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Can't buy me happiness: How voluntary simplicity contributes to subjective wellbeing

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**Can't buy me happiness:
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CAN'T BUY ME HAPPINESS: HOW VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY CONTRIBUTES TO SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING

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Can't buy me happiness: How voluntary simplicity contributes to subjective wellbeing

Nadine van Dijk

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Can't buy me happiness: How voluntary simplicity contributes to subjective wellbeing¹

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Abstract

The ongoing debate on the purpose of 'development' has given rise to many new studies on happiness and quality of life, situated in both developed and developing countries. Recent insights from this field include the suggestions that ever-increasing incomes do not always increase happiness, and that an emphasis on materialistic values goes hand in hand with relatively low levels of subjective wellbeing. Meanwhile, key authors within the 'new economics' debate are concerned with the effects of dominant economic values and behaviours on human and ecological wellbeing. They point towards 'voluntary simplicity', a more sustainable practice that involves a relatively low consumption level, as a way forward. While it is clear that lifestyles based on less materialistic pursuits benefit the natural environment, it remains unclear how they may contribute to quality of life. Building forth on recent psychological and other related fields of research, this paper combines primary and secondary qualitative data to suggest how voluntary simplicity contributes to subjective wellbeing. Policy makers looking to promote human and ecological wellbeing are advised to make use of an empirically grounded understanding of how relatively ecologically sustainable lifestyles may contribute to life satisfaction.

Key words: wellbeing; voluntary simplicity; new economics; life satisfaction; simple living

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I would like to warmly thank the people who welcomed me in their lives to interview them. I would also like to thank Severine Deneulin for encouraging me to transform my dissertation into a working paper so that others could learn more about voluntary simplicity and wellbeing.

1. This paper is based on my MSc dissertation in Wellbeing and Human Development, University of Bath

1 Introduction

The recent economic crisis has reinforced doubts regarding the shortcomings of the current global economic system. High levels of income inequality and environmental degradation are among the top concerns for critics (Holloway 2010; Jackson 2009; Spratt *et al.* 2010). Some authors within the 'new economics' debate point towards mainstream consumption patterns as a leading cause of our environmental and social problems (Schumacher 1973; Jackson 2009).

Meanwhile, a mounting body of evidence indicates that ever-increasing incomes, a cornerstone of the dominant view of development, do not always make us more happy (Diener *et al.* 1993; Diener and Oishi 2000). Importantly, the pursuit of materialistic goals, the spirit of underpinning consumerism, is shown in some cases to be correlated with unfulfilled potential for life satisfaction (Belk 1985; Cohen and Cohen 1996; Kasser and Ryan 1993, 1996, 2001; Richins and Dawson 1992; Sheldon and Kasser 1995, 1998, 2001).

These critiques are turning attention towards alternative interpretations of the purpose of 'development'. If economic growth per se cannot guarantee social progress and environmental stability, academics and policy makers need to look deeper into the issue of the impacts of different types of economic values and behaviour on the social and environmental environment. The field of wellbeing studies offers interesting insights in this regard.

Complementing the findings that critique the effects of materialistic pursuits (e.g. wealth, social recognition, success), there is evidence that suggests that emphasising non-materialistic values (e.g. equity and ecological sustainability) is correlated to relatively high levels of subjective wellbeing, or how we evaluate the quality of our own lives (Cohen and Cohen 1996; Diener and Oishi 2000; Kasser and Ryan 1993, 1996, 2001; Ryan *et al.* 1999; Schmuck *et al.* 2000). Non-materialistic values are also often related to more ecologically sustainable ways of life (Kasser 2002). The next logical step in research, then, seems to be to further explore lifestyles that de-emphasise materialistic goals, i.e., 'voluntary simplicity'. Voluntary simplicity refers to conscious decisions to detach oneself from materialistic values adhered to by some, such as conspicuous consumption and limitless income growth. It entails the voluntary decision to live with a lower income and relatively few possessions. As a conscious move away from high levels of consumption and income, voluntary simplicity or 'simple living' is a clear expression of non-materialistic values. Some key authors within the new economics debate hail simple living as a possible way forward, towards higher levels of both human and ecological wellbeing (Kasser 2002; Jackson 2009; Schor 1998; Schumacher 1973).

Although it is clear that in consuming less, and therefore using fewer natural resources, voluntary simplicity contributes to ecological sustainability, there is less research explaining the relationships between simple living and high levels of wellbeing. Kasser (2002) offers a basic but useful theoretical framework for analysing the 'mechanism' through which simple living and life satisfaction might be related. He posits that emphasising non-materialistic values increases our 'subjective wellbeing' because these values better fulfil our basic psychological needs than materialistic values do. It remains to be empirically explored, however, how this theory is reflected in the actual lived experiences of voluntary simplifiers.

In order to bridge the wellbeing and new economics debates, and move from theory to practice, there is a need to fill the knowledge gap of how economic behaviour based on non-materialistic

values contributes to wellbeing. How do theories on sustainable lifestyles and wellbeing bear out in reality? Building on Kasser's theory (2002) by bringing together and analysing empirical findings, this paper explores primary and secondary data on voluntary simplicity and its diverse relationships with subjective wellbeing. The experiences of people who opt for voluntary simplicity reveal how their values and choices relate to life satisfaction. The paper asks the fundamental question: How does voluntary simplicity contribute to subjective wellbeing? Related questions include: what experiences motivate people to focus on non-materialistic, as opposed to materialistic values? Which dimensions of wellbeing are influenced by non-materialistic values and behaviour? Finally, what mindset and resources enable people to live simply?

