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**Running Head: RESEARCHING VOLUNTARY SIMPLIFIERS**

**Towards Sustainable Consumption:  
Researching Voluntary Simplifiers**

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# **Towards Sustainable Consumption:**

## **Researching Voluntary Simplifiers**

### **Abstract**

This paper examines and extends the notion of “voluntary simplifiers” (VS). VS are individuals who have freely chosen a frugal, anti-consumer lifestyle which features low resource use and environmental impact. The paper will begin by reviewing empirical work with VS and their mainstream counterparts, non voluntary simplifiers (NVS). It will go on to identify and locate within this literature an intermediate group: Beginner voluntary simplifiers (BVS). BVS may support some aspects of sustainability (such as buying fair trade coffee or recycling domestic waste) without either embracing a complete lifestyle change like VS, or completely dismissing ethical or environmental features of products and services they consume, like NVS. Insight into the complex decision making processes of BVS is crucial for the understanding of the concept of voluntary simplification and is therefore important for the advancement of sustainable consumption.

## Introduction

Every time someone makes a decision about whether (or not) to purchase a product or service there is the potential for that decision to contribute to a more or less sustainable pattern of consumption. Each purchase has ethical, resource, waste and community implications. Individuals or families build up portfolios of such purchase (or non-purchase) decisions (Peattie, 1999) which may or may not be linked or underpinned by a belief set. One of the approaches to understanding the behaviour and beliefs which contribute to different patterns of consumption makes use of the notion of voluntary simplification.

Voluntary simplifiers (VS) are 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” (Etzioni, 1998:620). Researchers emphasise different aspects of voluntary simplicity, such as environmental values (Moisander & Pesonen, 2002), reduced consumption (Cherrier & Murray, 2002) and ethical principles (Shaw & Newholm, 2002). However, like the notion of sustainable consumption, voluntary simplicity will contain all of these elements. 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.

A recent study of definitions of VS found in popular books and electronic media found that these five elements, outlined some 25 years ago, can still be found in most of the definitions used today (Johnston & Burton, 2003). The same study discovered that definitions of VS centred on four “dimensions” or values: Self, Relationships, Society and Earth (Johnston & Burton, 2003).

Importantly, as Shama (1996) points out, voluntary simplicity does not just mean having less of everything. It certainly means having less of some things (material), but also more of others (nonmaterial). Equally, the taking up of a VS lifestyle may not be wholly driven by a (negative) rejection of materialism or consumerism but could also be prompted by a (positive) drive to establish a more family oriented life (Craig-Lees & Hill, 2002). Elgin (1981) describes voluntary simplicity as an “examined life” in which people are motivated to get their lives back in control and attempt to regain those things that are important.

An important feature of voluntary simplicity is that it is based on free choice, distinguishing it from the poor or near poor who are forced to lead a simpler life. In his book summarising the VALS survey, Mitchell (1983) makes a distinction between the Needs Driven poor and the Inner-Directed voluntary simplifiers. Craig-Lees and Hill (2002) highlight the fact that to be considered voluntary simplifiers, individuals must have access to resources such as wealth, education, and unique skills that *could* be traded for high income. In fact, some researchers have found that the socio-economic features of voluntary simplifiers are highly educated, rather wealthy, and have professional skills (e.g. Craig-Lees & Hill, 2002, Etzioni, 1998, Zavestoski, 2002), although this is not an uncontested view (see for example Hamilton & Mail, 2003). For a more extended and nuanced discussion on simplicity and poverty see Segal (1999: 20-22).

The values of voluntary simplicity are as old as philosophy itself. Expressions of the ideals of an ascetic lifestyle can be found in the writings of ancient Chinese and Greek philosophers (Rudmin & Kilbourne, 1996; Zavestoski, 2002). Echoes of VS can be seen today in the teachings of a wide range of world religions (Rudmin & Kilbourne, 1996; Zavestoski, 2002). In the US the voluntary simplicity or simple living movement was inspired by writers such as Thoreau (1937) and later Elgin (1981). In the 70s when the VS movement was first studied in the US, a boom in simpler lifestyles was predicted (Elgin & Mitchell, 1976). This prediction of widespread VS by the turn of the century was not shared by all commentators at the time (Phillips, 1977) and has not come to pass. However, in recent years, voluntary simplicity has gained momentum in both the US (Zavestoski, 2002) and in Western Europe (Etzioni, 1998). There has been growth in this, and associated lifestyles such as downshiffters (Hamilton, 2003; Hamilton & Mail, 2003). Echoing the claims of early writers, Shama (1985) declared that voluntary simplifiers constituted the most rapidly expanding market segment in the US, although he does not offer evidence for

this view. While VS has not been the source of sweeping change in mature capitalism that has been predicted, it endures as a lifestyle for a modest proportion of the population in North America today. It is clear that, as Maniates (2002) states, the VS movement can neither be dismissed as a fad nor simply ignored.

