. Wilson's seminal review summarized early research on happiness and suggested that demographic factors like health, age, and income were correlated with happiness. However, he concluded that little theoretical progress had been made since ancient times (Wilson, 1967). In 1973, the term "happiness" was introduced as an index term in *Psychological Abstracts International*, marking an important step in recognizing the field, and in 1974 the journal *Social Indicators Research* was founded, which published many articles on SWB and further established the area as a legitimate field of study (Diener, 1984). Below are some of the other key figures related to SWB.

Bradburn and Caplovitz (1965)

Norman Bradburn and David Caplovitz developed the Affect Balance Scale (ABS), which distinguished between positive and negative affect. This work highlighted the importance of measuring both positive and negative dimensions of emotional experience (Bradburn & Caplovitz, 1965).

Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers (1976)

Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, and Willard Rodgers published comprehensive studies on the quality of American life, emphasizing life satisfaction and well-being. Their work helped establish important methodological standards for measuring SWB (Campbell et al., 1976).

Andrews and Withey (1976)

Frank Andrews and Stephen Withey conducted influential research on the structure of SWB, identifying life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect as key components (Andrews & Withey, 1976).

Bradburn (1969)

Norman Bradburn proposed that happiness consists of two separate dimensions: positive affect and negative affect. His work sparked considerable debate and further research into the independence of these dimensions (Bradburn, 1969).

Diener (1984)

Ed Diener's review consolidated existing research and provided a comprehensive overview of the measurement, causal factors, and theoretical approaches to SWB. He highlighted the need for reliable and valid measures of SWB and emphasized the importance of both affective and cognitive components (Diener, 1984).

As the field of SWB has evolved from philosophical inquiries about the nature of happiness to a robust area of psychological research, this has contributed to the development of reliable measures and the understanding of the factors influencing SWB. This historical development reflects a growing recognition of the importance of positive aspects of human experience in psychology.

Part II Focus on Nordic Positive Ritual and Well-Being**Purpose and Scope of the Paper**

The purpose of this paper is to explore the intersection of ritual and Nordic culture to better understand and create an operational definition of positive ritual. The scope of this inquiry includes a brief overview of ritual, understanding of Nordic cultures and the possible causes for

such consistent well-being in those countries, and how to consider possible application of positive rituals. The goal is to take the findings from the WHR a step further and examine how ritual can have an impact on SWB.

Nordic Positive Rituals and Subjective Well-Being

The Nordic countries – Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland – consistently rank highly on the WHR. The first WHR was published in 2012 (The Earth Institute, Columbia University, 2012). That year, Denmark, Finland, and Norway were the top three countries and Sweden wasn't far behind at #7. And from 2013 on, the Nordic countries have been in the top ten happiest countries each year that the WHR was published (World Happiness Report, 2020). Additionally, one must be oriented to key concepts in Nordic culture, which often don't have English translations or close facsimiles. This paper will lay out some of the more prevalent concepts found across the Nordic countries. And while these concepts in and of themselves aren't necessarily rituals, each has the capacity to invite creation and observance of rituals that can invoke positive emotions, such as the Finnish sauna culture.

There are many factors that contribute to the consistent showing of the Nordic countries on the WHR, including high levels of social support, quality of institutions, freedom to make life choices, relatively high health and life expectancy, income equality, generosity and prosocial behavior, and a high degree of social trust and strong sense of community (World Happiness Report, 2020; *World Happiness Report 2024*, 2024). The Nordic countries also have several concepts that support a more resilient view of the world and likely lead to this sense of well-being. This paper will explore how those concepts lead to different types of rituals, which in turn can potentially be exported or leveraged by other populations around the world that are interested in raising a general level of well-being.

Overview of the Structure of the Paper

This paper began by outlining several key terms and concepts related to well-being and its constituent components. The next sections will define rituals and their possible importance to humanity and SWB. Following that primer on core well-being concepts and the connection to ritual, the next area of focus will be Nordic countries and their cultural context. This paper will then introduce and explain some of the Nordic concepts that may be the foundation behind Nordic well-being and use of positive ritual, including *hygge*, *friluftsliv*, and *fika*, among others. Then the key area of exploration will be the connection between rituals and Nordic culture to create a lens for outlining and operationalizing positive rituals. Finally, this paper will suggest practical applications of positive rituals and the potential implications.

Rituals and Positive Rituals

The word "ritual" originates from the Latin word "ritus," which means "rite" or "religious observance" (*Ritual* | *Etymology of Ritual by Etymonline*, n.d.). The term "ritus" in Latin referred to a prescribed or established form of religious or other ceremonial practice. Over time, this term evolved into "ritualis" in Medieval Latin, which pertained to rites. From there, it was adopted into Old French as "rituel" and eventually made its way into English as "ritual."

