Individualism and Community for Voluntary Simplifiers

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This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources has been acknowledged.

Harry Andriopoulos
23 June 2017
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Abstract

Voluntary simplicity is a cultural movement constructed around overt expressions of individualism in response to the excesses of ‘consumer society’. As the term also suggests, its general public recognition as a critical force against over-consumption appeals to a ‘moral good’. This has turned voluntary simplicity into a socially reflective movement which often appeals to ‘community’ and the social norms of collective action. This thesis explores historical developments in the theories of individualism and communitarianism which have influenced understandings of what constitutes a ‘voluntary simplifier’. The author contends that Ronald Inglehart’s (1977) theory of ‘postmaterialism’, the seminal theory underpinning voluntary simplicity, was quickly transformed into a concept which connoted various individual and social ‘goods’. This became a source of criticism for communitarian critics of consumerism, who associated this development with self-interest, further moral decline and a growing “culture of narcissism”. This is at odds with more recent theorists who view individualism in more pragmatic ways. Paul Lichterman’s (1996) notion of a “culture of personalism” and Clive Hamilton’s (2008) appeal to a kind of philosophical individualism have proven to be more compelling to both voluntary simplifiers and ‘self-help’ authors. This has not been a universally positive development, however. An examination of the “Simple Living Forums” within the thesis reveals a strong sense of modesty and commitment to pluralism amongst voluntary simplifiers, which reflects both an affirmation and a denial of self. Voluntary simplicity continues to lack adequate framing processes which are essential for maintaining a social movement. The thesis therefore concludes that
voluntary simplicity is, ironically, associated with the excesses of consumer society and alienation from democratic processes. Because elements of consumer society have become part of the processes of late-capitalism, voluntary simplicity remains trapped between its critical centre and a culture of self-interest and insignificance.
**Introduction**

Voluntary simplicity is a notoriously difficult concept to define. The term, referring to a movement or lifestyle has been sustained, reworked and even rejected. VS has transformed from a predominantly environmental and religious subculture in the 1970s to the broadest of conceptual toolboxes, referring to anything from the formation of deep personal philosophies to simple ‘stress relief’. Voluntary simplicity has previously been referred to as a ‘movement’, a ‘lifestyle’, a ‘philosophy’ (or philosophies) and a ‘state of mind’, often interchangeably. The concept, itself, is an umbrella term for a wide array of lifestyle choices and is not bound to any particular ideological principles. Yet, general public recognition of ‘simple living’, ‘downshifters’ and ‘treechangers’ places voluntary simplicity into the realm of social movements. As such, it stands as a quasi-prescriptive, quasi-existential movement which has adapted to changes in cultural trends. This, it will be shown, is linked to political and cultural developments in the West since the 1970s.

For the purposes of reader comprehension, the following are general features of voluntary simplicity lifestyles:

- Commitment to environmental sustainability;

- Commitment to social and political change including community engagement;

- Desire for personal fulfilment and space to create personal philosophy (either in a group and/or alone);

- Desire for increased control over personal lifestyle choices.
The thesis has a number of aims. I firstly seek to place VS in the context of a historical decline in the value of work as a source of meaning and new approaches to self-actualisation since the 1970s. I attempt to show how the economic conditions which guide attitudes have in turn influenced elements of neoliberalism within voluntary simplicity. The growth of voluntary simplicity can be traced from the social condition of “individualization” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002) through which individuals are increasingly expected to make decisions in the absence of social structures. Second, I provide an overview of Ronald Inglehart’s theory of “postmaterialism” and attempt to place it in the development of voluntary simplicity culture and in the sociological realm more generally. This key theory has formed the basis of a number of distinct approaches to voluntary simplicity lifestyles. Communitarianism measures lifestyle commitment according to acts of social and environmental consequence. This “intensity” (Etzioni 1998) model is often the default approach for academics in the study of voluntary simplicity. Individualism, by contrast, regards the primacy of introspective “being” (Hamilton 2008) as the philosophical premise of individual and collective wellbeing. Individualism and communitarianism are extremely broad areas of study which take on new meanings in the lives of voluntary simplifiers. Chapter three attempts to contextualise the double-edged nature of individualism as voluntary simplifiers grapple with an uncertain world. I pose questions about the ability of individualism to provide the alternative to consumer society. Chapters four and five are detailed explanations and critiques of communitarianism, the alternative philosophy to individualism. In them, I draw two conclusions about communitarian theory. I find, on one hand, that communitarianism accurately identifies problems with a purely individualistic approach
to voluntary simplicity. However, communitarianism taken to extremes is self-defeating and inadvertently encourages apathy, as well as the kinds of alienation which communitarian philosophy ultimately rejects. Chapter six considers two crucial alternatives to individualistic and communitarian philosophies. A variant of liberal philosophy, “personalism” (Lichterman 1996), seeks to bridge the conceptual divide which has emerged between individualism and communitarianism in the growing popularity of voluntary simplicity lifestyles. This in turn has led to new forms of introspection and cooperative engagement between voluntary simplifiers. Lichterman’s (1996) “culture of personalism” expounds the possibility of community with highly individualistic structures. Clive Hamilton (2008), on the other hand, sees community as possible only through deep and uncompromising introspection. In spite of its preponderance, I argue that Paul Lichterman’s “culture of personalism” reflects a conflation of fundamentally opposing concepts. This approach, when operationalised, often leads to unexpected and contradictory results. Here, ‘personalism’ and ‘communitarianism’, far from being distinct conceptual rationales, intersect unpredictably. Notions of freedom and responsibility arise within the lives of individuals in which there is little or no material constraint. The contradictions which result serve to both reinforce and undercut the focus upon values which underpins voluntary simplicity lifestyles. In support of this argument, I show how commitment to movement ideals such as ‘modesty’, ‘self-reflection’ and ‘self-expression’ are compromised by attempts to adhere to both individualistic and communitarian principles. The aim of this approach is not only to refute the presumptions of what constitutes a voluntary simplifier, but also to show how theory itself reinforces and undermines movement ideals of authenticity and
openness. Here, the anxieties created by reflection on consumer society are often transposed onto the field of voluntary simplicity itself. This poses deeper philosophical questions about the appeal of voluntary simplicity as a social movement and its worth as a genuine alternative to consumer society. Much about voluntary simplicity is characterised by generalisations and clichés. I identify the ways in which voluntary simplicity authors conflate concepts relating to individualism and communitarianism without any consideration of the implications for voluntary simplifiers. Chapter seven contends that “non-judgement” (Sandlin & Walther 2009) is the concept which sustains voluntary simplicity culture and avoids conflict between voluntary simplifiers on online fora. My study of an online forum for voluntary simplifiers, simplelivingforum.net, attempts to identify the ways that voluntary simplifiers express ideas and communicate with others. I took as a starting point the ideas which reflect the historical development of voluntary simplicity culture, particularly, individualism, communitarianism and pluralism. In particular, I seek out the unprompted, public statements made by voluntary simplifiers. I examine whether commonalities in the expression (and reception) of personal narratives represents an anti-conflict mentality that is reflective of the aforementioned debates within voluntary simplicity. Specifically, I ask whether a general move by voluntary simplifiers towards more modest and open-ended expression represents progress or constraint within voluntary simplicity culture. In the study, I discovered a persistent modesty as well as an aversion to ‘professional knowledge’ provided by individuals or institutions. I conclude that the embrace of “personalism” amongst voluntary simplifiers reflects a weak cultural movement which has yet been unable to define its worth as the alternative to consumer society. The reader should note
that there have already been a number of studies which offer thorough overviews of voluntary simplicity and general manifestations of ‘lifestyle change’ in voluntary simplifiers (eg Johnson 2004a, Grigsby 2000). This thesis seeks to limit analysis of voluntary simplicity to ‘individualism’ and ‘communitarianism’. The increasing popularity of voluntary simplicity lifestyles since the 1990s makes these concepts the understated but pivotal dynamics in voluntary simplicity lifestyles and academic research more generally.
Chapter 1: The Foundations of Leisure

