

# The Voluntary Simplicity Movement: A Multi-National Survey Analysis in Theoretical Context

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Voluntary Simplicity Movement can be understood broadly as a diverse social movement made up of people who are resisting high consumption lifestyles and who are seeking, in various ways, a lower consumption but higher quality of life alternative (Grisby, 2004; Alexander, 2009, 2011a). Recently a multi-national online survey was launched for the purpose of gaining empirical insight into this ‘post-consumerist’ social movement. Presently 2268 participants in the movement have completed the 50-question survey and that makes it the most extensive sociological examination of the movement available (Schor, 1998; Pierce, 2000; Kasser, 2002; Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002; Grigsby, 2004; Brown and Kasser, 2005; Hamilton and Denniss, 2005). This paper presents a foundational analysis of these new survey results.

## 2. WHY EXAMINE THE VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY MOVEMENT?

Before turning to the survey and its results, we wish to provide some theoretical context to this research paper by outlining briefly why we chose to examine the Voluntary Simplicity Movement (hereafter, the ‘Simplicity Movement’). As Directors of the Simplicity Institute – which is a research institute focusing on issues related to sustainable consumption – we feel it is important to be explicit about the presuppositions that we bring to this research project. All researchers have potential biases that may result from studying a subject from a particular viewpoint, but we feel that one means of being reflexive and transparent in this regard is for us to state our presuppositions from the outset.

### 2.1. *Ecological Overshoot*

Many credible scientific studies have shown that the human economy is degrading the planet’s ecosystems in ways that are unsustainable (Wackernagel, 2002; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005; Hansen, 2011). While this is hardly news, the full implications of the ecological crisis are rarely acknowledged or understood, at least with respect to what it means for the ‘Western-style’ consumption practices of the global consumer class.<sup>1</sup> It is clear enough that human beings need to consume *differently* and produce commodities more *efficiently*. But few people (and no governments, in the developed world, at least) are prepared to accept that attaining an ecologically sustainable global economy requires the global consumer class to consume *less*. On the contrary, the mainstream position on sustainability seems to be that economies around the world simply need to adopt ‘sustainable development,’ which in theory means continuing to pursue economic growth (i.e. increases in GDP per capita) while

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<sup>1</sup> We use the phrase ‘Western-style’ rather than ‘Western’ to acknowledge that the high consumption, energy intensive lifestyles that originated in the West are practiced today in many regions of the globe, such as the growing consumer classes in nations like China, India, Brazil, etc. We will refer to those living such high consumption lifestyles throughout the world as the ‘global consumer class.’ While this phrase obviously homogenizes a diversity of lifestyles, it is sufficiently suggestive of a referent for immediate purposes.

employing science and technology to produce and consume more cleanly and efficiently (e.g. UNDP, 2007/8, p. 15).

This mainstream vision of how to achieve a sustainable world is coherent in theory, at best, but demonstrably it does not reflect empirical reality. Although many economies around the world are indeed getting better at producing commodities more cleanly and efficiently (a process known as ‘relative decoupling’), overall ecological impact is nevertheless *still increasing*, because every year increasing numbers of commodities are being produced, exchanged, and consumed as a result of growing economies (Jackson, 2009, Ch. 5). We might have more fuel-efficient cars, for example, but the rebound effect is that we are also driving more and buying more cars. This is but one example of the ‘Jevons Paradox’ that permeates market societies and beyond (Polimeni et al, 2008) – a paradox, so-called, because a per unit reduction in the throughput of commodities does not actually lead to reduced ecological impact, since those efficiency improvements are outweighed by the increasing amounts of commodities that are consumed (Holm and Englund, 2009). The obvious implication of this is that technology and efficiency improvements are not going to solve the ecological crisis, as their most optimistic advocates suggest they can – at least, not unless the global consumer class also downshifts to some significant extent from its currently unsustainably high levels of consumption. Since voluntary simplicity as a way of life generally implies ‘choosing to live on less,’ we see the mainstreaming of its ethos into the global consumer class as being an absolutely necessary part of any effective response to the ecological crisis.

## 2.2. *Poverty amidst Plenty*

The fact that the global economy is already in significant ecological ‘overshoot’ is even more challenging when we bear in mind that in the poorest parts of the world today great multitudes are living lives oppressed by extreme poverty (World Bank, 2008). The global challenge, therefore, in terms of humanitarian justice and ecological sustainability, can be stated as follows: The human community must find a way to *raise* the material standards of living of the world’s poorest people – who surely have a right to develop their economic capacities in some form – while at the same time *reducing* humanity’s overall ecological footprint (Meadows et al, 2004, p. xv). We feel this provides a further and equally compelling justification for the adoption of lifestyles of reduced consumption among the global consumer class.

## 2.3. *Overpopulation*

What exacerbates the ecological and humanitarian crises outlined above is the fact that, according to the United Nations, global human population is expected to exceed nine billion by mid-century (UNDSEA, 2008). Obviously, this will intensify greatly the already intense competition over access to Earth’s limited natural resources and it will put even more pressure on Earth’s fragile ecosystems (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 1990). The problem of an expanding human population, therefore, provides further support for the proposition that any transition to a just and sustainable world will need to involve the global consumer class transitioning away from high consumption lifestyles.