Definitions of Rituals

In the early 20th century, beginning with the works of Arnold van Gennep (1909) and Émile Durkheim (Durkheim & Swain, 1915), scholars began looking at the connection between religion and ritual in the Western world and in particular how rituals mark significant life changes and contribute to social cohesion and collective consciousness. Later, Victor Turner (1969) expanded this research to explore liminal events and social transformative functions of rituals. Other scholars, such as Erving Goffman (1959), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966), Mary

Douglas (1966) and Clifford Geertz (1973) expanded research of ritual behaviors into many different cultural domains, especially taking a broader anthropological view of other societies around the world. More contemporary researchers, such as Catherine Bell (1992) began to develop different frameworks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the theory and practice of ritual. As a result, there are now many ways to define and think about rituals, but as of yet there is not one overarching theory of ritual, nor is one entirely necessary (Boyer & Liénard, 2020). Accordingly, one's definition of rituals can range from a highly scripted and rigid sequence of events observed in a communal setting, to much more organic and personal ways of behaving privately. In common vernacular, what are often considered rituals are named social interactions that include elements of normative behaviors, aligned with group identity or cohesion (Boyer & Liénard, 2020).

Boyer & Liénard (2020) identify four different mental systems that can help to better understand different forms of behavior and social interaction that can be considered rituals. These systems identify mechanisms that can be present in various forms of behavior, from named patterns of social interaction to OCD compulsions or non-clinical routines, but it is not necessary for any of these mechanisms to be present for a behavior to be considered ritualistic. The four systems Boyer & Liénard (2020) outlined are listed below.

Scripted, Normative Interactions

These are actions that are conducted according to specific scripts. Participants hold shared expectations for how these interactions should unfold, and it's not uncommon for violations of these scripts to result in the feeling that the ritual has not been properly performed. One example is the *incwala*, a long sequence performed by the Swazi in South Africa just before their new crops can be consumed (Kuper, 2018). Among the many conditions for this ritual, only

a member of the royal clan can organize the ceremony, and a black ox must be taken from one of the villagers' herd to be sacrificed.

Coalitional Signaling

These are actions within rituals that can signify group identity and cohesiveness. These rituals can create a strong sense of identity and unity among the participants. Additionally, these actions often include commentary on social order and hierarchy. For instance, a dramatic example is the *ekimomwar* of Turkana, wherein pastoralists in Kenya split a sacrificial ox in half, and after the body parts are arranged on the ground, participants step through the sacrificial site in hierarchical order (Liénard, 2004).

Magical Causation

Many rituals involve beliefs in magical causation, where specific actions are believed to produce specific effects. These beliefs often stem from intuitive expectations about contagion and relevance, and such rituals are culturally transmitted and compelling due to their activation of underlying cognitive systems. In Brazil, *simpatia* refer to a wide variety of actions from which people expect specific positive results, such as economic success, good grades at school, or a happy marriage (Legare & Souza, 2012).

Ritualized Behavior

This includes actions performed with compulsion, scriptedness, goal-demotion, and redundancy, and are often intended to ward off threats. They can be seen in both collective ceremonies and individual compulsions (e.g., OCD). Rafael Nadal, a world-renowned tennis player, has several on-court rituals that he always performs in the same way, from the way he steps across lines with his right foot, the way he picks his underwear, or the way he always eats

his energy gel the same way with four squeezes (“The Definitive Guide to Rafael Nadal’s 19 Bizarre Tennis Rituals,” 2014).

Beyond these mental systems, perhaps a simpler definition of ritual would be “a predefined sequence of symbolic actions often characterized by formality and repetition that lacks direct instrumental purpose” (Brooks et al., 2016). This way of thinking about ritual is more concerned with the symbolism of the actions involved, rather than any particularly useful function of the behavior. For those that grew up in a faith tradition, religious observances are replete with ceremony that exemplifies this manner of ritual, from the way a congregation has a specific sequence of times to sit, stand, or kneel, or to repeat phrases back to whomever is leading the worship service. Or perhaps one’s faith tradition has a familiar sequence for conducting a wedding ceremony or funeral. These types of more rigid, communal practices are included in what Norton (2024) calls *legacy rituals*. Or perhaps one might consider rituals as components of a “cultural tool kit” as people amalgamate symbols, stories, and world views (Swidler, 1986).

Xygalatas (2022) takes this a step further, and explains that rituals are culturally strategic ways of acting in the world that often appear senseless or without direct purpose but hold significant meaning and function within human societies. By this definition rituals are repetitive, structured actions that can range from mundane daily practices to elaborate ceremonies involving excruciating pain and sacrifice. Rituals are deeply ingrained in human nature and serve various psychological and social functions, such as reducing anxiety, fostering social bonds, and providing a sense of control in uncertain situations, all of which can be avenues to increasing SWB. Rituals pervade every documented society, and range from simple like handshakes, to complex and costly such as Hindu weddings that can last for several days (Buckley, 2006).

Rituals differ from habits, in that habits are causally transparent, while rituals are causally opaque; the purpose of the ritual and its constituent steps may not be readily apparent (Xygalatas, 2022). Nonetheless, it has been hypothesized that ritual may actually have been critical to human evolution (Archer, 2001; Atkinson & Whitehouse, 2011; Liénard & Boyer, 2006).

Given the diversity of frameworks concerning ritual as well as the lack of a clear overarching theory of ritual—and the strong argument that such a theory is not desirable since what constitutes ritual is subjective to the point that empirical study is not possible (Liénard & Boyer, 2006), this leaves the curious observer quite a bit of latitude with respect to defining ritual. For the purposes of this paper, ritual is considered an observable form or pattern of human behavior that may be causally opaque or symbolic in nature, and seeks an outcome typically sought by many rituals, such as social cohesion or identity, threat deterrence, or positive conclusion. This definition is intentionally loose and vague, in order to capture as much of the ‘spirit’ of ritual as possible and allow space for both a traditional collectivist view of ritual as well as an individual’s freedom to build and observe ritual at a personal level.