Raising these questions has potentially great societal value. If less materialistic lifestyles are related to greater feelings of life satisfaction, it is plausible that being able to act on those values (for example, by opting for voluntary simplicity) enhances these feelings even further. As the beneficial effects of simple living on the natural environment are clear, policy makers may be well advised to place understanding and even promotion of simple living high on their agendas. In doing so, they could potentially create space for more sustainable wellbeing, and thereby better prospect for development.

2 Economic behaviour and wellbeing

2.1 Materialism revisited

Within the mainstream neoclassical view of the relationships between economic behaviour and wellbeing, it is assumed that overall wellbeing is maximized through individuals' pursuit of self-interest. The individual and rational pursuit of pleasure is seen as the key strategy connecting economic behaviour to the process of increasing wellbeing (or in economic terms, utility) (Etzioni 1988). For a political-economic system reliant on economic growth through production and consumption, this pursuit of pleasure translates for a large part into individual's spending money on consumer goods (Jackson 2009). In other words, in neoclassical economic thinking, wellbeing is 'revealed' through patterns of consumption.

Recently, the global capitalist economy has come under heavy criticism. Many scholars have written institutional critiques of the system. Efforts to envision a more social and sustainable economy are referred to with umbrella terms such as 'moral economy', 'human economy', 'new economics', and 'social and solidarity economy'. The scope of this paper does not lend itself for a comprehensive discussion of this debate. Instead, it will briefly highlight some wellbeing-related critiques of mainstream assumptions about the relationships between economic behaviour and wellbeing.

Etzioni (1988) criticises the neoclassical approach by arguing that the assumption of human behaviour being motivated only by the pursuit of pleasure is incorrect. According to him, economic behaviour is motivated also by other strivings such as that for morality. He also states that although individuals sometimes act rationally, their selections of means and goals are often based on values and emotions. Furthermore, Etzioni emphasizes the role of social collectives in decision-making processes. He claims that all behaviour is in fact embedded in a social context, without which people would not function well. Bringing these arguments together, Etzioni states

that people are constantly debating between individual desires and internalized moral commitments to others.

Another recent significant angle in wellbeing-related critiques of mainstream economics comes from the mounting body of findings suggesting that emphasising some materialistic values is negatively related to subjective wellbeing (e.g. Belk 1985; Cohen and Cohen 1996; Kasser and Ryan 1993, 1996, 2001; Richins and Dawson 1992; Sheldon and Kasser 1995, 1998, 2001). The definition of 'materialism' in these studies is often based on Belk's (1985) identification of three common 'materialistic' characteristics: possessiveness, non-generosity, and envy. Drawing on the work of Schwartz and Sagiv (1995), Kasser (2002) connects materialism to values for wealth, social recognition, being ambitious, being successful, and preserving public image. In some studies, participants who value materialistic goals highly in comparison to other goals, report relatively low levels of life satisfaction. These findings run counter to neoclassical assumptions regarding the relationships between materialism and wellbeing.

Kasser *et al.* (2004) believe that people can obtain a so-called 'Materialistic Value Orientation' (MVO) through socialization, internalization and modelling as well as through attempts at mending a sense of insecurity. This sense of insecurity, as Kasser *et al.* see it, is caused in some people by past experiences in which their basic psychological needs remained unfulfilled. They are, consciously or subconsciously, attempting to fulfil these needs by materialistic achievements. The first basic psychological need that Kasser *et al.* (2004) identify is the need for a sense of security, safety and sustenance. The other three basic needs they recognize stem from Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory. Ryan and Deci (1985, 2000) posit that people need to feel a degree of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in order to experience an ongoing sense of integrity and wellbeing. If one of these needs goes unfulfilled, people cannot thrive. Autonomy here refers to self-endorsed motivation. This entails having the freedom to act on one's own feelings and ideas, rather than being controlled by external actors. Feeling 'authentically engaged' in one's behaviour increases one's wellbeing (Kasser 2002). Competence refers to the experience of one's behaviour being effective (Deci and Ryan 1985). That is to say, that one is generally capable of reaching the effect one was hoping their behaviour would have. Relatedness refers to one's connections with other people. These connections reach from relatives and friends to larger groups one feels part of.¹

In attempting to explain why an MVO might be related to relatively low levels of subjective wellbeing, Kasser *et al.* (2004) suggest that materialistic achievements contribute poorly to the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for security, autonomy, competence and relatedness.² As stated before, they also suggest that an MVO may be adopted because of a lack of fulfilment of basic needs in the past. In short, Kasser *et al.* speculate that an MVO is both caused by, and sustains, unfulfilled needs for security, autonomy, competence and relatedness. It is through this mechanism that an emphasis on materialistic values may undermine subjective wellbeing.

¹ For more on self-determination theory, see Ryan and Deci (2000).

² The scope of this paper does not allow going into the full explanation of the effects Kasser *et al.* suggest materialism has on the fulfilment of basic psychological needs. For details of their theorisation, see Kasser *et al.* (2004).

2.2 Wellbeing

Wellbeing is a broad concept that includes people's satisfaction with their life, their personal development and social functioning (Marks and Shah 2004). It is related to terms such as happiness and quality of life. Although there has been an increasing interest in wellbeing in scientific literature, a universally accepted definition of the term has not yet been constructed. Nevertheless, it has proven to be a key concept in recent scientific and policy discussions. Wellbeing has even been suggested as an appropriate measure of the progress of nations, countering the dominance of purely economic indicators. This suggestion is reflected in the United Kingdom in the efforts of Prime Minister David Cameron to measure the wellbeing of British citizens (see ONS 2012), and in the Kingdom of Bhutan and its Gross National Happiness Index (GNH 2013).