I. The End of Certainty

II. Postmaterialism

I. The End of Certainty

Work as a source of self-actualisation, personal fulfilment and collective engagement has been seen to have been in decline since the latter part of the 20th century (Bauman 1998, Beck 1992, 2000). Job insecurity, isolation from community and more varied familial structures have changed perspectives on and experiences of work in Western democracies. Work remains central to the lives of some, providing stability in the form of connections to community and private life (Doherty 2009). However, for a majority in the West, flexible labour and job insecurity have changed the rationales through which people create personal objectives. The notion of a ‘work/life balance’ is increasingly becoming the concept through which these insecurities are projected. The quest for identity has consequently moved beyond work as an end in itself (Giddens 1991, Sennett 1997, 1998). The root of this concept is fundamentally Marxian, as individuals distanced from the fruits of their labours search for an alternative which recognises the value of work. But the abundance which accompanies this factor reduces dissatisfaction to ‘identity’ rather than material loss. The two main sources of explanation for this new type of alienation from labour are ‘consumerism’ and the quest for ‘self-actualisation’. For Bauman (1998: 24), the purpose of work is linked inextricably to the “capacity” of an individual as “consumer”. Anti-consumerist polemics are common and usually seek to
reduce social ills such as social alienation and poor health to excessive work (see e.g. Hamilton 2003, 2005, Schor 1991, 1998). This intellectual tradition argues that the primary consequence of overwork is consumption which accentuates rather than undermines individual and social problems. Individual input to the formation of identity, here, is minimal. There are, however, subtler interpretations of the work/identity decline. For Sennett (1997, 1998), individuals in response to the insecurity of work create overarching narrative visions which both negate and reinforce anxiety. On one hand, narratives help to create a semblance of a “coherent self” (Sennett 1997: 172), in which changes in an increasingly flexible economy represent stepping stones to a desired goal. On the other, “people come to know such dislocations as their own lack of direction. The ethics of responsibility becomes, ironically and terribly, a subjective yardstick to measure one’s failure to cohere” (Sennett 1997: 174). This ‘irony’ is based upon the fact that one never truly has control of the narrative that he or she constructs. Those advocating the ‘end of work’ view this semi-permanent narrative as a delusion which merely conceals the absence of control in the lives of individuals. Individuals, therefore, find themselves in a system of work that is disconnected from traditional social structures which provide moral purpose and unable to guarantee the narrative stability which it encourages. In this way, “life loses its self-evident quality” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 7), as individuals fluctuate between narratives unfulfilled and the promise of new and impenetrable destinies. This insecurity has prevailed in spite of relative material security for many.
The two distinct approaches to the decline of work which have emerged since the 1970s are not identical, but share many features. The implicit rejection of ‘consumption’ as the sole basis of social ills and lifestyle change is a crucial distinction which sets apart the two main views on postmaterialism. Contrary to the ‘consumption’ based model of postmaterialism, “individualization” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002) sets up a series of personal crises and opportunities which do not necessarily follow a linear path toward ‘(in)security’ or ‘contentedness’. This creates a division between deterministic and non-deterministic conceptions of the post-work individual. The ‘deterministic’ formulation (based upon consumption, discussed below) primarily considers material conditions whilst the ‘non-deterministic’ reconstruction (self-actualisation) considers the open-endedness of ‘late-modern’ life in Western democracies. Needless to say, ‘anti-consumerism’ and “individualization” are both products of a cultural shift towards ‘postmaterialism’ (Inglehart 1977, 1981, 1990). Postmaterialism, discussed below, has enjoyed widespread usage as both an intellectual field and an activist rationale against consumer capitalism. Meaningful activity, for theorists writing in the postmaterialist tradition (Hamilton 2003, 2005, 2008), is generally understood as a materially unencumbered and meaningful pursuit of individual endeavours. On one hand, the notion that ‘money doesn’t buy happiness’ is a well-recognised expression which transcends class and politics. The purpose of its usage can vary (for example, it may be used to justify inequality) but the idiom itself is an enduring symbol in favour of an unspecified ‘greater good’. Theorists of ‘late modernity’, by contrast, place work within a complicated bind of ‘precarity’, ‘self-actualization’ and ‘individualization’ (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002, Giddens 1991, Sennett 1997, 1998). These theorists view the
decline of work and the social structures upon which it relies as a double-edged sword. Individuals are compelled to fashion their own identities but are not always equipped to do so in spite of relative material security (Beck 2000). At first glance, the loss of faith in the principles of consumer capitalism (characteristic of postmaterialism) and the inability of individuals to maintain a consistent identity (characteristic of “individualization”) appear hand-in-hand. In many cases, the material reasons for lifestyle change (eg an interest in conservation) and various forms of personal crisis (eg, health problems or career dissatisfaction) are complimentary. The link between poor health and the consumption of environmentally damaging food (such as fast food) has been established in both voluntary simplicity culture and public knowledge more generally. However, the distinction between environmentally (consumption) based lifestyle change in postmaterialism and the less specific lifestyle change inherent in ‘self-actualisation’ is, occasionally, an active tension within the field of voluntary simplicity. In the analysis that follows, I attempt to show how the inadvertent convergence of these perspectives helped lay the foundations for the highly contested nature of the voluntary simplicity field, especially with regard to contemporary understandings of individualism and communitarianism. People have indeed become detached from the alienating processes of work and consumerism, yet as we will see, the exact nature of the voluntary simplicity alternative is equally unclear.

The insecurities of work in the West have come to exist in conjunction with greater wealth for many in the middle class. Increases in wealth and consumption within well-off households have placed “post-materialist” concerns at the forefront of personal
fulfilment. Indeed, the prospect of an “end of scarcity” (Bell 1973) and by inference a society built upon leisure and personal fulfilment, has garnered significant cultural clout. Strategies to procure early retirement are as much in the domain of high end traders and investors as in environmental activists and anti-capitalist campaigners. The largely accepted association of notions of ‘stress’ and ‘obligation’ with work often transcends political divides. On the face of such a development, this should allow individuals to discard traditional notions of social obligation and allegiances. Yet, the stresses associated with the decline of traditional social categories such as family and work still gain a greater public profile than do the freedoms generated by social change. Individuals occasionally long for a ‘different’ time which may or may not have actually existed in the imagined form. Generally speaking, this has left individuals with desires to fulfil both individual and collective wellbeing. In an era of ‘self-help’ and the never ending ‘project’ of ‘self-actualisation’ (Giddens 1991), individual-oriented collectives in the form of “lifestyle enclaves” (Bellah et al. 1985) increasingly satisfy the communally minded. Wilkinson (2010: 466), for example, demonstrates that the motivations behind volunteering are “two-sided”. Communal engagement has increasingly come to be characterised by the pursuit of self-fulfilment. The study undertaken by Wilkinson suggests that the act of volunteering is a conduit for many aspects of modern life (both individual and collective). These range from matters of personal fulfilment (i.e friendship and intimacy) to traditional understandings of community (Wilkinson 2010: 466). Crucially, in this formulation, engagement with one aspect of volunteering (eg friendship) does not undermine appreciation of the other. Rather, volunteering had,
according to one participant in the study, assisted with the development of an individual’s “character” (466).

These examples show that what constitutes ‘selfishness’ and ‘altruism’ has consequently become clouded. It also shows that non-work community engagement can be more than a convenient social good. The relationship between materialist and post-materialist value sets has therefore been fragmented and occasionally contradictory. Where volunteering often presents an ideal situation in which personal fulfilment and communitarian sentiment is mutually reinforcing, personal history often makes this equation difficult to sustain. The contradiction that I intend to explore throughout this chapter is as follows: In a world where the choice to live a communitarian or individualistic oriented lifestyle is always available for those free from material constraint, the anxieties which have generated these choices remain a constant challenge. Countless ‘self-help’ manuals on the topic of voluntary simplicity discuss the possibility of a ‘genuine’ or ‘authentic’ lifestyle, but what this lifestyle entails is rarely made clear. Individuals read self-help materials for numerous reasons; they may do so to seek guidance or to justify a life of isolation. Individuals may also attempt to visualise their own lives as parallel to others who practice voluntary simplicity and support a rationale of community engagement. Individuals may broach each of these perspectives at different points of their lives, in spite of stated long held beliefs about society and what constitutes a meaningful life.
II  Postmaterialism

As a starting point, we might therefore begin by analysing a concept which is central to the history of voluntary simplicity in the Western world, namely, ‘postmaterialism’. ‘Postmaterialism’ is largely accepted as the theory that explains value orientations of individuals who practice voluntary simplicity. Greater material security combined with social upheaval is difficult to articulate in terms of a given concept but it is worth keeping in mind the aforementioned division between ‘anticonsumerist’ and ‘late modern’ thought.

Early theorist of postmaterialism, Ronald Inglehart (1977, 1981, 1990), makes the argument that postmaterialism (or, the particular values that an individual holds in the experience of material abundance) is a “deep-rooted phenomenon” (1981: 897) in Western societies. The framework underpinning this claim is complex. In his surveys, Inglehart has considered the following factors to be central to determining a ‘materialist’ or ‘postmaterialist’ mindset:

A. Maintain order in the nation, B. Give people more say in the decisions of the government, C. Fight rising prices, D. Protect freedom of speech, E. Maintain a high rate of economic growth, F. Make sure that this country has strong defense forces, G. Give people more say in how things are decided at work and in their community, H. Try to make our cities and countryside more beautiful, I. Maintain a stable economy, J. Fight against crime, K. Move toward a friendlier, less impersonal society, L. Move toward a society where ideas count more than money (Inglehart 1981: 884).

The closed format of the findings determined which of the goals the survey participants deemed to be most important. In the formulation above, for example, options “I” and
“K” connoted materialist and postmaterialist value sets respectively. The rise of postmaterialism which Inglehart discovers is framed in terms of two further concepts. Inglehart attempts to understand the relationship between what one ‘possesses’ (material wealth, security) and ‘needs’ (expectations, desires) in terms of two possible hypotheses concerning “scarcity” and “socialisation”:

The “scarcity” hypothesis places immediate ‘needs’ at the centre of (post)materialist attitudes. It presumes that an individual will always rate personal fulfilment above altruistic concerns. The hypothesis draws upon the psychological tradition of Maslow (1954), in which individuals seek to acquire that which is in “relatively short supply” (Inglehart 1981: 881). An individual who satisfies thirst and hunger will, necessarily, prize other ‘needs’ such as “esteem, self-expression and aesthetic satisfaction” (1981: 881). This formulation of ‘scarcity’ roughly coincides with the popular view that money, or, one’s immediate economic ‘situation’ determines one’s values.

The “socialisation” hypothesis, by contrast, suggests that the relationship between materialist and post-materialist value sets is established over time, especially during an individual’s “preadult years” (Inglehart 1981: 881). Here, Inglehart suggests that the individual’s ‘intrinsic’ postmaterialist attitudes may be put into conflict with ‘acquired’ ones, though the relationship is not immediately observable. The individual, in this case, responds to both ‘needs’ of the present as well as the conditions which influenced the ‘needs’ of the individual at a critical point of their life, usually adolescence. The approach presumes a more gradual process of value change. The research which
Inglehart cites suggests that postmaterialists outnumber materialists among a “New Class” of professionals (drawn from the 1960s generation of students) but not from the generation which directly experienced the hardships of the Second World War (Inglehart 1981: 888). Inglehart concludes that the divide between age groups is linked to influence upon decision making; the “New Class” of professionals, whilst being temporarily disadvantaged in the “student ghetto” (1981: 894) of the 1960s, had by the 1980s become influential in the political realm. Temporary economic crises, for Inglehart, were not as great an influence on postmaterialism as the burgeoning influence of these new professionals. According to Inglehart (1981), this explains why economic crises (such as the global oil shock and subsequent inflation of 1973), did not see an automatic reversion of values, even when postmaterialists are directly affected. This conversely applies to ‘materialists’ who experienced hardship during childhood. Immigrants from war-torn countries, for example, often place a high value on material security long after this need is satisfied. This is not to say, however, that these immigrants do not value the happiness of family over wealth. Rather, the individuals are simultaneously conscious and unconscious of the forces which influence their values (in this instance, ‘scarcity’). Conditioning (and critical moments) is/are as important as the response to one’s perceived needs at any given point. Thus, Inglehart’s preferred hypothesis creates a somewhat more balanced relationship between an individual and society but crucially retains personal fulfilment as the focal point of analysis.