## 2.4. *The Limitless Pursuit of Economic Growth*

There is also a complex macroeconomic problem that may also depend for its resolution upon more people in the global consumer class embracing lifestyles of reduced or restrained consumption. Every nation on the planet currently aims to grow its economy, and for the poorest nations, justifiably so (Purdey, 2010). If it is accepted, however, that the global economy already exceeds the sustainable carrying capacity of the planet; and if it is also accepted that techno-efficiency improvements are leading to ‘relative’ but not ‘absolute’ decoupling of the economy, then this casts considerable doubt on whether economic growth is still an appropriate goal for the richest nations on the planet. Indeed,

there is a vast body of literature on ecological and post-growth economics which argues forcefully that the richest nations should immediately give up the pursuit of growth and move toward a ‘steady state’ economy – that is, an economy that develops qualitatively but does not grow quantitatively (Daly, 1996; Victor 2008; Jackson, 2009). There is also an emerging body of literature on ‘degrowth’ which argues more radically that, due to the fact of ecological overshoot (among other reasons, such as global population growth), the richest nations will need to move through a period of *planned economic contraction* before seeking to achieve a steady state economy (Latouche, 2009; Kallis, 2011; Alexander, 2011b, 2012).

While we cannot enter into the intricacies of this macro-economic debate here, our position is that eventually, if not today then tomorrow, the economies of our world, starting with the richest ones, are indeed going to have to learn how to stop growing, and to stop growing in a way that is stable and deliberate, not the result of unplanned recession or ecosystemic collapse (Woodward and Simms, 2006; Victor, 2008). The great obstacle that lies in the way of a macroeconomics ‘beyond growth,’ however, is the dominant paradigm of growth economics that quite explicitly treats growth in GDP as the best measure of national progress and politico-economic competency (Purdey, 2010). In fact, the growth paradigm is so deeply entrenched in mainstream political discourse in the developed nations (and increasingly elsewhere) that it is hard to imagine any of the major political parties, whether on the Left or the Right, daring to pursue or even seriously consider a post-growth alternative (Hamilton, 2003a). In the developed world, at least, this arguably gives rise to an acute and disturbing contradiction: We must give up the pursuit of growth, but cannot.

Given the hegemony of growth economics in the political sphere, we maintain that any realization of a macroeconomics beyond growth will need to be built from the grassroots up. More specifically, the Simplicity Movement – or something like it – will almost certainly need to expand, organize, radicalize, and politicize, if a steady-state or degrowth economy is ever to emerge through democratic processes (Alexander, 2011c).

## 2.5. *Peak Oil*

Even if the developed nations never *choose* to question the growth imperative – which admittedly seems to be a real likelihood – the issue of ‘peak oil’ suggests that the era of growth is coming to an end nevertheless (Deffeyes, 2010; Heinberg, 2011). The International Energy Agency reported in November 2010 that the production of conventional oil peaked in 2006 (IEA, 2010). While there is still some debate about when the peak of total ‘liquid fuels’ will arrive (Hopkins, 2008), it is now widely accepted that if they have not already peaked, they will peak sometime in the foreseeable future, and then, after an undulating plateau, enter terminal decline. Since oil *demand* is expected to keep on rising, however, the reduction of oil *supply* will inevitably lead to sharply increasing oil prices (Hirsch et al, 2010). The issue is not that human beings will ever run out of oil, therefore; the issue is that we will soon run out of cheap oil, and perhaps already have.

This is hugely significant because oil is not just another commodity – it is the lifeblood of modern industrial civilization. If the price of oil surges, as many predict it will (Heinberg and Lerch, 2010), no one is quite sure what will happen to the global economy that is so dependent on it. Many of the most prominent experts in the field argue that if immediate steps are not taken to mitigate the effects of peak oil, the consequences are likely to be extremely grim (Heinberg and Lerch, 2010). The world seems to be recovering (at least superficially) from the ‘credit crunch,’ but the ‘oil crunch’ may well come to tell a different story.

Again, the intricacies of this highly complex issue cannot be explored here. Our purpose in raising the issue of peak oil is simply to highlight the fact that breaking free from industrial society’s addiction to oil will entail breaking free from high consumption lifestyles that in so many ways depend upon oil. The ‘Transition Initiatives,’ founded by

Rob Hopkins (2008), provide the most prominent example of people responding to peak oil at the grassroots level, and in their attempts to re-localize economies and become less oil-dependent those involved are in many ways exemplifying ‘simpler lives’ of reduced consumption. This is a strong indication that, if there is to be a voluntary transition to a world beyond cheap oil, it is very likely to be informed by the post-consumerist ethos of voluntary simplicity.

## 2.6. *Consumer Malaise*

Finally, what makes the problems outlined above all the more troubling is the fact that high consumption lifestyles, so often held up as the peak of human development, are in many cases engendering an unexpected discontent or malaise among those who live them (Lane, 2000; Myers, 2000; Putnam, 2000; McCormack, 2001; Pickett and Wilkinson, 2010). There is in fact a mounting body of sociological and psychological evidence (Kasser, 2002) indicating that lives orientated around achieving high levels of consumption often result in such things as time poverty, stress, physical and mental illness, wasteful status competition, loss of community, disconnection from nature, a sense of meaninglessness or alienation in life, and general unhappiness (not to mention ecological degradation).

This evidence, however, troubling though it is, arguably provides something of a silver lining to the admittedly gloomy problems outlined above (Jackson, 2005; Brown and Kasser, 2005). If high consumption lifestyles are not even a trustworthy path to personal wellbeing, this raises the tantalizing possibility that members of the global consumer class could live more fulfilling and meaningful lives by *reducing* their consumption (while at the same time reducing their ecological footprint, reducing their dependence on oil, and leaving more resources for those in greater need). Determining whether this possibility is a romantic myth or an emerging empirical reality is another factor that motivated our examination of the Simplicity Movement.

