AUTHOR(S):

TITLE:

YEAR:

Publisher citation:

OpenAIR citation:

Voluntary Simplicity

Voluntary Simplicity: what it is; and what it is not

Etzioni describes voluntary simplifiers (VS) as people who choose, "out of free will – rather than by being coerced by poverty, government austerity programs, or being imprisoned – to limit expenditures on consumer goods and services, and to cultivate non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning" (1998:620). Although there are many different definitions of voluntary simplicity (Johnston & Burton, 2003), this definition is useful because it includes the three major elements that set this movement apart from others: free will; limiting consumerism; and alternative sources of satisfaction. In the three sections that follow, I will discuss each of these elements in turn.

Non-voluntary simplicity

The first element of Etzioni's definition is free will. Voluntary simplifiers are changing their lifestyles of their own volition. This is an important point because there are lots of people, especially during the recent economic downturn, who have simplified their lifestyles in some way out of necessity. They may stop buying certain goods or services that they do not deem necessary or wait longer to make luxury purchases, but because their motivation is to save money, or to live on an income that has been reduced through wage cuts, unemployment or redundancy, they would not be considered voluntary simplifiers. If someone takes public transport simply because they cannot afford a car, rather than to reduce the environmental impact of their lifestyle, and would change to driving a car if their income allowed, then their simplification is non-voluntary. Mitchell (1983), for example, makes a distinction between the Needs-Driven poor and the Inner-Directed voluntary simplifiers. In other words, voluntary simplifiers are individuals

who have access to resources such as wealth, education, and unique skills that *could* be traded for high income, but who have elected not to do so (Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002). For a more extended discussion of simplicity and poverty see Segal (1999: 20-22).

Limiting Consumerism

The second component of a voluntary simplicity lifestyle is that there is a focus on reducing (or changing) personal or household (or even community) consumption (Cherrier & Murray, 2002). Here there is an overlap with much that is written about 'green consumers' who are driven by environmental values (Moisander & Pesonen, 2002) to reduce the amount of impact their lives have on natural resources through, for example, waste reduction or water and energy conservation. There is also resonance with the tenets of the 'ethical consumer' who seeks to shop in such a way as to promote social justice and equity (Shaw & Newholm, 2002). However, like the notion of sustainable consumption, voluntary simplicity will contain all of these elements. And whilst most voluntary simplifiers would, due to their reduced consumption patterns, be considered to be 'green', not all green consumers would necessarily be considered voluntary simplifiers, as the examination of the final element of voluntary simplicity, will demonstrate.

Alternative sources of satisfaction

Although frugality is a central tenet of this movement, voluntary simplicity does not just mean having less of everything (Shama, 1996). Whilst voluntary simplifiers aim to have less of some (material) things, they also aim to have more of others (non-material). A common trade-off made is the reduction of monetary income through giving up, cutting down or changing paid employment in order to

have more time to spend on family, creative endeavours or self-development. Thus the motivation behind a simplified lifestyle can be focused on either part of this equation: some people are driven to simplify through a rejection of consumerism, or Western notions of career; for others the drive is to increase the time they have with their families (Craig-Lees & Hill, 2002) or the meaningfulness of the work they do.

This trade-off points to an overlap between voluntary simplifiers and downshifters. Downshifters are characterised as individuals who give up the pursuit of income in order to increase the amounts of unstructured time available to them (Hamilton and Mail, 2003). Often this means working part-time, changing careers or giving up urban lifestyles in order to raise families, have more leisure time or take up more rewarding work. The end result of downshifting does look similar to a voluntary simplicity approach, but the decision to downshift is often focused solely on personal interests, such as reducing work-related stress or illness whereas simplicity addresses these but also encompasses broader concerns for the environment or society (Shaw and Newholm, 2002). Taylor-Gooby (1998:647) notes that "downshifting indicates a movement of social values away from ostentation, but it is not clear that downshifters will abandon income disparities or ecologically damaging consumption practices".