In both hypotheses, Inglehart is less interested in the notion of communal welfare as an end in itself. Rather, the value that one places upon ‘community’ would (for Inglehart)
reflect the relative fulfilment of ‘needs’ and whether or not these are (and have been) satisfied. Inglehart’s focus upon large amounts of data over time takes as its primary task proving the (entrenched) existence of postmaterialism within Western societies. Nor was Inglehart able to detect the potential distance between postmaterialist “values” and “actions” (or, the social desirability of postmaterialist thoughts and values) in the broader political realm. Finally, the manner in which postmaterialism is articulated is independent from material constraint but is not necessarily free from market power. In the following chapter, I attempt to place the growing recognition of postmaterialism since the 1970s with burgeoning anxieties more generally, most notably the question about whether ‘postmaterialism’ should have an intrinsic purpose within society; that is, as something more than an aggregation of individual ‘values’.
Chapter 2: The Problem of Postmaterialism

I. Introduction

A central component of voluntary simplicity is its implicit rejection of certain aspects of individualism which are detrimental to community and to the environment. Whilst personal fulfilment is also integral to most voluntary simplicity typologies, the implication of a ‘lifestyle change’ usually implies some form of engagement with others (such as environmentalism or connections with the individual’s local community).

Inglehart’s research is primarily based upon individual responses to a series of pre-formulated statements (such as support for nuclear power) (Inglehart 1981: 897). Being ‘beyond’ materialism with personal values placed at the fore is no guarantee that an individual will care for community or the environment. Many of the ideas from other surveys considered by Inglehart’s (1981: 894) research are so broad that nearly anybody could be regarded as possessing “postmaterialist” values. Factors in other studies attributed to postmaterialism cited by Inglehart such as “more say on job”, “less impersonal society” and “more beautiful cities” (1981: 894) say little about what individuals value at a personal level. It also makes no real distinction between ‘environmental’ and ‘non-environmental’ forms of postmaterialism. Saul Newman (2002: 608, 616) argues that the “conceptual stretching” associated with Inglehart’s approach attempts to be predictive in a cultural environment in which “social science
cannot predict conditions”. Newman points out that the growing secularisation of the West which Inglehart associates with postmaterialism is not a one-way process, and that the “symbols and myths” which prevail should be used “…to help pinpoint how cultural change is mediated through individuals, institutions and mobilizing frames to influence political change” (2002: 617). Following from this, it is not any more appropriate to refer to a single postmaterialist ‘culture’ than it is to identify a single ‘democratic’ or ‘religious’ culture. Postmaterialism is merely a concept which seeks to explain different elements of social change, some of which have little to do with postmaterialism itself. Viewing postmaterialism as independent of culture (that is, as a predetermined cultural “shift”) is a substantial political issue which in itself shapes cultural values. As it will be discussed in the following chapters, elements of postmaterialism have been co-opted by companies, governments and other traditionally ‘conservative’ institutions in the hope of generating (and maintaining) wealth and influence. Methods of individual expression which express values, too, have changed dramatically since the 1970s. The age of social media is an opportunity for both meaningful and superficial discussions of values. An individual can, expound one view on an online forum, followed shortly by another contradictory view, without much fear of being held to account. Pro-environmental fads and subtle corporate manipulation frequently generates criticisms against environmentalists and voluntary simplifiers. As it will be shown in the following chapters, this has encouraged individual, movement and external reflections, all of which have shaped contemporary voluntary simplicity culture. Postmaterialism may be a relatively stable component of Western
societies, as Inglehart contends, but just what postmaterialism actually entails is no clearer than Inglehart’s initial foray into the value individuals place upon law and order and impersonal society.

II. Leisure & the Postmaterialist Ethos

Inglehart’s theory is not fully able to take into account the “institutions and mobilizing frames” (Newman 2002: 617) which underpin postmaterialism. His ‘socialisation’ hypothesis is, nonetheless, a useful means for analysing individual motivations more generally. Individual values are not formed instantly upon invitation from a researcher, nor are values pre-packaged views awaiting public dissemination. This makes Inglehart’s theory not only a means of explaining broad social phenomena but also offers a way for individuals to assess their own values. However, it is reasonable to point out that Inglehart’s approach was not designed for personal reflection or to agitate for social change, but rather to indicate the presence of value change within Western societies.

Inglehart has evidence to show that the rise of post-materialist oriented middle-aged professionals is indicative of a broader value shift in Western publics. The move of 1960s radicals into mainstream professions by the 1980s is apparently indicative of a sustained trend towards postmaterialist value sets. This “New Class” (Inglehart 1981: 894) of wealthy professionals has helped reinforce post-materialism more generally, though these individuals remain a relative minority in Western societies (Inglehart 1990). As people experience extended abundance, Inglehart contends, postmaterialism becomes entrenched within society itself. However, as this development has taken hold,
differences between postmaterialists have clearly emerged which require deeper questioning than that intially offered by Inglehart. With this in mind, it is important to remember that Inglehart’s research into postmaterialism detected a broad cultural shift, but postmaterialists themselves have not been oblivious to the recognition that the shift has procured. This means that researchers and theorists alike should cast a critical eye over values, especially when these are presented as a fait accompli. Value formation is not a purely insular or protected process; individuals are equally influenced by “institutions and mobilizing frames” (Newman 2002: 617), namely, the structures which encourage and temper cultural change. In sum, Inglehart’s theory of postmaterialism should be understood as a useful starting point toward an ever evolving range of ‘values’ of which an individual is not always aware.

The language of postmaterialism therefore has what might be described as an ‘essential’ contradiction at its core. Put simply, in order to move beyond ‘needs’ as the sole basis for personal fulfilment, a discussion about these very same ‘needs’ must take place. Whilst the inauthenticity of such a discussion may be clear to some (Lasch 1979), this is arguably preferable to an institutionalised or collectively sanctioned form of postmaterialism. Inglehart himself remarked that a postmaterialist society which is fully realised (through a “punitive spirit”) against industry could ironically undermine the basis for postmaterialist values (1981: 898). This is evidence that Inglehart’s large quantitative studies are not well suited for distinguishing types of postmaterialist values and whether such values are necessarily complimentary. It is essential to distinguish the internal processes which dictate postmaterialist values from a postmaterialist politics which
escapes classification. At an individual level, “needs” are both personal and socially constructed but are usually understood in exclusive terms (i.e. as ‘personal’ or ‘social’). The quest for ‘self-actualisation’ runs parallel with the decline of traditional social categories within Western publics. At one level, therefore, postmaterialists are drawing from similar circumstances in which individual and collective upheaval has taken place. This is a general point of agreement amongst those voluntary simplifiers who choose a solitary lifestyle and those who seek a life predicated upon communal ties. The loss of certainty in everything from relationships to job security reflects the general desires of individuals to forge more individual freedom and community engagement.

Such uncertainty, however, has led individuals to various forms of nostalgia, as well as postmaterialism. Advocates of “late modernity”, “individualization” and “reflexive modernization” (Beck 1992, 2000, Giddens 1991, Bauman 1998, Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002), for example, all contend that the ‘radical shifts’ away from traditional social categories are in some respect constitutive of their presence (imagined or actual). Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002), point out that traditional categories such as family and work are in decline. However, the fact that these concepts remain politically salient means that they continue to exist as “zombie categories” (2002: 27). Individuals in this way distance themselves from and occasionally yearn for social structures which may no longer exist. In short, the process of ‘self-actualization’ inherent in postmaterialism concerns a loss of community as much as a loss of individual identity but is usually presented as one or the other. But rather than coming to a conclusion over the ‘intrinsic’ value of such structures, individuals relate to these “categories” through significant life
events, which in turn determine whether these structures retain a ‘personal’ or ‘social’
importance. For example, an individual’s divorce will influence their views about ‘the
nuclear family’ but the nature of such views is likely to be fluid and draw upon both
personal experience and knowledge over what traditionally constitutes the ‘nuclear
family’. Hence, whilst there is general agreement over the presence of a social malaise or
alienation within the late-modern West, a more pertinent question about the ‘source’ (or
sources) of postmaterialism becomes apparent. Individuals in search of a lifestyle change
respond to a range of conflicting principles and are therefore manipulable as discourses
no longer grounded in enduring social circumstances. In later sections, this thesis will
contend that this insecurity provides an entry point for those who reduce ‘self-
actualisation’ to consumption above all else. Individuals are not necessarily aware of the
forces which bind them, though levels of awareness can change over time. This
frustratingly abstract notion, understood as a gradual process of realising one’s needs and
aspirations, is an increasingly important component in contemporary voluntary simplicity
discourse of ‘openness’ and ‘genuineness’, a complex debate which will also surface in
later sections of this thesis.

The amenability of Inglehart’s postmaterialism to nearly any situation involving ‘identity
formation’ has been an important factor in the framing of the voluntary simplicity social
movement. As this thesis attempted to explain earlier, it is tempting to view Inglehart’s
theory of postmaterialism purely in terms of individual motivations, but “institutions and
mobilizing frames” (social structures which include, it will be shown, the market and
social movements), also influence individual value formation. Given the presence of the
postmaterialist ‘value shift’ within Western publics, it is almost certain that the ‘shift’ itself is a concept of contention. For if ‘needs’ such as meaningfulness, social acceptance and cultural distinctiveness are ever present among voluntary simplifiers, individuals too, may become part of the intellectual landscape.