## 2.7 *The Coherency of Voluntary Simplicity as a Holistic Response*

If we are correct that post-consumerist lifestyles of reduced and restrained consumption will indeed be a necessary part of any transition to a just, sustainable, and flourishing human civilization, then gaining some extensive empirical insight into the contemporary Simplicity Movement is a matter of some importance. And even if some readers do not agree entirely with the perspectives outlined above, studying the Simplicity Movement is of value nevertheless because it contributes to our understanding of consumption choices in contemporary consumer cultures. In particular, it is important that we understand who the participants in this movement are, how they are living, and what motivates them, as well as what prospects the movement has for expanding into the mainstream and engendering significant social, economic, and political change. Furthermore, by acquiring a better understanding of what *challenges* participants in the contemporary Simplicity Movement face, governments, NGOs, and think-tanks, etc., will be better able to develop appropriate and effective policy proposals for the purpose of transcending high consumption lifestyles and facilitating the transition to lower consumption but higher quality of life alternatives. Primarily for these reasons, we created the online ‘simple living’ survey with the aim of acquiring some of the information needed to answer these important questions.

# 3. THE ‘SIMPLE LIVING’ SURVEY

## 3.1. *Outline of Content and Method*

In the broadest terms, the survey was designed to gain some empirical insight into the lives of people who are choosing to move away from high consumption lifestyles and

who are embracing lifestyles of reduced or restrained income and consumption. In its preamble the survey states that it seeks participants who are living a ‘simpler life,’ which is defined as a lifestyle of ‘reduced or restrained income, consumption, and / or working hours’ (Simplicity Institute Study, 2011). Parents who had reduced or stopped paid employment to care for children, and students, were asked to fill out the survey only if they considered their simpler lifestyle (as defined above) was a *long-term* way of life. It was also made clear that the survey was not intended for people who were *involuntarily* living simply. We note that Brown and Kasser (2005, p. 356) provide evidence that when people self-categorize themselves as ‘voluntary simplifiers’ they do so accurately.

The survey was launched with 50 questions. The survey begins with demographic questions and moves onto questions of lifestyle, behavior, values, and motivations. There are also questions relating to happiness, income, community, and politics. The survey includes some open text questions where participants are asked to comment on what they find best about living simply, what challenges they face in doing so, and what steps they think government could take to better support simple living. The final question just provides a space for further comments.

Once the survey was created, the next task was to get as many participants as possible. We began by seeking promotion of the survey by contacting every organization, website, or ‘blog’ we could find related to simple living, voluntary simplicity, downshifting, etc., on the assumption that many people living simply (according to our definition stated above) would be interested in and likely to browse those online resources. We then contacted academics, educators, and activists who are involved in the Simplicity Movement (or involved in closely related subjects such as sustainable consumption) and asked them to promote the survey to relevant networks. The response was positive and soon we had a steady flow of participants.

Although a ‘control’ sample would maximize the usefulness of some of the survey results, the results in themselves remain useful as a description of the Simplicity Movement, especially due to the unprecedented sample size. We note also that statistics on populations at large (regarding income, education, demographics, energy consumption, etc.) are available already in many cases, thus making a control sample unnecessary in such circumstances. Furthermore, we note Brown and Kasser’s (2005) controlled study of voluntary simplifiers which, although based on far fewer participants, supports some of the findings below (mostly notably, the findings on happiness and ecological value orientations).

#### 4. OVERVIEW OF RESULTS

Below we will outline and provide a preliminary analysis of the most significant findings of the survey results as they currently stand. Before doing so, however, we will provide an overview of the results pertaining to, first, demographics, and second, the practice of simplicity.

##### 4.1. *Demographics*

The participants in the survey came from all around the world, but primarily from the developed regions of the world. Of the 2268 participants, 970 were from North America, 871 were from Australia, 147 were from the UK; 108 were from Western Europe (excluding the UK); 77 were from New Zealand; 4 were from Japan; and 91 were from ‘other’ parts of the globe. Since we are primarily interested (at least presently) in how people are living simply in the most developed regions of the world, the analysis below excludes all those participants who answered ‘other.’ In the future, however, we hope to broaden or refocus the analysis to include those participants. We also excluded participants who stated that voluntary simplicity was not a long-term lifestyle decision. We did this because we are interested primarily in voluntary simplicity as a ‘way of life,’

not a temporary engagement. This means that the analysis below is based on the answers provided by 2131 participants.

In terms of more specific geographic locality, 28% of participants lived in large cities (over 500,001 people); 18% lived in medium sized cities (between 100,000 and 500,000 people); 16% lived in small cities (between 15,001 and 99,999 people); 17% lived in small towns (under 15,000 people); and 21% lived rurally (i.e. non-urban or farm). This dispels the myth that simple living is the reserve of those who live rurally. In an increasingly urbanized world, it is promising to see the Simplicity Movement existing predominantly in cities, for if it only manifested as a predominantly rural lifestyle, it would probably lose any prospect of impacting significantly on mainstream, urbanized culture (Shaw and Moraes, 2009; Ambrose, 2010).

