

Mapping out the 'downshifting' phenomenon

(1) Introduction

(i) Definitions

'Downshifting' refers to a phenomenon whereby individuals voluntarily pursue a simpler lifestyle of reduced material consumption, sometimes involving a change in work-life balance, in order to allow more time and energy for the non-materialistic aspects of life. These typically include time spent with family and friends, the pursuit of personal interests, and community engagement. The extent to which downshifter change their lifestyles differs greatly. Many continuums have been put forward, such as Etzioni's discussion of 'moderate', 'strong' and 'holistic' simplification (1998); Huneke's categorisation of 'committed' and 'less committed' simplifiers (2005); and Young's identification of 'beginner' and 'radical' simplifiers (2004). In some examples of downshifting a philosophical or moralistic element is clearly present, while in others the lifestyle change results from a shift in personal priorities. The definition of 'voluntary simplicity' often corresponds more closely to the former, while 'downshifting' refers to the latter. Nonetheless, as both are concerned with the reduction of material consumption in the pursuit of a simpler lifestyle and non-material sources of satisfaction, they can to some extent be used interchangeably. With this in mind, this paper uses the term 'downshifting' to encompass all varieties and extents of the phenomenon.

(ii) Extent

There appears to be a sub-set of the population in many advanced economies who represent downshifters. While recent empirical studies are largely lacking, a 2017 study indicates that downshifters make up one sixth of the German population (Peyer et al, 2017: 37) and earlier data shows similar figures for the UK (25%), Australia (23%) and the US (19%) (Hamilton, 2003a; Hamilton, 2003b; Schor, 1998). It should be noted that these figures are based on a broad definition of downshifting. The percentage of German downshifters was taken from a study that was based on objective data on equivalent household incomes and the level of product possession of selected consumer goods, rather than on a self-reported scale. Those relating to the UK and Australia were based on the number of people who agreed with the following question:

'In the last ten years have you voluntarily made a long-term change in your lifestyle, other than planned retirement, which has resulted in you earning less money? For example, have you voluntarily changed to a lower paying job, reduced your work hours, or quit work to study or stay at home?'

Certain groups were excluded: those who started their own business (as this often means working harder and, if successful, an increased income¹); those who had simply turned down a promotion (considered a 'sideways shift' rather than a downshift); and those who took time off to have a baby (as this might mean a cut in income but does not necessarily indicate a decision to transition to a less materialistic lifestyle). Only those aged 30-59 were questioned. Those over the age of sixty were excluded on the basis that most are retirees and those under thirty were excluded given that the question refers to decisions made in the last ten years, which is less appropriate for those in their twenties. Similarly, the percentage of American downshifters is taken from a survey that asked respondents if, over the previous five years, they had voluntarily changed their lives in a way that involved reducing their income. It should therefore be noted that a relatively broad spectrum of downshifters are included in these figures and they can thus be reasonably understood to represent the continuum of those shifting to less materialistic lifestyles, from the more radical to the less extreme. In order to ascertain what percentage of these populations can be considered 'holistic', 'committed', or 'radical' downshifters, that is to say, the more extreme end of the spectrum, much more refined data is required.

(iii) Aims

This paper seeks to explore the broad and complex **relevance** of this phenomenon through considering how it relates to the following domains: environmental and economic, psychological, political, societal, technological and spiritual. The potential for transformative impact in these areas is assessed throughout. The direct experiences of downshifters have been incorporated into this analysis, based on interviews held with individuals belonging to the local **Bristol 'Minimalist' meet-up group**. This online platform links people who have an interest in the ideas put forth by 'The Minimalists', who since their founding in 2010 have published books, recorded podcasts and created a documentary, gaining a following of twenty million people, with the aim of promoting a reduction in material possessions and consumption in order to improve wellbeing through making room for 'more time, more passion, more experiences, more growth, more contribution, more contentment' (Fields-Millburn and Nicodemus).

Where those interviewed sit on the identified continuum between more and less radical downshifting will be explored in part through the later discussion of their **motivations**. However, as an initial clarification it should be noted that four of the six interviewees altered their working pattern and accepted a lower income, one felt this was not necessary due to the highly flexible nature of his work but has encouraged his wife to do so, and one has not changed her work or income as a result of engaging with the ideas of simple living. A narrow definition of what downshifting consists of and the degree to which it is taking place, such as those established in previous studies, is therefore difficult to determine in this case. Nonetheless, the shared characteristic of all participants was their pursuit of

¹ It is admitted that this remains a recognised method of downshifting for certain people, so some genuine downshifters will naturally have been excluded.

reduced consumption in favour of a less materialistic lifestyle. Their personal experiences of this transition cannot be generalised due to the small sample size but are included so as to offer additional depth and richness to the existing literature.