Differentiation Between Rituals and Positive Rituals

How then, does one differentiate between ‘ritual’, and ‘positive ritual’? As there is not an agreed-upon academic definition of ritual, neither is there a commonly recognized definition of positive ritual. This paper considers positive ritual to be a subset of the broader definition of ritual, with the distinction that positive rituals are those actions or behaviors that contribute positively to an individual’s or group’s well-being, sense of identity, or social cohesion. In other words, if a ritual is intended or designed in such a way as to positively impact SWB, it may be considered a positive ritual.

Examples of Positive Rituals in Various Contexts

Positive rituals can be as simple as the *hanami*, or cherry blossom festivals, observed each spring in Japan as a social tradition (Azizi, 2020; Moriuchi & Basil, 2019). Family and friends meet under the trees to enjoy the blossoms of the *Sakura*, or cherry trees. These gatherings often include normative behaviors, such as bringing a blue picnic cloth to sit on, supplying one's own food and drink, especially sake, and taking garbage away when departing. Groups will gather and enjoy the view of the short-lived sakura blossoms, often sitting in conversation all day. These small parties positively impact SWB by allowing for appreciation of nature's beauty while fostering social cohesion.

Establishing a daily meditative practice can also be a form of positive ritual. As Jon Kabat-Zin (2005) explains, mindfulness is an opportunity to wake up from automatic and unconscious ways of living and to live in harmony with oneself and the world. He further explains that mindfulness can be a path to take charge of the direction and quality of one's life, getting in touch with one's own wisdom and vitality. These qualities would likely improve positive affect, thereby increasing SWB.

In the United States, Thanksgiving holiday is celebrated each November in a family-oriented feast that traces its origin back to the arrival of the *Mayflower* on the North American continent in 1620 (Baker, 2010). While the actual beginning of the holiday is somewhat disputed and steeped in folk legend, the current holiday as observed in the US includes common traditions such as serving a turkey dinner and spending time with family and friends. These gatherings tend to positively impact SWB by strengthening familial bonds and providing an opportunity for families to express gratitude.

Part III Nordic Positive Rituals

Nordic Countries and Their Cultural Context

To get to Nordic positive rituals, one must first understand something about which countries are considered part of the Nordics, as well as a bit about their historical and cultural context. Scandinavia—a term that refers exclusively to Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, is sometimes mistakenly used interchangeably with reference to the Nordic countries (Tomlin, 2024; Törnqvist, 1998). Part III of this paper will outline the Nordic countries and provide a brief historical and cultural overview, before describing some of the unique philosophies of this region of the world that set the stage for an exploration of positive rituals.

Overview of Nordic Countries

The term "Nordic countries" refers to a group of countries in Northern Europe and the North Atlantic, which share close historical, cultural, and linguistic ties; specifically Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. Additionally, the autonomous territories of the Faroe Islands and Greenland (both part of the Kingdom of Denmark) and Åland (part of Finland) are also sometimes considered part of the Nordics. The Nordic countries are known for their strong welfare states, high levels of social trust, and emphasis on egalitarianism and gender equality (World Happiness Report, 2020).

Denmark

Located in Northern Europe, Denmark consists of the Jutland Peninsula and numerous islands. Denmark is a modern and prosperous nation with strong political and economic influences on Europe. After formerly being a stronghold for Viking warriors, Denmark joined NATO in 1949 and the EU in 1973. After opting out of certain elements of the Maastricht Treaty in the years since then, a referendum in 2022 removed Denmark's 30-year opt-out of defense

issues, which now makes Denmark a full participant in the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy. With a population of nearly 6,000,000 and excellent access to the North Sea and the Baltic Sea, most population centers tend to be along the coastal areas. Denmark's form of government is a parliamentary constitutional monarchy (Central Intelligence Agency, 2024a).

Finland

Situated in Northern Europe, Finland borders Sweden, Norway, and Russia. Throughout history, Finland has been under Swedish rule from the 12th to the 19th centuries, and under Russia's control in the 19th century. Finland gained its independence in 1917 and successfully defended its independence during World War II. Features of Finland's modern welfare state include high-quality education, strong support of equality, and a national welfare system. Finland joined the EU in 1995, and finally became a full member of NATO in 2023 following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Finland's population of more than 5,600,000 is over 90% of Finnish background. Finland is governed by a parliamentary republic (Central Intelligence Agency, 2024b).

Iceland

An island nation in the North Atlantic Ocean, Iceland is known for its dramatic landscapes. The land area of this country is slightly smaller than the US state of Pennsylvania. Iceland is a sparsely populated country, with less than 400,000 inhabitants, nearly all of whom live in urban areas, especially the capital city of Reykjavik. Iceland's form of government is a unitary parliamentary republic (Central Intelligence Agency, 2024c).