With respect to other demographics, the participants fell into all age brackets, with nothing particularly noteworthy about the distribution. 68% were married or in a de facto relationship; and 69% owned their own home. 42% had no children, 40% had one or two children; and 18% had three or more. In terms of annual household income (converted into US dollars), there was also a significant range. 19% of households lived on less than \$20,000 per annum; 17% of households had an annual income that fell between \$20,001-\$35,000; 27% fell between \$35,001-\$60,000; 23% fell between \$60,000-\$100,000; and 14% were over \$100,000.

Obviously, much more detailed analyses of income could be provided if we isolated the participants into regions of the world and compared their incomes with national medians. For now, however, we just wish to note that 67% of participants acknowledged that they had *reduced* their incomes from what they had been in the past. This confirms that the Simplicity Movement generally represents a movement of people who are moving toward lifestyles of reduced and restrained income and consumption (Brown and Kasser, 2005).

#### *4.2. Some Characteristics of the Practice of Simplicity*

The issue of how participants are actually practicing simplicity is obviously complex and could never be captured completely in a 50-question survey. But the survey results do provide some interesting insights. In terms of participants taking action for the purpose of living more simply, the results show that 38% changed jobs or careers; 48% reduced working hours; 16% moved city or suburb; 23% moved house; 21% moved rurally; and 22% sold or changed their car. Furthermore, when asked whether they took steps to reduce household energy consumption, 46% said they did so ‘at every opportunity;’ 41% did so ‘often’ and 12% did so ‘sometimes’; with less than 1% saying they did ‘not often’ do so.

The values of frugality (defined as minimizing expenditure) and minimalism (defined as valuing fewer possessions) also proved to be a part of most people’s practice of simple living. For example, 50% said that minimizing expenditure plays a ‘large part’ in their practice of simple living, while 35% said that it plays a ‘moderate part.’ 15% said that it plays only a ‘small part’ or that it was ‘not particularly’ important. In the comments box, however, many people also acknowledged in various ways that ‘it is more about where and what the money is spent on’ that just being frugal, or that they were prepared to spend extra for ‘long-lasting quality items.’ Others noted that purchasing things like ‘land,’ ‘solar panels,’ ‘water tanks,’ ‘tools,’ and ‘carbon offsets,’ while part of living simply for them, were expensive. As one participant put it, ‘buying locally and ecologically [is] more important than minimizing expenditure,’ a point to which we will return.

In terms of possessions, many also acknowledged that while decluttering life can secure ‘the energy to focus on what is important,’ its ‘the type of possessions’ that matters most and the ‘attitude’ one has toward them, ‘not the number.’ Several also commented on the pleasure they derived from things they had made, purchased second-hand, or salvaged. It would seem, then, that the ‘simple’ values of frugality and

minimalism resist simplistic interpretation. For example, it is clearly not enough to say that voluntary simplicity ‘just means spending less,’ even though spending less and decluttering is often considered an important part of it (Cherrier, 2009; Ballantine and Creery, 2010).

Home food production also plays an important role in living simply. 83% of participants grow some of their own fruit and / or vegetables, with 17% saying they grow more than half of what they eat. This provides some evidence for the conception of the Simplicity Movement as a ‘local food’ movement, one that values self-sufficiency and self-reliance. It also provides some evidence for the view that the Simplicity Movement operates in many ways ‘outside’ the formal marketplace. This is ratified by the finding that 36% of participants are involved in barter or ‘informal’ exchange systems (e.g. food swaps, LETS, etc.). In terms of diet, 11% said they eat a typical diet (e.g. most foods) while 63% said that they emphasized fresh and unprocessed foods. 9% eat fish but are otherwise vegetarian; 13% are vegetarian and 4% are vegan.

When travelling locally (i.e. defined as within 5km), 50% of participants noted that they would bike or walk and 8% would take public transport. 37% would usually drive. This question prompted 5% of participants to answer ‘other’ and leave a comment, with many people noting that they were often required to drive due to such things as ‘harsh winters,’ ‘rural living,’ ‘health conditions,’ or ‘lack of public transport.’ Others noted that they drove a ‘hybrid car’ or that when they drove locally they would plan to do ‘everything in one trip,’ ‘carpool,’ or even ‘hitch hike.’ These comments and others suggest that many participants desire to escape the car culture, but for various reasons find it difficult or impossible to do so.

With respect to clothing, 51% say that living simply ‘significantly’ affects their clothing choices (e.g. wearing second-hand, homemade, or repaired clothing); 44% say that it affects their choices moderately or mildly; and only 5% say that it doesn’t affect their clothing choices at all. As for recycling, 82% say that they do so ‘at every opportunity,’ with 12% saying that they recycle ‘usually.’ 5% say that they recycle occasionally and 1% say they ‘almost never’ recycle. 77% of participants compost.

We can also report on a few miscellaneous points that may be of some interest. 67% of participants are involved in a community organization. On the subject of spirituality, 52% say that spiritual practice of some sort is a regular part of life. The survey results also dispel any conception of the Simplicity Movement as a movement of luddites, with 80% stating that advanced technology has a role to play in living simply.