Much about this development can be explained by existing sociological theory. Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) notions of “cultural capital” and “distinction” have helped to explain the constantly evolving nature of a cultural “field” within most social movements. The concepts suggest why previously esoteric concepts become popular and are subsequently shunned by a movement’s ‘true’ representatives (who are often unexpectedly subsumed into popular culture). If this has taken place within the voluntary simplicity movement, it has been a complicated and contradictory process. This is because the meanings of voluntary simplicity itself are unclear to both practitioners and to the world’s ‘non-simplifying’ majority. As it will be discussed in later sections of this thesis, the perceived popularity of various forms of postmaterialism (and voluntary simplicity) have generated new cultural developments which attempt to assuage the instability caused by the inevitable quest for “distinction” in all social movements.

The initial source of this division is inadvertently identified by Inglehart. Inglehart’s “New Class” often fills positions of mainstream political parties that young radicals tend to eschew. No longer limited to the student protests of the 1960s, postmaterialists have “direct access to the command posts of the socio-political system” (Inglehart 1981: 894).
Elements of this “New Class” often write prescriptive ‘self-help’ books which many view as an extension (rather than a critique) of late-capitalism (Lichterman 1992, Lasch 1979). The question “Who owns the value shift?” is in many respects more important than whether or not the value shift has taken place. Inglehart points to the presence of postmaterialists in the political realm, including parliamentarians, religious and corporate figures (1981: 894). In Inglehart’s analysis, however, there is little analysis of the ways that post-materialist rationales influence social change. Here, a potential discord arises between the intellectualisation of postmaterialism within society and the presence of postmaterialist value sets within individuals. This is particularly salient when one considers the infinitely adaptable notion of ‘progressive’ ideas in the political realm.

Ironically, the prevailing minority status of postmaterialists in the political realm can have the effect of stunting internal debates and generalising postmaterialist values. This is because the power relations of the relative minority are not considered in the public realm, and talking points are usually provided by more general concepts and principles (such as neoliberalism, alienation or capitalism). Those who venerate the ‘postmaterialist’ values are often oblivious to the power relations which influence such ideas. Concepts such as ‘inequality’, ‘alienation’ and ‘environmental degradation’ are rarely seen as contradictory in movements which can be described as ‘progressive’ (such as the voluntary simplicity movement). In practice, however, the concepts highlight highly varied worldviews.

The tension between individual values and broad categories which seek to standardise such values is an uncultivated debate within the postmaterialist realm. It is perhaps
because a form of postmaterialism which purports to understand or stereotype individuals implicitly (in the minds of many) detracts from a ‘truly’ postmaterialist lifestyle. That is, a lifestyle which is characterised by others indirectly subverts the ways in which individuals formulate their own ‘postmaterialist’ values. In either case, a commitment to pluralism or individual differences functions as an awareness which moves beyond Inglehart’s original explanation of Western value change. ‘Value change’ now serves as a fulcrum between ‘self-actualisation’ and reflections on how others will view such ‘self-actualisation’ (that is, where one finds him/herself on the postmaterialist ‘spectrum’). In practice, this creates a kind of cognitive dissonance, where an individual responds to both the freedom from constraint (post-materialism) and the various perceptions of what this freedom might involve. This often generates generalised categories of individuals which carry with them various forms of cultural appeal and stigma (eg. ‘the conservationist’, ‘the treechanger’, ‘the feminist’, ‘the loner’, etc). The title of Inglehart’s best known work, *The Silent Revolution* (1977), is therefore only a semi-accurate depiction of postmaterialist value sets in Western societies. The trend towards postmaterialism is clear, but reflection upon this trend by postmaterialists (in the politcal realm) themselves has generated a slightly different dynamic. It is therefore integral to separate postmaterialism as a social phenomenon (as delineated by Inglehart) and postmaterialism as an idea variously interpreted as a means of achieving further social change (i.e. as a vehicle for ideas and political agendas). The absence of a discussion over what values would fill this divide between postmaterialism and its interpretations has been key to the development of voluntary simplicity itself over time.
This chapter has attempted to trace the growth in postmaterialist ‘culture’. I propose that postmaterialism has transformed from an academic tool to a concept used to describe an ever-evolving array of values and social conditions. Where postmaterialism initially made no real distinction between individual and collective values, contemporary interpretations of postmaterialism reflect more complex ethical dilemmas for the voluntary simplicity movement. Is postmaterialism based upon a willingness to perform collective ‘goods’? If so, should this reflect environmental (conservation) or social (community service) acts? What is the role of individualism?

The following chapters will offer a deeper examination of the ways in which theorists and critics have interpreted postmaterialist culture. It will suffice at this point to suggest that postmaterialism says surprisingly little about specific value orientations of individuals. Alienation and social dysfunction are both concepts which most (even non-simplifiers) could agree with, but this critique in effect says little about what individuals actually believe. An individual’s interests may coincide with broad concepts (eg. environmentalism), but ‘individualisation’ often means that values can be changed or jettisoned without great consternation. This critique, which I discuss in detail (chapter 4), forms a key line of attack for communitarian critiques of postmaterialism. As it will be argued, this critique has generated a further culture shift which currently pervades the voluntary simplicity movement.
It is perhaps easy to forget that theorists of individualism have also been forced to adapt
to the development of postmaterialist culture. After all, Inglehart’s theory measures
individual values as the basis for cultural change. The reflection upon which the
realisation of postmaterialist values is based invokes questions of a philosophical nature.
If postmaterialist values of a minority are to be realised, can individualism and self-
reflection genuinely provoke social change? Could such change be deemed unimportant
by individuals with a postmaterialist mindset? How and why?

These are complex questions which theorists of both individualism and
communitarianism have attempted to consider. It is important to remember that
individualism and communitarianism retain a conceptual salience within the lives of
Inglehart’s postmaterialists. These extremely broad philosophies served as conceptual
tools in discussions which ranged from civil rights to considerations of a ‘global
community’. In spite of significant ontological differences, both individualism and
communitarianism involved a key element of Inglehart’s postmaterialism, most notably,
the notion that ‘true’ personal and (or) collective wellbeing was more important than pure
economic efficiency. Postmaterialism, as a concept, remains as much a tool for ‘self-
help’ authors as it does for global activists. It is therefore unclear whether
postmaterialism has closer connections to individual ‘needs’ or a sense of a collective
wellbeing. Indeed, the theorists of “individualization” and “reflexive modernity” are
equally ambivalent about possible links. Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and others
mainly concerned themselves with changing perspectives on everyday matters, leaving
what individuals ‘ought’ to think about the decline of traditional social categories to one
side. In a world where individualisation is the norm, nostalgia for past structures appears to most as an indulgence rather than a course for collective action.

This leaves two general propositions for those attempting to deconstruct the postmaterialist mindset which I will consider in the following two chapters. On one hand, the loss of individualism resulting from the decline of work as a source of personal fulfilment necessitates a new and impenetrable form of individualism which remains inviolable. Postmaterialism here requires a kind of isolated (individualised) value reconstruction which is inviolable from scrutiny. On the other, the decline of traditional social structures has necessitated a new form of community which is independent of material constraints and proceeds to reaffirm (or reconstruct) the social ‘position’ of individuals. And in what has arguably been the biggest factor in contemporary understandings of individualism and community, Inglehart’s “New Class” of postmaterialists of the 1980s would soon begin to engage with the very forms of consumption which many voluntary simplifiers purport to eschew.
Chapter 3: Individualism

I. Late Modernity

II. New Sources of Neoliberalism

I. Late Modernity

The notion that the individual is the locus of society is one of the touchstones of contemporary sociology. Subjects of interest to sociologists with an overtly individualistic focus include: intimacy (Bauman 2003), the decline of the traditional family (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002), employment insecurity, social movements (Melucci 1985, 1989) and postmaterialism (Inglehart 1977). The broad thrust of contemporary sociological theory operates on the presumption that it is the individual’s desires, goals and anxieties which characterise society as a whole. Notions of ‘the individual’, however, are not independent of power relations. The connection between theory and public interpretations of individualism is particularly evident in the theory of Anthony Giddens. Giddens, who is perhaps best known as advisor to the British Labour Party in the late 1990s, was responsible for normalising market-based individualism. ‘Third Way’ economics had the effect of dissolving ideological divisions which were politically problematic, placing additional pressure upon individuals to be productive and ‘active’ citizens. This “epistemological fallacy” (Furlong 2009: 349) tacitly convinces individuals that ‘action’ rather than ‘history’ explains personal successes and failures.
II. New Sources of Neoliberalism

One of the key moral dilemmas faced by voluntary simplifiers is the relationship between personal development and the culture of “individualization” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002) which sees such development as independent of social structures. Inglehart’s postmaterialism showed that what constitutes a truly ‘free’ individual is tied both to the mental capacities that one accords to individuals themselves as well as the ways in which personal history influences meaning making. Yet, as I explained in the previous chapter, contemporary culture runs against the kind of contextualised identity which Inglehart describes. The notion of “self-actualisation” as a never ending “project” (Giddens 1991) in the life of an individual is not especially regarded as detrimental to wellbeing. In fact, self-oriented ‘storytelling’ is often regarded as redemptive individualism at work; it tells the storyteller (and his/her audience) that he/she remains ‘in control’ in spite of great uncertainty. Theorists have shown that this kind of confected optimism has filled the space left by support structures such as community and the “social capital” which it engenders (Putnam 2000). Individualism, as a consequence, masks social breakdown by appearing to remain ‘relevant’ or ‘realistic’ in the lives of people who otherwise struggle without social support structures (which are sometimes maligned).