In their analysis of the effects of materialistic values, Kasser *et al.* focus on subjective wellbeing. Within wellbeing literature, subjective wellbeing (SWB) is understood as people's multidimensional evaluations of their lives, including cognitive judgments of life satisfaction as well as affective evaluations of moods and emotions (Eid and Diener 2004). Subjective wellbeing, therefore, is related to both momentary feelings (moods) and more long-term life evaluations (life satisfaction). Objective wellbeing (OWB), in contrast, can be defined as 'externally approved, and thereby normatively endorsed, non-feeling features of a person's life, matters such as mobility or morbidity' (Gasper 2007). Examples of life aspects relating to objective wellbeing could be access to health care and education.

We experience wellbeing not only on the individual level. The wellbeing of others, and of our natural environment, greatly influences how we evaluate our lives. Chambers (1997) draws on his experience with participatory methodologies in development research, to conclude that the objective of development should be 'responsible wellbeing by all and for all'. He understands wellbeing to be 'the experience of good quality of life'. The subjects themselves should define what constitutes a good quality of life. Chambers proposes to include the principles of equity and sustainability into the concept of wellbeing, by transforming it into 'responsible' wellbeing. Obligations to the quality of life of others, and regard towards economic, social, institutional and environmental sustainability are central to the concept of responsible wellbeing. Some exploratory studies in the United States suggest that this idea of personal wellbeing and concerns for others and the natural environment can go hand in hand in reality (see Kasser and Sheldon 2002; Brown and Kasser 2005).

This paper draws on multiple approaches to wellbeing. Kasser *et al.* (2004) offer a useful basic framework for exploring how economic behaviour and psychological needs relate to wellbeing. Like Kasser *et al.*, I focus mostly on subjective wellbeing, while keeping in mind that it cannot be fully separated from objective characteristics of life. Moving the analysis from individual-focused psychological theory to the socially oriented practice of voluntary simplicity also requires recognition of the interconnectedness of our wellbeing with the wellbeing of others. I draw on Chamber's (1997) concept of responsible wellbeing to explore this interconnectedness.

3 Voluntary simplicity

Rejecting elements of consumerism, voluntary simplifiers engage in a range of alternative behaviours based in non-materialistic values. It may not be appropriate to speak of a 'group' or

'movement' as their lives are quite diverse. Still, some common denominators in characteristics and behaviour can be identified.

3.1 What is voluntary simplicity?

Criticisms of mainstream economic behaviour, especially those geared towards the negative consequences of high levels of materialism on wellbeing and the natural environment, have inspired many alternative practices around the world. These alternatives include trading schemes such as labour-credit systems (e.g. Kinkade 2011) and community currencies (e.g. Seyfang 2007; Blanc 2010), and avoiding, or greatly reducing, the use of money (e.g. Cattaneo 2011). They also include alternative employment strategies such as working in cooperatives (e.g. Alperovitz 2006), or even avoiding paid work altogether (e.g. Cleaver 2011; Cattaneo 2011; Levitas 2001). Voluntary simplicity involves consciously and voluntarily choosing to consume relatively little, and/or earn a relatively low income.

Voluntary simplicity is a broad term, describing not simply one but a wide range of practices. The lifestyles of two people adhering to practices and values related to VS may appear quite diverse. While one may live in a low-impact community, occasionally selling local produce, the other may live in a suburb apartment, with a part-time job in healthcare. Capturing this variety within lifestyles in one definition is a challenge. Several authors have managed to construct useful definitions that illustrate both the variety and the common denominators within what is referred to as voluntary simplicity. Alexander and Ussher (2012) define the voluntary simplicity movement as "people who are resisting high consumption lifestyles and who are seeking, in various ways, a lower consumption but higher quality of life". Etzioni (2004) describes the phenomenon as a movement that rejects materialism in the form of consumerism, and attempts to de-connect from the rat race of consumer novelty. Elgin (1993) clarifies that "the objective is not dogmatically to live with less, but is a more demanding intention of living with balance in order to find a life of greater purpose, fulfilment, and satisfaction" (Elgin 1993, p.25).

For the purpose of this study I have chosen to use the following conceptual description: consciously and voluntarily purchasing and owning less than others in the same society do and/or earning a considerably lower income than one might earn, and sustaining these decisions over a period of time. This description encompasses two categories often included in existing VS theory. The first category includes those who attempt to maintain a very 'basic' lifestyle, using as little means as feasible. The second category is broader, including those who choose to earn less than they could, given their level of education and work experience. Although they 'downshift' voluntarily, they may still earn an above-average income. A common characteristic of both categories is the conscious choice of deciding what is 'enough' to sustain a fulfilling lifestyle, reducing the need for ever-increasing levels of income and possessions. Including both categories in the concept of voluntary simplicity offers the advantage of including a variety of relatively sustainable lifestyles in the analysis.

Motivations for 'simple living', as the lifestyle of voluntary simplifiers is often referred to, vary greatly and may include environmental concerns, religious values, and personal views on leading a fulfilling life. It is very important to note that whatever motivation a person has to live more simply, 'voluntary simplicity' refers only to the free choice to do so. VS is not the same as poverty, and as Shi describes: 'For simplicity to be both fulfilling and sustaining, one must choose it' (Shi 1985, p.280).

Because voluntary simplifiers are very diverse, it can be misleading to talk about characteristics of this 'group'. Some authors, however, do detect trends. Schor (1998), in profiling American downshifters, mentions that before simplifying their lives, most worked more than forty hours a week, that most are of white Caucasian ethnic background, and most are highly educated. Grigsby (2004), describing voluntary simplifiers overall, adds 'middle class', 'heterosexual', and 'rich in social resources' to the list of common characteristics.