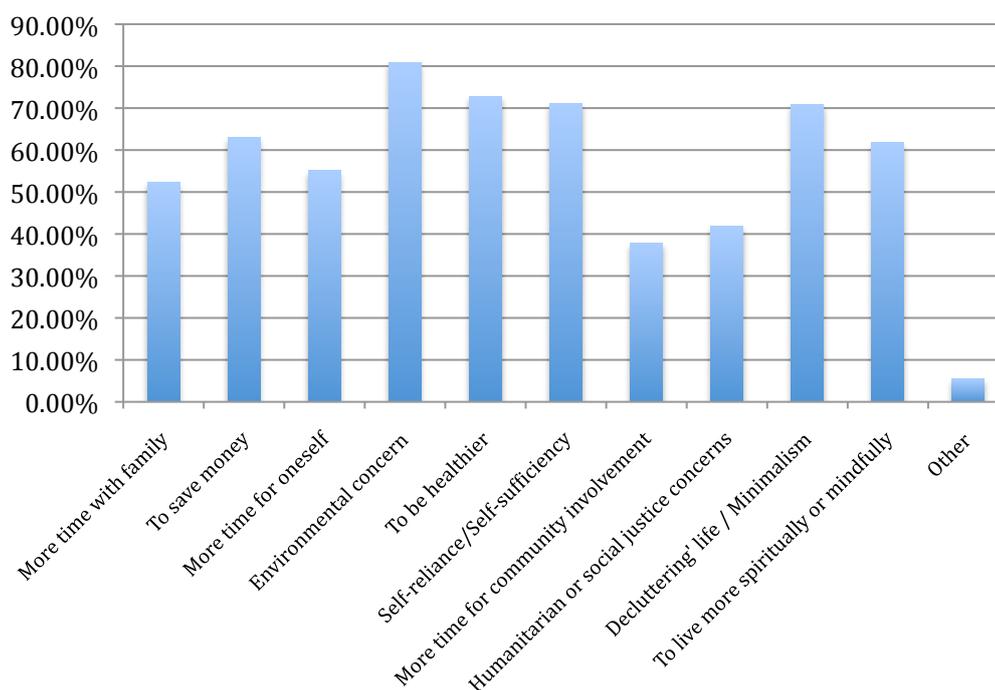
## 5. A STATEMENT AND PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF THE CENTRAL FINDINGS

We will now state and offer a preliminary analysis of what we consider to be the central findings of the survey.

### 5.1. *Diversity of Motivations*

The Simplicity Movement is sometimes described, occasionally even by its advocates, as a ‘leisure expansion movement’ (Segal, 1999, p.13). The criticism sometimes implicit in this description is that voluntary simplicity is a self-centered, narrowly hedonistic philosophy of life. While it may well be that a life of voluntary simplicity is merely a means to greater leisure *for some*, the results of our survey demonstrate that the Simplicity Movement is comprised of people who are motivated by a diversity of issues – not simply leisure expansion or personal happiness.

Figure 1 (below) illustrates the results regarding what motivates people to live simply. Participants were provided with an array of options (see *x* axis) – including an ‘other’ option with a text box available for comments – and were asked to select all that applied to them (with the percentage of participants who selected each motivation noted on the *y* axis).

**Figure 1.** Percentage of Participants Listing Specific Motivations For Living Simply

While this particular inquiry did not seek to evaluate the *relative importance* given to each of these motivations – and space does not presently permit an analysis of each of these motivations – the broad range of issues motivating participants nevertheless illustrates that the Simplicity Movement cannot be fairly pigeon-holed as a movement driven by a single issue or small range of issues. While many are motivated by the desire for more time (e.g. with family and / or for oneself), it is clear that many are also motivated by more ‘ethically based’ factors (e.g. environmental concern, humanitarian or social justice, and / or community involvement). Others are motivated by the desire to declutter their lives; to live healthier lives; or to live more spiritually or mindfully, etc. A separate question (answered by 1306 participants) also asked whether participants were motivated by the notion of ‘peak oil’: 65% said that they were; 20% said that they were not; and 15% said that they were not aware of the issue.

Once it is acknowledged that the Simplicity Movement is motivated by diverse array of issues (including ‘ethically based’ ones), the fact that simpler lifestyles can also be described as a means to ‘leisure expansion’ or as a form of ‘alternative hedonism’ (i.e. low consumption pleasure seeking), seems to provide not grounds for criticism but further support for the Simplicity Movement (Soper, 2008; Kasser, 2009).

## 5.2. Happiness

The survey also inquired into whether participants in the Simplicity Movement were happier now that they were living more simply. This question was aimed at participants who had once lived less simply but who had made a transition toward a simpler life, so an option was needed for participants to answer ‘not applicable’ if they had always lived a simple life. 10% indicated that this was so.

Of those who *were* living more simply than they once had – the remaining 90% of participants – the results overwhelmingly showed that the transition toward a simpler life increased happiness. Overall, 87% reported that they were happier living more simply. More specifically, 46% said they were ‘much happier’ and 41% said they were

‘somewhat happier.’ 13% said that they were ‘about as happy’ as they were previously. Quite remarkably, only an insignificant amount (0.3%) said that they were ‘less happy.’

These results are potentially important because they indicate that a ‘double dividend’ can flow from living simply, or even a ‘triple’ or ‘quadruple’ dividend, etc. (Jackson, 2005; Brown and Kasser, 2005; Kasser 2009). That is to say, the results suggest that the arguments for simpler living based on environmental, humanitarian, population, limits to economic growth, and peak oil concerns, etc., are supported also by an argument based on increased happiness. People have a reason to live simply for their own sakes, the evidence suggests, but by doing so, it may be inferred, they are also likely to benefit others and the planet. If this is indeed so, it is extremely good news.