Despite the fact that most people acknowledge and regret the loss of community, individualisation is frequently recognised as the main source of social bonds. Social media technology connects individuals with unique interests or backgrounds more efficiently than any other medium. It simultaneously represents therapy and self-
actualisation, usually without the connotation of weakness that the former implies.

Where ‘pre-individualisation’ support structures often involved judgement of character (eg. religion), contemporary platforms allow individuals to tailor their own ‘experience’ of community. In this way, an individual’s ability to identify and refine a moral cause is central to the maintenance of the identity upon which it is based. In other words, the moral uncertainty brought on by individualisation becomes the individual’s purpose.

The extent to which individualisation and postmaterialism function hand in hand is therefore questionable. At one level, postmaterialism presumes an emphasis on identity (non-material) interests. The values connoting postmaterialism are highlighted in Inglehart’s survey (italicised below):

A. Maintain order in the nation, B. Give people more say in the decisions of the government, C. Fight rising prices, D. Protect freedom of speech, E. Maintain a high rate of economic growth, F. Make sure that this country has strong defense forces, G. Give people more say in how things are decided at work and in their community, H. Try to make our cities and countryside more beautiful, I. Maintain a stable economy, J. Fight against crime, K. Move toward a friendlier, less impersonal society, L. Move toward a society where ideas count more than money (Inglehart 1981: 884).

Inglehart’s main concepts of interest relate to political engagement (B), civil rights (D), city management and government responsiveness (G, H), friendship (K) and an intelligent society (L). The kind of moral uncertainty which concerns Inglehart relates to government, with the exception of (K) and perhaps (L). This is interesting because it demonstrates the environmental bias at the centre of postmaterialism. Whilst personal fulfilment and individualisation are considered obliquely in Inglehart’s formulation, the unmistakable references to government and politics are given a much greater emphasis.
If the reader recalls the lack of moral certainty brought on by individualisation, it is difficult to see how the political elements of postmaterialism truly explain the rise of voluntary simplicity. The kinds of reflections on personal fulfilment and society in most contemporary ‘self-help’ manuals, for example, emphasise individualism (as ‘self-help’ would naturally imply). Nonetheless, as I will argue in a later chapter, Inglehart’s non-specific and environmentally oriented interpretation of postmaterialism remains popular amongst academics if not voluntary simplifiers themselves. This debate between self-interest and collective will is therefore based upon two distinct views about postmaterialism. On one hand, the notion of a postmaterialist ‘culture’ is an extension of the structural phenomenon which Inglehart originally describes; as ideas about conservation, community and personal fulfilment spread over time, this is reflected in social constructs (such as parliament and democratic protest). There is a possibility, on the other hand, that ‘self-help’ culture does not reflect postmaterialism at all; rather, postmaterialist culture merely reflects the pressures placed upon individuals and the very absence of some postmaterialist values. In other words, what the observer sees in an individual’s values may in fact be different from what the individual actually believes.

Much of this latter formulation depends upon whether the reader regards postmaterialism as a concept which connotes political or therapy-based solutions to individual problems. I wish to argue that this is an active tension within the field of voluntary simplicity because the basis of postmaterialist values is not settled. Individualisation has compelled individuals to place greater importance upon both notions of freedom and community solidarity but the different shades of each of these concepts are rarely considered. Could
an ‘individualist’ who desires a “friendlier, less impersonal society” but who places little to no importance upon the environment or government decisions be described as a ‘postmaterialist’? The quantitative nature of Inglehart’s surveys sheds no light on this question.

Nonetheless, this question remains at the heart of postmaterialist culture and the varied interpretations of what it should entail. It is important to remember that individualism, characterised increasingly by excessive consumption is a given concept which is present in all interpretations of voluntary simplicity. As a consequence, individualism, as a concept, remains much maligned by critics who remain sceptical about the intent of individuals (Lasch 1979, Bellah et al. 1985). This critique, which I attempt to analyse in the following chapter, tends to be uncompromising and harsh. Friendship (as implied by Inglehart) is still an important part of postmaterialist culture, even though an absence of political action may render such connections inconsequential. And, indeed, there is nothing to say that an individual who only prioritises the ‘joy’ of friendship or even living in isolation cannot be postmaterialist. But, as I show in the next chapter, the notion of ‘the individual’ retains significant cultural baggage; in fact, the very sources of constraint and identity loss for individuals are the basis for criticism of individualism itself.
Chapter 4: The (Communitarian) Critique of Neoliberalism

I. Postmaterialism in Everyday Life

Postmaterialism has been criticised in academic circles (Bekin et al. 2005, Ballantine & Creery 2010, Humphery 2010, Marsh 1977). Moreover, the privatisation of leisure resulting from a liberalisation of market economies in the 1980s has offered individuals the opportunity to ‘experience’ quality of life. Corporate leisure and various activities which involve stress relief often blur the line between consumerism and self-actualisation. More generally, the rise of “conspicuous simplicity” (Brooks 2003), or status-oriented conservation has changed the consumer landscape. Trends range from celebrity endorsements of (nominally) environmentally sound products to industries which seek to capitalise upon the vague notion of the ‘green’ consumer (Cherrier 2007). The “vanguardist” nature of such culture often conveys a “vision of gain” in which emancipation from consumer society is limited to an “enlightened few” (Humphery 2010: 160-161). This underlying rationale of individualised benefits associated with lifestyle change has far broader influence than it does within esoteric green groups. ‘Simplicity’ as a principle has been adopted by a vast majority of marketing firms and is a desirable social characteristic more generally. It conveys control, power through relative modesty
and adaptability to diverse social trends. Conservative author David Brooks (2011: 4) refers to this kind of attitude as belonging to the “Composure Class”, a group of wealthy and sophisticated individuals who are unable to prioritise the basics of life whilst “making everybody else feel inferior”. This kind of critique is amenable to consumption as well. Popular consumer products (eg. Apple) are often praised for a simple, economical and visually distinct design (even though the value of stylistic ‘advantages’ is questionable). The association of excessive effort with the most undesirable elements of consumer society (eg. in loud and unintelligible television advertisements) has necessitated subtler ways of attracting a consumer’s attention (eg. product associations with charities or morally ‘good’ causes). In this way, ‘the experience’ of a product is often as important as its material function. The coalescence of the principles of consumer capitalism (i.e. built in obsolescence of products and excessive consumption) with postmaterialist ideals (an unspecified social ‘good’) is subtle and often presented without the slightest awareness of contradiction.

This postmaterialist ‘trend’ increasingly characterises popular culture in the West and around the world. The formulaic ‘romantic comedy’ film genre can usually be reduced to the notion that money (and related character traits like arrogance) cannot buy happiness (though this wisdom is often not recalled by people in real life situations). Marketing psychology is based, in large part, upon convincing people that a large (and probably unnecessary) purchase for family is justifiable on the grounds that money is not as important as those one cares about. That an individual might deploy the language of postmaterialism to fulfil fundamentally material ends is indicative of a fairly recent
development in contemporary culture. Appeals to a ‘moral good’ are achieved through symbols which are contextualised only through the products being advertised. For example, the ‘self-help’ book genre which seeks to explain this conflation of principles is itself regarded as a symptom of consumerism based social malaise. Indeed, a jaundiced reader might view the financial success of “self-help” authors who write of the joys of material deprivation as irreconcilably hypocritical. Arguably, this ‘materialistic’ postmaterialism is a kind of concealed contradiction which is tacitly referred to by people to command leverage and can encourage arrogant or abusive behaviour. Domestic violence, for example, is often justified on the grounds that the aggressor’s partner does not appreciate material goods provided for (apparently) well-intentioned purposes.

The material/postmaterial inversion technique is also a favourite of politicians, who, under sustained questioning over funding reductions proclaim that policy outcomes are not ‘just about the money’. This is despite the fact that such a statement usually represents a complete fixation upon the monetary implications of a policy. The notion that ‘inspiration’ transcends all material encumbrances is a popular notion in creative industries, which is used to justify great expense and unorthodox or untimely methods. In fact, in all spheres of life, some form of postmaterialism is at play and represents, in essence, a subtle means of getting what one wants.

On social issues, for example, general support for an issue grants an individual the ability to attach the abstract notion of ‘conviction’ to their own sense of self-worth whilst
maintaining a unique public profile. In this way, the issue itself becomes a vehicle to advance some other cause, which is often unrelated to the individual’s stated aims. This can take the form of an obfuscation of individual and collective goals. It is this which is at play when the postmaterialism which Inglehart identifies as a trend in the post war West intersects with those who purport to represent those ideals. For example, the leader of a socialist movement may in fact have the ultimate intention of promulgating a doctrine of self-aggrandisement and deification. Jim Jones, the religious leader of the “People’s Temple” mixed religious, Marxist and authoritarian ideology in a movement which eventuated in the ordered suicides of nearly all its members. Despite the overt anti-capitalist (anti-consumerist) ideals of the leader, Jones eventually came to see himself as a conduit of god. Though this remains an extreme example of self-centredness and manipulation, it might also be argued that contemporary environmentalism sustains a similar critique.

II. A Culture of Narcissism?

It should be of little surprise that the politics of conservation more generally is regarded as a transient fashion or the preserve of a supercilious ‘elite’. On the one hand, ‘simplicity’ is often seen as a populist lifestyle choice, little more than a mainstream reformulation of 1960s counter-culture. On the other, the complex politics of individual and collective fulfilment is viewed as a series of esoteric debates between competing ideological forces which belie the notion of ‘simplicity’ itself. Neither of these
conceptions of voluntary simplicity culture resembles a way forward for conservation politics more generally.