(2) Relevance

(i) Environmental and economic relevance

Economic growth has been 'the single most important policy goal across the world for most of the last century' (Jackson, 2009: 3), pursued largely through mass-scale, resource-intensive production and consumption (Schneider et al., 2010; 512). Such an objective is at fundamental odds with the finite resources of the planet. There are limits to resources such as fossil fuels, water, land, timber and minerals, as well as to the regenerative capacity of the earth's ecosystems, soils, oceans and atmosphere (Jackson, 2009: 45). The seminal Limits to Growth thesis of 1972 concluded that if growth patterns in 'population, industrialisation, pollution, food production and resource depletion' continued, then total system collapse would ensue within the following one hundred years (Meadows et al, 1972: 23). Proving, through a simulation model, that technological and efficiency improvements aiming to create 'green growth' would not be sufficient to ensure ecological stability, the report demonstrated that a substantial reduction in material throughput itself would be required (Meadows et al, 1972). Such inescapable 'limits to growth' indicate the inevitability of radical lifestyle change in advanced economies, away from the present high levels of consumption. If not undertaken voluntarily, there is a distinct possibility that such change will be provoked via 'shock and response' due to 'an ecological tipping point, a financial breakdown or an overly indebted economy, a geopolitical disruption, an oil crisis, or some confluence of such forces' (Alexander and Rutherford, 2014: 19). In order to avoid such a 'shock and response' transition, significant policy interventions will be necessary, which themselves necessitate considerable support for such measures from citizens (Alexander and Rutherford, 2014: 13). Currently there is a tendency for individuals to perceive the prospect of reducing their consumption as risking their quality of life, associating such a lifestyle change with 'frugality, stagnation and the denial of material comforts' (Hobson, 2013: 1090). This presents a significant challenge to the lifestyle change that, in some form and to some extent, must forcibly occur in order to limit both planetary damage and the subsequent human suffering.

Downshifting should therefore be considered of utmost relevance in environmental and economic terms given that it offers empirical evidence of an alternative lifestyle that works in the favour of both sustainability *and* the quality of life of those involved. By reconceptualising 'the good life' away from materialism, wealth-accumulation and consumption, it weakens the perceived necessity of growth and enables public support for the type of transition that will need to occur. In this way, if it were to expand significantly, it may present a challenge to the growth-driven economic system. While it is not possible to predict the future trajectory of downshifting at this stage, the attraction of such a positive conception of this alternative lifestyle may encourage an increasing number of people to voluntarily

engage with it. There is further space for the phenomenon to grow in light of wider societal trends, such as the implementation of austerity measures and the displacement of workers through automation, given that it may provide a rationalisation for those who have undergone 'involuntary downshifting'. Some potential for expansion therefore appears to exist, but in order to reliably assess the likelihood of this materialising much greater, up to date research is needed into what drives people to downshift and whether the decision is limited to any particular demographic or set of personal circumstances.

(ii) Psychological relevance

The values inherent to the consumer culture are founded on the premise that happiness results from 'satisfying ever-more consumer desires through market transactions' (Alexander, 2012: 349). Increasingly, evidence suggests that this logic is flawed. On a societal level, the commonly known Easterlin Paradox demonstrated that an increase in a country's per capita GDP does not translate into greater self-reported levels of happiness (Easterlin, 1995). This has been confirmed in the case of the UK, where the percentage reporting themselves as 'very happy' decreased from 59% in 1957 to 36% in 2009, despite real incomes more than doubling in that time (Jackson, 2009: 40). On an individual level, those displaying aspiration to high materialism and consumption report lower levels of wellbeing (Kasser et al, 2004: 19). This is unsurprising, as of the nine fundamental needs identified by Max-Neef only a minority require material satisfaction (such as food and water for 'subsistence' and clothing and shelter for 'protection'), while many others are not satisfied by material throughput (for example, 'affection', 'understanding', 'participation' and 'leisure') (Max-Neef, 1991: 50-51). Such needs are met through 'intrinsic' experiences such as self-acceptance, interpersonal relationships and community feeling, rather than the 'extrinsic' goals of obtaining money, possessions, image or status (Kasser, 2009: 178). This offers some explanation as to why seeking wellbeing through consumption fails to deliver and demonstrates that the dominant value system of the consumer culture is ultimately unfit for purpose in psychological terms. This is reinforced by the vast numbers of people experiencing psychological distress in advanced economies through stress, burnout, or mental illness.