Norway

Located in Northern Europe, Norway has a long coastline along the North Atlantic Ocean and is legendary for its majestic fjords. Known for two centuries of Viking raids into Europe and

the British Isles, these raids slowed down after King Olav Tryggvason became a Christian in 994. Over the next several decades, conversion of the rest of the Norwegian kingdom to Christianity continued. Denmark absorbed Norway in 1397, in a union that lasted more than four hundred years. Denmark attempted to transfer control of Norway to Sweden in 1814, but Norway managed to evade this hand over and established its own constitution. Sweden subsequently invaded Norway, but eventually relented and let Norway keep its constitution in exchange for accepting a union under a Swedish king. Norway eventually gained full independence in 1905. Norway stayed neutral in World War I, and attempted to do the same at the outset of World War II. However, Nazi Germany occupied the country from 1940-45. Norway became a founding member of NATO in 1949. In the late 1960s, the discovery of oil and gas off the coast of Norway significantly changed its economic situation. In order to maintain the country's extensive social safety net and to remain competitive in the global marketplace, Norway has not joined the EU. Norway's 5,500,000 inhabitants live mostly in the milder southern part of the country, with about 85% in urban areas. The mountainous central area of the country is very sparsely populated. Like Denmark, Norway's form of government is a parliamentary constitutional monarchy (Central Intelligence Agency, 2024d).

Sweden

The largest of the Nordic countries by area, Sweden is located in Northern Europe, bordering Norway and Finland. Sweden was a formidable military power during the 17th century and maintained military non-alignment in the following centuries until finally joining NATO in 2022. For more than two hundred years, Sweden has not participated in any war. Through a series of agreements with Germany, Sweden maintained its neutrality during World War II. Sweden's successful economic system combines capitalism with a strong welfare organization.

Sweden joined the EU in 1995 but has not adopted the euro as the national currency. Sweden's nearly 11,000,000 inhabitants mainly live in the milder southern part of the country, with nearly 90% in urban areas. As with the other two Scandinavian countries, Sweden is governed by a parliamentary constitutional monarchy (Central Intelligence Agency, 2024e).

Brief Historical and Cultural Background

The Nordic countries share a complex interweaving of historical, cultural, and linguistic ties that shape their unique identities within the broader European context (Nordic Co-operation, n.d.). What follows is a brief outline of significant historical time periods in the area and the present-day cultural themes that were shaped by these historical events.

The Viking Age (c. 850-1050 AD)

Perhaps the most widely recognized historical theme from this part of the world is the advent of the Vikings. Accordingly, the history of the Nordic countries is deeply influenced by the Viking Age when Norse seafarers from these regions ventured across Europe, the North Atlantic, and into Russia (Barrett et al., 2000). This period was marked by expansion, trade, and conquest, establishing the maritime prowess and cultural reach of the Nordic peoples. Of note, the perception of Vikings as merely barbaric savages is an oversimplification, as their society was marked by intricate social structures, legal systems, trade networks, craftsmanship, and exploration (Graham-Campbell & Williams, 2007; Reynolds et al., 2013).

Medieval Period (11th-16th Centuries)

By the 11th century, Christianity had spread throughout the Nordic region, leading to significant cultural and political changes. The Kalmar Union (1397-1523) unified Denmark, Norway, and Sweden under a single monarch (Gustafsson, 2006). This union faced internal conflicts and eventually dissolved, leading to the rise of separate nation-states.

Early Modern Period

Sweden emerged as a major European power during the 17th century, engaging in several wars, including the Thirty Years' War which took place from 1618 to 1648 (Lockhart, 2004). Denmark-Norway remained united until 1814 when Norway entered a union with Sweden, which lasted until 1905 (Boas, 2014). Denmark retained control over Greenland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands until these territories gradually gained greater autonomy or independence (Berg, 2014).

Modern Nation States

By the 20th century, all the Nordic countries had transitioned into modern nation-states. They maintained neutrality during World War I, and with the exception of Finland and Norway, nearly did the same during World War II (Nilesh, 2012).

Nordic art and architecture reflect a blend of indigenous styles and European influences, from Viking-age artifacts to modern design and architecture characterized by minimalism and functionality (Myronenko, 2016; O'Neill, 2017). Notable contributions include the stave churches of Norway, the wooden architecture of Finland, and the functionalist design principles epitomized by designers like Alvar Aalto and Arne Jacobsen (Aune et al., 1983; Sanz, 2012).

Midsummer, also known as the summer solstice, is a significant event in the Nordic region, marked by various traditional festivities. In Sweden, Midsummer is celebrated with dance, music, and the decoration of the maypole, as depicted in Anders Zorn's painting "Midsommardans" (Zorn, 1897). The celebration involves people gathering outdoors to enjoy the long daylight hours, a practice that is deeply rooted in rural life and customs. This event not only reflects the cultural heritage but also the connection to nature that is prevalent in Nordic traditions, although it varies some between the countries. In Denmark it's called *Sankt Hans*

Aften and is linked to the birth of St. John the Baptist, and in Finland, Denmark, and Norway, celebrants light big bonfires (Carlsson, 2023). Swedes focus on the Maypole, a painted pole that's decorated with flowers, which they traditionally dance around.

The Nordic countries are home to North Germanic languages, including Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, and Icelandic. Finnish, spoken in Finland, is part of the Finno-Ugric language family, which is distinctly different and includes Hungarian and Estonian as well as the Sámi languages of the northern Scandinavian peninsula (Bakró-Nagy et al., 2022). All of these languages reflect a rich literary tradition, especially the Scandinavian languages with roots in Norse mythology and sagas, transitioning into globally recognized modern literary figures like Hans Christian Andersen, Astrid Lindgren, Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, and Selma Lagerlöf (Brantly, 2019; Hansen & Simonsen, 2022; Rikhardsdottir, 2019).