Some commentators have noted subtle changes in the ways that voluntary simplicity is framed by its proponents. Zaveckoski's (2002) analysis of books on voluntary simplicity has revealed a move away from discourses underpinned by spiritual and religious tenets towards discussions of simpler lifestyles as an alternative to stressful, consumption-driven and time-impoverished ways of living. Rudmin and Kilbourne (1996:190) refer to this as the "secularization of simplicity". With this change came a move away from the idea of a VS lifestyle as something demanded or idealised as part of an organised religion, to a portrayal of VS as a philosophy in its own right which can benefit individuals and improve quality of life. For a full discussion of the history and development of voluntary simplicity see Rudmin and Kilbourne (1996) and Shi (1985).

In social science research, the pursuit of VS goals and ideals or the absence of these (NVS) are set up as a useful pair of stereotypes which facilitate research into sustainable consumption lifestyles and motivations. Clearly the notion of VS is much wider in scope and implication than that of sustainable consumption. VS can be conceptualised as a lifestyle which will provide a natural framework for sustainable consumption practices. Although consumption is not the only aspect of voluntary simplification, it is an extremely important and visible element with subsequent implications for related components of VS identified earlier e.g. resource conservation, waste reduction, and ecological impact.



The authors seek to review critically extant theoretical and empirical representations of the VS concept because they believe that this understanding will have important implications for the ability to increase sustainable consumption. In order to achieve this, the current characterization of voluntary simplifier/non voluntary simplifier as a dichotomy will be examined and challenged. As part of this reconceptualisation, it is proposed that more theoretical and empirical attention be given to individuals whose lifestyles fall between these extremes. This group may be, for example, currently undertaking some features of a voluntary simplifier lifestyle, but have not fully committed or converted to it. These individuals can be termed beginner voluntary simplifiers (BVS). In terms of promoting sustainable consumption, they are an important target group themselves, and in contrast with the non voluntary simplifiers can help in building understanding of the process of moving towards sustainable consumption.

The paper will continue by setting out the current empirical approaches to studying voluntary simplicity. BVS will then be defined in relation to other work in the field. Building on this, the theoretical and empirical reasons for the importance of the notion of beginner voluntary simplifiers for the marketing of sustainable consumption will be outlined.

### **Studying Voluntary Simplifiers**

Much of the scant academic work on voluntary simplicity lifestyles is found in the social psychology literature. The size of this literature is in sharp contrast with the growing coverage of VS issues in the US media (Maniates, 2002). As Craig-Lees and Hill (2002) have noted, much of this work is purely conceptual or even speculative. Early work in the field can be evangelical in tone and what Maniates calls “rosy-eyed” (2002: 206). There is often a dearth of critique and other hallmarks of academic quality. For example, studies cite

few academic references, rely too heavily on secondary referencing and sometimes lift classic concepts and definitions without referencing them at all.

Early empirical work on voluntary simplifiers centres on the quantitative measurement of various aspects of their belief structures and behaviours (Shama, 1981; Leonard-Barton, 1981). This has been done with a view to market segmentation (Shama, 1981) or more general demographic identification of voluntary simplifiers (Leonard-Barton, 1981). A number of commentators have raised methodological issues pertaining to this body of work. Craig-Lees and Hill (2002:192) call attention to the fact that voluntary-simplicity scales used by Leonard-Barton (1981), adapted by Shama and Wisenblit (1984) and further adapted by Iwata (1997; 1999; 2001) are heavily biased towards environmental values and therefore believe that they are not broad enough to encompass a VS lifestyle. Further they point out that they are unquestioningly based on the “unverified assumptions” of Elgin and Mitchell (1977a) and other early proponents of VS rather than empirical evidence (Craig-Lees & Hill, 2002:192). Rudmin and Kilbourne (1996) criticise quantitative approaches to studying VS, particularly the self report scales favoured by many researchers as they feel these may solicit responses which appear to be the same but in fact belie a wide range of different meanings. The use of student samples (e.g. Iwata, 1997; 2001) and small sample sizes used in studies hoping to make generalizations about the US population (e.g. Shama, 1988; Shama & Wisenblit, 1984; Iwata, 1997; 1999; 2001; Huneke, 2005) should also be questioned. Zavestoski (2001) provides a good example of the sort of methodological reflexivity often missing from studies of voluntary simplicity in this quantitative tradition.

More recently a new group of empirical studies has developed which has taken a qualitative approach to the study of voluntary simplifiers. Craig-Lees and Hill’s (2002) study of voluntary simplifiers and non voluntary simplifiers in Australia used qualitative

interviews to ask both groups about their possessions, lifestyles and purchasing habits. They discovered three underlying motives for adopting simplified lifestyles: environmental, spiritual and self-oriented. Interestingly, many of the differences that they uncovered between the VS and NVS groups that they studied were not in terms of whether or not the two groups own various different artefacts, but in the meanings they ascribed to them. For example, cars represented functionality (and some guilt) to the VS group and brand (and status) to the NVS group.