Another aspect of voluntary simplicity not shared by other movements is the explicit link with spiritual aspects of life. Elgin (1981) describes voluntary simplicity as an "examined life" and for many people their expressions of simplicity are linked to specific religious or spiritual philosophies. This spiritual element of voluntary simplicity is almost always absent in the discussion of downshifting, offering a further distinction between these movements. Over the past few decades however

there has been a tendency for voluntary simplicity discourses to rely more on more general expressions of spiritualism such as self-development or harmony with nature than on the teachings of specific religious or spiritual movements (Zavestoski, 2002). Rudmin and Kilbourne (1996:190) have termed this the "secularization of simplicity". Contemporary voluntary simplicity might therefore be argued to represent a philosophy in its own right, rather than something that is practised as part of an organised religion.

In summary then, Voluntary Simplicity has kinship with a number of other social movements, such as downshifters and green consumers, but it can be distinguished by the presence of three elements: voluntary simplifiers have deliberately reduced their consumption; they have deliberately reduced their income in order to gain more quality of life; and they are guided by a spiritual 'examination' of their lives and their selves which may or may not be linked to an organised religion.

Social Group	Deliberately reduced consumption	Deliberately reduced income	Spiritual element
Voluntary Simplifiers	✓	✓	✓
Low income	✓	✗	✗
Downshifters	✓	✓	✗
Green consumers	✓	✗	✗
Ethical consumers	✗	✗	sometimes

Table 1: Distinguishing Voluntary Simplicity from other social groups

Table 1 summarises the differences between voluntary simplifiers and other groups within society who may embrace certain elements of the voluntary simplicity life. I close this section by offering the classic and enduring (Johnston and Burton, 2003) definition of Voluntary Simplicity, as coined by Elgin and Mitchell in their early writing about this movement more than 30 years ago (see Figure 1).

Elgin and Mitchell, (1976; 1977a; 1977b) identify five key, interdependent values of voluntary simplifiers:

- **Material Simplicity** which implies consuming less (but not necessarily cheaper) products and services. Included in this is the favouring of items which are resource efficient, durable, not mass-produced and have a smaller ecological impact.
- **Human Scale** denotes a commitment to working and living in environments which are smaller, decentralised, and less complex. The aim is to reduce the anonymous nature of much industrialised work experience which decouples the contribution made by individuals from the end results.
- **Self-Determination** involves a reduced reliance on large corporations and institutions such as supermarkets and finance companies. This is portrayed as an increase in personal control. Self-determination also includes notions of self-sufficiency such as home food production, mending and doing without. It also means looking to your own values to guide you rather than being driven by the media or the expectations of others.
- **Ecological Awareness** is an important aspect of VS which centres on resource conservation, reduction of waste and pollution and the protection of nature. It also extends to the promotion of social responsibility, equality, diversity and caring for others implying increased community involvement.
- **Personal Growth** denotes a concern for self-realization through the development of practical, creative or intellectual abilities.

Figure 1: Elgin and Mitchell's classic definition of Voluntary Simplicity

Voluntary Simplicity in the academic literature

Voluntary Simplicity is not new. Ascetic lifestyles that have their basis in Chinese and Greek philosophies of the ancient world are still revered by many of the world's major religions today (Rudmin & Kilbourne, 1996; Zavestoski, 2002). The American movement is underpinned by the writing of Henry Thoreau (1937), a philosophy scholar, who wrote 'Walden' as a powerful expression of a life of "plain living and high thinking" (Rudmin & Kilbourne, 1996; 194) which inspired many and has become synonymous with Voluntary Simplicity. However the writer that has introduced these ideals to the wider public is Duane Elgin (1981) whose straightforward text is the cornerstone of most contemporary voluntary simplicity.

