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**Simply happy? Voluntary simplicity and
subjective wellbeing**

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Abstract

Recent evidence shows that an emphasis on materialistic values goes hand in hand with relatively low levels of subjective wellbeing. Key authors within the 'new economics' debate point towards the practice of 'voluntary simplicity' as a way forward towards more ecological and human wellbeing. As voluntary simplicity involves a relatively low consumption level, the benefits to the environment are clear. From a social perspective, however, the question of *how* such a way of life may contribute to human wellbeing remains to be further explored. This dissertation contributes to answering this question. Building forth on recent psychological research, it combines primary and secondary qualitative data to suggest how voluntary simplicity, as an expression of a Nonmaterialistic Value Orientation, contributes to subjective wellbeing. The findings suggest that although the experiences of voluntary simplifiers are very diverse, some common themes can be identified. Besides the commonly proposed experiences of autonomy, competence and relatedness, 'doing the right thing' is found to be a key experience contributing to the wellbeing of voluntary simplifiers. Public policy makers looking to promote human and ecological wellbeing are advised to make use of a grounded understanding, such as the one presented in this dissertation, of how relatively ecologically sustainable lifestyles may contribute to life satisfaction.

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Acronyms

MVO	Materialistic Value Orientation
OWB	Objective Wellbeing
SWB	Subjective Wellbeing
VS	Voluntary Simplicity

“I see voluntary simplicity as so much more than downshifting, decluttering, and frugality... it’s also about happiness, contentment... going outside your comfort zone, accepting responsibility for your actions, and getting your priorities ‘right’.” (Shirley n.d.)

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 (e.g. 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 (e.g. Schumacher 1973; Jackson 2009). Meanwhile, a mounting body of evidence is indicating that ever-increasing incomes, a cornerstone of the dominant view of development, do not always make us more happy (see for example Diener *et al.* 1993; Diener and Oishi 2000). Importantly, the pursuit of materialistic goals, the spirit underpinning consumerism, is shown in some cases to be correlated with unfulfilled potential for subjective wellbeing (see Belk 1985; Cohen and Cohen 1996; Kasser and Ryan 1993, 1996, 2001; Richins and Dawson 1992; Sheldon and Kasser 1995, 1998, 2001).

In contrast, there is evidence that emphasising nonmaterialistic values is correlated to relatively high levels of subjective wellbeing, or how we evaluate the quality of our own lives (e.g. Cohen and Cohen 1996; Diener and Oishi 2000; Kasser and Ryan 1993, 1996, 2001; Ryan *et al.* 1999; Schmuck *et al.* 2000). Nonmaterialistic 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 such as limitless income growth and conspicuous consumption¹.

Voluntary simplicity refers to conscious decisions to detach oneself from materialistic values, such as always wanting to achieve more and more wealth, and to choose 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 nonmaterialistic values. Some key authors within the new economics debate hail simple living as a possible way forward, towards higher levels of both human and environmental wellbeing (e.g. 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 nonmaterialistic values increases our subjective wellbeing because these values better fulfil our basic psychological needs than materialistic ones do. It remains to be empirically explored, however, how this theory is reflected in the actual lived experiences of voluntary simplifiers.

To move the wellbeing and new economics debates from theory to practice, there is a need to fill the knowledge gap of how nonmaterialistic values contribute to wellbeing, building forth on Kasser's theory by bringing together and analysing empirical findings. I will explore primary and secondary data on voluntary simplicity, which I regard as an expression of a 'Nonmaterialistic Value Orientation', an emphasis on nonmaterialistic values. As such, it serves

¹ For a description of conspicuous consumption, see Veblen Veblen, T., 2000 (1899). *Conspicuous Consumption*. In: Schor & Holt, (eds.) *The Consumer Society Reader*. New York: The New Press.

as a great sample for analysing the relationships between nonmaterialistic values and subjective wellbeing. The experiences of people who opt for voluntary simplicity reveal how their values and choices relate to life satisfaction. My central research question is:

How does voluntary simplicity, as an expression of a 'Nonmaterialistic Value Orientation', contribute to subjective wellbeing?

In order to answer the central research question, it is divided into three sub questions, being: What experiences motivate people to focus on nonmaterialistic, as opposed to materialistic values? Which dimensions of wellbeing are influenced by nonmaterialistic values and behaviour? And: What mindset and resources enable people to live simply?

Answering these questions has potentially great value for social policy. If non-materialistic values 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 promotion of simple living high on their agendas. In doing so, they could potentially create space for more sustainable wellbeing.

The remainder of this dissertation is structured as follows: in chapter two, I summarise the literature review that provides the basis for my analysis, exposing knowledge gaps and clarifying how I will use theoretical concepts here. Chapter three provides an answer to the question 'what is voluntary simplicity', and embeds this practice in a range of alternative economic behaviours. In chapter four I set out my methodological approach, before presenting my findings. Chapter five serves as a space for discussion on questions raised by the findings.