The emphasis of Shaw and Newholm's (2002) studies of voluntary simplifiers was on ethical rather than eco-friendly consumption (although they define ethical consumption in such a way as to encompass ecological concerns). They worked with ethical consumers in focus groups and in-depth interviews. They found that ethical consumers exercised constraint in their consumption practices and that this was driven by strong internal values. Importantly, they also uncovered a great deal of diversity in the different forms of ethical simplicity displayed by the consumers they studied.

Zavestoski (2002) observed, interviewed and surveyed participants in voluntary simplicity courses offered in the workplace. The findings were contrasted with a survey of university students in the same region. He found that the people learning about how to adopt voluntary simplifier lifestyles were highly educated and well paid individuals, often working in the service sector. Their motivations for choosing voluntary simplicity were both positive (e.g. to increase life satisfaction) and negative (e.g. being tired of the pressure to consume, environmental concerns).

Moisander and Pesonen (2002) carried out a series of interviews with members of four different communes in Finland. Their aim was to elicit "life story" narratives from their

12 participants which they have analysed in order to discover their reasons for renouncing mainstream notions of consumption and ways of living.

As can be seen from the discussion above, a number of the empirical studies to date have contrasted elements of a voluntary simplifier lifestyle with a non voluntary simplifier lifestyle either explicitly, (Craig-Lees & Hill, 2002; Zavestoski, 2002) or implicitly (Moisander & Pesonen, 2002). Understanding both of these groups and the process of moving between them can be further enhanced by studying a third group: Beginner voluntary simplifiers. This idea does have resonance with issues raised by previous authors and in the next section, a number of concepts in the literature which have kinship with BVS will be considered.

### **Locating Beginner Voluntary Simplifiers in the VS Literature**

Elgin and Mitchell (1977a) were early champions of VS and they outlined four categories of voluntary simplicity: Full, partial, sympathizers, and indifferent, unaware or opposed. Full voluntary simplifiers prefer, “organic gardening, recycling, natural foods, simple clothing, biking to work, back-packing on vacations, engaging in meditation or other growth processes” (Elgin & Mitchell, 1977a:208). They define partial voluntary simplifiers as people who have taken up some of the tenets of a VS lifestyle, but not others. Sympathizers are people who espouse the values of the VS movement but have not yet changed their lifestyles. Lastly, the indifferent, unaware or opposed group includes the poor and near poor as well as higher income groups who are focused on material success and may even regard VS as a threat.

During this period, and similarly motivated by the energy crisis of the early 70s, a group of Canadian researchers developed a number of scenarios for the future which have

interesting parallels with VS. Their work became known as the Conserver Society Studies (Orfald & Wilson, 1985). The outcome of these studies was a series of imagined future states for society. These ranged from the Squander Society (“doing less with more”) and a Status Quo Society (“doing more with more”) through a couple of partial change scenarios (Growth with Conservation Society “doing more with less” and Affluent Stable State Society “doing the same with less”) to what they describe as a Buddhist Society (“doing less with less”) (Valaskakis, Smith, Sindell & Martin, 1977; Valaskakis, Sindell, Smith & Fitzpatrick-Martin, 1979).

Two decades later, Etzioni (1998; 1999) also raises the issue of the “level of intensity” of voluntary simplicity. He outlines three groups, downshiffters, strong simplifiers and holistic simplifiers. Etzioni’s (1998) downshiffters are people who make superficial attempts to address their consumption by, for example, concentrating more on simple designs of goods, purchasing less ostentatious brands and organizing more “homely” social events. Their reduced consumption is “inconsistent and limited in scope” (Etzioni, 1998:622) and tends to entail different consumption rather than less. The next group, strong simplifiers, are people who change their lives by readdressing the trade-offs they are making between time and money. They give up their high levels of income in order to reduce stress and secure more time for leisure, family, creative and intellectual pursuits or work which is low paid or even voluntary. This group aims to consume less and is motivated primarily by quality of life concerns. Confusingly, this group is often termed downshiffters in the wider literature (see below for a discussion of this issue). The final group identified by Etzioni (1998) is called holistic simplifiers and he sees these individuals as aspiring to be part of the simple living movement as advocated by Elgin (1981). The lifestyles of this group are underpinned by an explicit philosophy of simple living. Their consumption is much reduced and motivated by social, ethical and environmental values.

In an earlier study which also typified VS by their motivations, Leonard-Barton and Rogers (1980) identify three groups: Conservers, Crusaders and Conformists. Conservers act out of a desire to reduce waste; Conformists as a response to personal guilt or peer pressure; and Crusaders are motivated by social concern.