Positive Rituals in Nordic Countries

Understanding key concepts of well-being from the Nordic region helps to understand rituals that are born from these perspectives. The next few sections of this paper outline some of the more prevalent concepts. And while not necessarily comprehensive of all the Nordic perspectives on society and life, these concepts are some of those most likely to lead to the creation of positive rituals. Of the concepts that follow, *fika* is one that can already be considered a ritual in the way that it is commonly practiced.

Hygge

Hygge (pronounced "hoo-gah") is a Danish term that doesn't have a direct translation in English, but describes a sense of coziness, comfort, and contentment (Wiking, 2016). More than just a word, it embodies a cultural phenomenon deeply rooted in Danish life that focuses on a feeling. *Hygge* is often described as the art of creating a warm atmosphere and enjoying the good

things in life with good people. It reflects a philosophy of finding joy in the simple pleasures, fostering a sense of well-being and togetherness. Hygge is about creating a comfortable and inviting environment that promotes relaxation and a sense of well-being (Wiking, 2022).

Wiking (2022) provides common practices to create hygge, including the use of soft lighting, candles, warm blankets, and comfortable furniture to create a welcoming space. Or enjoying comfort food and drink with others through hearty meals, warm drinks like hot chocolate or tea, or homemade treats. Appreciating nature, whether through a walk in the park or bringing natural elements indoors, like plants and flowers, is another common way to invite hygge. Social gatherings are also a great avenue to hygge, such as spending quality time with friends and family, often involving intimate gatherings, game nights, or leisurely dinners. Even alone time engaging in activities that promote relaxation and mindfulness, such as reading a book, knitting, or listening to music, are great ways to bring hygge into one's day (Wiking, 2016).

During the NOREX training exercises mentioned in the introduction, the Norwegian hosts often treated their guests to examples of hygge, such as taking the staff to a ski lodge for a relaxing weekend after the completion of the rigorous field exercises. These staff getaways included chef-curated and prepared cuisine, and ample opportunity to relax in a model atmosphere of hygge; such as conversation and aquavit by a cozy fire after a hearty meal (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Example Hygge Setting



Note 1 - Example of a setting prime for experiencing hygge; the text is in a local Norwegian dialect that instructs those present to "not speak ill of others". Photo taken by the author in February 2013, while training with Norwegian Soldiers in the Trøndelag region.

Fika

A ritual popularized in Sweden, fika is called a natural coffee break that everyone stops for throughout their day, but it's much more than that (Carlsson, 2023). In addition to coffee, sandwiches are very common, especially served on rye with various cold cuts or *pålägg*. With all the accompaniments, it's actually closer to a small meal, and is celebrated both at home and the workplace, emphasizing social interaction and commensality (Yngve et al., 2023).

In the Swedish workplace, the twice-day ritual of fika is considered essential for maintaining work-life balance and health and is seen as both a sign of employer generosity and a

tool for reducing work alienation (Morley et al., 2018). This approach also helps to reduce hierarchical barriers, promotes a sense of community, and enhances teamwork and collaboration. Participating in fika regularly helps to reduce stress and improve overall well-being. It provides a moment of relaxation and mental reprieve from daily tasks, contributing to better work-life satisfaction (Caprioli et al., 2021).

Friluftsliv

Friluftsliv, which translated from Norwegian is “free open-air life”, is a Scandinavian philosophy of spiritual connectedness with the landscape and freedom in nature (Gelter, 2000). This concept and way of living exists in all Nordic countries, and the phrase is widely used in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, while in Finland, the term is *taivasalla*, which roughly translates to “under the sky” (Carlsson, 2023). The concept is not precisely defined, leading to various interpretations, yet this perspective emphasizes a lifestyle that fosters environmental education and being active outdoors, regardless of the type of activity or season of the year (Faarlund, 2015). The connection to nature also encourages leaving the outdoors in the same condition it was found, or preferably even better by picking up litter and acting as a good steward of the environment. Friluftsliv is also connected to a concept that the outdoors are a common good and everyone has the freedom to roam; in Swedish this is called *allmansrätten* (“right of public access”) and in Norwegian it’s *friluftsløven* (“the Open Air Act). In Finland, one will hear this described as *jokamiehen oikeudet*, or “everyman’s rights” (Carlsson, 2023).

As a result of living this way, many in the Nordic countries form a deep emotional and spiritual connection with nature. This connection leads to a heightened sense of awareness and a feeling of being at home in the natural environment, which can evoke strong emotional responses and a sense of spiritual wholeness (Gelter, 2000). Gelter (2000) contends that this also helps

synchronize the rhythms of the body and mind with the natural world, and this synchronization reduces stress and promotes a sense of well-being and mental clarity. The organic rhythms of nature, such as the patterns of light, weather, and landscapes, harmonize with human biological rhythms, leading to a feeling of harmony and pleasure. By fostering a sense of connectedness with nature, *friluftsliv* helps reduce feelings of insecurity and fear, which can otherwise lead to aggression towards others and the environment, and this connectedness promotes a more biophilic lifestyle, characterized by love and respect for nature (Gelter, 2000).