Finally, in chapter six, I offer conclusions concerning my research questions, as well as recommendations for future research.

2. Literature Review

This chapter offers a theoretical basis needed to answer the central research question: how does voluntary simplicity, as an expression of a 'Nonmaterialistic Value Orientation', contribute to subjective wellbeing? Theories and findings on human behaviour, wellbeing, and materialistic and nonmaterialistic values support the embedding of the research question in previous work. They also expose the knowledge gaps that prompted the research for this dissertation. Before turning to recent insights into the relationships between (non)materialistic values and subjective wellbeing, I will briefly set out the history of recent critiques of mainstream economic assumptions that have led to these insights. Then, I will suggest a framework for analysing how non-materialistic values may contribute to subjective wellbeing.

2.1 Critiques of Mainstream Economic Assumptions

Within the mainstream neoclassical view of the relationships between economic behaviour and wellbeing, it is assumed that overall wellbeing is maximized through the collective pursuit of self-interest. Etzioni (1988) highlights four basic assumptions of the neoclassical view as 1) that people have only one motivational source which is the pursuit of pleasure, 2) that in order to pursue that pleasure people act rationally, 3) that the individual is the decision-making unit, and 4) that the market can be treated as a separate system. The individual, rational pursuit of pleasure, then, is seen as the key strategy connecting economic behaviour to the process of increasing wellbeing (or in economic terms, utility). Within a political-economic system reliant on economic growth through production and consumption, this pursuit of pleasure translates for a large part into individuals' spending money on consumer goods. In other words, in neoclassical economic thinking, wellbeing is 'revealed' through patterns of consumption. The idea that individuals engage in a rational pursuit of pleasure is seen to prove that their materialistic pursuits increase their subjective wellbeing.

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 have been referred to with terms such as 'moral economy', 'human economy', 'new economics', and 'social and solidarity economy'. Although much of the focus in this literature is on ecological sustainability, here I will focus on those areas of the debate focusing on wellbeing-related critiques. These range from criticisms of the functioning of the economy as a whole, to alternative theories of human behaviour and wellbeing.

Schumacher (1973) challenges the view that Western economies are superior to other economies. As one of the founders of the current debate on the functioning of the economy, he rejects the idea that economic 'laws' cannot be questioned. He refers to Buddhist culture in Burma, and explores how this culture might hold clues for an economy that is based on the pursuit of wellbeing. He invokes a Marxian idea of alienation to argue that the ever-progressing division of labour in the West is detrimental to wellbeing. From Schumacher's perspective, people and creative activity should be regarded as more important than goods and consumption. He states that for a Buddhist economist, consumption is viewed only as a means to wellbeing.

Jackson (2009), builds on views such as Schumacher's in his attempt to redefine 'prosperity'. He states that prosperity should be about (bounded) capabilities for flourishing. He hereby refers to the ideas of Sen and Nussbaum (here understood as explained in Deneulin and Shahani 2009) who have laid the foundations for the capability approach. Very simply stated, capabilities are the opportunities people have to achieve certain functionings (states of being or doing). To be capable of flourishing, which is very much connected to wellbeing, people

need access to certain opportunities that allow them to live the life they have reason to value. According to Jackson, economic policy should aim to promote these opportunities.

Etzioni (1988) criticises the neoclassical view from yet another angle. He argues that the assumption that human behaviour is motivated only by the pursuit of pleasure is incorrect. According to Etzioni, 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 in his 'I & We' paradigm, 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 some materialistic values are negatively related to subjective wellbeing (see Belk 1985; Cohen and Cohen 1996; Kasser and Ryan 1993, 1996, 2001; Richins and Dawson 1992; Sheldon and Kasser 1995, 1998, 2001). In some of these studies, participants who value materialistic goals highly in comparison to other goals, report relatively low levels of wellbeing. These findings run counter to neoclassical assumptions regarding the relationships between materialism and wellbeing. The definition of 'materialism' in these studies is often based on Belk's (1985) identification of three common 'materialistic' characteristics, being: possessiveness, nongenerosity, and envy. Basing himself on work by Schwartz and Sagiv (1995), Kasser (2002) connects materialism to values for wealth, social recognition, being ambitious, being successful, and preserving public image.

Kasser *et al.* (2004) classify a focus on materialistic goals as a 'Materialistic Value Orientation' (MVO). An MVO involves "the belief that it is important to pursue the culturally sanctioned goals of attaining financial success, having nice possessions, having the right image (...), and having a high status" (ibid, p.13). Kasser *et al.* believe that people can obtain an 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. Kasser (2002) explains that our need for security relates to our desire to stay alive. This need can be connected to access to food and shelter, but also to being free from unstable and anxiety-provoking situations. The other three basic needs recognised by Kasser *et al.* (2004) stem from Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory. Deci and Ryan (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. Having the freedom to act on one's own feelings and ideas, rather than being controlled by external actors. Feeling 'authentically engaged' in our behaviour increases our 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, to friends, to larger groups we feel part of.²

² For more on self-determination theory, see Ryan, R.M. & E.L., D., 2000. Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55, 68-78.