Of course, these results do not ‘prove’ that living simply will make a person happier. But they do show that the overwhelming majority of participants in this extensive study are notably happier for living more simply. And this suggests that simpler living is providing some people with a viable and desirable alternative to higher consumption lifestyles – an alternative that those in the global consumer class may find that it is in their interest to explore also. Furthermore, if increasing amounts of people come to see simpler living as being a path to increased personal happiness, and those people actually begin exploring lifestyles of voluntary simplicity *en masse*, this may well put pressure on governments to do more to support the transition. Should such a cultural shift ever occur, we would surely find ourselves living in a very different world (Alexander, 2011d).

### 5.3. *Voting with Money*

The idea that how a person spends their money is how they vote on what exists in the world is often held up as one of the central tenets of the practice of simplicity, in market societies, at least (Dominguez and Robin, 1999). Our results seem to confirm this, although they also confirm that there remains room for participants in the Simplicity Movement to take greater efforts to spend their money in socially or ecologically conscientious ways. When asked how often participants directed their expenditure toward organic, local, fair-trade, or ‘green’ products, 31% said ‘almost always’ and 43% said ‘often.’ 21% said they ‘sometimes’ would do so and only 5% said they would ‘not often’ do so. With respect to the specific question of energy consumption, 60% obtain all or some of their energy from renewable sources, with 19% of participants producing some of their own energy at their homes (e.g. solar). A control sample would enhance the meaning of these figures, but we can say, with respect to the question of energy consumption, at least, that participants in the Simplicity Movement seem to use their powers of expenditure to ‘vote for renewable energy’ to a much higher degree than the social norm.<sup>2</sup> This is in line with the earlier findings that environmental concern is a leading motivation among participants in the Simplicity Movement.

Arguably the most interesting thing about these results is what they imply about the potential impact the Simplicity Movement could have on the world if it expanded into the mainstream and radicalized. Imagine, for example, if the greater part of an entire nation ‘almost always’ or ‘often’ directed their money toward organic, local, fair-trade, and ‘green’ products. Purchasing something sends a message, consciously or unconsciously, to the marketplace, affirming the product, its social or ecological impact, its process of manufacture, etc. And when the demand for goods increases or decreases,

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<sup>2</sup> For data on renewable energy use in Australia, see Australian Bureau of Statistics, at <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features80March%202009> at 10 April 2011 (reporting that 8% of energy used by households in Australia was renewable). Our results show that 17% of Australian participants purchase 100 percent renewable energy; 35% purchase partially renewable energy; and 34% produce some or all of their own renewable energy. Overall, 73% of simple living Australians in our survey obtain at least some of their energy from renewable sources.

basic economic principles dictate that the supply tends to increase or decrease proportionately. This implies that the global consumer class, with its vast powers of expenditure, has the potential to become a non-violent revolutionary class and change the world, partly by changing its spending habits (Micheletti, 2010).

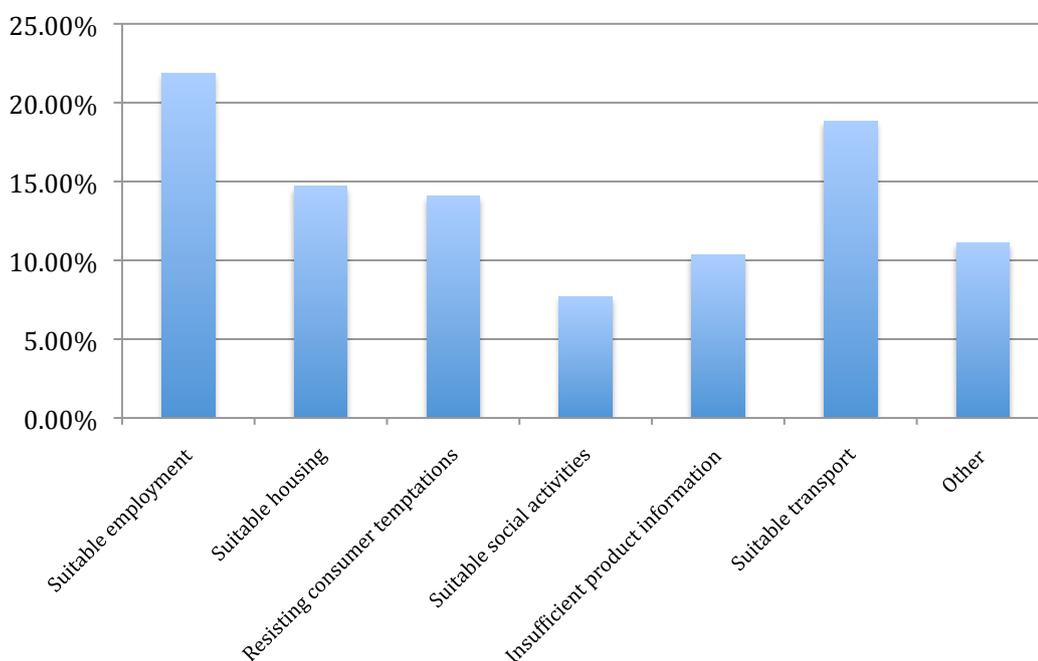
As well as ‘voting with their money,’ our research provides some grounds for thinking that participants in the Simplicity Movement are also ‘voting with their time’ in ways that differ from the general population. Research has shown that in North America and Britain, at least, the activity to which people dedicate most of their time (aside from working and sleeping) is watching television, averaging around 25 hours per week (Layard, 2005, p. 86). Contrast this with participants in the present study: 19% say that they watch no television at all, with 12% saying that they watch less than one hour per week and a further 28% saying that they watch between 1 and 4 hours per week. While this finding does not indicate how those in the Simplicity Movement *do* spend the time, we think these results are interesting in themselves for showing that there is significant *difference* in leisure activities.