In light of this, there is a favourable space for an alternative value system and lifestyle model. Downshifting offers one such alternative that facilitates the development of the 'intrinsic' experiences that are presently underdeveloped due to an overemphasis on 'extrinsic' pursuits. The long working hours required to finance continued consumption result in 'time poverty' (de Graaf, 2003), whereby individuals have little time for goals such as learning new skills, taking care of their health, spending time with family and friends, and enjoying 'sport, culture or other recreations' (de Geus, 2009: 122). In contrast, downshifting 'frees up' time through reducing work and the resulting 'time affluence' enables downshifters to engage in precisely these 'intrinsic' pursuits that benefit wellbeing (Kasser and Sheldon, 2008: 244).

This interpretation was confirmed in the case of **Bristol's Minimalists**. For example, Henry, 35, said: 'Because I buy less stuff it has an effect on what I need to do to earn that money'. He explained that he no longer needs to 'maintain' and 'finance' mindless and unlimited consumption, resulting in him having more time and, in turn, improved wellbeing:

'I used to get really side-tracked and go full steam ahead with buying things... Reducing my consumption has freed up my time and enabled me to do the things I want to do in my life, which has in turn made me happier and calmer and less stressed.'

Downshifting therefore represents a potential response to the shortcomings of the value system and lifestyle that is dominant in the consumer culture. Through demonstrating and facilitating the wellbeing benefits derived from rebalancing the material and non-material aspects of life, downshifting may have the potential for transformative impact in the psychological domain.

The changes involved in downshifting nonetheless result in some undesirable psychological outcomes, commonly relating to the role of consumer goods as symbols of status or as a means of identity creation. Once our basic needs are met, our consumption takes on a 'positional' quality: we effectively consume to position ourselves in social groups and in relation to others (Hirsh, 1995). Similarly, commodity consumption is undertaken as a means of establishing a personal identity, with consumers forging their sense of self through their association with certain goods or brands (Hamilton, 2010: 573). In this way, consumption is linked to 'social acceptance, the social expression of one's identity, and the creation of meaning in life' (Alexander, 2011: 11). Given this deeply psychological aspect, attempts to relinquish such attachments to consumer goods and to past patterns of consumption can have extreme effects, illustratively described by Hamilton as a process of experiencing 'a sort of death' (Hamilton, 2010: 574).

This psychological barrier to downshifting was clearly confirmed in the case of **Bristol's Minimalists**, who explained that it was far from a painless process. For example, Caroline, 45, spoke of her husband's experience as such:

'He has used objects to build fantasies. So for instance, he had loads of clothes that didn't fit him. But there was that false hope that he would eventually wear those clothes, so those clothes remained in the house. I chipped away at it and eventually it all went. But that meant he lost that false hope and he had to face up to the reality of who he is: the fact that he *is* overweight, and he is not that 'future person', and there can be quite a lot of sorrow attached to that... Similarly, he was saying that for him books were a status symbol, because he's dyslexic. He wanted people to come round to his home and see his books and think 'oh, he reads those books'... He said: 'it's all putting a plaster on

something... You were making me take that plaster off, and you were making me look at the pain'. I said: 'But where does that pain come from? What is that pain?' He was saying, 'the pain is who I am, it's my personality type, it's my upbringing, it's nurture and nature and all of those things together'.

This stark representation of the use of possessions as an expression of the 'extended self' (Jackson, 2009: 63) highlights the delicate relationship between downshifting and psychological wellbeing. Nonetheless, Caroline, along with the other interviewees who shared similar experiences, noted that these drawbacks were worth it for the longer-term benefits to wellbeing. She went on to say:

'I said: 'So I've given you all this pain, by taking all the plasters off, and I've stripped away all your false hopes, I've made it worse... Was it worth it?' I said: 'What is the real impact of it?' He said: 'freedom'.'

In this way, participants exhibited an interesting degree of resolve in terms of accepting short-term psychological discomfort or challenges in order to pursue a longer-term goal. This adds weight to the common interpretation that downshifting must necessarily be a voluntary undertaking. When based on the values held by the individual in question, the 'longer-term goal' resonates enough for the challenges involved to be perceived as 'worth it' and eventually result in eudemonic wellbeing ('feeling meaningful') as opposed to the hedonic wellbeing ('feeling pleasure') often gained through consumption (Venhoeven et al, 2013: 1374). The psychological barriers to downshifting, and the potentially important role of existing value systems in developing the necessary resolve to overcome them, therefore limits the transformative potential of the phenomenon in the psychological sphere.

Much more research is required in order to fully appreciate the scope that downshifting has to better address the psychological needs and wellbeing of individuals. Indeed, while it appears to have potential in theory, and has reportedly had an impact on those engaging with it in practice, it remains unclear to what extent these gains would materialise in a wider group of people, in the event of the phenomenon expanding.