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 relatedness³. 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 a Materialistic Value Orientation 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. Solberg *et al.* (2004), after empirically testing several hypotheses on the relationships between materialism and subjective wellbeing, provide partial support for the mechanism suggested by Kasser *et al.* They find that ‘materialists’ have relatively poor social lives (relatedness), that working toward material goals is less rewarding than working toward other goals, and that people experience a significant gap between what they have and what they want regarding their material goals (competence).

2.2 Wellbeing

Contrasting traditional mainstream and new heterodox visions of economic behaviour and wellbeing is not simple, partly because the concept of ‘wellbeing’ is difficult to define. 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,

³ The scope of this dissertation 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 their theory see Kasser, T., Ryan, R.M., Couchman, C.E. & Sheldon, K.M., 2004. Materialistic Values: Their Causes and Consequences. *In: Kasser & Kanner, (eds.) Psychology and Consumer Culture*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

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). Here I will briefly describe approaches to wellbeing that are helpful in understanding how less materialistic lifestyles may influence wellbeing.

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.

Some approaches to wellbeing take both OWB and SWB into account. The University of Bath's Pathways approach, for example, recognises seven dimensions of wellbeing. These are: social connections, close relationships, competence and self-worth, physical and mental health, values and meaning, economic resources, and agency and participation (White n.d.). Within the Pathways approach, wellbeing is understood as consisting of a number of layers, reaching from an outer 'external environment' layer, to an inner layer of how people feel in themselves. Through these layers, OWB and SWB are interrelated.

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'. What constitutes a good quality of life should be defined by the subjects themselves. 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.

Three exploratory studies in the United States show that this idea of personal wellbeing and concerns for others and the natural environment can go hand in hand in reality. First, people who experience more satisfaction and less stress during Christmastime were found to also take into account concerns for environmental sustainability in the way they celebrate Christmas. They serve organic food, for example, and give environmentally friendly presents (Kasser and Sheldon 2002). Second, American adolescents' happiness was found to be positively correlated with a number of sustainable household practices including recycling and reusing materials (Brown and Kasser 2005). Third, lower ecological footprints were reported by individuals who also reported high levels of positive vs. negative affect and high life satisfaction (ibid.).

In this dissertation, I shall draw on multiple approaches to wellbeing. Kasser *et al.* (2004) may offer a useful basic framework for exploring how psychological needs are related to wellbeing. Like Kasser *et al.*, I shall focus mostly on subjective wellbeing, while keeping in mind that subjective wellbeing cannot be fully separated from objective characteristics of an individual's life. As the Pathways approach suggests, inner wellbeing is often ultimately influenced by 'outer' layers such as culture and availability of resources (White n.d.). 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 will draw on Chamber's (1997) concept of responsible wellbeing to explore this interconnectedness.

2.3 Nonmaterialistic Value Orientation and Subjective Wellbeing

If materialism is related to low levels of subjective wellbeing, does the opposite hold? Is the adherence to nonmaterialistic values related to relatively high levels of life satisfaction? Empirical findings suggest this is indeed the case (e.g. Cohen and Cohen 1996; Diener and Oishi 2000; Kasser and Ryan 1993, 1996, 2001; Ryan *et al.* 1999; Schmuck *et al.* 2000). How, then, might these findings be explained?

In attempting to interpret these findings, Kasser (2002) suggests that perhaps nonmaterialistic values better fulfil the basic psychological needs for security, autonomy, competence and relatedness than materialistic values do. Applying this logic to environmentally friendly environments and behaviours, Kasser (2010) speculates that when society, through individual acts of sustainable behaviour, is able to overcome the threats that come with environmental degradation, this should increase peoples' sense of security. Not being faced with consequences such as global warming and diminishing water supplies for example, might ultimately contribute to wellbeing by diminishing worries regarding access to food, water and shelter. Kasser further hypothesises that people who are new to sustainable practices such as repairing broken objects might a first experience a reduced sense of competence due to a lack of skills. He believes that as they gain experience with these practices, their sense of competence might actually become greater than it was before they committed themselves to these practices. Participating in local economies might increase a sense of relatedness, because feeling closer to the production process, and meeting like-minded people, might build a sense of community and connection. Finally, in speculating on the relationships between environmentally friendly environments and behaviours and a sense of autonomy, Kasser limits

himself to suggest that the more autonomous the reasons for behaviour, the more likely people are to sustain their new practices over-time.

The idea that more ecologically sustainable lifestyles might contribute to the wellbeing of the environment, as well as that of people who act this way, leads Kasser and other authors such as Jackson (see Kasser 2002; Jackson 2009) to promote the potential benefits of voluntary simplicity (VS). VS can be seen as the conscious decision to live with a lower income and fewer possessions (see next chapter for a more elaborate definition). Brown and Kasser (2005) find that VS may be correlated with relatively high levels of subjective wellbeing. They also find that much of the wellbeing of survey respondents with a VS lifestyle is statistically explained by them being orientated more towards 'intrinsic' goals than 'extrinsic' ones.