There are some estimates on the scope of voluntary simplicity, or the potential for the practice to expand. After stating she cannot estimate the size of the movement with any certainty, Schor (1998), finds from her survey that about 60 percent of Americans say they want to simplify their lives to some extent. She also estimates that between 1990 and 1996, 19 percent of adult Americans chose to 'downshift' voluntarily ('downshifting' referring to consciously earning a lower income). However, because many of those who may analytically be referred to as voluntary simplifiers are not members of official VS associations, it is very difficult to get a sense of the scope of the 'movement'.

Although the practice of VS combines Eastern and Western influences (Elgin 1993), most of the literature strictly refers to so-called Western countries. Voluntary simplicity is often situated as a counter-reaction to the dominance of the spirit of capitalism and consumerism. As such, much of the literature focuses on voluntary simplifiers in the United States, where the term also originated (Shi 1985). Although it is often American voluntary simplifiers that are explicitly mentioned in the literature, the general assumption is that there is some scope of voluntary simplicity in all Western countries.

Although voluntary simplicity can be considered a response to modern-day consumerism, it is not an entirely new practice. According to Buell (2005) and Shi (1985), voluntary simplicity has existed in some ways and forms throughout history. Elgin (1993) also emphasizes this and points towards practices in ancient Greek, Christian and Eastern traditions that point towards a simpler life. Shi (1985) traces the history of thought about simple living in the United States, showing that from colonial times, through Quakers and hippies, the sentiment that simple living somehow relates to the good life has always been passed on in some way.

So what is new about voluntary simplicity? Schor (1988) states that modern downshifters differ from previous voluntary simplifiers, mainly in the sense that nowadays downshifting happens not only on the fringe of society, but can be very much part of it. According to Schor, it has become possible to downshift within mainstream culture. Elgin (1993) stresses that although the idea of simple living is not new, knowledge on ecological challenges is. Voluntary simplicity may be a way to meet these challenges.

4 Voluntary simplicity and subjective wellbeing

4.1 Theoretical perspectives

Whatever the location or exact definition of voluntary simplicity, it is clear that this practice, or rather, process, is supported by a desire to lead a less materialistic lifestyle. As the analysis in this paper centres around the relationships between an emphasis on non-materialistic values and subjective wellbeing, voluntary simplifiers are exemplary study cases.

The question is: if materialistic values are related to low levels of subjective wellbeing, does the opposite hold? Is the adherence to non-materialistic values related to relatively high levels of life satisfaction? Empirical findings suggest this may indeed be the case (e.g. Brown and Kasser 2005; Cohen and Cohen 1996; Diener and Oishi 2000; Kasser and Ryan 1993, 1996, 2001; Ryan *et al.* 1999; Schmuck *et al.* 2000). How might these findings be explained?

Etzioni (1993) broadly links voluntary simplicity to wellbeing by stating that once individuals have freed themselves from the values of consumerism, living a simple life can be compatible with the universal striving for wellbeing, as these individuals find new indicators of social recognition, that are not so much based on material achievements. Schor (1998) describes voluntary simplifiers in the following way: "their experience is that *less* (spending) is *more* (time, meaning, peace of mind, financial security, ecological responsibility, physical health, friendship, appreciation of what they do spend)" (Schor 1998, p.133).

Brown and Kasser (2005) find that the high levels of wellbeing reported by survey respondents with VS lifestyle is correlated to an orientation towards 'intrinsic' values and goals rather than 'extrinsic' ones. Kasser (2002) suggests that these intrinsic values better fulfil the basic psychological needs for security, autonomy, competence and relatedness than extrinsic values do (see Kasser 2010 for his full reasoning).

In contrast to Kasser and Brown I prefer to refer to 'non-materialistic values' in the context of VS, because the extent of materialistic influences on their lifestyle is what sets voluntary simplifiers apart from others. Nevertheless, if one wants to use the term 'intrinsic', non-materialistic values can be seen as that subset of intrinsic values that run counter to materialistic values for wealth, social recognition, being ambitious, being successful, and preserving public image. Non-materialistic values may include equity and ecological sustainability, for example.

4.2 Analytical framework and methods of research

I take Kasser's (2002) theory that an emphasis on non-materialistic values contributes to the fulfilment of psychological needs for security, autonomy, competence and relatedness as a guide to answer the question 'how does voluntary simplicity contribute to subjective wellbeing?'

The analysis presented in this paper is based on both primary and secondary research. Semi-structured interviews were held with one couple and seven individuals. Invitations to participate in the research were sent to locals of the Bath area including attendants of a symposium on sustainable lifestyles, as well as personal contacts of Bath university staff. The invitations defined various characteristics of voluntary simplifiers including earning and/or working less than once could in theory. An interview guide was used as a starting point for the interviews. Each interview started with a comprehensive description of voluntary simplicity, followed by the question: 'related to this definition, have you made any conscious choices regarding where you live, the things you buy and use, or your work and income?'. Following questions related to the influence of these choices on various aspects of quality of life, as well as perceived tensions toward society and policy. Not all interviewees self-identified as 'voluntary simplifiers' as not everyone is familiar with the term. Yet they related to the definition of VS in various ways. While some experienced lower incomes due to a conscious career shift to a more 'social' sector, others simply worked less to spend more time on other aspects of life. They experienced differing financial background with some getting by purely on their current income and others relying on

savings or the means of their social environment. All interviews took place in July 2012 within the United Kingdom; seven were with locals of the Bath area and one with a resident of a low carbon community in the Yeovil area. Of the interviewees, four were women and five men. They ranged between 35 and 70 years of age.