For ‘communitarian’ critics of personal fulfilment, the implication of the postmaterialist ‘trend’ is that individualism ultimately provokes selfish and vain behaviour at the expense of substantive political engagement. Writing at a time of incipient consumer capitalism in the United States, Christopher Lasch (1979: 10) argued that the individual’s need for an “admiring audience” in a depoliticised environment of self-fulfilment is linked to a “culture of narcissism”. The era of ‘self-actualisation’ generated by this culture, for communitarians, “posit(s) a free individual in a totally administered society” (Lasch 1979, Lichterman 1992: 423). Lasch contends that the distance of individuals from social processes leads to a futile quest for self-actualisation, or, the “banality” of “endless possibility” (1979: 11):

Twentieth-century peoples have erected so many psychological barriers against strong emotion…that they can no longer remember what it feels like to be inundated by desire. They tend, rather, to be consumed with rage, which derives from defenses against desire and gives rise in turn to new defenses against rage itself (Lasch 1979: 11).

In the above quotation, Lasch is deriding the lifestyle change upon which unstructured movements like voluntary simplicity, and self-actualisation more broadly, is based. Lasch makes two separate though interrelated points. Firstly, political engagement is based upon emotional forces and feelings an individual has no power to articulate. Yet, this increases the power of the bureaucracies and institutions which shape this consciousness and consequently lead to insular, “therapy” based solutions on the part of
individuals. Intellectually flaccid protest, in this context, becomes an affirmation rather than a refutation of the forces which people resent (consumerism and alienation, in the case of voluntary simplicity). The second, and rather more interesting element of the above quotation is the implied negative connotation associated with respect for others and pluralism (“defenses against rage itself”).

The implication of Lasch’s argument is that a politics based upon the self is doomed to failure because the pluralistic non-judgment which such self-actualisation involves is itself a constraint on the self and social change more broadly. The hint of scorn directed at universal respect for (uninformed and insular) individual ‘opinions’ involves a degree of hubris which most voluntary simplicity practitioners would today likely reject. Whilst the social problems identified by communitarians like Lasch are still replicated within the ‘self-help’ genre today, approaches to consumer culture have changed to a degree. Needless to say, communitarians like Lasch are not particularly interested in possible exceptions to this conservative understanding of contemporary culture. The implication is that individuals who purport to represent the interests of a wider public are at best deluded by their own fruitless quest for self actualisation, or, at worst seek to control collectives though faux collective imaginaries.

The cultures of minimal commitment which result are an attractive source of criticism for communitarians (see Lichterman 1992, Bellah et al. 1985). Arai & Pedlar (2003: 190) argue that “the public realm is valued for its instrumentality; that is, as a public means for
achieving private ends.” Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002: 26) boldly contend that “the public realm no longer has anything to do with collective decisions”, adding that “selfrealisation” has become little more than a “public stopgap” in the absence of collective structures. For MacIntyre (1981: 19), the absence of shared morality resulting from liberalism has led to fallacious expressions of collective sentiment which merely “mask” an individual’s “personal preference”. This “culture of emotivism” (MacIntyre 1981: 22) creates environments conducive to demagogues who seek to maximise personal publicity whilst appealing to various forms of collectivism. This then raises the question about whether any singular form of moral truth is possible, something which MacIntyre, and communitarians generally, find doubtful (Kitchen 1997). The pessimistic reduction of individualism to selfishness and alienation serves as a critique of both capitalism and the resultant culture of personal fulfilment. Social ills like overconsumption and alienation, communitarians argue, cannot be overcome through ‘individual’ initiative alone, irrespective of purpose. Or, to put the philosophical position differently, “…the existence of political community (and our attachment to it) should be the starting-point of our philosophical reflections, and the value of political community should be the conclusion” (Kukathas 1996: 81).

For communitarians, an intellectualised critique of the forces which purportedly undermine political activity and social change is ineffective without corresponding communal involvement. The communitarian argument rests upon a form of traditional Durkheimean ([1912] 2012) theory in which individuals are never truly able to externalise themselves from the social forces which bind them. Communitarians aim
simultaneously to reject the principles of consumer society as well as the individualised responses which consumer society ironically sustains. In this sense, the quest for an ‘authentic’ or “unencumbered” (Sandel 1984a, 1984b) self is unachievable, insofar as the self cannot exist without the social environment to support such authenticity. It is important to remember that communitarianism is, first and foremost, a critique of the *entire* era of “institutionalised individualism” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002). This refers to the decline of traditional social categories such as community *as well as* the continual need for the individual to refashion identity (Giddens 1991, Bauman 2001).

Alternatively, Beck & Beck-Gernshiem (2002) argue that as individuals are required to ‘service’ each component of their identities themselves, collective identities become increasingly difficult to maintain. This appears to create a situation where the “unencumbered” individual must “lurch” between “detachment” and “entanglement” interchangeably (Sandel 1981: 28 in Dagger 1999: 186). ‘Detachment’ in this instance refers to alienation from categories which provide moral support, whereas ‘entanglement’ refers to the engagement with socially regressive groupings or groups with otherwise weak social bonds. This generates nostalgia for collective categories, which MacIntyre (1981) suggests allows individuals in power to appeal to collective imaginaries for personal gain. Representatives of the ‘self-help’ era might fall into this category. For communitarians, the consultation of self-help ‘manuals’ (in groups or alone) is a symptom of the individual’s perennial inability to deal with this “entanglement” and “detachment” (Lichterman 1992). An individual may, for instance, become involved (‘entangled’) in certain social processes in order to avoid alienation (‘detachment’), but
the aversion to the latter may inadvertently negate the former. The implication is that residual collective activity which occurs in the presence of an individualised society is a symptom of rather than an affirmative refutation of the forces which induce alienation (Lasch 1979). In this sense, any individual attempt to assuage feelings of selfishness or alienation, for communitarians, actually demonstrates their existence. For example, the very existence of public charities, for example, often obfuscates the absence of government funding and general public apathy toward the less fortunate.

III. Communitarian Theory: Three Avenues

The broad rationale for communitarianism has important implications for the individual with postmaterialist value orientations. It serves as a consistent warning against the selfishness and social fragmentation characteristic of late capitalism. It also provides an interesting starting point for debates about voluntary simplicity, which is increasingly viewed as a means for mitigating these social ills (eg Andrews 2013a). Yet communitarian theory is wide ranging and more controversial than it appears. Communitarian theory has over time attempted to address the assumptions which have impugned the postmaterialist turn in Western societies. Thus, it is crucial at this point to distinguish the three main aspects of communitarian theory.

The “embeddedness” thesis (Caney 1992) concerns the philosophical orientation of communitarianism. The ‘critical’ thesis, often closely allied to the ‘embeddedness’ thesis, is a general critique of ‘liberalism’ which doubts the possibility of a
‘communitarian’ society in spite of social fragmentation. The ‘pluralist’ thesis, by contrast, is a pragmatic approach which resembles moderate liberalism. Pluralism, to be sure, is a form of liberalism as it implies acceptance irrespective of social norms, but elements of pluralism have been co-opted by more recent communitarian theorists in search of a middle ground. This puts communitarian philosophy into an internal conflict between sceptics (eg Lasch 1979, MacIntyre 1981, Taylor 1989) and pragmatists (eg Etzioni 1996a, 1996b, Kemmelmeier et al. 2006). In the following section, I shall refer to the main proponents of communitarian theory Daniel Bell (1973, 1976), Alasdair MacIntyre (1981), Michael Sandel (1984), Amitai Etzioni (1994, 1996a, 1996b), and others where necessary. I am aware that theorists from the various communitarian and liberal traditions would take issue with elements of the overview offered here. To this, I suggest that any incidental oversight is attributable to changes which have taken place within the theoretical field.¹

The excesses of individual consumption (and the general lack of agreement over what could or should replace it) have provided the symbols for communitarians and liberals respectively. Early communitarian theorising was based upon the presence of both a ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ thesis (Kitchen 1997). On one hand, the philosophy of communitarianism rests upon the inextricability of the individual from a social ‘identity’. Michael Sandel (1982: 150, cited in Cohen 2000: 284) describes this ‘positive’ iteration of communitarian theory: “Community describes not just what they have as fellow

¹ Academic works in this period tend to be influenced by concepts central to Cold War politics (especially communism and authoritarianism). They have had little to no bearing on voluntary simplicity culture in recent times. Note also that the use of the term ‘liberal’ in this thesis represents individualism in all its forms (as opposed to its American usage which usually connotes Leftist politics).
citizens but also what they are, not a relationship they choose . . . but an attachment they discover, not merely an attribute but a constituent of their identity.”

This “embeddedness thesis” (Caney 1992: 274) is predicated upon the notion that individuals are, first and foremost, “bearers of a particular social identity” (MacIntyre 1981: 220). The philosophy is traceable back to Durkheim’s ([1912] 2012: 247) conception of society as the primary entity in the formation of the individual,

Society is a reality sui generis; it has its own particular characteristics, which are not found elsewhere and which are not met with again in the same form in all the rest of the universe. The representations which express it have wholly different contents from purely individual ones and we may be rest assured in advance that the first add something to the second (Durkheim ([1912] 2012: 247).

This approach takes as a given the notion that it is not possible to put into question the “social features of (an) existence” (MacIntyre 1981: 220). Taken in a conservative reading, the implication is that it is fundamentally impossible to see through that of which one is a part. Where autonomy is inferred, for early communitarians this is understood as a “discovery” (Sandel 1982) of social position, from which an individual is never truly able to achieve distance. This teleological element of Durkheim’s theory has been widely criticised within sociology for being both unrealistic and susceptible to ideology. Liberal critics, too, have rightly queried how this ‘positive’ approach can account for social change, particularly with regard to issues which most contemporary theorists would assess as socially regressive. The fact that individuals change community allegiances indeed suggests that community cannot be, as Caney (1992: 275) suggests, a “philosophy of mind”. The presence of multiple communities in turn suggests that no
universally respected form of morality exists in any case. If this is the case, it appears that the ‘embeddedness’ thesis is ultimately a vehicle to advance a ‘critical’ thesis which is not hamstrung by the ontological impositions of what constitutes ‘the person’. That the ‘positive’ communitarian thesis rests upon conscious impositions upon the individual is itself the most probable reason for the presence of a ‘negative’ counterbalance within the same works of communitarian scholars. Indeed, the fact that these social constraints are often described as ‘imposts’ would require, for communitarians, an explanation which could only be drawn from the social context in which one finds herself. In this sense, although communitarianism would dearly like to maintain an ostensibly ‘positive’ philosophy, the practical reality means that a ‘negative’ thesis is always in tow.