Kasser (2002, 2010), based on an extensive literature review, identifies three common 'intrinsic' values that might underlie life goals that contribute to subjective wellbeing. These are personal growth/self-acceptance (i.e., knowing and liking one's self), affiliation (i.e., having close interpersonal relationships with family and friends), and community feeling (i.e., working to make the world a better place). In the context of VS, I prefer to refer to 'nonmaterialistic values', because the extent of materialistic influences on their lifestyle is what sets voluntary simplifiers apart from others. I also find the term 'intrinsic' problematic. As every individual defines what is intrinsic or extrinsic for them personally, I find it tricky to create these categories as an outsider. Nevertheless, if one wants to sustain the term 'intrinsic', then nonmaterialistic values can be seen as that subset of intrinsic values that run counter to materialistic values for values for wealth, social recognition, being ambitious, being successful, and preserving public image. Nonmaterialistic values may include equity and ecological sustainability, for example.

I will explore in what ways voluntary simplicity contributes to subjective wellbeing, taking Kasser's (2002) theory on nonmaterialistic values as a guide, and seeing how his ideas bear out in the context of voluntary simplicity. I will refer to an emphasis on nonmaterialistic values as a 'Nonmaterialistic Value Orientation', in keeping with Kasser *et al.*'s (2004) terminology of a 'Materialistic Value Orientation'. In selecting a sample, the difficulty arises that values are non-visible. They become more apparent through behaviour. Voluntary simplicity, as the next chapter illustrates, involves detaching from goals usually considered materialistic. As such, I will regard the acts involved with voluntary simplicity as expressions of a Nonmaterialistic Value Orientation. The central research question, then, is 'how does voluntary simplicity, as an expression of a 'Nonmaterialistic Value Orientation', contribute to subjective wellbeing?'

2.4 Objectives

While answering the central research question is the main objective of this dissertation, there are four more objectives that the above literature review has spurred:

1. To complement Kasser's (2002) theory on the ways in which a Nonmaterialistic Value Orientation may contribute to subjective wellbeing with more qualitative empirical findings (section 4.2)
2. To give space to the narratives of voluntary simplifiers themselves within the theoretical debate (chapter 3 and section 4.2)
3. To connect these personal narratives to the wider new economics debate (section 5.3)
4. To offer a platform for further discussion (chapters 5 and 6)

Before turning to the methods and findings, in the next chapter I will elaborate on the practice of voluntary simplicity.

3. Voluntary Simplicity

Voluntary simplicity is a way to act on nonmaterialistic values. Rejecting elements of consumerism, voluntary simplifiers engage in a range of alternative behaviours. Because of the heterogeneity in behaviours, it may not be appropriate to speak of a 'group' or 'movement' as such. Still, some common denominators in characteristics and behaviour can be identified. This chapter gives basic answers to the questions of what voluntary simplicity is, what common characteristics of voluntary simplifiers are, what scope simple living has and in what geographical areas it is relatively popular, and how new it is. Finally, I describe how existing VS literature approaches the theme of wellbeing.

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. Within academic and popular literature, these economic alternatives are sometimes grouped together within conceptual terms of a social or solidarity economy. 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 limiting extremely, 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). In this dissertation, the practice of 'voluntary simplicity' is central. It 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. Grigsby (2004) describes voluntary simplifiers as “concerned about environmental degradation, critical of conspicuous consumption and ‘careerism’, and *dissatisfied with the quality of life afforded by full participation in mass consumer society*” (italics added).

Some state that the goal of voluntary simplicity is to live with as few possessions as possible. Elgin (1993), however, states “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). Shi (1985) concurs in saying that “money or possessions or activities themselves do not corrupt simplicity, but the love of money, the craving for possessions, and the prison of activities do” (Shi 1985, p.280).

Motivations for ‘simple living’, as the lifestyle of voluntary simplifiers is often referred to, vary greatly and may include environmental concerns and personal views on leading a fulfilling life. It is very important to note that whatever motivates a person 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).

Perhaps more an analytical concept than a grassroots identity marker, the term 'voluntary simplicity' does not necessarily sound familiar to all individuals leading a consciously 'simple' life. Although a number of organised gatherings exist (such as those organised by the United States-based Simplicity Forum), most 'members' of the voluntary simplicity movement have not officially registered themselves as such anywhere. They may not all recognize it as a movement, rather emphasizing their personal experiences and values that have led them to make alternative choices in their personal lives.

3.2 Characteristics of Voluntary Simplifiers

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. Generally speaking, most of my interviewees met most of these criteria also, although not all had ever worked full-time.

3.3 Scope and Locations of the Voluntary Simplicity 'Movement'

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 choose to 'downshift' voluntarily ('downshifting' referring to consciously earning a lower income), and explains this phenomenon primarily by dissatisfaction with job stress and skewed work-life balance. However, because many of those who may analytically be

referred to as voluntary simplifiers do not explicitly identify or register as such, 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.