Second, I used the existing literature on voluntary simplicity on valuable information on its relationships with subjective wellbeing. Although many authors on voluntary simplicity did not explicitly ask the question of how this practice related to wellbeing, data from their primary research sometimes offers key insights into this topic. Schor (1998) was a particularly useful source because she had asked about subjective wellbeing but not analysed this material against a theoretical framework. The existing literature also allowed me to check that the topics that were brought forward during the primary research conducted for this study matched the themes suggested by interviewees living in other regions. Section five of this paper includes quotes from my interviews as well as Schor's (referenced distinctly).

Third, voluntary simplifiers themselves take part in lively online debates, which often reflect how they feel their values and lifestyle contribute to their life satisfaction. The website (<http://www.choosingvoluntarysimplicity.com>) is currently the most active online forum for voluntary simplifiers to discuss all things related to their way of life. Together, the interviews, literature and online debates form an extensive base for exploring how voluntary simplicity contributes to subjective wellbeing.

Various methods of qualitative data analysis guided the process of analysing the interviews, literature and online forum. Recognising the need for ground theory on the links between voluntary simplicity and wellbeing, I started by recognising patterns in the data and continued with open and axial coding, clustering and finally drew conclusions. In connecting quotes from interviewees to wellbeing theory frameworks, discourse analysis proved a useful tool (e.g. relating the reoccurring theme of 'freedom' in the interviews to a need for 'autonomy' as identified by Deci and Ryan [1985]).

5 Voluntary simplicity and wellbeing

The narratives of voluntary simplifiers offer clues as to how their way of life contributes to their wellbeing. Common themes found in interviews, literature and an online forum illustrate ways in which voluntary simplicity contributes to wellbeing.

5.1 Why choose a simpler way of life?

Deciding to earn considerably less money, possibly even changing careers, to buy and own far less than most people do, has far-reaching consequences in many domains of life. For some voluntary simplifiers, these are recent choices triggered by a series of events. To others, simple living has come naturally since they were children. What they have in common is the conscious decision to make alternative economic choices. To understand the range of motivations for simple living, it is helpful to think of the experiences underpinning these motivations as processes rather than singular events. Voluntary simplifiers choose to live simply every day and may vary in their 'simplicity' over time. Here I will highlight some common reasons voluntary simplifiers give for making such choices.

Schor (1998) finds that common reasons for voluntary simplifiers to work less are a desire to have more free time and less stress, to lead a more meaningful life, and to spend more time with children. While these may be common reasons for choosing a simpler way of life, the events leading up to this are very diverse. Steve, now in his sixties, said that on the day of he graduated university, he felt so fed up with formal surroundings that he vowed never to hold a 'proper' job in his life. Others related that in the middle of a successful corporate career, they decided to move to sectors where they would earn less money, but were more in line with their social and ecological beliefs. Wanting to spend more time with children or on non-work related activities were also often mentioned. Yet others stated that they had never been career oriented, and had in their childhoods been happy without many possessions. Two interviewees, both men in their sixties, said that they had always felt different from others and had always had the urge to be free from the obligations that the working life involves. These narratives illustrate that motivations for simple living are complicated and diverse.

5.2 Autonomy and identity in daily activities

All interviewees emphasised the positive effects on their wellbeing of the freedom to make conscious and sometimes ad hoc choices regarding their daily activities. Often referring to work, but also to leisure activities such as seeing friends, going for a walk, or spending quality time with their children, they took on a broad perspective when speaking about their daily activities. In fact, for some, the line between work and leisure was quite blurry. A central theme brought forth by interviewees is that of enjoying their current activities, whilst they had not done so in the past or would imagine not doing so as much if they had chosen a different lifestyle. Having the time, and being free to choose, to act on what they feel makes them happier, is a crucial way in which voluntary simplicity contributes to their wellbeing.

Having the time to explore various interesting activities leads, for some, to a daily life in which they feel competent and comfortable with the parts of their identity formed by their activities. Steve remembered that on moving to Bath in 1981, he had felt that after leading an alternative lifestyle he did not have the work skills or the desire to become employed. Steve:

"I wanted to earn some money in a fun way. I picked up photography, worked with someone in a studio for a while, and gradually became a self-employed photographer. I thought, if I'm gonna do work, it's gotta be fun, give me an ego thing, not 9-5, that I can apply myself to. I hung onto that, I was a photographer now."

Lucy and her partner Peter, who decided a year ago to live on their own patch of land with their two children, found a similar joy in their activities. Their new lifestyle involves growing vegetables and keeping a cow, activities the family is not very familiar with. It has been hard work and a struggle sometimes to find peace and enjoyment on a day-to-day basis. Lucy related, however, that she is happy with their choice and feels good about learning new skills with the help of others and the Internet. She said she feels happy when viewing her life from a 'death bed perspective' because "overcoming the minor struggles is worth seizing control of your presence on the planet". Peter added that proving that the status quo is not necessarily the best way of doing things is important to him. By making alternative choices, Steve, Lucy and Peter have contributed to their identity in a way they find fulfilling. They have deliberately made room in their lives for personal choices, and find enjoyment in being able to do these things.

5.3 Visions of work

Although voluntary simplifiers have very diverse work situations (e.g. full-time, part-time, self-employed, unemployed), they often share an alternative view on the function that work should have in their life, and a preference for a less skewed work-life balance.