(iii) Political relevance

As previously highlighted, a transition in lifestyles will be necessary in environmental and economic terms. There is a great deal of scope for reforming societal structures so that they facilitate the widespread practice of the type of pro-environmental behaviours foreseen in such a lifestyle change. For example, in relation to overcoming the obstacles to more widespread cycling as a means of transport, Soper asks:

'Why not multi-lane tracks, with cover for those who want it, cycle rickshaws and motorised bikes for the too young and less able, showers and changing-rooms and cafés at regular intervals on cycle tracks?' (Soper, 2006: 37).

Crucially, such structural reform requires a shift in political priorities, which naturally implies public support. As already established, downshifting is therefore of utmost political relevance as it has the potential to create the 'fertile conditions for a politics of simplicity' (Alexander, 2011: 12) by reconceptualising 'the good life' and thus negating the often-noted concerns amongst the public that such a transition in lifestyle would reduce their quality of life. Put simply, the shift in personal priorities evident in downshifting may be accompanied by a shift in attitude regarding wider political priorities, towards a politics of sustainability. This was certainly observed in the case of **Bristol's Minimalists**, with participants noting a greater sense of awareness of and interest in societal issues such as production and waste, business ethics, and the social policies of other countries.

However, for such a political shift to be meaningful, the ideals and concerns of those pursuing simpler ways of life must be developed into 'clearly articulated and plausible policies that can be carried into existing political structures to bring about institutional change' (Grigsby, 2004: 186). In the words of Alexander:

'Reformative efforts must not be limited to personal transformation, but must also employ 'grass-roots' or 'bottom up' forces to reshape 'topdown' politics' (Alexander, 2011: 12).

There is thus an important tension to note in this regard, as downshifting has been identified as a largely apolitical phenomenon that is more focused on individual lifestyle change than policy initiatives (Grigsby, 2004: 12). The experiences of **Bristol's Minimalists** offer evidence to support this interpretation, with participants clearly expressing the personal nature of their lifestyle change. For example, Henry said: 'I have done it quite discretely, I haven't been too vocal about it.' Similarly, Caroline described her experience of downshifting as 'a very personal journey'. The interviewees displayed no engagement with the promotion of this lifestyle on a political level and even demonstrated signs of stepping away from politics in general. To illustrate, James, 35, explained:

'One thing I've really knocked down is checking the news everyday. I find that really stressful, because I haven't got any control over any of it... I don't *need* to know what's going on all the time... The whole Brexit thing, the whole Trump thing, I didn't really know much about it, I thought: I could spend my time looking at that and worrying about it, or, I could write my novel. Or I can come and have this interview with you, or I can play my guitar; things that I really want to do. So, consumption of unnecessary feeds into my brain, I've reduced.'

While this type of prioritization may be beneficial to wellbeing, such a 'simplification of engagement' could prohibit the further development of this phenomenon by limiting its spread of ideas, practices and related policy suggestions. Furthermore, it may even paradoxically offer more space to the global politico-media-industrial complex that is driving consumption by situating those sceptical or resistant to it outside of politics.

It therefore appears that there is potential for downshifting to have a transformative impact in the political sphere given the increased awareness of wider political and environmental concerns that it engenders in participants, yet the non-politicised nature of the phenomenon limits this significantly by failing to transform convictions into action. This may be inherent to downshifting due to its seemingly personal rather than philosophical orientation (explored further in the later discussion on **Motivations**). Although it is not possible to confirm without further research, this suggests that downshifting, in its current form, is politically limited.

(iv) Societal relevance

In theory, downshifting represents one potential avenue for reversing the trend of community decline that has been witnessed in advanced economies in the post-war era. While the demands of a culture characterised by aspiration to high materialism and consumption and its inherent individualistic nature result in community relationships and civic engagement becoming side-lined, downshifting should allow more time and energy for these pursuits, thus increasing social capital (Alexander, 2011: 6). Furthermore, the downshifting ideology corresponds with the world of alternative community living, which is often characterised by sharing economies, an increased proportion of local enterprises and cooperative businesses, and more community interaction and interpersonal reliance in general.

In practice, in the case of **Bristol's Minimalists**, some interviewees mentioned taking on social or community-related engagements since downshifting that they would not have previously. These included offering their skills to help others without financial remuneration, volunteering as a school governor, and participating in this study. However, it should be emphasised that overall the interviewees tended to prioritise the additional time available to them for relationships (spending time with family and friends) and pursuing personal interests. While an increased openness to social engagement was observable, when asked directly whether downshifting had increased their involvement in their communities this was resoundingly denied. This corresponds with their descriptions of the lifestyle change as a highly 'personal' journey, as outlined in the previous 'Political' section of this paper.