The academic literature on Voluntary Simplicity is centred on the social psychology literature and, to a lesser extent, the marketing literature. Following Elgin and Mitchell's early work (1976; 1977a; 1977b) several commentators produced conceptual, or even speculative (Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002) pieces on the theme of voluntary simplicity. What these pieces lacked in evidence they made up for in enthusiasm, often extolling the virtues of voluntary simplicity in "rosy-eyed" (Maniates, 2002: 206) tones.

A second group of researchers took up the challenge of designing quantitative instruments which would distinguish voluntary simplifiers (VS) from non voluntary simplifiers (NVS)[1] and measure their attitudes and behaviours (Shama, 1981; Leonard-Barton, 1981; Shama and Wisenblit, 1984; Shama, 1988; Iwata, 1997; Iwata, 1999; Iwata, 2001; Huneke, 2005). This work is often in the 'market segmentation' tradition which aims to find out the demographic or psychographic

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[1] Note that the term NVS refers to everyone who is not a voluntary simplifier and not the non-voluntary simplifiers (those who simplify out of necessity) discussed above

profile of simplifiers and it parallels the search for the 'green consumer' in the marketing literature, both in its approach and in its ultimate failure to identify simplifiers consistently (McDonald et al, 2012). A number of issues have been raised with this body of work including the size and nature of the samples used (McDonald et al 2006), the use of self-reports as a way of collecting data about behaviours (Rudmin and Kilbourne, 1996) and the bias of the research instruments towards environmental issues (Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002), which, as was argued above, only constitutes a proportion of the range of voluntary simplicity.

The third tranche of work in this area has begun to look at voluntary simplifiers using qualitative research approaches. The aim here is to understand the simplifiers and the motivations that underpin their life choices (Moisander and Pesonen, 2002; Zavestoski, 2002). Craig-Lees and Hill (2002) have found that although VS and NVS groups may own the same items, that they do so for different reasons, and ultimately attribute different meanings to them. This insight offers an interesting dimension to the research problem and suggests that it will not be possible to 'define' VS groups in terms of their consumption behaviours alone. Another facet of simplicity that is challenging for researchers is that it exists in so many forms and with so many different emphases. In line with the myriad of definitions of voluntary simplicity (Johnston and Burton, 2003), Shaw and Newholm's work (2002) has uncovered several distinct ways of being a voluntary simplifier. This is a common theme in the literature where commentators have distinguished between groups of simplifiers, either in terms of different 'degrees' of voluntary simplicity (see for example, Etzioni, 1998) or different 'kinds' of voluntary simplicity in terms of their lived experience (see for example, Shaw and

Newholm, 2002) or their motivations (see for example Zavestoski, 2002). Taken together, the need to examine the meanings given to possessions, the diversity of motivations that drive these lifestyles and the difficulty of defining simplicity either as a concept, or as a lived experience, mean that this body of work does not perhaps offer the answers that marketers might seek, but it certainly underlines the need for qualitative approaches to studying voluntary simplicity.

Some writers predicted a huge growth in the numbers of people simplifying their lifestyles by the end of the 20th Century (Elgin & Mitchell, 1976; Shama, 1985). Whilst this has not come to pass, the Voluntary Simplicity (sometimes called Simple Living) movement gained some momentum in both the US (Zavestoski, 2002) and in Western Europe (Etzioni, 1998) at the close of the millennium. Voluntary Simplicity has not provided the challenge to mainstream capitalism that many of its proponents might have liked, but it survives as a lived reality for a modest proportion of the population today.

Organisational Practices[2]

As suggested above, it is difficult to make generalisations about the organisational practices of Voluntary Simplifiers because they are diverse and dispersed individuals, many of whom may not even think of themselves as belonging to a movement or a group. Nevertheless although it is not easy to make generalisations about their practices, it is possible to discern a degree of underlying similarity in their conceptualisations of, and approaches to, their practices. At the root of Voluntary Simplicity is an implicit rejection of many of the

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[2] The descriptions of voluntary simplifiers in the sections that follow are drawn from data gathered as part of an ESRC project (award RES-388-25-0001). For more information about how these data were gathered, please see McDonald et al (2012).