Lagom

The Swedish word of Lagom does not have a direct translation in English, and is interpreted to mean "just enough" or "not too much, not too little" (Barinaga, 1999). It's thought that the word originates from the Viking term *laget om*, or "around the team" and comes from the custom of passing a horn of mead around with just enough for everyone to get a sip (Dunne, 2017). Whether or not that anecdote is historically accurate, the etymology of lagom comes from the word *lag*, which is a commonsense rule or "law". The law of lagom encourages seeking a balance just the right amount, whether that's just the right amount of milk in the coffee, or just enough time to do a task properly. It speaks to a Nordic sense of egalitarianism and equality, and is related to another term, the Law of Jante, also known as *Jantelagen* in Swedish, *Janti laki* in Finnish, *Jantelögin* in Icelandic, or *Janteloven* in Norwegian and Danish (Carlsson, 2023; Wiking, 2017). This is a form of social conduct that emphasizes community over individuality, and frowns upon anyone who stands out. Elements of lagom can be spotted in all areas of Swedish life, from the work-life balance encouraged by *fika*, to the minimalist and functional style of design, or in the approach to food and drink. Even the Swedish approach to health and

wellness can be seen in the decidedly unpretentious Friskis&Svettis health clubs across the country (*Friskis&Svettis in English*, n.d.).

Practicing lagom leads to balance and moderation, by avoiding extremes and fostering a sense of contentment and satisfaction. This cultural mindset encourages individuals to seek a harmonious balance between work and leisure, consumption and conservation, and personal desires and social responsibilities (Barinaga, 1999; Einhorn, 2002). It also fosters a strong sense of social cohesion and equality. This emphasis on collective well-being over individual excess leads to a society where people prioritize community, fairness, and shared prosperity. This is evident in practices such as the Swedish welfare system and the strong social safety nets that support citizens. In the context of economic policies, lagom influences a cautious and pragmatic approach to economic integration and cooperation. The Nordic countries, particularly Sweden, have adopted a "just enough" approach to European integration, ensuring they benefit from economic cooperation while maintaining their sovereignty and social welfare systems (Einhorn, 2002).

Njuta

Derived from the old Norse *njóta* (to enjoy, to keep, to use), *njuta* (pronounced “nyuutah”) is a Swedish word often translated to mean “enjoy”, but just as *hygge* doesn’t have a direct English translation, neither does *njuta* (Brantmark, 2023). And also like *hygge*, *njuta* encompasses more of a philosophy than a simple experience of enjoyment, and is much more emotionally charged than the English word ‘enjoy’ (Granlund, 2006). In part, perhaps that is because *njuta* denotes a behavior similar to savoring (Bryant, 2003). *Njuta* takes this mindful aspect of savoring and blends toward gratitude, which is heartfelt and unscripted (Fredrickson, 2009). As a result, this nuanced blend of enjoyment, savoring, and gratitude results in a more

satisfied way of living life, and can be seen in various aspects of Swedish culture, from how they interact with each other, to how they decorate their homes, to how they enjoy the outdoors (Brantmark, 2023).

Sisu

Yet another word that doesn't have an appropriate English translation, *sisu* is a Finnish term often described as a mix of courage, resilience, grit, tenacity, and perseverance, or an individual's ability to push through extreme challenges by accessing deep, often latent, inner strength (Lahti, 2019; Nylund, 2018). *Sisu* is about enduring significant adversity and exceeding preconceived capacities, and enduring major disruptions rather than minor inconveniences (Lahti, 2019). Lahti (2019) explains that an action mindset—a consistent, courageous approach towards challenges, emphasizing taking action against all odds, can help to access inner resources of energy and endurance previously unexpressed or unknown to the individual. There is a fine line because too much *sisu* can have negative consequences, such as health problems, burnout, and even death due to overextending oneself. Over indexing on *sisu* can also cause harm to others, when obsession with tasks is at the expense of others, leading to mercilessness and lack of empathy, and can cause harm to reasoning through poor judgment and an inability to see the big picture, resulting in futile persistence and failure (Lahti, 2019).

Despite these risks, *sisu* in itself is a neutral tool, and applied appropriately can help people both in overcoming hardships and becoming a person of integrity (Nylund, 2018). *Sisu* is imbued in many aspects of Finnish life, from the way kids are exposed to nature at an early age to learn self-efficacy in the outdoors, to the way Finns lean on *sisu* to have the courage to stand up for principle and fight for important values like equality, to cultivating endurance by getting out of one's comfort zone and stretching beyond perceived strength (Nylund, 2018). In these

ways, Finns believe that *sisu* can help to achieve freedom, independence, welfare, and success, and by using this gut strength to overcome challenges can positively impact SWB, especially at the individual level.

Betta Reddast

This Icelandic phrase, pronounced *thet-ta red-ust* (Akashi, 2013), is the country's unofficial motto that roughly translates to “things will work out” and speaks to the Icelanders' easy-going, laid-back attitude and great sense of humor (Hammel, 2020). This sensibility is likely born from the reality that over the centuries, just living in this small island country was quite difficult, so modern-day challenges are relatively easy in comparison (Sigmundsdottir, 2014). More than just a phrase, it is a way of life that encourages optimism, resourcefulness, and an unwavering belief in the potential for positive outcomes.