3.4 How New is Voluntary Simplicity?

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 simple living thought 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 downshiffters differ from previous voluntary simplifiers, mainly in the sense that nowadays downshiffting 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.

3.5 Wellbeing in VS Literature

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 dissertation centres around the relationships between an emphasis on nonmaterialistic values and subjective wellbeing, voluntary simplifiers are exemplary study cases. Simple living is interpreted here as an expression, or a 'sign', of a Nonmaterialistic Value Orientation.

Focusing on the values underlying simple living rather than only regarding the daily practices involved with such a lifestyle, creates opportunities to explore the feelings and emotions experienced by voluntary simplifiers as a result of their lifestyle. Etzioni (1993) makes a similar connection, linking 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). In chapter 4.2, I will discuss how these general ideas from VS literature, and the more specific ideas presented in the previous chapter, bear out in the narratives of voluntary simplifiers on their wellbeing.

4.1 Key Concepts and Methods

This subchapter provides an overview of how the research for this dissertation was conducted. First, I will operationalise the key concepts. After reviewing the relevant literature, I will clarify how I use the concepts of wellbeing, voluntary simplicity and Nonmaterialistic Value Orientation. Then I will describe through which methods I collected the data I base my analysis on. After mapping out my methods, I will explain why and how I selected my interviewees. Next, I will clarify my methods for analysing the primary and secondary data. Finally, I will paint a picture of the contributions and limitations of this dissertation.

4.1.1 Operationalisation of Key Concepts

The concepts of wellbeing, voluntary simplicity, and ‘Nonmaterialistic Value Orientation’ are central to this dissertation. These are broad terms that require context-specific definitions in order to make clear the frameworks within which the research questions are answered. In this section, I briefly operationalise the analytical concepts within the central research question ‘how does voluntary simplicity, as an expression of a ‘Nonmaterialistic Value Orientation’, contribute to subjective wellbeing?’

Wellbeing

I will focus on subjective wellbeing, while being careful not to omit the relationships between objective and subjective wellbeing, and the influences of the wellbeing of others and the natural environment.

Voluntary simplicity/voluntary simplifiers

Consciously purchasing and owning far less than most people do, earning a considerably lower income than one might earn, possibly paired with a decision to work in a 'social' sector, and sustaining these decisions over a period of time.

Related to terms such as simple living, simpler living, simple life, simple lives, simplifiers.

'Nonmaterialistic Value Orientation'

Inspired by Kasser *et al.*'s (2004) concept of a 'Materialistic Value Orientation', a Nonmaterialistic Value Orientation refers to placing relatively high emphasis on values that run counter to values for wealth, social recognition, being ambitious, being successful, and preserving public image. Nonmaterialistic values may include equity and ecological sustainability, for example.

4.1.2 Methods of Data Collection

The analysis presented in this dissertation is based on both primary and secondary research. An interview guide approach was used for the semi-structured interviews (see Mikkelsen 2005, p.171). Besides analysing the narratives of my interviewees, I explored the existing literature on voluntary simplicity on valuable information on its relationships with subjective wellbeing, often stemming from primary research conducted by the authors. Also, 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 answering the central research question and sub questions raised in chapter one.

4.1.3 Sample

In July 2012, I conducted one double, and seven individual semi-structured interviews with people matching most or all of the criteria mentioned in the definition of 'voluntary simplicity' above. I used the snowball sampling method to find my interviewees. All interviews took place within the United Kingdom, seven were with locals of the Bath area and one with a resident of a commune in the Yeovil area. Of the interviewees, four were women and five men. They ranged between 35 and 70 years of age.

4.1.4 Analysis

Various methods of qualitative data analysis guided the process of analysing the transcribed interviews. Starting by recognising patterns in the data, I continued with open and axial coding (see Mikkelsen 2005, p. 182), clustering and finally drawing 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'). To analyse the secondary data of the literature and internet forums, I generally followed the steps of content analysis described in Mikkelsen 2005, p. 188).

4.1.5 Contributions and Limitations

I believe the use of qualitative data greatly enhances the discussion of why voluntary simplicity and/or nonmaterialistic values contribute to subjective wellbeing. While current publications within the new economics debate are usually based on quantitative data from surveys and experiments, they are limited by a lack of narratives. How we experience wellbeing differs from person to person. Personal narratives, therefore, are in my opinion the best source of data for understanding the how and why of wellbeing.

Conducting interviews does entail some ethical considerations. Although the practice of voluntary simplicity does not necessarily lead to sensitive interview topics, it might well do for some, as it covers such a large extent of a person's life. In addition, hypothetically there is a chance that someone reading this dissertation recognises one of the interviewees by their narratives. To limit this risk as much as possible, I have omitted highly personal information from the narratives presented in chapter 4.2, and have changed the names of all interviewees.