Signs of attitudinal change were nonetheless clear in terms of interpersonal reliance, most notably in relation to individual ownership and a new interest in sharing, renting or borrowing items. Caroline described writing to a local Bristol library to suggest the replication of a 'tool library' in Toronto that she had read about, while Julia, 30, explained that she would be thrilled 'if the opportunity arose for more sharing, more borrowing', but that not living near many people in her

social network limited her participation in such practices. These inferences of the necessity of formal sharing structures (e.g. via a library) or more obvious and accessible opportunities outside of existing social circles highlight the inevitable limits to ad hoc interpersonal sharing based on cultural norms. Illustratively, Emma, 26, explained:

I don't have a printer, and when I need to print something out, *someone's* going to have one, someone on my street would have one, but you can't just knock on someone's door and say: 'Can I use your printer?' It's weird! I think if someone did that to me [I would agree] but I would be quite taken aback.'

Evidence of increased social capital and involvement in the community is therefore present to a limited extent in the case of **Bristol's Minimalists**, in terms of a subtle attitudinal change and increased openness towards elements of a more community style living rather than as a major feature of their change in lifestyle. The extent of civic engagement was therefore relatively weak in comparison to the potential described in theory. This may be explained in part by the distinction between the numbers assumed to be embodying simple living as a premise to the theory, which would naturally enable a greater sense of 'shared experience', and the relatively low numbers of those who are engaged in reality, as well as the prevailing social norms that militate against the types of interpersonal interactions and reliance that allow social capital to develop. In this sense, as in the case of the 'Political' sphere, downshifting has a limited potential for transformative impact in its current form.

(v) The relevance of technology

A common criticism of downshifting is that it is backward looking, anti-technology and anti-innovation (Elgin, 2013: 72), which suggests it has a limited compatibility with modern society and thus reduces its potential for impact. Within more extreme examples of this phenomenon a degree of scepticism around technology may indeed be present, in that advocates may reject 'those aspects [of technology] which seem to cost more than they come to, all things considered' (Alexander, 2011: 4). This is understood to mean that, in contrast to the usual preference for progress in the form of 'speeding up and saving time' (Soper, 2006: 36), those who value simplicity may take a more holistic approach by taking into account the environmental and social costs of a technological development, alongside the benefits or opportunities for enjoyment that are compromised. To illustrate, Soper explains as such:

'The machines and lifts and escalators and moving walk-ways that reduce our energy expenditure do so at the cost of the exertion of muscular power and the sense of vitality that goes along with that'... While 'to walk or to cycle is also to enjoy sights and scents and sounds, and the pleasures (and benefits) of physical activity and forms of solitude and silence, that are denied to those who travel in more insulated and speedier ways' (Soper, 2006: 35-37).

This could be likened to Putnam's assessment of the decline in social capital, which he considers to have been caused in part by the individualisation of leisure time, through television, the internet and the (increasingly more relevant) advent of virtual reality headsets: all of which come at the detriment of 'positive social externalities' gained from more simple, or 'primitive', types of entertainment (Putnam, 1995).

Despite this tentative approach to technology, advocates of simple living are explicit in its non-universality, insisting that there is no one prescribed way in which to live a simple life and that the practical implications of engaging with the common values espoused will be different for each individual in their own context (Alexander, 2011: 7). In light of this, it is conceivable that there will be a variety of positions towards technology within the downshifting phenomenon, whereby some downshifters are neutral about technology, following society's general patterns of use and uptake, others avoid technology, simplifying their use and uptake to a minimum, and others in fact see technology as vehicle by which they can further simplify their lives.

This suggestion that scepticism towards technology is not necessarily characteristic of all downshifters is clearly reflected in the case of **Bristol's Minimalists**. Of the scenarios outlined above the latter two were observable in different participants. For example, Emma identified herself as a reluctant adapter to new technologies, describing her efforts to only replace things when broken and therefore absolutely necessary, along with her infuriation that technology is often no longer built to last, citing mobile phones as a relevant example. This was a common, but not the exclusive, sentiment amongst the group. In contrast, Caroline described how she gets on board with new technology very quickly. She explained that she has an 'Amazon Alexa' (an 'intelligent personal assistant'), along with a Nutribullet blender and an instant pressure cooker, all of which she considers to improve the efficiency of running a family home and create more time for meaningful personal and family engagements. These vastly different attitudes to technological gadgets therefore reinforce the interpretation that scepticism towards technology does not forcibly go hand in hand with the phenomenon of downshifting. However, the scenario in which downshifters are neutral towards technology was not observed, suggesting that those opting for a simpler lifestyle may be more likely to fall on either side of the debate rather than remaining ambiguous. This seems logical given the deeply considered and self-reflective nature of the phenomenon, yet from such a small sample remains no more than speculation.