assumptions that underpin capitalism. For example, capitalism privileges notions of growth, efficiency and scale. Elgin and Mitchell's tenets of Voluntary Simplicity, as set out above, are often read as a practical way forward for a better way of living, but they can equally be understood as an extensive and political critique of the ideas that currently underpin social and commercial structures. Thus most Voluntary Simplifiers share a common disquiet about current social assumptions about ways of living and how these ultimately shape peoples' lives. Some Voluntary Simplifiers are explicit in their rejection of the tenets of capitalism, whilst for others the questioning of social norms remains implicit, embedded in their practices and lived out through their choices about how they spend their time and money. Although Voluntary Simplifiers all share a commitment to question and re-think these assumptions at an individual (or, more accurately, household level) in terms of their own practices, some also address these issues at a societal level, in terms of community practices, or in political spheres.

Since the organising practices of Voluntary Simplifiers, stem from this underlying (implicit or explicit) belief that current social norms are privileging the wrong things, it is helpful to consider some of the interrelated ideas that are presented in opposition to these norms in order to support a discussion of how these lead to alternative ways of doing things. In the discussion that follows, attention will be given to *Mindfulness*, the value of *Time* (as opposed to money), and how these influence the practical choices that Voluntary Simplifiers make. This is followed by a short commentary on the *Environmental Impact* of Voluntary Simplicity lifestyles.

Mindfulness

Elgin (1981) talks about an 'examined life'. This idea runs through the narratives of many Voluntary Simplifiers. Some people use the tenets of a specific religion as a starting point to examine their lives. So for example, Buddism and different forms of Christianity (especially Quakerism) have been associated with Voluntary Simplicity. However there are also many secular interpretations of Voluntary Simplicity. What these views share is a commitment to thinking through life choices, starting from the point of view of a specific set of values, whether they are associated with a specific religion, a broader sense of spirituality or a position of environmental concern. In this way, Voluntary Simplifiers tend to begin their journeys by questioning social norms and establishing their own internal compass in terms of what they are going to privilege and then working these values through into the practical realms of their lives by asking themselves what those values would look like once they were operationalized through a lived life. So rather than looking at current levels of household waste and devising a domestic system sort recyclables and divert more material away from landfill, a Voluntary Simplifier is more likely to ask themselves how and why they are producing so much waste and think about how they could live differently in order to produce a lower amount of waste. As an example, this contemplation might lead to an observation that packaging waste was a symptom of shopping at supermarkets, an implicit decision for many people, which in turn is due to a lack of time to undertake weekly food shopping, which is driven by working long hours. Thus the Voluntary Simplifier may ultimately tackle their waste concern by starting to work less, giving them more time to shop in a different way which generates less packaging and reduces their household waste. The outcomes might look very similar (less waste) but the process is characterised by a deeper level of examination of the inter-related

nature of issues, and is more likely to take a holistic approach and/or include (or consider) a rejection of what is regarded as 'normal' to others.

Time

At the basis of our society is the notion that money and time are inextricably linked: the value of something is how much time you have to work to pay for it. One of the most common strategies amongst Voluntary Simplifiers is to rearrange their lives in a way that does not maximise the money that they have, but seeks to maximise the amount of time they have instead. One of the most significant impacts of deciding that time is more important than money is in terms of the choices that Voluntary Simplifiers make about work. For example, rather than taking a job with an employer that would pay a premium for their specialist Masters degree, they might choose a lower paid position which they perceived as more fulfilling, or less stressful. Some of them emphasise changing the amount of work that they do (by going part time or limiting their hours of work for salaried positions) whilst others are more concerned with changing the kind of work they do (for example changing career to do work that they find more meaningful). This shift in emphasis from money earned to time spent can often mean that income is reduced or restricted and so Voluntary Simplifiers' practices often adjust accordingly.