This dissertation faces some limitations concerning the conclusions. Offering a partial explanation of why any behaviour contributes to subjective wellbeing is complex, and always involves a level of speculation. I have tried to limit speculation as much as possible by using open questions in my interviews that allowed the interviewees to determine the indicators of wellbeing to a large extent. However, the scope and timeframe of this dissertation limited the number of interviews I could do. Therefore, my results should be taken as preliminary suggestions, rather than fixed conclusions.

4.2 Findings: Voluntary Simplicity and Subjective Wellbeing

This subchapter presents my key findings from interviews, literature and an online forum on voluntary simplicity. The narratives of voluntary simplifiers offer clues as to how their way of life contributes to their wellbeing. It is clear that the term 'voluntary simplicity' encompasses quite a wide range of practices and situations. This chapter illustrates that, as diverse as the activities and experiences of voluntary simplifiers are, some common denominators can be detected regarding the underlying values that motivate people to practice simple living, and regarding their experiences and how these contribute to their wellbeing.

These common denominators structure this chapter. They are visible within reoccurring themes through which voluntary simplifiers describe how their values and lifestyle contribute to the quality of their lives. These themes are: the processes that motivate individuals to practice voluntary simplicity, autonomy and identity in daily activities, work, doing the right thing, alternative interpretations of security, and alternative relationships with money and possessions.

Although not all experiences described in this chapter apply to all voluntary simplifiers, a general picture can be drawn as to the various ways in which this lifestyle contributes to subjective wellbeing. In the final paragraph of this chapter, I draw preliminary conclusions on the range of ways in which VS may contribute to subjective wellbeing.

4.2.1 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 natural 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 his graduation from university, he felt so fed up with formal surroundings that he vowed never to hold a 'proper' job in his life. A few other interviewees 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. Drawing general conclusions regarding motivations for simple living, then, is complicated.

4.2.2. 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 during the interviews 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 nor 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.

4.2.3 Visions of Work

Although voluntary simplifiers have very diverse work situations (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).

Jeff, a twenty-five year old college graduate living in Seattle has very specific thoughts on the role work should play in his life:

“First, ‘I needed to find a way not to be in a nine-to-five-until-I-died treadmill. I had a vision of life being much, much more than spending most of my life in a job that was somebody’s else’s agenda.’ Second, ‘I wanted to learn how human beings could live more lightly on the earth.’” (Schor 1998, p.134).

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. She says she finds her

'mundane' housework very satisfying and has never been happier. She 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.

4.2.4 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 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' wellbeing-related narrative. Aligning their day-to-day behaviour with their ecological and social values gives some voluntary simplifiers a sense of fulfilment that effects 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 that "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 scopes 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. It is filled with quotes and stories relating that happiness does not come from the outside – possessions, achievements, events, but 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.

4.2.5 Alternative Interpretations of 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 homeschooled 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 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 security, manage to define security 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.

4.2.6 Alternative Relationships with Money and Possessions

Another area some voluntary simplifiers 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 a representative essay on how owning less, does not automatically lead to more wellbeing (Shirley n.d.). She argues quite the opposite, 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 nonmaterialistic 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.

4.2.7 Summary of Findings and Preliminary 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 to act on their own definitions of social justice rather than being part of larger organisations, as Peter and Lucy do, for example may contribute to both feelings of autonomy and 'doing the right thing'. Still, the common themes described in this chapter suggest various shared experiences, and common ways in which simple living may contribute to subjective wellbeing. I do not suppose these themes offer an exhaustive list of ways in which voluntary simplicity relates to subjective wellbeing. Here I simply offer some preliminary conclusions while connecting the findings to the theory presented in chapter two.

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, and of overcoming needs for financial security. 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 wellbeing of others is a third main theme coming forth in the narratives. 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.

5. Discussion

The narratives and conclusions from the previous chapter illustrate the complexity of drawing conclusions on how voluntary simplicity, and its underlying values, contribute 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. This chapter discusses three 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 I focus on 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 are more likely to practice simple living in the first place. The third and last issue discussed here is that of how to connect data on VS with the wider socio-economic debate. How does understanding diverse and personal experiences of simple living help us in framing new directions for policy?

5.1 Enabling Voluntary Simplicity

If voluntary simplicity contributes to life satisfaction, why should anyone not choose to live simply? Making such a choice is enabled by various resources as well as mindsets. First, it is important to stress that there is an incommensurable difference between poverty and voluntary simplicity. The fact that living simply is a *choice*, makes it voluntary. Not all people have the option to make this choice. When faced with a livelihood that is simply insufficient, it

is unlikely that we would feel like we have an option in this respect. Being free to make a choice may also have to do with financial backups. Some voluntary simplifiers have carefully planned their downshifting in order not to become too vulnerable financially. For example, instead of quitting his IT job full stop, Chris decided to continue in it part-time for a considerable period so that he could save up. Having his savings, he feels more secure that in case his new massage business fails, he will not lose his house. Hazel, who has recently quit her job as a self-employed consultant to pursue a self-funded PhD, has chosen to do so only after paying off her mortgage.