Regardless of the varied opinions of the value of technology, all participants nonetheless noted that it served them in their transition to a simpler lifestyle through the gathering of information and the sharing of ideas with likeminded people over the Internet. For example, some discussed the sharing of practical techniques for reducing consumption through Facebook groups such as Slow Your Home, or KonMari, in which users offer each other inspiration and encouragement, while others spoke of how the podcasts they listen to act as regular reminders of the

relevant principles and thus sustain their interest in and commitment to the transition and long-term lifestyle.

Hostility towards technology can therefore not be automatically attributed to downshifting. Instead, those engaging with the phenomenon are likely to hold varying views on the role of technology in their lives, with some seeing it as superfluous and others as enabling. Furthermore, its function in terms of connecting people and facilitating the sharing of information demonstrates its compatibility with modern society, in contrast to the assertions of its critics, and highlights a potential avenue by which the phenomenon may develop or grow. In light of these evaluations, the potential impact of downshifting does not appear to be limited by its relation to technology and the latter may in fact serve the phenomenon's continuation and/or expansion.

(vi) The relevance of spirituality

Notions of simple living can be found in many religions and spiritual traditions (Walther et al. 2016: 24). The declining influence of these aspects of life in advanced economies in recent decades has led to the subsiding of moral strictures on consumption (Schor, 1999: 47), enabling its rapid development into one of the defining cultural characteristics of society today. Spirituality continues to feature in the lives of many who pursue simple living, but certainly not all. A study of the relationship between voluntary simplicity and Western spirituality identified two categories of participants. Firstly, 'spiritual voluntary simplifiers', who engage in simplicity to 'be closer to God', and secondly, 'secular voluntary simplifiers', who reduce their consumption without a spiritual focus - for example as 'a financial trade-off representing personal values' - meaning they continue to engage in some consumption but 'more thoughtfully' (Walther et al, 2016: 29; 31).

In the case of **Bristol's Minimalists** the latter category initially appears to be the more appropriate description, as none of those interviewed expressed a direct spiritual or religious motivation. However, some participants did discuss the usefulness of spiritual practices, such as meditation and mindfulness, in developing a more conscious kind of consumption. In this way, spiritual traditions may inform efforts to escape the structures of the consumer culture, for example through Zen philosophy's notions of awareness and detachment.

While at first this seems to indicate that the relationship between downshifting and spirituality is that the latter facilitates more conscious consumption, the experience of one participant indicates the reverse. Caroline shared how she had never considered spirituality to be a defining feature of her lifestyle change, but that recently she had begun to see it as such, given the new sense of 'consciousness' that she was experiencing that 'wasn't tapped into before'. This suggests that on the one hand spiritual traditions may enhance the consciousness of consumption, while on the other hand conscious consumption may enhance feelings of spirituality. This indicates a mutually reinforcing role for downshifting and spirituality. Such an intertwined relationship and high level of complementarity makes the negation of a

spiritual aspect to downshifting difficult to justify, regardless of the fact that none of those interviewed described it as an explicit motivator for their lifestyle change. Spirituality can therefore be described as highly relevant to downshifting, as a facilitator or ultimately influential by-product if not as a driving force.

(3) Motivations

In light of the extensive relevance of this phenomenon and its transformative potential in various spheres, it is important to understand its scope for further expansion and thus *what drives individuals to engage with it*. Existing literature highlights that motivations for downshifting are diverse and differ between individuals, with some acting for philosophical or moral reasons and others being driven by personal desires and preferences (Alexander, 2011: 2). Despite the vast array of motivations, there is a noted tendency for downshiffters to act predominantly for personal benefit rather than philosophical conviction, although they do often dispose of a social critique (Hamilton, 2003a: 25).

The empirical data required to confirm or deny this interpretation is limited: studies exploring the main reasons behind the choice to downshift are scarce and largely out-dated. Those that do exist offer some support to this weighting in favour of personal over philosophical motivators. Studies of downshifting in Britain and Australia in 2003 found 'time with family' to be the most commonly cited 'main reason' for the change, followed by desires for more personal fulfilment, better health and more balance, while post-materialistic values or the pursuit of a more environmentally friendly lifestyle were cited as a main motivator by only 5% and 12% of participants respectively (Hamilton, 2003a: 20; Hamilton 2003b: 21).