As part of a course on consumer behaviour, Moisander and Pesonen (2002) solicited 84 written accounts of green consumerism from their students. Analysing these accounts using a constructionist approach, they uncovered two different conceptualisations of “the green consumer”. One group, which they have characterised as “the socially acceptable green consumer” was constructed as, “an autonomous, prudent and well-informed choosing individual, who performs his/her received role in society as a powerful market actor by meticulously monitoring and controlling his/her consumption-related activities” (Moisander & Pesonen, 2002:332). The other group, which they have termed “voluntarily simple green consumers” were described in much more extreme terms as rejecting capitalist values and mechanisms. This group were portrayed in the students’ accounts as “either somehow dangerous, asocial, environmental activists or as somewhat ridiculous, naïve, and unrealistic ‘tree-hugging’ nature enthusiasts” (Moisander & Pesonen, 2002:334).

Similarly, Shaw and Newholm (2002) describe two different consumption patterns which involve either maintained or reduced levels of consumption. Consumers aiming to maintain their consumption favour technological solutions for tackling the environmental impact of the products and services that they buy. This might mean purchasing energy efficient refrigerators or wind-up radios, for example. In a similar way this group is attracted to fair-trade products which they substitute for equivalent products in their weekly supermarket shop. These strategies mean that individuals will still enjoy similar levels of consumption but they will consume differently. The people who are trying to reduce their

consumption on the other hand, might, for example, buy second hand (or not at all), car-share, grow their own food, or restrict their diets. These approaches to consumption are quite different from the first group in that they imply an explicit aim of owning and using less and less. In Sorell and Hendry's (1994) terms this second group aims genuinely to reduce consumption rather than simply refine it.

Zavestoski (2002) also alludes to two different kinds of VS lifestyles, although he does not develop this idea any further or address it empirically. His interpretation is that voluntary simplifiers are people who are actively, "minimizing consumption of material goods, exercising self-reliance, developing [their] intellect and other non-material facets of human existence" (Zavestoski, 2002:149). He contrasts these aims with what he describes as shallower VS who, although they also aim to reduce their consumption to an extent, will be engaged in less extreme forms of lifestyle change such as, "reducing the clutter in [their] life, eliminating burdensome time commitments, and creating peaceful personal space to enjoy life" (Zavestoski, 2002:150).

Most recently, Huneke (2005) surveyed 113 self-selected US voluntary simplifiers about a range of practices associated with a VS lifestyle. A statistical analysis of their responses revealed that there were two groups of respondents. The first group are described as highly committed simplifiers. These respondents reported that they consistently tackled a comprehensive range of VS practices and were willing to, "make ongoing behavioural changes" (Huneke, 2005:547). Huneke (2005) contrasts this group with less committed simplifiers who did not report such high levels of consistency and undertook fewer activities.

The notion of different levels or types of VS clearly has been explored before by a number of commentators. However most writers who offer these characterizations do not

attempt to align their concepts with those used by others. Nor does any one piece discuss the ideas of different authors with respect to each other. An interesting exception to this rule is Ensley (1983) who attempts to reconcile the work of Valaskakis et al (1977), Elgin and Mitchell (1976), and Leonard-Barton and Rogers (1980). What follows is a synthesis of concepts across the whole literature. In order to clarify these concepts in relation both to each other and to the proposed groups of VS, BVS, and NVS their relative positions have been summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1. Levels of intensity of VS discussed in the literature and how they map on to the three-fold categorisation.**

As can be seen from Table 1, there is a number of concepts in the voluntary simplicity literature which can be aligned with the term non voluntary simplifier. The first and least problematic of these is Valaskakis et al's (1979) Squander Society which intends to "do less with more". This is closely followed by their Status Quo scenario and Elgin and Mitchell's (1977a) indifferent, unaware and opposed group. However Elgin and Mitchell's sympathizers (1977a) can also be included in this category as the authors are clear that although the sympathizers endorse a VS lifestyle, they have made no changes in their own ways of living. Etzioni's (1998) use of the term "downshifTERS" to signify people who are addressing over-consumption in only a very superficial way has also led them to be categorised in Table 1 above as a type of non voluntary simplifier in the terms of this study. This may seem controversial given the meanings that others (see for example Hamilton (2003) or Schor (1998)) have ascribed to the term. However Etzioni (1998:622) is clear that although what he calls downshifTERS may dress down or drive old cars they "basically maintain their rather rich and consumption-oriented lifestyle". Further, he suggests that the motivations of this group are more to do with subscribing to a fashion of "less is more" than



changing their life patterns for environmental, social or ethical reasons. In a similar vein, Leonard-Barton and Roger's (1980) Conformists have been placed in this category.

The next category includes terms which imply actual changes in lifestyle, although these may be limited or fragmented. These range from ideas such as Leonard-Barton and Roger's (1980) Conservers or Etzioni's (1998) strong simplifiers through to Moisander and Pesonen's (2002) socially acceptable green consumer. This group of concepts either entail only a subset of lifestyle changes or denote consumers who are concerned with simplification for personal level reasons (such as stress) rather than social level ones (such as environment or ethics).