A reoccurring theme in the interviews and the literature is the strong view that work should be worthwhile and in line with personal values. Schor describes the story of Jennifer, a forty-one year old woman, who explained the feelings she had towards her high-paying job before deciding to quit doing paid work. Jennifer:

“... I felt like I was spending all of my life’s energies doing something that I didn’t much care about just to get a check every two weeks so that I could go out and buy some more books that I never had the time to read and some more records that I never had the time to listen to.” (Schor 1998, p.123).

Chris, a thirty-something year old IT expert chose to go from full-time to part-time, to quitting his job to run his own massage business. Describing his feelings with his old job:

“I was working in an office, in a profit making environment.... I only worked there for money, basically, that was the only... and I grew to not want to do that anymore, and then later on I grew to kind of hate myself for continuing to do it.”

Chris explained these strong feelings came from his experience that the company he worked for, and the people he worked with, did not fully share his environmental and social values. To him, aligning his work with his values was a very important step. Now, giving massages, he feels he is doing something of practical use, which also allows him to care for others through his work.

Not everyone feels their work needs to reflect their values, in order for it to have a fulfilling role in their lives. For many voluntary simplifiers, however, this seems to be a significant part of the story of why they chose to make far-reaching changes with regard to their employment. For others, the number of hours their paid job was demanding from them each week was an important factor. Mary, for example, described that she felt her job ‘shouldn’t take over my life’. She quit her job, in order to spend more time with her children, take care of an ill relative, and be more active politically. She says she finds her ‘mundane’ housework very satisfying and has never been happier. Although her family can no longer buy all the same goods and services they could in the past, Mary experiences less stress and feels more able to live in the moment and to manage her own time. Her husband has continued to work, which enables her not to feel too much stress about the financial future of their family.³

5.4 Doing the right thing

When their job, or any other part of their previous lifestyle, did not reflect some of their key values, some voluntary simplifiers seem to fare better at integrating those values in their new way of life. For many, choosing an alternative way of life is not only about their own wellbeing, but also about the wellbeing of others and of the natural environment. Ecological and societal

³ Cases like Mary’s, where one partner relies on the other to be able to work less, raise important questions regarding gender roles. Motivations to simplify or downshift so can sometimes be negative (in terms of this analysis) rather than positive; for example, when a woman’s wage hardly covers the costs of childcare, making it more attractive to stay at home. Which cases to include in studies on voluntary simplicity is an interesting question for further debate.

concerns are often a key part of their motivations to live simply. Acting on these concerns can lead to the experience of 'doing the right thing'. Although the theme of morality is not often explored in wellbeing literature, it comes forth very often in voluntary simplifiers' narratives. Aligning their day-to-day behaviour with their ecological and social values gives some voluntary simplifiers a sense of fulfilment that affects how they evaluate their way of life. Mary, for example, says she feels better about the way she spends her time since she quit her paid job. She is now able to take care of some ill relatives and spend more time with her children. She says she has always sympathised with the environmental movement and it has always been important to her to contribute to it as much as she can. Now that she has more free time, she does more political activities than she used to be able to. Chris, who runs his own massage business, expresses similar feelings towards his new lifestyle, saying, "my life now more represents me".

To behave ethically means different things to different people. Voluntary simplifiers identify a range of practices as ethical, and implement these to differing extents in their lives. Most stress the necessity of living more simply because of the urgency of the ecological crisis. Some also experience that simple living spurs them to treat other people differently. Lucy, for example, says that while in the past she would feel over-asked by a request to help a friend for a full day, now she feels more free about giving time to others. In her youth, she did not have a sense of communality, but now she understands how much friendships give her and that spending time on friends' needs means investing in the "best thing possible". Just like Mary, Lucy paints the picture of her choice to spend less time in paid employment as allowing her to spend more time helping others in some way.

In some cases, voluntary simplifiers have chosen consciously to take matters into their own hands when it comes to acting on their moral convictions. Lucy, for example, says that after being involved with several non-governmental organisations, she found she did not subscribe to all their ideas and courses of action, and prefers to make sure her own actions are 'good'. Her partner Peter has a Christian background that has instilled the idea of helping other people in him, and he believes that his actions may have greater consequences. Peter: "If I can change one person's life, then they might go on to change another person's life, and so forth!" They seem to have found a sense of autonomy in incorporating their values in their day-to-day life.

Such a sense of autonomy is also a reoccurring theme on the online forum on voluntary simplicity.⁴ It is filled with quotes and stories relating that happiness do not come from the outside – possessions, achievements, events, but rather from the inside – how we decide to deal with what happens to us in our lives. The message seems to be that it is our personal responsibility to make sure we live according to our own values, and that doing so might make us happier.

5.5 Alternative interpretations of financial security

One of the most striking findings from the qualitative data is that some voluntary simplifiers have counter-cultural ways of viewing (financial) security. For some, deciding to earn less can be a source of stress. Harry and his wife have home-schooled their children. Their main reason to do so was that they want to transfer a sense of self-acceptance to them. They believe the official

⁴ <http://www.choosingvoluntarysimplicity.com>

school system does not teach children that it is okay to be who you are, and that you can therefore, in a sense, rely on yourself. Because Harry and his wife have spent much of their time raising their children, they have spent little time in paid employment. Harry admits that although he generally feels money is not important, he sometimes worries about not having built up much of a pension, and is not sure how exactly to continue this lifestyle in the future.

Other voluntary simplifiers, while not denying their need for a sense of financial security, manage to define it in a very different way. They feel quite confident that no matter their financial situation, they will be all right. This feeling often seems to be based in having lived this way for a longer period, and having experienced that 'everything always work out in the end'. Steve formulates it as follows: "with regards to money... I guess I've always been at the right place at the right time." Peter explains his feelings of security are based in his experiences of moving around a lot when he was younger: "it's made me feel I'll be okay wherever".