On the other hand, the negative thesis moves the locus of analysis away from an individual’s social bonds, and toward the forces which purportedly encroach upon an individual’s realisation of his/her social position, most notably (liberal) individualism. In the context of lifestyle change characteristic of voluntary simplicity, this means that an individual will focus upon the social forces which do not reflect their true ‘identity’. Communitarians have derided “lifestyle enclaves” (Bellah et al. 1985) which support individualistic, “therapy” (Lasch 1979) based collectives as a symptom of rather than a refutation of consumer society. This is particularly unedifying for the reader, especially those who remain sympathetic to communitarian philosophy, because an individualistic iteration of community is (for many) a desirable element of personal ‘lifestyle’. However, individuals cannot ‘own’ that desire, because, according to these communitarians, this desire is inextricably linked to social structures themselves.
This has clear implications for the analysis of voluntary simplicity. Primarily, it suggests that voluntary simplifiers who reject the individualism of consumer society are somehow merely responding to purely social forces, which (if one accepts the notion of market primacy) venerate liberalism over communitarianism. This would imply, rightly or wrongly, that attempts to negate the effects of liberalism are in fact constitutive of liberalism itself, which in turn suggests that all individual efforts are intrinsically narcissistic. It might be argued that this would do little to advance communitarian philosophy in a practical sense, unless one is willing to take action on issues of importance privately whilst accepting the domination of markets over society more broadly. Given, that this is often an implicit feature of voluntary simplicity lifestyles, I will return to this in a later section.

The liberal critique encapsulated within the ‘negative’ communitarian thesis is a fundamental rejection of individualism which is blunt and uncompromising. Even communitarians have reflected upon the jarring tone of 1980s communitarianism. Daniel Bell (2005), reviewing the work of Charles Taylor and Michael Sandel in addition to MacIntyre, characterises the attitude of the early communitarians,

…there seems to have been an assumption that once you expose faulty foundations regarding the liberal self, the whole liberal edifice will come tumbling down. The task is to criticise the underlying philosophy of the self, win people on your side, and then we can move on to a brand new communitarian society that owes nothing to the liberal tradition (Bell 2005: 226).

This hastiness to classify a ‘world not yet known’, appears to resonate from the presence of a highly individualistic society. The implicit distancing from the practical ‘process’ of
community is perhaps due to a recognition that the individualistic society is in fact capable of some form of community, and that this could contradict the ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ communitarian theses respectively. Indeed, the presence of “lifestyle enclaves” (Bellah et al. 1985) which, whilst being based on the individualistic principles of therapy, may still represent some form of meaningful collective engagement. For example, Kemmelmeier et al. (2006), argue that “good works” in wider society can result from collective engagement which prioritises individual autonomy and self-fulfilment. Indeed, as I will argue in chapter seven, most ‘self-help’ writers in the realm of voluntary simplicity operate on the presumption of a mutually dependent relationship between (internally contemplated) individual needs and open (collective) dialogue. As highlighted earlier, liberal critics have seized upon the communitarian overreach as evidence that the individual, not society, is the basis for all interaction. Indeed, the liberal critics of communitarianism have regarded the philosophy as a precursor to authoritarian society with a weak or non-existent public sphere. This sort of ideological rebuke is not particularly realistic or compelling, given that post-materialism (which is largely a product of wealth) usually has a natural inclination towards individualism (rather than the collectivism of ‘market forces’ or authoritarianism). Nonetheless, the imagery of an authoritarian milieu has allowed liberals to distance themselves from the critique of a consumer society in which identity formation is secondary to consumption (see Hamilton 2003, 2005, Schor 1991), in spite of its philosophical preponderance. Contrary to the image of market-oriented alienation, liberals seek to link individual ‘choice’ of association to the development of the ‘person’ (Cohen 2000: 305). The so called “difference principle” (Sandel 1984: 89) which accounts for deviations from
established traditions grants liberals space to critique consumer society. By distinguishing (‘embedded’) personality from “moral personality” (Caney 1992: 278) liberals can accept the possibility of an individual acceding to moral forces. Moreover, liberals argue that if the morally sanctioned consumer society is immoral or alienating, as voluntary simplifiers contend, then clear distinctions between moral and personal personalities would appear essential to achieve social change that communitarians desire. Put differently, any meaningful form of communitarianism in modern society would require, at a minimum, individuals that “refuse what they are” (Foucault 1980, 1982, 1985). Moreover, by suggesting that communal desire is universal and that individuals have no choice in the matter, liberals can contend that the communitarian’s “ideal society” is based upon a distant “normative project” (Cohen 2000: 289).

The implication here is that communitarians are only interested in established communities and closed to the notion of social change. Liberals, by contrast are seen to be open to new associations where loyalty to a cause is constantly reassessed. This has allowed firstly, a communitarian retort based upon abstract social ills (eg ‘liberalism’) and, secondly, a suggestion that liberal and communitarian philosophies in fact have a great deal in common (see Caney 1992, Crowder 2006, Cohen 1998, 2000, Kitchen 1997, Dagger 1999, Buchanan 1989). For example, Bell (2005: 230) points out that “preoccupation with the social order” is a preserve of both liberalism and communitarianism. In fact, liberal critics have subscribed to most elements of communitarian theory including the presence of a “sense of obligation”, but assert the primacy of choice in any obligation experienced. However, the issue for “liberal
communitarian” (Crowder 2006) theorists has been the failure of traditional
communitarians to distinguish the “possibility of choice” from the “desirability of
choice” (Bell 2005: 225).

The implication is that whilst a ‘liberal’ outcome may not come to pass on every
occasion, the possibility for such an outcome should always be available. This notion
would appear to exist on shaky ground, particularly given that many social movements
(including voluntary simplicity) mandate liberal pluralism as the basis for ‘community’.
Such a mandate could also plausibly undermine free thought within a movement, for
socially mandated pluralism, too, is a form of constraint (discussed later). Any sign of
pragmatism within the traditional communitarian argument, by contrast, is viewed by
critics as evidence of weakness and as a begrudged unwillingness to accept the virtues of
liberalism. Simon Caney, for example, points to MacIntyre’s acceptance that an
individual does not necessarily need to accept the “moral limitations” of the community
in which the individual finds herself and that “the self is nothing but the social roles it
inherits” (MacIntyre cited in Caney 1992: 275-276). Clearly, liberals have caught
communitarians attempting to adhere to both ‘strong’ and ‘pragmatic’ theoretical
arguments (which exist in full knowledge of incipient liberal critiques such as Caney’s,
without doubt). This is despite the fact that a liberal critique of communitarianism as
‘radical’ and ‘pragmatic’ is equally unreasonable. Furthermore, liberals presume that the
“possibility of choice” is or could be accessible to all, independent of historical
encumbrances. The earlier explication of postmaterialism demonstrates that this is
impossible (at least in the absolute sense), irrespective of material security. The
criticisms against communitarians also potentially negate the altruistic component of voluntary simplicity, even the forms which assert primacy of the individual.

In this chapter, I have attempted to identify the traditional ‘sticking points’ of liberal and communitarian theory. On one hand, early communitarians tend to be bound by the notion that society is bereft of a ‘moral centre’ which is unlikely to be recovered in any practical sense. On the other, liberals (through popular culture) have achieved more success in pointing out the importance of individualism in the process of social justice. ‘Self-help’ culture since the 1990s has tended to emphasise this latter iteration of social change (Dominguez & Robin 1992, Drake 2000, Salzman 1991, Frank 1999, 2004). The communitarian response to cultural developments which favoured individualism, however, remained in contention well into the 1990s.
Chapter 5: The Limits to ‘Negative’ Communitarianism

I. Introduction

II. Individualism in Context

III. Reflexivity in Social Movements

IV. Democratic Pluralism

I. Introduction

Until this point, I have argued that communitarianism fell out of favour with most progressive-minded people. I point out that this development is largely traceable to the emergence of postmaterialist ‘cultures’ which are in turn influenced by individualisation, breakdowns in traditional structures and the ubiquity of global communication (Beck 1992, 2000, Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002, Giddens 1991). The usefulness of the traditional communitarian model is therefore limited. It is interesting that the intellectual debate around individualism and communitarianism since the 1990s has been marked by a near ubiquitous assertion by theorists of both philosophical persuasions to be pragmatic. Following the rise of globalisation in the 1990s, this approach has been extended to rationales for political engagement. Richard Dagger (1999), in a wide ranging critique of Michael Sandel’s communitarian philosophy, concludes with a circumspect tone. Dagger concedes that Sandel is “right” to argue in favour of a “formative politics” which remains integral to the communitarian tradition, but laments Sandel’s explicit rejection of “liberalism” as a potential source of inspiration in the political realm itself (207-208). In
the advent of 1990s globalisation, communitarians would soon invoke a similar argument with the concepts “liberalism” and “communitarianism” in reverse. Communitarian scholar Amitai Etzioni (1996b: 155) used the compound, “I/We”, to explain the mutual dependence of communitarianism and liberalism. Far from Macintyre’s (1981) depiction of a morally irretrievable world which is “after virtue”, Etzioni seeks to account for social fragmentation with a more optimistic tone. Etzioni describes the way that people connect with others as being a product of “layered loyalties” (Etzioni 1996a). In this formulation, no singular association defines the identity of an individual; rather, these associations are distinct but can overlap in the pursuit of a morally good society (a “community of communities”) (Etzioni 1996a: 10).