The final group comprises all those concepts which can be associated with extensive changes against most or all of the criteria outlined by Elgin and Mitchell (1977a): Material simplicity; human scale; self-determination; ecological awareness; and personal growth. These terms imply people who have rejected consumer lifestyles and stepped outside of the mainstream due to concerns that are larger than themselves and their immediate families.

As this review shows, there are already a number of writers who have conceptually raised the question of an intermediate group which has distinct characteristics from either VS or NVS, if only in degree. At a general level there is agreement that "the term 'voluntary simplicity' refers not to a single phenomenon but to a complex set of attitudes, inclinations and changes in goals and lifestyles" (Wachtel, 1996:225).

This tendency to define a middle ground is not surprising when the two other concepts are considered empirically. Non voluntary simplifiers are people who have adopted little or no sustainable consumption practices. No recycling; no organic or fair trade produce, no energy saving devices, no journeys on foot or public transport to work or shop. At the

other extreme, voluntary simplifiers are individuals who lead an anticonsumer life underpinned by a philosophical (or perhaps spiritual) rejection of the social norms of a capitalist society. This too, is an extreme position unlikely to be held by a large proportion of people in the UK. Looked at in these terms, the beginner voluntary simplifier begins to seem like the norm. In fact, if non voluntary simplifiers and voluntary simplifiers were described in this absolute way, almost everyone would fit in the BVS category.

However no-one has so far approached this important idea empirically. What is different about the perspective taken here is that it advocates that studying the beginner voluntary simplifiers group directly will be crucial for understanding the decision making processes that lead individuals into both of the other groups. Hence the theoretical contribution of this paper is in two parts: First to define BVS as a concept and as a consumer group in its own right and secondly to conceptualise the VS, NVS and BVS groups as fluid. To date, only Rudmin and Kilbourne, 1996 (and in his critique of this work, Shama, 1996) consider the possibility of movement between groups and the practical marketing implications of this have never been fully developed.

To understand degrees of voluntary simplification as a continuum which encompasses the whole range of consumption styles helps the understanding of the VS concept in a number of ways. Firstly, moving away from a VS/NVS dichotomy allows all (non) consumers to be located theoretically, rather than just some groups. Secondly, seeing individuals as inconsistent over time (or even over purchases) allows Peattie's (1999) notion of a portfolio of purchases which are not necessarily consistent to be incorporated. Finally, centring empirically on these paradoxes, rather than shying away from them, gives a deeper appreciation of the complexity of purchase/non purchase behaviour in real life.

The conceptual work outlined in this paper will form the basis of an extended empirical study which will investigate these three groups and address the problematic question of movement in and between them. As such the work presented here significantly complexifies the theoretical and empirical approach taken to studying VS to date.

There are a number of reasons why beginner voluntary simplifiers are both theoretically and empirically important for the understanding of the VS concept as a whole. In the sections that follow the possible features of BVS which offer distinct approaches to understanding different levels of acceptance of sustainable consumption are discussed.

### **A multiplicity of approaches to sustainable consumption**

As well as being less practiced in sustainable consumption, BVS individuals will be a more diverse and heterogeneous group than either of the other two. It might be that people have strong views on waste reduction without examining the ethical behaviour of companies, for example. Further, the networks of information available to an individual may make an important impact on their decision making processes (Peattie, 1995) and this suggests that within this group, heterogeneity of contacts and patterns of behaviour and trust are more likely to be found than in either of the other two groups. Studying individuals in this situation will help the understanding of the many possible approaches to sustainable consumption. Below, three categories of beginner voluntary simplifier which take into account the potential for movement between NVS, BVS and VS lifestyles are proposed.

#### ***Three Types of Beginner Voluntary Simplifiers***

##### ***Apprentice simplifiers***

One possibility is that beginner voluntary simplifiers are voluntary simplifiers in the making. In other words, they have been non voluntary simplifiers and are currently in the

midst of a lifestyle change or reconsideration which will go through various iterations and then will eventually become voluntary simplifiers. If this is the case, then in sociological terms, they represent the “stranger” (Schutz, 1969) and are more able to articulate a process which may have become rehearsed and implicit in more established voluntary simplifier individuals. In marketing terms, decisions are still “high involvement” for the beginner voluntary simplifiers and require extended problem solving strategies because of unfamiliarity with the alternatives, but also high involvement in the sense of being important to the consumer (Chan & Lau, 2004). Studying this type of BVS can help the understanding of the process of taking up a VS lifestyle and give insight into the deliberations, barriers and issues involved in this lifestyle change. For marketers, this consumer position has implications in terms of the amount of information they provide to allow BVS to reach an environmental purchase outcome. It cannot be assumed that BVS will be familiar with either environmental language or the benefits of using one product or service over another. Unlike VS, who may have access to specialist green publications, BVS may rely on more accessible and mainstream media as well as actual product information on packaging.