Some of the likely results of living this way include reduced stress, as individuals may experience less worry and anxiety about situations beyond their control, and increased resilience and optimism, as it encourages people to face challenges with a sense of calm confidence and helps individuals to maintain hope even in difficult times. Icelanders are known for their resourcefulness and proactive problem-solving, often working hard to ensure positive outcomes while maintaining a belief that things will ultimately be okay (Sigmundsdottir, 2014).

The interplay of these Nordic concepts—*hygge*, *fika*, *friluftsliv*, *lagom*, *njuta*, *sisu*, and *betta reddast*—creates an interesting framework to enhance well-being. These philosophies embody positive emotions and values such as coziness, balance, resilience, and optimism. By fostering a strong sense of community, connection with nature, and mindfulness, they contribute to a high quality of life and overall happiness.

Fredrickson's (2009) research on positive emotions underscores the importance of these feelings in building resilience and well-being. The Nordic practices emphasize creating environments and rituals that nurture these positive emotions, leading to lasting benefits in both personal and communal contexts. By embedding these principles into daily life, individuals can cultivate a sense of fulfillment and contentment that is both deep and enduring.

Part IV Practical Applications and Implications

Using the lens of positive ritual and these rich concepts from the Nordic countries, these become building blocks for creating new rituals, and for looking differently at existing rituals. Numerous possibilities become available to apply these principles on both the social and individual level to have a positive impact on the components of SWB. Key areas to consider while leveraging the wisdom of the Nordics include the impact on raising life satisfaction, improving positive affect, and reducing negative affect.

Individual Level Rituals

For those looking for ways to incorporate individual rituals to increase their own SWB, the following are some examples and thought starters. These examples of ritualized behaviors are intended to serve as a guide in a descriptive fashion, rather than taking on a prescriptive quality. The needs of each individual are different, so there is no 'one size fits all' when it comes to establishing and observing one's own rituals.

Morning Rituals

Most people have some sort of routine in the morning as they prepare for the day ahead, likely born out of repetition and habit. A morning ritual is beyond the simple causally transparent tasks of preparing for the day, and as one determines the intended outcome of the ritualized behavior, a morning ritual can take many forms. Hygge reminds one to embrace and savor

comfort and coziness, so elements of a ‘hygge morning’ could include starting the morning in a cozy space, lighting a candle, wrapping in a soft blanket, or sitting by a window with natural light. A warm beverage, such as tea or coffee, can augment this experience, providing an opportunity to savor each sip by focusing on the flavor, warmth, and comfort that it brings. The balance of lagom could suggest a mix of activities that balance one’s physical, mental, and emotional well-being, as long as one isn’t overloading with too many tasks! Additionally, practicing deep, even breathing exercises can help one aim for a state of equilibrium and calmness. The connection with nature promoted by friluftsliv could suggest some brief outdoor time, perhaps going for a short walk in a garden or just standing outside and savoring the energy of the morning. Perhaps a focus on the sights, smells, and sounds of the natural environment can help one more fully tune in with nature. Sisu might lead one to engage in some form of exercise that challenges and energizes, such as yoga, a short run, or a series of stretches. One could augment this experience with affirmations that emphasize strength, resilience, and determination to face the day’s challenges. Or one could embrace njuta and prepare a nutritious breakfast and focus on eating it mindfully, paying attention to textures, flavors, and nourishment that it provides. Depending upon the approach one chooses, the likely outcome of these approaches is a morning ritual can become a holistic practice that nurtures one’s body, mind, and spirit, setting a positive and balanced tone for the rest of the day.

Evening Rituals

Similarly, these same concepts can be applied to building an intentional evening ritual, which can help an individual to unwind, reflect on the day, and prepare for a restful night. To embrace the coziness and comfort of a hygge mindset, one can dim the lights, light a candle, or use a diffuser with calming essential oils to create a cozy environment of relaxation. Using a soft

blanket and wearing comfortable clothes can add to the peacefulness of the ritual. Lagom invites reflection upon the day, and what went well or what could be improved, without dwelling too much or ruminating on any one aspect too much. To borrow from friluftsliv, one might go for an evening walk to enjoy the cooler evening air and the calming effects of nature. Or to recognize sisu, one might spend time reflecting on how they handled challenges during the day, and acknowledge resilience and strengths. And njuta might encourage one to prepare a nutritious dinner, to be savored and appreciated. Incorporating these elements into an evening ritual can help one unwind from the day's stresses, promote relaxation, and foster overall well-being and balance.

Workday Rituals

Another area for building rituals is the workplace, to help one feel focused, balanced, and productive throughout the workday while also ensuring moments of relaxation and mindfulness. In order to bring hygge into one's workspace, one can personalize their work area with items that make them feel comfortable and happy, such as a cozy chair, soft lighting, and personal mementos. During breaks, one can take a few moments to relax in a cozy spot with a warm beverage or a snack. To bring in elements of lagom, one can plan their workday with balanced periods of focused work and regular breaks. Techniques such as the Pomodoro Technique can help to maintain this balance (Cirillo, 2018). One should avoid overloading their to-do list, and focus on completing a few important tasks rather than trying to do everything at once to stay true to the spirit of lagom. Friluftsliv invites one to take short breaks outside whenever possible, or perhaps even conduct walking meetings to combine working with the outdoors. Even a few minutes of fresh air can rejuvenate the mind and body. Or if getting outside is impractical, bringing elements of the outside indoors may be helpful, such as plants or natural light. Njuta

reminds one to practice mindfulness while working, perhaps by focusing on one task at a time in order to fully embrace and engage in the process without distraction. Additionally, one might intentionally schedule enjoyable activities during breaks, such as listening to music or chatting with a colleague. Incorporating these elements into a workday can help individuals to stay productive, balanced, and mindful, enhancing the overall work experience and well-being.