Somewhat conversely, a multi-national online survey carried out in 2011 by the Simplicity Institute shows that over 80% of respondents indicated that environmental concern is one thing that motivates them to live simply, while only just over 50% said they were driven by having more time to spend with family (Alexander and Ussher, 2011: 9). As environmental concern can be considered a philosophical or moral concern over a personal one, this appears to contest the previous data. However, the disparity may be explained in part by the fact that the later study allowed respondents to select as many options as they felt applied to them, whereas the previous studies focused on the *main* motivator. Furthermore, the later study shows that, aside from environmental concern, more respondents cited personal motivators than broader moral or social ones: humanitarian concern and more time for community involvement were the least chosen options (around 40% each). They were much less frequently chosen than options relating to personal benefit, such as health (around 75%), self-reliance (just over 70%), desires to de-clutter (just over 70%), to save money (over 65%), or to live more spiritually or mindfully (just over 60%). When collated, the data therefore suggests that while environmental concern is one of the motivators for most downshiffters, it is unlikely to be the *main* motivator, while other moral or social issues are not common drivers at all. Overall, across the disparate and scant data, a trend towards personal rather than philosophical motivators can be observed.

This is certainly representative of the case of **Bristol's Minimalists**. The common explicit motivators for changing their lifestyles were: (1) reducing stress (2) pursuing greater personal fulfilment and (3) seeking more autonomy.

(i) Reducing stress

Participants commonly described the decision to reduce their consumption as based on a desire to reduce stress. James explained how he went through a 'mid-life crisis', saying: 'I was trying to do too much... I never realised how stressed I was all the time, I was speeding in my life, rushing through everything.' For him, the decision to downshift was an attempt to 'simplify' the way in which he did things, thus 'reducing mental clutter'. Similarly, Emma described her shift in consumption as a response to her experience of depression, stemming from work-related stress. Others linked stress to owning excessive possessions. For example, Julia said:

'I believe we inhabit a space of land, each of us, and in that space of land you stack up all of the things that you think that you need... I realised that my space, if I was to draw a circle around me, was just filling and filling and filling, to the point that I had already reached my border; now I was just stacking stuff on top of each other. I had duplicates of things and it was really getting out of control. It was good to start seeing that stuff go.'

Henry echoed this: 'I think everything you have you store in your mind as well... You catalogue everything in your mind.'

(ii) Personal fulfilment

Seeking greater personal fulfilment was a further common motivator. As an illustration, James described how his decision to downshift was largely motivated by a desire to change how he spent his time, away from mindless activities and towards spending time with his wife and son and pursuing his 'passions'. He explained the process he has been through as 'about aligning everything on a pathway that takes you to being more fulfilled.' It should be noted that spending time with family and friends was often referenced by those interviewed as an important part of feeling fulfilled, especially those with children.

(iii) Autonomy

Participants also expressed a clash of values with the usual lifestyle model and explained downshifting as a way of rejecting it. Illustratively, Henry spoke of how the typical pattern of working long hours in order to get into the housing market and to spend money on things that bring little meaning is 'pushed on you', saying: 'I had always had a feeling I wanted to somehow not be a part of that.' On a more day-to-day basis he said:

'I have always really resented being controlled by society... I didn't mind working; I've always worked since I left school... It was just that constraint of having to be somewhere at a certain time, for a certain amount of time. It's such a norm to everyone in society but it has never sat well with me... I just felt really bitter about the fact that we couldn't do these really nice, human things because we permanently had to be somewhere.'

Julia similarly explained how she is now setting up her own business, doing something she feels passionately about that 'doesn't involve anybody else telling [her] what to do, or what to do with [her] time': a risky venture that has only been made possible financially by reducing her consumption.

These three overarching motivations can all be categorised as personal rather than philosophical drivers, confirming the trend established in previous studies. The pursuit of autonomy perhaps appears to be less clearly categorised in this regard, but in context was clearly pursued for personal gain rather than so as to make a statement about society. The experiences shared by **Bristol's Minimalists** also add weight to the evaluation that environmental concern is a very common, yet not dominant, factor. None of those interviewed cited environmental concern as their main motivation for changing their lifestyle, yet all six expressed an awareness of environmental issues and some related behavioural change, such as striving to cycle, walk or drive in a more fuel-efficient way and to reduce waste. A tendency towards becoming more aware of and interested in environmental issues as a result of their change in lifestyle was observable in all cases. For example, Sophie, 24, explained: 'the more I think about it, the more the environmental impact of consumption has *become* a motivation'. This indicates a similar pattern to that of spirituality, whereby environmental concern may represent an ultimately influential by-product of downshifting.