### *Partial simplification*

However, advance from NVS via BVS to VS should not be regarded as inevitable. Obviously, this could happen, but people could also settle in lifestyles that are BVS. Equally they may decide to go back to NVS ways of living in time (Rudmin & Kilbourne, 1996). Therefore it is envisaged that there will be some stable BVS individuals who have adopted some features of a voluntary simplifier lifestyle but do not take part in others. They may walk to school with their children, use local shops, purchase low energy light bulbs and use their local bottle banks, but at the same time, use a dishwasher daily and commute 30 miles to work by car each weekday. Equally, individuals or households may have embarked on a BVS lifestyle for one set of reasons (for example, relieving time pressures or reducing

household expenditure) and having thought through the consequences of the changes they are making, sustain a low consumption lifestyle for completely different reasons (for example reducing environmental impact). This is a fragmented approach to sustainable consumption, full of paradoxes and decisions which seem to sit uneasily together (Shaw & Newholm, 2002). Uncovering their decision processes in detail will allow researchers to compare and contrast the circumstances for adoption and non-adoption of sustainable consumption practices as well as how different practices are prioritised and reconciled.

Either apprentice simplifiers or partial simplifiers may be regarded as a vanguard group for non voluntary simplifiers, as they have adopted some features of sustainable consumption. They are more likely to be seen as a relevant reference group for the general public than the more extreme voluntary simplifiers. They will represent a far higher proportion of the population than the voluntary simplifiers, making them an important group to study in their own right. Further, they represent a considerable target market for ethical or green products and services. To understand why this group adopts some purchase behaviours and not others would allow marketers to reconsider the marketing mix as a whole and to change certain elements to attract NVS and BVS. Insight into what prompts some NVS to develop into BVS, or the latter to move towards a VS lifestyle would also enable marketers to target such consumers with “aspirational” (i.e. greener) products. However, as Miles (1998:45) notes, “any movement against [consumerism] is merely subsumed within the capitalist system as yet another market niche”, and thus there is a tension here between recognising voluntary simplicity as a marketing opportunity when at its core is an emphasis on reduced consumption. Peattie (1995:97) suggests there is a “dawning recognition that there is a discrepancy between marketing as it was supposed to be and marketing as it is having to become” which has implications for the whole organisation. However, as has already been suggested, the VS concept is an extreme one, and to generate or encourage

interest in NVS and BVS, notions of sustainability have to be made desirable and accessible. To put it in a different context, Straughan and Roberts (1999:574) speaking for marketing managers, suggest that for most companies, green marketing is not about saving the planet, but about saving the business.

### *Accidental simplification*

There may also be a group of people who undertake aspects of a VS lifestyle, but who do not share the same ethical or environmental motivations. There is a significant subgroup of accidental simplifiers that has been identified by a number of commentators (Etzioni, 1998; Gregg, 1936; Rudmin & Kilbourne, 1996) as involuntary simplifiers. This group includes many lower income individuals who might favour public transport or energy conservation for purely financial reasons, for example. However, the simple lifestyles of this group are not undertaken voluntarily but rather forced on them due to poverty. As such, they cannot be considered conceptually to be VS (Etzioni, 1998; Shaw & Newholm, 2002; Zavestoski, 2002) and should not be included in a study of this lifestyle. This absolute exclusion (at least conceptually) of low income groups has been challenged to a degree by Rudmin and Kilbourne (1996:171) who point out that, “external compulsion and necessity do not rule out voluntary simplicity”. In other words, if VS is the decision to consume less than your income and circumstances would allow then technically anyone who decides against purchases on the grounds of environmental impact or ethical or social issues should be categorised as VS, regardless of their level of income.

There are other kinds of accidental simplifiers that outwardly fit the criteria for VS but do not share their ethical or ecological motivations. For example, a previous study revealed that some individuals eat organic food for taste or even health reasons (Oates & McDonald, 2002). There are also people who walk or cycle to work every day with the

explicit intention of increasing their levels of fitness. These motivations have resulted in lifestyle choices that do lead to a simpler lifestyle but it by no means represents a rejection of consumption or a commitment to the environment or a fairer world.

Downshiffters, as defined by Hamilton and Mail (2003) may be another example of the accidental simplifier. In broad terms, downshiffters are individuals who give up the pursuit of material goods in order to increase the unstructured time at their disposal. 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 work which is more fulfilling. The end result of downshifting looks similar to voluntary simplicity, but it is often fuelled by decisions to reduce stress associated with high pressure work situations rather than environmental or ethical concerns. Taylor-Gooby (1998:647) notes that “downshifting indicates a movement of social values away from ostentation, but it is not clear that downshiffters will abandon income disparities or ecologically damaging consumption practices”. Shaw and Newholm (2002:170) make a similar point that although downshiffters are in fact voluntarily simplifying their patterns of consumption, they do not share the same, “concerns about environmental, social and animal welfare issues”.