Other than financial and material resources, voluntary simplifiers may feel more comfortable accepting the uncertainties their way of life brings because of their social resources. Schor (1998) emphasises this point:

“simple-livers insist that although they might meet the government’s criterion, they are not poor. This is true, but for reasons they sometimes do not recognize. Few Americans can thrive on \$10,000 a year. Simple-livers can because they are rich in cultural capital (Bourdieu’s term) and in human capital (economists’ term for education and training.” (Schor 1998, 137). “Unlike the traditional poor, they have *options* – including the option of jumping back into mainstream culture.” (ibid. p.137)

Many interviewees indicated that their friends and, sometimes, family supported their choices and they felt they might rely on them in times of need. In some situations, this way of life itself might strengthen the very social resources that make it easier to overcome temporary

uncertainties. Living in a community or area where simple living is common, for example, might allow voluntary simplifiers to share their resources in times of need.

There may still be other reasons why some would not choose to live more simply. Even when someone has sufficient financial, material and social resources, they might not choose for voluntary simplicity because they simply do not like the idea of a fluctuating income and the risks that come with that. It appears that to an extent believing that 'everything always turns out alright' in a financial sense may contribute to voluntary simplicity as a fulfilling lifestyle. If someone would stress about financial risks by nature, simple living might not be sustainable for them because it would be more of a negative than a positive experience. The same logic might apply to relationships with money and possessions. A person with a mindset of seeing an accumulation of wealth as a key goal in life would, for obvious reasons, find less fulfilment in voluntary simplicity. Enjoying this way of life and finding fulfilment in it, then, is as much enabled by alternative views towards wealth as it is by material and social resources.

Finally, for some, voluntary simplicity may not be attractive because they would be labelled as 'different'. Although some say voluntary simplicity is on the rise, it is still on the fringe of society. Placing little value in achievements such as material, financial, and career-related success means partially breaking with some highly mainstream beliefs. Taking on an 'alternative' identity may be unattractive to some.

5.2 Do Happier People Choose to Live Simply?

Although an emphasis on nonmaterialistic values has been shown in some studies to be correlated with relatively high levels of subjective wellbeing (e.g. Cohen and Cohen 1996; Diener and Oishi 2000; Kasser and Ryan 1993, 1996, 2001; Ryan *et al.* 1999; Schmuck *et al.* 2000), and the findings in this dissertation may offer a partial explanation of why such an

emphasis could contribute to wellbeing in the case of voluntary simplicity, there remain unanswered questions in this area. For example, it might be the case that on average, people who emphasise nonmaterialistic rather than materialistic values in their life feel more life satisfaction even before making alternative economic choices. In other words, individuals who feel satisfied with their resources and options in life to start with might be relatively susceptible to nonmaterialistic values. As Kasser *et al.* (2004) suggest that perhaps those who have experienced unfulfilled basic psychological needs in the past are more drawn to materialistic values, it might be tempting to suggest the opposite case is at play regarding voluntary simplicity. Having experienced a great sense of security, autonomy, competence and relatedness in their childhood might be a reason for some to feel comfortable living simply. However, whether this is the case remains to be proven empirically.

Of course, even if individuals who feel good about their lives would be more drawn to simple living, this would not exclude the realistic possibility that such practices further contribute to their wellbeing. It might not be a case of either/or, in reality both influences might be at play. Although it is very difficult to measure at which point choices influence subjective wellbeing, rather than subjective wellbeing influencing choices, more research is clearly needed if a framework for answering these questions is to be suggested.

Understanding these issues has potentially large benefits for social policy. If, for example, it were that case that individuals with relatively high levels of subjective wellbeing are more drawn to less materialistic lifestyles, we may wonder what experiences and beliefs enable them to partially reject mainstream economic goals. Because purchasing and owning less implies using fewer natural resources, less material lifestyles are often preferable from an ecological perspective. It may be in the interest of policy makers then, to promote, if possible,

experiences that are more likely to interest people in reducing their emphasis on material goals.

5.3 Moving Towards More Responsible Wellbeing

The goal of this dissertation 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 a 'counterproductive' 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 nonmaterialistic 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.

6. Conclusion

An emphasis on nonmaterialistic values, or a Nonmaterialistic Value Orientation, is found to be correlated with relatively high levels of subjective wellbeing (e.g. Cohen and Cohen 1996; Diener and Oishi 2000; Kasser and Ryan 1993, 1996, 2001; Ryan *et al.* 1999; Schmuck *et al.* 2000). Kasser (2002) suggests that such findings might be explained by the theory that nonmaterialistic values better support the fulfilment of our basic psychological needs than materialistic values do. The fulfilment of the needs for security, autonomy, relatedness and competence is assumed to be necessary for an optimal experience of subjective wellbeing (see Kasser *et al.* 2004; Ryan and E.L. 2000). This dissertation has aimed to enhance the understanding of how a Nonmaterialistic Value Orientation may contribute to wellbeing, by focusing on the practice of voluntary simplicity, which entails emphasising nonmaterialistic values in day-to-day life. In the process of exploring this topic, this dissertation aimed to complement Kasser's (2002) theory with qualitative empirical findings. It also aimed to give space to the narratives of voluntary simplifiers themselves, and to connect these to the wider new economics debate. Finally, it strived to offer a platform for further discussion.