As relatively low and sometimes irregular incomes can be a part of simple living, for some, not experiencing too much stress about these insecurities is a mindset that enables them to continue to enjoy simple living. Some are aided in this feeling by confidence in their practical skills that relieve the need for money such as growing food and fixing broken equipment. Feeling competent in their relative self-sufficiency, they may feel they have their skills to fall back on when their income is temporarily low. Another 'back up' can be a sense of community. Harry, for example, relates that he and his wife have in the past been part of home educator communities, and could potentially lean on them for advice and support when they run into uncertainties.

5.6 Alternative relationships with money and possessions

Another area voluntary simplifiers can have alternative views of is that of money and possessions. To some voluntary simplifiers, simple living entails 'purging' as many of their belongings as they can, in order to 'declutter' their lives (Grigsby 2004). When applied to its extreme, this mindset can lead to a 'one in, one out' mentality, where someone only allows himself or herself to purchase an item if they get rid of another one. When discussing this theme amongst themselves, however, the dominant discourse amongst voluntary simplifiers is one of avoiding forced commitments to purging. On the online forum on voluntary simplicity, for example, many authors stress their diversity and the importance of allowing everyone to follow their own specific path towards simplicity. It is often stressed that if a certain way of simplicity, for example getting rid of as many possessions as possible, is forced upon someone, it will not bring them the happiness it could if they gradually decided to do it. Shirley, one of the authors on the forum, has written an essay that expresses common reflections by voluntary simplifiers on how owning less does not automatically lead to more wellbeing (Shirley n.d.). She argues quite the opposite, stating that either focusing on accumulating things, or focusing on losing as much as possible, means placing too much value on things.

In other words, emphasising non-materialistic values does not imply having no feelings towards money and possessions whatsoever. While preferring not to centre their lives around material strivings can motivate people towards simple living, the following experience of buying and owning less than most people do in some cases makes voluntary simplifiers more aware and appreciative of what they do have. A common theme in narratives from simplifiers is viewing money and possessions as means towards life satisfaction, instead of ends in themselves. Schor (1998) describes the representative story of Alice, a married woman with two adult children:

"I can't say that I don't think it's fun to do things or that I don't think material things are important. But what I'm willing to do to get there has totally changed." The importance of money has fallen relative to "quality of life, what I do for a living, the actual content of what I do, connection with friends, connection with other people, connecting up on a personal level even with people that I work with. The quality of my life at work was terrible. It was so tense." (Schor 1998, p.121).

Sophie, a fulltime mother, describes similar feelings towards the objects in her house. She relates that almost all their furniture pieces were given to them, rather than bought. She does not feel that accumulating more objects would make her happier. This does not mean, however, that she does not appreciate the things they have. She goes into lengthy descriptions of the types of wood that went into the table and cupboard and how beautiful she thinks they are. She explains she would not want to replace them because they are so valuable to her.

Still, simple living is coupled with low consumption levels, and therefore with relatively few possessions. Deciding that 'enough is enough' when it comes to money and possessions, is a very personal experience. Within families, it can be easier when this experience is shared amongst family members. Mary, for example, describes that although her husband has a high paid job, he 'hates things', indicating he, like her, does not place much emotional value in accumulating things. As such, he was able to support her decision to quit her job to spend more time with their children. They have worked out a balance as a family that is compatible with a degree of voluntary simplicity. Their conscious consumption decisions are in line with their view on the relationships between money, possessions, and wellbeing.

6 Conclusions and reflections for future research

6.1 Conclusions

It is clear from the experiences of voluntary simplifiers that there is no one given way in which their way of life contributes to their wellbeing. They have differing reasons to choose to live simply, and have differing experiences with it. Furthermore, when attempting to analyse their experiences, it proves difficult to identify distinct factors as contributors to wellbeing, as they are very much interrelated. Choosing not to be part of larger organisations, but rather to act on their own definitions of social justice, as Peter and Lucy do, for example may contribute to both feelings of autonomy and of 'doing the right thing'. Still, the common themes that come forward in the narratives of voluntary simplifiers suggest various shared experiences, and common ways in which simple living may contribute to subjective wellbeing. Some of these themes connect to existing theories on the topic. For example, interviewees often highlighted experiences of autonomy and competence, which is predicted by Kasser *et al* (2004), basing their theory on Deci and Ryan (1985). Other themes, however, suggest that there is more to the story. It seems a successful framework for analysing the relationships between voluntary simplicity, as an expression of non-materialistic values, and wellbeing is based in a broader understanding of our quality of life.

Simple living appears to be not so much a recipe for sky-high everyday happiness. Just like others, voluntary simplifiers experience struggles regarding financial worries or building new skills, for example. Rather, this way of life seems to carry a lot of meaning for voluntary

simplifiers, when they view their life from a more distanced perspective. Many say they are happy with the choices they have made, and prefer their (new) lifestyle in general.

For some, the experience of being free to decide what to do with their time, rather than spending much of it in paid employment, is very important. They derive a sense of autonomy from taking matters into their own hands this way. Feeling autonomous in the sense of having the freedom to design their daily lives as they want them (to a high degree) is very often brought up by voluntary simplifiers when asked how their way of life contributes to their wellbeing. In fact, having this freedom is a key reason for many to prefer this lifestyle to a more mainstream one.

Other common themes are those of feeling relatively self-sustainable. These experiences are related to feelings of competence, of feeling able to satisfactorily handle tasks at hand. Regarding money and possessions as means, not ends in themselves, is an important 'tool' here to feel satisfied with a simpler life.