If these lifestyle aspects are part of an “examined lifestyle” (Elgin, 1981) which is the product of a different kind of rationale, then there may be alternative routes to promoting sustainable consumption habits which do not necessarily rely on green language or appeals. Other beneficial aspects of environmentally-friendly products and services, such as health, may also be emphasised.

### **Empirical Challenges**

In order to understand the difference between, and the marketing implications of, VS, NVS and BVS lifestyles, a qualitative approach is recommended. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, as Craig-Lees and Hill (2002) point out, not nearly enough is known about these groups and exploratory and/or descriptive work is still important in advancing comprehension of these different consumer approaches. Secondly, the BVS in particular are an extremely heterogeneous group (Rudmin & Kilbourne, 1996; Shama, 1996; Shaw & Newholm, 2002) which may need further refinement into sub-groups, as suggested above. The reason that a grounded approach is so important for this work is because, as argued by the extant literature, the only way to distinguish between some of the different kinds of BVS outlined here is in terms of their motivations. It is possible that the same actions and lifestyle outcomes are underpinned by very different purposes and meanings. In order to uncover these subtle and difficult issues, a programme of in-depth interviews with individuals in all three groups will be required.

To operationalise the notion of BVS empirically, criteria which will allow distinctions to be drawn between these groups for sampling purposes would need to be established. For example, someone who takes part in a kerbside recycling scheme provided by their local council and makes no other sustainable consumption choices would not be considered to be a beginner voluntary simplifier. Craig-Lees and Hill (2002) solve this problem by looking at VS/NVS only and by deliberately interviewing people who represent extreme cases of either group. However, clear cut off points between the groups should not be expected. Instead, the groups should be conceptualised as a continuum which ranges from the extreme voluntary simplifier to the complete non voluntary simplifier and encompasses a variety of different lifestyles in between. As discussed above, this conceptualisation is supported by the literature, although it has never been developed or tackled empirically.



As well as being broadly qualitative, researchers studying these groups need to achieve a new level of detail. As Peattie (1999) proposed, the best way to understand green consumerism is not by trying to label individuals, but by viewing each individual's consumption behaviour as a series of transaction decisions, including those decisions to engage in alternate consumption behaviour as well as not to engage in any consumption activities at all. These decisions may or may not be inter-related and underpinned by common values. Looking at sustainable consumption in this way leads to a micro focus on individual purchases which reveal competing priorities, paradoxical outcomes and the nature of compromises reached in real decision processes. Taking this approach also moves the debate on green issues away from traditional marketing concepts such as demographic segmentation into more uncertain, ambiguous, and post-modern concerns, characterised by Brown (1995:176) as necessitating further focus on "the customer *as an individual*" (italics in original), emphasising the diversity and plurality of each consumer. It is at this level of analysis that there is potential to take forward the debate on sustainable consumption and the problems and issues it raises for real consumers.

If Peattie's (1999) conception of purchasing in terms of a portfolio is considered, this can give insight into both Peattie's idea and the different positions on the VS continuum. For example, a VS (non)consumer might be represented by a series of purchases and/or non purchases which are guided and underpinned by a coherent set of principles as outlined by Elgin (1981). An NVS consumer might display an equally consistent, but very different, string of purchases which are all driven by a philosophy of conspicuous consumption. Seen framed in Peattie's (1999) notion, both these very different consumption patterns make 'sense' in that they are 'explained' by strong and coherent core values and can be seen to be inter-related. However a portfolio of purchases and/or non purchases for a BVS would be much less likely to make sense in this way. As discussed earlier, this could be for a number

of reasons. Firstly the underlying rationale for making (or not making) purchases may be in transition or flux. In other words, it may reflect a move from (or between) the two consumption philosophies represented by VS and NVS. In time the portfolio of purchases may become more consistent as the tension between these competing values is resolved one way or the other. However, it is also possible for these core values to remain unresolved, each fuelled by conflicting external influences such as peer pressures, cultural norms or media demands. The purchase portfolio would therefore contain many purchases that can be seen as independent and underpinned by a loose set of vacillating core values. In this case, consumption behaviour is unpredictable and heavily context dependent. On the face of it, this is bad news for marketers seeking to promote sustainable consumption, as NVS seem impervious to change. However viewed in this way, the large BVS group are open to persuasion at every purchase. This view also allows the three groups to be identified from their consumption behaviours.