#### 5.4. Greatest Obstacles

One of our leading motivations for conducting the ‘simple living’ survey under analysis was to gain some empirical insight into what were the greatest obstacles people faced when trying to live simply. We feel such information will be critically important should policy makers ever decide they will try to reduce overall national consumption practices by promoting and facilitating the emergence of ‘simpler’ lifestyles.

Participants were asked what was the *greatest* obstacle they faced in trying to live simply, and Figure 2 (below) illustrates the results.

**Figure 2.** Greatest Obstacle to Living Simply vs. Percentage of Participants



Those who selected ‘other’ left comments highlighting a wide variety of other obstacles. We will not try to list them comprehensively here, but some of the recurring points included having family members (e.g. spouse) with a different ‘worldview’; health or disability issues; paying for education; and the expense of ‘green’ consumer products (e.g. solar panels, organic food, etc.). Since only 11% answered ‘other,’ however, it can be inferred that the six obstacles suggested by the survey quite accurately expose some

of the greatest challenges people face living simply. This finding in itself should provide some guidance to policy makers who wish to lessen the obstacles people face when trying to live more simply.

For example, many people reported that they find ‘the lack of information needed to buy responsibly’ as their greatest challenge to living simply, and this suggests that a politics of simple living would involve increasing the mandatory information on product labels (Oates et al, 2008). To provide a second example, the fact that many people find ‘resisting consumer temptations’ a great obstacle suggests that a politics of simple living might involve taking steps to reduce people’s exposure to advertising. We will not, however, try to expound a politics of simple living here; nor do we suggest that devising policies to help people overcome the obstacles to simple living will be ‘simple.’ Indeed, it may well be that background structural issues (tax policies, state subsidies, government investment, banking systems, property law, contract law, international law, etc.) need to be reformed before the structure of society could facilitate the expansion of the Simplicity Movement (Alexander, 2011b). But the information provided by participants about their greatest obstacles to simply living certainly provides a good place to start thinking about the question of what a politics of simple living would look like.

One point that deserves further comment is the issue of finding employment that suits one’s values and lifestyles requirements. As seen from Figure 2, more participants highlighted this as their greatest obstacle to simple living than any other. One aspect to the problem that is particularly important is how to address the structural biases in modern capitalist societies that function systematically to promote overwork (de Graaf, 2003).

Economic theory posits that actors in an economy should be free to maximize their happiness (or ‘utility’) by selling as much or as little of their time (or ‘labor power’) as they want (Kimmel and Hoffman, 2002). Currently, however, there are structural biases in advanced capitalist societies that function to promote overwork (i.e. working hours that are not ‘optimal’ or ‘utility maximizing’), such as laws that treat the 40-hour work week as ‘standard’ or which exclude part-time workers from many of the non-pecuniary benefits enjoyed by those who work full-time (Grant, 2010). The effect of these structural biases is essentially to force or coerce many people to work longer hours than they want or need to, which gives rise to cultures that tend to over-consume resources and under-consume leisure. This might lead to higher GDP per capita, but at the cost of quality of life and planetary health (Robinson, 2007).

The problem of structural biases promoting overwork is one that our survey suggests participants in the Simplicity Movement are confronting in significant numbers. 55% report that if they could, they would reduce their current paid working hours and accept a proportionate reduction in income. This is not, however, a problem faced only by participants in the Simplicity Movement. It is a problem endemic to many modern market societies and may be a significant structural barrier inhibiting the expansion of the Simplicity Movement. For example, 28.7% of full-time Australian workers in Australia work 50 hours per week or more; and of these workers, 46% claim they would prefer to work fewer hours, accepting a drop in pay (Australian Conservation Foundation, 2010, p. 11).

One way to respond to this issue would be to introduce a shorter ‘standard’ work week, such as the 35-hour work week that exists in France (New Economics Foundation, 2010); another option would be to ensure that part-time workers enjoy the same non-pecuniary benefits that full-time workers receive (on a pro-rata basis). We feel these are policy reforms that deserve serious attention. Perhaps more importantly still, however, is the policy response that has taken hold in Holland in the form of the *Hours Adjustment Act 2000*. This path-breaking act allows employees to reduce their hours to part-time simply by asking their employers. As explained by leading work reductionist, John de Graaf (2009, p. 274):

Unless there is a clear hardship for the firm – something shown in less than 5% of cases – the employer must grant the reduction in hours. Workers keep the same hourly salary, full health-care, and pro-rata additional benefits like vacation time and pensions. This law, in the most concrete terms, allows workers to trade money for time, without losing their jobs or healthcare. As a result, more than a third of Dutch employees work part-time, the highest ration in the world.

Some may object that industrial relations policies such as this will not maximize GDP per capita. But that is to miss the point. The point of an economy, arguably, is to efficiently promote quality of life for all, and if a smaller economy promotes quality of life by providing increased leisure but less income and consumption for its participants, then a smaller economy is the most economically rational option to choose. In a word, this is the rationality of degrowth (Latouche, 2009), and in many ways it would also seem to be implicit to a politics of simple living (Alexander, 2011b).