In the Marketing literature, a distinction is made between *consuming differently* and *consuming less* (Peattie, 2010). So people who tackle sustainability agendas by buying environmentally friendlier versions of the products they use (such as recycled paper), and adopting technological approaches (such as switching to use a car with high fuel efficiency and low CO_2 emissions for their daily commute to

work) to reducing the environmental impact of their lifestyles are characterised as consuming differently. The *consume differently* group may reduce their carbon footprint, but they do not change the way they live. The group who *consume less* would be more likely to car share or take the bus and over time, they may change jobs or move house in order to avoid having a commute in the first place. There is a parallel here to be drawn between these groups of green consumers and the decisions that are made by Voluntary Simplifiers. Partly because they are inclined to reflect upon their practices, and partly because of their reduced income, Voluntary Simplifiers are less likely to be drawn to high cost, technology-mediated solutions. Instead they are attracted by simpler solutions. So a Voluntary Simplifier seeking to reduce their electricity use would be more likely to choose an extra jersey rather than solar panels. As they have deliberately made a trade-off between time and money in favour of more time, they are also able to employ time-rich measures, such as growing their own vegetables, rather than simply switching their buying behaviour by, for example buying organic vegetables instead of non-organic alternatives as part of their weekly supermarket shop. Some Voluntary Simplifiers come to see Local Exchange Trading Schemes (LETS) and other systems of local currency as a way to address the relationship between time and money in a different way and these are examined in more detail in Chapter 12.

Environmental Impact

Although a number of the examples of practices cited so far would be recognised by those engaged in environmental protection, it is worth reiterating here that not all Voluntary Simplifiers are driven by values associated with sustainability.

Although many of their practices do reduce their environmental impact, that is not necessarily the purpose of the behaviour change for all Voluntary Simplifiers. Many are driven by spiritual values or are committed to redressing their work life balance in order to spend time with family or pursue their own spiritual or artistic development. In other words, an extra jersey does not always denote an eco-warrior: it could equally signify a Simplifier who does not wish to sacrifice family time or a day of painting in order to earn the money to sustain a higher heating bill. Nevertheless, whilst a reduction in environmental impact (in the widest sense) is not always the primary driver of Voluntary Simplification, it is nearly always the result.

One of the issues quickly exposed to be self-perpetuating and self-defeating by the joined-up thinking of the Voluntary Simplifier is built-in obsolescence. Thus products that are designed to become out of date, fuelling the need for repeat purchases before a product is worn out, such as technology-based products and fashion clothing, become understood differently by the Voluntary Simplifier. Once people begin to weigh their lives in terms of time rather than money, it becomes hard to see replacing a television set which is not broken, at X cost which will take Y hours to earn as anything other than a non-essential drain on your most precious resource: time. The Voluntary Simplifier therefore seeks out different relationships with material goods. Once they begin to operate on the basis of need and function rather than brand or innovation, Voluntary Simplifiers often start to purchase on the basis of how long-lasting or hard wearing an item is. Many also purchase items such as furniture or clothing second hand. They also seek out other solutions for ownership, such as sharing, for larger items which are used infrequently. So Simplifiers may informally share the cost of a purchase of garden tools or a car trailer with like-minded friends or neighbours on the understanding that they may

use them whenever they need. Or they may enter into sharing arrangements more formally, by purchasing an item as a community. These practices all reduce the environmental impact of Voluntary Simplifier lifestyles, whether that is the primary intention or not.

Becoming a Voluntary Simplifier

Voluntary Simplifiers often refer to their process of simplification as a journey. Many begin their journeys in isolation. Their changes in practices come from the mindfulness described above which is often brought on by a sense of growing dissatisfaction: with way they are living their lives, with the pace and demands of modern life and/or with the effects their lives are having on their own health, the welfare of others or on the planet. In many cases, they do not know that they are Simplifiers until they have reached the limits of their own ingenuity in terms of solving practical problems, or feel the need of support from likeminded individuals and begin to reach out to others. The help and support that they seek has traditionally been in the form of handbooks and self-help guides. Over the past decade, some of these resources have been translated to websites (see the further reading section for suggestions of handbooks and web-based resources). This relationship between the 'wise' and the 'new' voluntary simplifier, conducted through reading and contemplation is characteristic of how many Voluntary Simplifiers learn or deepen their practices. Many cite inspirational texts (including Thoreau's (1937) Walden) which they return to again and again in their thinking about how best to re-model their lives in line with their simplicity values.