A qualitative approach will also allow individuals and their consumption behaviour to be considered in a wider context. Each purchase or non purchase decision will be taken in the light of family and/or peer values, reference groups, cultural norms and media pressures. As well as a better understanding of internal values and attitudes, in-depth interviews can help to establish how external influences can affect individual decisions. For example, BVS inconsistency may in part be explained by an inability to reconcile conflicting pressures of consumerism as championed by the media and other spiritual, philosophical or political aspirations.

Uncovering the decision making processes of any of these consumers will not be an easy task. Some of the decisions will be made sub-consciously, and will be very hard for individuals to articulate. Other decisions may be made using heuristics, such as brand loyalty

which neither include nor accommodate the inclusion of spiritual, ethical or environmental considerations. Careful questioning will be required in order to obtain full and candid explanations of purchase decisions. A series of decisions made by one consumer may be incoherent when viewed as a whole as they have not been made using the same criteria, time frames, sets of priorities or sources of information. Neither will any one decision process be located at a particular point in time. Rather they will be emergent and perhaps revisited in a number of different contexts by the individual concerned. These issues present significant difficulties for the empirical process which will need to be addressed through careful and reflexive approaches to research design.

In the longer term, quantitative methods will also have an important role to play in the development of this field. Once motivations for different routes to BVS and VS have been established through qualitative work, a new generation of surveys will be able to be designed. Building on the work identified above, quantitative surveys will be able to incorporate a more comprehensive range of VS elements which have been surfaced through grounded methods. Through careful standardised questioning survey-based research will be able to quantify the proportions of the different VS, BVS and NVS groups and sub-groups in the population. This work will need to avoid the shortcomings of the some quantitative studies to date by adopting large, random and stratified samples so that statements about the different groups identified can be made with rigour and confidence.

### **Conclusions**

Voluntary simplicity is a belief system and a practice of an alternative culture to conspicuous consumerism. Voluntary simplifiers' life styles and practices centre on the reduction of consumption. They pursue non-material satisfactions and value nature, people, and self-growth above material possession. Thus, although voluntary simplifiers can be a

useful group for real world research into sustainable consumption, it is important that they are studied along with non voluntary simplifiers and, crucially, beginner voluntary simplifiers. Further, these groups should not be conceptualised as distinct, static or coherent statements of lifestyle, but treated as overlapping, fluid and inconsistent streams of purchase and/or non purchase decisions. The understanding of the different decision making processes of these three groups can give insight into both rudimentary and sophisticated patterns of implementation of sustainable consumption philosophies and practices. For this, an empirical approach which is qualitative in nature and situated at a micro level of analysis is strongly advocated for the short and medium term, whilst more rigorous quantitative research which builds on this will play a role in the longer term.

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**Table 1****Levels of intensity of VS discussed in the literature and the three-fold categorisation**

| <b>Concept</b>                     | <b>Source</b>                 | <b>Categorisation</b> |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Squander Society                   | Valaskakis et al, 1977; 1979  | NVS                   |
| Indifferent, Unaware & Opposed     | Elgin & Mitchell, 1977a       | NVS                   |
| Status Quo Society                 | Valaskakis et al, 1977; 1979  | NVS                   |
| Sympathizers                       | Elgin & Mitchell, 1977a       | NVS                   |
| Downshiffters                      | Etzioni, 1998; 1999           | NVS                   |
| Conformists                        | Leonard-Barton & Rogers, 1980 | BVS                   |
| Growth with Conservation Society   | Valaskakis et al, 1977; 1979  | BVS                   |
| Conservers                         | Leonard-Barton & Rogers, 1980 | BVS                   |
| Strong Simplifiers                 | Etzioni, 1998; 1999           | BVS                   |
| Maintained Consumption             | Shaw & Newholm, 2002          | BVS                   |
| Shallow Voluntary Simplifiers      | Zavestoski, 2002              | BVS                   |
| Downshiffters                      | Schor, 1998                   | BVS                   |
| Less Committed Simplifiers         | Huneke, 2005                  | BVS                   |
| Partial Simplifiers                | Elgin & Mitchell, 1977a       | BVS                   |
| Socially Acceptable Green Consumer | Moisander & Pesonen, 2002     | BVS                   |
| Affluent Stable State Society      | Valaskakis et al, 1977; 1979  | BVS                   |
| Reduced Consumption                | Shaw & Newholm, 2002          | VS                    |
| Downshiffters                      | Hamilton, 2003                | VS                    |
| Full Voluntary Simplifiers         | Elgin & Mitchell, 1977a       | VS                    |
| Voluntary Simplifiers              | Zavestoski, 2002              | VS                    |
| More Committed Simplifiers         | Huneke, 2005                  | VS                    |
| Holistic Simplifiers               | Etzioni, 1998                 | VS                    |
| Crusaders                          | Leonard-Barton & Rogers, 1980 | VS                    |
| Buddhist Society                   | Valaskakis et al, 1977; 1979  | VS                    |
| Voluntarily Simple Green Consumer  | Moisander & Pesonen, 2002     | VS                    |