A further, theoretical motivator, put forth predominantly by Kate Soper, is that of **alternative hedonism**: the hedonistic pleasure to be experienced from simpler ways of living and from escaping the negative consequences of the consumerist lifestyle (Soper, 2009: 5-9). This pleasure was indeed observable in the case of **Bristol's Minimalists**. Most illustratively, Henry noted that downshifting has led to him enjoying 'commodities that are free', such as 'the feelings in going somewhere and seeing a nice view'. Similarly, when discussing home-grown food, Emma explained: 'I think it's twice as satisfying, when you have nurtured something and grown it yourself to then eat it... That is way more valuable to me.' While like spirituality and environmental concern this can be considered to represent a by-product rather than a motivator, it nonetheless confirms the relevance of such hedonistic benefit. According to Soper, alternative hedonism will be 'the most likely motivating force in any shift towards a more sustainable economic order' (Soper, 2009: 3). This seems to hold some weight given that intuitively consumers are more likely to make behavioural changes based on factors that affect them personally and immediately,

rather than on abstract concepts such as environmental impact. In this way, the confirmed presence of such hedonism in downshifting further supports the interpretation that the phenomenon has scope to grow and perhaps to influence society, given the additionally attractive element of personal, hedonistic pleasure.

(4) Concluding comments

Having reviewed the relevance of downshifting in the spheres of economy, environment, psychology, politics, society, technology and spirituality, it is clear that this phenomenon is not only widely relevant but has transformative potential in regards to some critical societal challenges.

In terms of the **economy and the environment**, downshifting provides an alternative to the damaging growth model. By reconceptualising 'the good life', the phenomenon may negate public concerns of reduced quality of life and thus encourage public support for the policy change needed to pursue greater sustainability. Furthermore, the positive conception of this lifestyle change may be attractive to voluntary and involuntary downshiffters alike and therefore encourage the growth of the phenomenon, especially in light of the broader societal trends that make involuntary lifestyle change more likely. If such growth were to ensue to a significant enough degree, this may represent a genuine challenge to the dominant economic model. Similarly, downshifting has transformative potential in the sphere of **psychology** as it provides an opportunity to rebalance the material and non-material aspects of life; proven to have benefits for individual wellbeing. The identified limitations in this area, notably the psychological challenges involved and the role of existing value systems, require further exploration in order to ascertain the extent to which they counter the psychological gains described in theory and observed in practice. It could even be said that downshifting has a transformative role in the sphere of **spirituality**. While the reverse appears instinctively logical given the history of spiritual teachings on consumption, downshifting appears to encourage greater consciousness and engagement with spiritual notions and practices.

In contrast, despite the promising theoretical potential of downshifting in terms of **politics** and **society**, the phenomenon appears to be significantly limited in these areas in its current form and context. As it stands, the predominantly personal element to the shift limits the extent to which participants engage in advocacy and wider policy concerns, while a lack of relevant structures and social norms hinders the realisation of greater community engagement. However, these barriers may be explained in part by the limited number of people currently engaging with this lifestyle and thus, if the phenomenon were to grow, could perhaps be reduced or overcome.

Contrary to much of the critical literature, **technology** does not appear to be at fundamental odds with downshifting, as participants demonstrate a variety of views regarding its value and it has been shown to play an important role in facilitating the

lifestyle change. Downshifting is therefore not limited by its relationship with technology and this area in fact represents a further space for potential expansion.

The case of Bristol's Minimalists confirms the trend observed in the literature of **predominantly personal, not philosophical, motivations**, as the three main motivations of those interviewed were reducing stress, increasing personal fulfilment, and pursuing greater autonomy. This is significant in that it may be related to the limitations observed in the transformative potential of downshifting for politics and society. Further research to confirm, modify or deny this interpretation is therefore crucial in terms of understanding whether such limitations are inherent to downshifting, and thus fixed, or whether they are open to change.

Having explored the extensive theoretical potential of downshifting along with its observable confirmations or limitations in practice, downshifting appears to have scope for transformative impact in the areas of economy and environment, psychology and spirituality, especially if the phenomenon is to grow. Significant constraints in the areas of politics and society suggest that in its current form and context the phenomenon is unlikely to achieve such impact, but again this may change depending on the future trajectory of engagement with this lifestyle. Technology and alternative hedonism are both significant in that they represent areas that may facilitate such growth. Throughout all the considered domains, up to date and extensive data is lacking, which hinders effective evaluation. Further research is therefore needed into the extent of the existing phenomenon, the motivations behind those engaging with it, and its relation to wider societal trends, in order to better assess its potential as driver of societal change.

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