The experience of (financial) security is brought forth by voluntary simplifiers in a rather surprising way. Simple living can be paired with unstable, in other words insecure, incomes. Although some voluntary simplifiers experience worries regarding their finances, others experience that no matter their financial situation, everything 'always work out all right'. This internal sense of security is rooted, for some, in childhood experiences of successfully dealing with forms of insecurity. In Kasser's terms one might say their basic psychological need for security may have been effectively fulfilled in their early lives.

The theme of relatedness comes up in interviews with voluntary simplifiers in connection to having the time and energy to spend time with, and help, friends and family, and gaining a sense of joy from this. In fact, some simplifiers report stronger feelings of community and more willingness to give to others.

Security, autonomy, competence, and relatedness do not paint the whole picture here, however. The basic psychological needs proposed by Kasser *et al.* (2004) go a long way to explain the why and how of simple living and subjective wellbeing. However, as other approaches to wellbeing (such as Chambers) suggest, experiencing wellbeing of others and of the natural environment can also be a vital component of subjective wellbeing. This theme is strongly reflected in the narratives of voluntary simplifiers. While relatedness, in the form of community feelings, can be part of why voluntary simplifiers enjoy their way of life, caring for others mostly comes forth within the theme of morality. Feeling a need to better align their view of morality with their day-to-day life seems to be a common motivator for simple living. Doing 'the right thing' is a major source of satisfaction for many simplifiers. Ecological and societal concerns often motivate people to practice simple living. Acting on these concerns, making a change, often supports simplifiers in being satisfied with their choices. Aligning their actions with their societal and ecological values gives many voluntary simplifiers a sense of life satisfaction. As such, morality is a key theme in explaining how voluntary simplicity contributes to subjective wellbeing.

These conclusions, although carefully constructed, are not exhaustive. Because of the limited scope of this paper, and the varying experiences of voluntary simplifiers, it is realistic to assume

there may be more ways in which simple living contributes to wellbeing. Further research is needed to enhance a grounded understanding of this topic.

6.2 Reflections for future research

The narratives and conclusions presented in this paper illustrate the complexity of drawing conclusions on how voluntary simplicity, and its underlying values, contributes to wellbeing. Offering a preliminary framework for relating these experiences is an important step towards better understanding how human and ecological wellbeing might go together.

There are other important questions that need to be raised, however. Here I will briefly highlight two key issues that need to be addressed further in order for the debate to grow. The first issue centres on enabling factors. Is it possible for everyone in the United Kingdom to start practicing voluntary simplicity? What characteristics set voluntary simplifiers apart that might offer clues towards why they might be in a better position to sustain such a lifestyle than some others might? The second issue that deserves further exploration is that of causality. Although it is clear that in some ways voluntary simplicity contributes to wellbeing, that does not fully explain the finding that voluntary simplifiers are significantly more happy than others e.g. (Brown and Kasser 2005). Another part of the explanation could theoretically be that happier people – or those with a greater sense of internal security – are more likely to practice simple living in the first place.

6.3 Moving towards more responsible wellbeing: Policy implications

The goal of this paper is not to argue for promoting voluntary simplicity as such amongst as many people as possible. It is rather to use simple living as an illustrative 'case' through which to explore possible ways to combine human and ecological wellbeing. In other words, I meant to research how the concept of responsible wellbeing might bear out in reality. To contribute to responsible wellbeing, it is not necessary for people to be labelled as voluntary simplifiers. It is experiences and acts, rather than analytical frameworks that make a real difference.

How then, can we relate the experiences of individuals who act as local agents for change, to the wider structural debate of socio-economic policy? There are two main ways in which 'top-down' policy can promote or limit more ecologically sustainable, and possibly more fulfilling, living. The first is through regulations and incentives that make lifestyles such as VS easier or more difficult. The second is through attempting to change citizen's values.

When asked if they felt sufficiently supported in their lifestyle by government or council regulations and incentives, most interviewees noted some improvements could be made. This is not the place to go into details on their recommendations; instead I will highlight the policy areas most often brought forward. A subject that was often mentioned is that of public transportation prices. Although travelling by public transport is much more environmentally friendly than travelling by car, it can be more expensive when several people (e.g. a family) are travelling at the same time. Another subject that voluntary simplifiers highlight is that of high prices of property. It can be difficult for an individual or family to decide to spend less time in paid employment, when they have to worry about paying off a high mortgage. Finally, some suggest gradually shortening the standard working week. This could, in theory, decrease our societal ecological footprint, increase employment levels, and give people more free time to

spend autonomously. Such suggestions regarding the working week are common within the academic 'new economics' debate (e.g. Coote *et al.* 2010)

Even when policy makers do their best to enable or even stimulate ecologically sustainable living, people who desire to live more simply might still very well decide not to, out of fear of the responses of their social environment. Mainstream values sometimes undermine the basic concepts of simple living. For example being unemployed, even if voluntarily, carries major stigma. Even if someone does not believe that paid employment always contributes to a better society, they may still resent being labelled 'lazy' or even an 'unproductive' member of society. Changing such labels is a difficult task. Policy makers have (limited) abilities to influence mainstream values. They can fund campaigns promoting more ecologically sustainable living, for example. Over the past decades, campaigns spreading environmental knowledge have had great influence on public awareness of the links between human behaviour and environmental degradation. It is likely that many now value our natural environment higher because of their improved awareness. Public funds could now be used to promote examples of how to incorporate this knowledge into more aspects of day-to-day life. If not used for the promotion of non-materialistic values, public campaigns could also serve to increase understanding for people with alternative economic lifestyles. A sense of being understood by others, who choose not to live simply, might make it easier for some to simplify their lives.

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