The recent economic crisis illustrates the need to meet these objectives. It has revived the 'new economics' debate, which aims to find ways to better combine economic behaviour with human and ecological wellbeing. Some key authors within this debate point towards the idea that voluntary simplicity is relatively compatible with ecological sustainability, and might foster subjective wellbeing. However, for this debate to move from theory to practice (i.e. real public policy measures), it would benefit from a more grounded understanding of how emphasising nonmaterialistic values, and acting on those values, may contribute to subjective wellbeing.

I have attempted to present such a grounded understanding, by drawing on qualitative primary and secondary data, highlighting the narratives of voluntary simplifiers. Their lived experiences illustrate the diverse ways in which nonmaterialistic values, and acting on those values, can contribute to their subjective wellbeing.

The findings presented in this dissertation have shown that the ways in which simple living contributes to wellbeing differ from person to person. Voluntary simplifiers emphasise a wide range of motivations for simple living and, accordingly, hope to gain different experiences from it. There are some common denominators to be recognised in their experiences, however. Experiences of autonomy and competence are clearly underlying themes in their narratives. Although the theme of relatedness does not come up as often in interviews with voluntary simplifiers, there is no reason to assume that simple living undermines needs for relatedness. In fact, some simplifiers report stronger feelings of community and more willingness to give to others. 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'.

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 subjective wellbeing and simple living. However, as other approaches to wellbeing suggest, experiencing wellbeing of others and of the natural environment can also be a vital component of subjective wellbeing. The theme of 'responsible wellbeing' is strongly reflected in the narratives of voluntary simplifiers. 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 dissertation, 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.

Although it is clear that voluntary simplicity is beneficial to our natural environment and to our wellbeing, it is unlikely that all citizens of the United Kingdom will in the near future start to practice simple living. It is important to understand that certain mindsets and resources make it more likely for some to detach from materialistic goals than for others. Firstly, it requires a certain level of economic resources to be able to *choose* to live simply. Second, many voluntary simplifiers can draw on sufficient relatives and friends who are supportive of their lifestyle. Furthermore, enjoying simple living may require a relatively stress-free approach to the financial vulnerability it may entail, and the acceptance of living on the fringe of society.

Still, there may be scope for public policy to promote living more sustainably. Such attempts would be well advised to be based on lived experiences of those people who are already leading such lifestyles. Because of the complexities of the relationships between simple living and wellbeing, it is advisable not to be too quick to draw conclusions when designing policy to promote simple living. Furthermore, the narratives and findings presented in this dissertation suggest that the theme of 'morality' should not be overlooked if new economic policy is to be effective in stimulating life satisfaction.

As suggested in chapter five, important avenues remain to be explored. Understanding whether and if so, why, individuals with relatively high levels of subjective wellbeing choose to live simply may be the next step towards making realistic conceptualisations of ways to combine human and ecological wellbeing.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

The following questions were used to guide the interviews. Not all interviewees were asked all questions, the guide simply served to guarantee that most topics related to the research questions were covered. Other questions were formulated during the interviews. This type of semi-structured interviewing adheres to the guide given in Mikkelsen (2005).

Introduce myself and say thank you

Explain research goal (explore how voluntary simplicity relates to a sense of wellbeing) and anonymity

Give wellbeing and Voluntary Simplicity definitions

1. Have you made any conscious choices regarding where you live, the things you buy and use, or your work and income?
2. What has motivated you to make these choices?
 - a. Were there things in your life that you wanted to change?
 - b. Were there any balances (e.g. leisure time/work) that you wanted to change?
 - c. *If they say 'because it's the right thing to do': explore the issue of morality*
 - d. How would you describe your dream life?
3. How would you say [your economic choices] have affected how satisfied you are with your life?
 - a. Overall
 - b. Name different dimensions: social relationships, etc

- c. What would you say are the most important experiences to you in your life?
How have your choices affected these?
 - d. Are you (always) happy with the choices you have made?
 - e. How do you think similar choices could affect other people's lives?
 - f. Do you feel like your choices have brought you where you wanted to go?
4. Are you in any way affected by the idea that your choices are 'running against the stream' in the sense that
- a. Do people around you support your choices? If yes: does this go for all people you know? If not, what sort of conflicts do you experience?
5. Are there wider incentives in society/public and social infrastructure to support your choice?
- a. E.g. public transport
6. Do you think it is doable for people to make similar choices?
- a. For everyone in the UK?
 - b. What would be needed for other people to be able to make steps like that?