Collective Level Rituals

By incorporating these elements into collective rituals, one can foster a sense of community, resilience, and well-being, while also celebrating the cultural richness and shared experiences within various groups.

Family and Household Rituals

Hygge can apply just as well to family gatherings as it can to individual rituals, through the use of soft lighting, comfortable seating, or warm beverages to invite a cozy environment. This can be a nice supporting element to evening routines for the household, such as reading stories together, playing board games, or having a family movie night with blankets and snacks. Lagom can influence family activities through a balanced mix of relaxation and enjoyment. Or in the operation of the household, distributing chores and responsibilities to ensure balance and prevent overburdening of any one family member. Friluftsliv can lead to family outings to parks, nature reserves, or hiking trails. Getting the family into the outdoors can be a great way to encourage exploration and appreciation of the natural world. Perhaps this can be taken a step further with a family garden project; planting and tending to a garden can be a bonding activity for the family and another way to connect with nature. Employing sisu might encourage the family to set collective goals or challenges, such as a particular fitness goal or creative project. Sharing stories of overcoming challenges and encouraging a growth mindset within the family

will also contribute to having open conversations about resilience and determination. Njuta can imbue many parts of family life, especially family meals enjoyed together mindfully. Adding a family ritual of sharing things for which family members are grateful can elevate a family meal conducted with njuta.

Community and Social Group Rituals

Possible settings to embrace comfort and coziness could be community gatherings such as potlucks, book clubs, or neighborhood meetings. Again, use of comfortable seating and lighting, or warm refreshments invites a sense of hygge. Lagom can encourage balanced participation in community activities, ensuring that everyone has a chance to contribute and to be heard. Planning community events that are inclusive and enjoyable for all, avoiding overly ambitious projects that could lead to burnout, further supports a balanced approach. Friluftsliv might involve organizing community nature walks or outdoor activities, encouraging participation from all age groups to foster a connection with nature. This can be furthered with community gardening projects, clean-up drives, or outdoor art installations to enhance communal spaces. Sisu might challenge a community to set collective community goals, such as improving local amenities or organizing charity events. Working together to achieve these goals fosters a sense of resilience and determination. A shared njuta approach may celebrate community achievements and milestones together. Or communities can organize festivals, fairs, or cultural events that bring joy and highlight the community's strengths. Encouraging mindfulness in social interactions, focusing on truly connecting with others and enjoying the moment, furthers the appreciative element of njuta.

Workplace Rituals

Work environments can invite hygge by creating cozy break areas with comfortable seating, plants, and calming décor. By encouraging employees to take breaks in these environments, they can use hygge to recharge. Work site rituals might involve organizing team-building activities that focus on creating a warm and supportive work environment, such as casual team lunches or coffee breaks. Borrowing directly from fika, instituting the habit of a daily routine for teams to connect over coffee is an easy and obvious way to build a new work site ritual. Lagom encourages the workplace to find balance and moderation through a balanced distribution of work tasks to prevent overload and stress. Also, encouraging employees to take regular breaks can help to manage their work-life balance. Moreover, keeping meetings focused and time-efficient, and avoiding scheduling too many meetings to allow employees time to focus on their tasks. Friluftsliv could suggest holding occasional meetings or brainstorming sessions outside; a change of environment can boost creativity and well-being. Professional development might borrow from the deep reserves of sisu by encouraging continuous learning and professional development, or offering workshops and training sessions that build resilience and self-efficacy. Njuta invites work teams to enjoy the moment, perhaps by regularly celebrating team achievements and individual successes together, or acknowledging hard work and milestones with small celebrations or shout-outs.

Part V Conclusion

By incorporating these positive rituals into daily life, both individuals and groups can enhance their well-being, foster stronger social connections, and create a more supportive and resilient community. Rituals rooted in concepts such as hygge, friluftsliv, fika, lagom, sisu, njuta,

and þetta reddast provide more than just cultural identity; they offer tangible strategies for enhancing SWB.

These Nordic philosophies offer a model example of how ritual can foster social cohesion, resilience, and a deep connection with nature. The Sámi reindeer ritual exemplifies the deep respect and symbiotic relationship between humans and nature, a theme that resonates through all Nordic practices. Whether it's the cozy atmosphere of hygge, the balanced approach of lagom, or the perseverance embodied in sisu, each concept underscores a holistic approach to life that nurtures both the individual and the community.

In a world facing significant challenges, from geopolitical conflicts to environmental crises, the principles and practices of positive psychology combined with Nordic rituals offers a much-needed dose of optimism. They remind of the resilience of the human spirit and the potential for collective efficacy. Embracing these rituals not only honors cultural traditions but also creates conduits to a more balanced, harmonious, and flourishing life. And perhaps if more societies took hold of these pathways, the top rankings of the WHR might start to change.

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