Voluntary Simplifiers are change-oriented. The changes they are working towards are quite radical in that they challenge many of the norms of mainstream

consumer society, and yet the typical Simplifier tends to move incrementally towards their goals (or, more precisely, away from the lifestyle that has caused their dissatisfaction) making small changes to their way of life over a period of many years, gradually simplifying their lifestyle. Sometimes their simplification goes unnoticed by friends and family until they reach a point where they need to make a major lifestyle change in order to progress, such as changing career, downsizing or relocating their house or giving up a car.

All Voluntary Simplifiers are engaged in personal change, but a minority are also involved with campaigning for change in a local or national stage, some in terms of changing laws, others in changing norms. Some offer help to others seeking support for their own changes, through writing new books or online resources.

In summary: the complexity of a simple life

The mindfulness that characterizes Voluntary Simplifiers, and their rejection of money as a way to measure life in favour of time presents a significant challenge to many of the assumptions about how modern lives could (or should) be lived. Voluntary Simplicity is undoubtedly a conceptual journey from acceptance of the norms that surround us to an examined, change-focused life driven by self-determined values. In particular, this shift in thinking about time and money reveals the inter-relatedness of decisions about work, housing, food and mobility and how each of these systems is locked into each other. For many people it is simply not possible to reduce the amount of time that they spend at work, or change their career without that having an impact on where and how they live. Making a change in how you travel has a knock on effect on where and how you shop and socialise, but it can also mean deciding between changing jobs and

moving house. Unpicking these relationships and trying to tackle these basic issues is much more difficult than *consuming differently*. For each Voluntary Simplifier, the outcome will be a deeply personal solution, crafted over time in dialogue with their own values and priorities.

Further Reading:

For a full discussion of the history and development of voluntary simplicity see

Rudmin, F.W., & Kilbourne, W.E. (1996). The meaning and morality of voluntary simplicity: History and hypothesis on deliberately denied materialism. In R.W. Belk, N. Dholakia, & A. Venkatesh (Eds.) Consumption and marketing: Macrodimensions (pp. 166-215). Cincinnati, Ohio: South-Western College Publishing.

Shi, D.E. (1986). In search of the simple life. Salt Lake City. UT: Peregrine Smith Books.

For an overview of the treatment of voluntary simplifiers in the academic literature, see:

McDonald, S., Oates, C.J., Young, C.W. and Hwang, K. (2006) Towards Sustainable Consumption: Researching Voluntary Simplifiers, *Psychology and Marketing* **23**(6) 515-534.

For an analysis of the many Voluntary Simplicity handbooks, see:

Zavestoski, S. (2002). The social–psychological bases of anticonsumption attitudes. Psychology & Marketing, 19(2) 149–165.

Further information on simplifying:

There are a whole host of handbooks and self-help manuals dedicated to Voluntary Simplicity, but the original and most quoted is by Duane Elgin:

Elgin, D. (1981). Voluntary simplicity: Toward a way of life that is outwardly simple, inwardly rich. New York: William Morrow.

Cecile Andrews is one of the best known proponents of voluntary simplicity in the US. She has written several handbooks on the process and value of simplifying. She offers individual consultations and runs workshops for groups interested in working towards a simpler lifestyle.

http://www.cecileandrews.com/

To follow individuals who have simplified their lifestyles and see how they have tackled specific issues, see, for example:

http://www.choosingvoluntarysimplicity.com/

http://adventuresinvoluntarysimplicity.blogspot.com/

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