Participants noted that ‘suitable transport’ was the second greatest obstacle to living simply, and this also raises an important point about structural barriers. For example, people may *desire* to escape car culture, but in the absence of safe and accessible bike lanes, or good public transport, many people can find themselves ‘locked in’ to high consumption, environmentally damaging practices (Sanne, 2002). This highlights the extremely important point that our personal lifestyle decisions always take place within structures of constraint, a point that provides further support for why a politics of simple living is necessary. If current structures are locking people into consumerist lifestyles, as they seem to be, those structures will need to be changed if there is to be any hope of an extensive behavior-shift in the direction of voluntary simplicity.

### *5.5. An Emerging Group Consciousness and Political Sensibility*

For present purposes, the final empirical insight to report on that we feel is of some significance – that we feel might be of the most significance – concerns what seems to be an emerging ‘group consciousness’ and political sensibility among participants in the Simplicity Movement. Often in the literature on voluntary simplicity the movement is criticized for being ‘escapist’ or ‘apolitical,’ a criticism that arguably has some weight, so far as it is true. Mary Grisby, for example, one of the more prominent sociologists on voluntary simplicity, reports (2004, p. 12) that in her experience participants in the Simplicity Movement ‘don’t generally talk about policy initiatives, instead focusing on the individual as the primary mechanism for change.’ In line with the conventional view, this characterizes the Simplicity Movement as a movement of people who are seeking to ‘escape’ the system at a personal level, rather than ‘transform’ it at a collective level.

Our results put this conventional view into question. To begin with, 68% of participants state that they conceive of themselves as part of a ‘simple living’ movement (based on 1564 responses). This is significant because before a social movement can ever act collectively for a social or political purpose – that is, before it can organize and mobilize to advance some collective aims – the participants arguably have to conceive of themselves as being part of a collective enterprise with collective power, and not simply as isolated and unrelated individuals. There is still a significant body of participants who seem to conceive of voluntary simplicity primarily as an ‘individualized’ way of life and less as a social movement (see Maniates, 2002). But from the fact that more than two thirds now see themselves as part of a social movement, it would seem that the Simplicity Movement has acquired the ‘group consciousness’ that it is often thought to lack (or historically did lack). Much social movement theory suggests that the emergence of group consciousness is an important and necessary phase in the maturation of a social movement into a more potent social and political force (McCann, 2006). Whether that proves to be true of the Simplicity Movement remains to be seen.

Perhaps more significant still, however, are the results showing, first, that 90% of participants state that they would vote for a political party that was dedicated to promoting simple living, and second, that 94% feel that local and/or national governments currently do not do enough to support simple living. These figures suggest that the Simplicity Movement is an unmobilized constituency whose political preferences potentially could be influential if an avenue opened up for their expression on the political scene. Influence would also depend on the overall size of the movement, of course, but at least three studies show that the numbers might be far higher than one might first have thought. With respect to the United States, for example, The Merck Family Fund (1995) estimates on the basis of their study that approximately 28 per cent of U.S. citizens are downshifting to some extent. Furthermore, a study conducted by Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss (2005, p. 154) concludes that 23 per cent of Australian citizens are downshifting to some extent. In another study, but with respect to Britain, Clive Hamilton (2003b, p. 12) reports that 25 percent of people aged between 30-59 are downshifting. If we extrapolate (crudely) and say that all the developed nations are downshifting to a similar degree – even if we make the conservative estimate that merely 20 per cent are downshifting overall – then in the developed world of roughly one billion people, *there are approximately 200 million participants in the global Simplicity Movement.*

Obviously there will be a wide diversity of lifestyles within this group, with some taking relatively minor steps to downshift and others taking more radical steps (McDonald et al, 2006). And the diversity of participants and their personal motivations make any attempt to manage or understand notions of ‘group identity’ within the movement a complex challenge (Sandlin and Walther, 2009). But if these participants are connected by their attempt to reduce or restrain their consumption – and if they also *feel* connected – then together they are a social movement of considerable collective power and political import, potentially, at least. If the movement were to organize, radicalize and expand in coming years, its collective power and political import would obviously increase.

Our study also indicates that the Simplicity Movement is not merely a movement of social and political aspirations without any action. 67% of participants report that they are involved in a community organization and, more specifically, 41% report that they are engaged in a community or political organization related to simple living. Before all else, perhaps, this can be interpreted as the emerging ‘politicization’ of the Simplicity Movement, albeit one driven from the grassroots up rather than the top down. When one looks at the world today, however, it is clear that more action is needed if a politics of voluntary simplicity is ever to reorientate the world’s trajectory into the future.

## 6. CONCLUSION

When one recognizes the multi-faceted problem of overconsumption for what it is – the root or contributing cause of environmental degradation; global poverty; uneconomic growth; peak oil; and consumer malaise – the ethos of voluntary simplicity presents itself as a remarkably coherent philosophy of life with which to live in response to all of those great problems. The prospect of nine billion people on the planet by mid-century makes it all the clearer that voluntary simplicity is a living strategy whose time has come. We hope that this study has provided some deeper empirical insight into this important subject.

We do not, however, hold up the Simplicity Movement as it exists as the answer to all problems. It hardly needs stating that the movement will need to radicalize to some significant extent and expand into the social, economic, and political mainstream if it is ever to respond effectively to the problems outlined at the beginning of this paper. But we maintain that there is an overall coherency to the ethos of voluntary simplicity that hacks at the root of those problems, while other responses (such as technology and

economic growth) seem merely to be hacking at the branches. Therein, we contend, lies the fundamental importance of voluntary simplicity to the future of human civilization.

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