Etzioni’s approach is a subtle but crucial adjustment to communitarian theory which reflects broader cultural changes away from all-consuming notions of judgement and responsibility (eg. religion and town hall politics) and toward the primacy of self-actualisation (eg. social media, private introspection). Communitarianism stands to benefit more from cooperation than from conflict in large part because of this flight to private life; indeed, it is arguable that communitarians have little choice in the matter.

Liberals have also made a number of points which appear reasonable to most, at least in respect to the realisation of postmaterialism and voluntary simplicity lifestyles. Critics have rightly remarked that society which is characterised by an intractable selfishness defeats the communitarian project before it begins (Caney 1992, Kitchen 1997, Cohen
2000). As I argued in chapter four, the result of the ‘negative’ communitarian thesis in practice, ironically, is alienation, anxiety and apathy. A number of social and political movements which seek to address perceived social fragmentation are themselves ‘negative’ (that is, divisive). These groups, many of which only pay cursory attention to traditional material claims seek to revoke the kinds of hard-fought freedoms won by disenfranchised groups in the 1960s. The 2016 presidential campaign of Donald Trump in the United States implored people to “make America great again”. The campaign (at the time of writing) deployed a recurrent theme of nostalgia for a past which (apparently) provided both opportunity and a sense of community for all. The appeal to ‘unite’ the United States, however, was driven by unsupported criticisms of the nation’s Black, Mexican and Muslim populations. Trump’s nomination as presidential candidate for the Republican Party was widely regarded as the outcome of apathy towards the political process rather than an example of it.

Progressive-minded communitarians, too, face a similar challenge. Even if the communitarian critique of liberalism is right, it is not clear what can be done to ‘rectify’ the situation. Any active form of communitarianism would require a degree of engagement that many would find unreasonable. A desire for a return to the ‘traditional’ family, for example, would inevitably be viewed in a contemporary framework of women’s rights. Second, the “precarity” (Beck 1992) identified by theorists of late modernity is likely to be more manageable for those in relative material security, especially voluntary simplifiers. If there are ‘constraints’ upon individuals due to the loss of a social ‘safety net’, it would be difficult to argue that this is in any way attributable to
the liberalism often associated with postmaterialism. As the title of Robert Putnam’s study on the decline of civic engagement in American society, *Bowling Alone* (2000), suggests, resulting alienation from community is attributable to weakness in *both* individuals and community. In other words, individualism is a symptom but not necessarily the (sole) cause of fragmented social structures identified by communitarian critics. Furthermore, even if the flight to ‘self-help’ is merely another arm of capitalism, shallow or fleeting forms of introspection may be more fulfilling than apathy or indifference to collective engagement. And even if the retreat to privatism is all pervasive as some have suggested (Arai & Pedlar 2003), the psychological and social benefits associated with contemplation should not be discounted. ‘Isolation’, ‘disaffection’ and ‘narcissism’ each have certain characteristics in common, but the application of each is only relevant to certain situations. The benefits of repose and contemplation to community more broadly tend to be downplayed by progressives who view all forms of isolation as contrary to the political processes which enforce change. A crucial point which I intend to develop later in this chapter is that the ‘end’ point of individualism or collective engagement alone tends to say little about the experiences which formed that disposition. On the contrary, the examples of voluntary simplifiers which I will explore in chapter eight imply the presence of highly varied forms of individualism.

II. Individualism in Context

The generalisations that stem from concepts such as ‘alienation’ often say more about the political stance of the speaker than the communal-mindedness of the individual
Inglehart’s approach showed, on one hand, that value formation should be approached from the perspective of an individual’s entire life history. On the other, however, the mechanism used to determine postmaterialist values is prescriptive, making no distinction between individualism and communitarianism (let alone different facets of individualism). I have attempted to argue that this can lead to situations in which powerful individuals can take advantage of these blurred values. This is the very problem underpinning “emotivism” (Macintyre 1981) where individuals claim to represent false or non-existent collectives (and therefore, articulate the morally ‘right’ kinds of individualism). Governments, for example, tend to regard an individual’s distance from the workforce as the basis for disengagement from community and a purposeless life. Despite appealing to both ‘individualism’ and ‘community’, the ultimate purpose of such statements is to impose control upon people, irrespective of their own sense of purpose. For example, a significant feature of voluntary simplicity is ‘downshifting’, a meaningful reduction of work hours (Schor 1991, 1998, Maniates 2002, 2010). Advocates show that this usually leads to improved family life and community engagement, including improved public health and greater care for the environment (see Schor, 1991, 1998, Hamilton 2003, 2005, 2008, Grigsby 2004, Segal 1999). The communitarian’s attempts to ‘define’ freedom in isolation from an individual’s own understanding of “work/life balance” (Pocock 2005) is questionable. Such research suggests that introspection (and even disengagement from society) can be an important source of ‘social goods’.
Moreover, it is difficult to see how communitarianism which is forged through
government or even social movements can be distanced from the operation of power.
Etzioni (1996a: 10) conceded as much when he concluded that “the need for order and
the need for autonomy cannot be fully reconciled” and that “communities must constantly
endeavour to balance both, or be thrown off into social anarchy or collectivism”.
Following from this, even if one accepts that an individual’s estrangement is inherently
recessive and must be changed, the communitarian approach inadvertently ‘labels’ the
alienated. In this sense, a fear of narcissism as depicted by Lasch (1979) is more likely
than not to provoke narcissistic behaviour (for both the ‘labelled’ and those assuming the
role of ‘labeller’). Bevington & Dixon (2005) argue that reflexivity in social movements
significantly influences the ways that individuals relate to each other. They make the
point that analysis of social movements tends to overemphasise “dominant theoretical
paradigms” which subsequently constrict the appreciation of movement history (2005:
203). In practical terms, this means that understandings of community are not neutral but
are often expressed as such in presentation to the general public. For the communitarian,
the narrative is one of unrestrained moral decline, a point which could only be described
as unconvincing. After all, the basis of voluntary simplicity (and postmaterialism) is the
appeal to principles which go beyond an individual’s base instincts. Therefore, it is not
unreasonable to argue that ‘negative’ communitarians have generated an unwinnable
argument which is serviced only by its distinction with unconstrained individualism. The
‘negative’ communitarian thesis is amenable to general critiques of consumer society (eg
Hamilton 2003, 2005). However, the typical voluntary simplifier is left with questions
about the actual benefits of community. The shape and role of the ‘community’ which
replaces consumer society is equally ambiguous. Whether the socially conscious individual desires a ‘community’ at all is also questionable.2 Yet, all this discussion co-exists in the general recognition that certain elements which encroach upon the individual are problematic and require a modicum of communitarian discourse to achieve some semblance of self-actualisation. The intellectual battleground therefore shifts from more general critiques of consumer society toward reflexive interpretations of personal philosophies (often on the subject of the virtues or vices of reflexivity itself).

The ongoing influence of communitarianism within voluntary simplicity makes the ideological division between the theories starker. If communitarians accept the premise that depoliticised reflection inspired by ‘liberalism’ undermines community (and is ubiquitous) it is difficult to see how a public sphere conditioned to discuss identity politics could be sustained. The “layered loyalties” (Etzioni 1996a: 10) cautiously welcomed by some communitarians are still undergirded by a sense of commitment which other communitarians argue cannot exist (Lasch 1979, Macintyre 1981). As I have argued (in chapter where), communitarians are split about whether a weakened public sphere can indeed produce something resembling ‘community’. Questions therefore arise about whether this communitarian critique can be better explained by critical academics in the public sphere.

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2 Or, for that matter, whether the individual should desire community. This is a key debate within the voluntary simplicity movement. Some (Andrews 2013a) regard community as essential whereas others (Hamilton 2008) argue in favour of a ‘true’ individualism (see chapter 6-7).
III. Reflexivity in Social Movements

The question about whether academics truly represent the nature of social movements has consumed social movement theory since the trend of postmaterialism became apparent by the late 1970s. Distinct categories have been created to account for differences in the purposes of social movements. Much has been written about the difference between single issue (“political process”) movements (eg. Tilly 1978, 1999, Snow et al. 1986, Meyer 1999) and open (“new social movements”) movements (eg. Touraine 1981, 1985, Melucci 1985, 1989, 1996, Goodwin & Jasper 1999a, 1999b, Jasper & Poulsen 1995). The former are typically concerned with “framing” (Snow et al. 1986, Benford & Snow 2000) a public image whereas the latter emphasise fluidity and contingency (personal fulfilment and identity politics). More recently, hybrid models purporting to offer the benefits of both have emerged, through discussion of a “social movement spillover” (Meyer & Whittier 1994) and democratic pluralism (Goodwin & Jasper 1999a, 1999b, Jasper 1992, 1997, Jasper & Poulsen 1995, McAdam & Poulsen 1993, Poletta 1999, 2004, 2006, Mouffe 1992, Bostrom 2004). Though the ‘pluralist’ approach runs parallel to the communitarian/liberalism debate, theorising within movements themselves have appeared to generate more fruitful results than the traditional communitarian critique. This is because an individual involved in a social movement prioritising free expression is not precluded from engaging with a social movement with relatively closed ideals and principles. In effect, reflection on movements by participants themselves generates its own dynamic and therefore refrains from labelling participants with conceptually loaded concepts. Bevington & Dixon (2005) contend that interaction between a movement and researchers generates “movement-relevant theory” which resembles neither individualism
nor communitarianism. A movement’s values, rather, are based upon a “dynamic and reciprocal engagement” (Bevington & Dixon 2005: 190) between participants and observers. This “public sociology” (Burawoy 2005) has allowed movements to more clearly delineate the parameters of their particular interests in full knowledge of glaring ideological differences.

The reader may be forgiven for wondering how and why this diversion from the liberalism/communitarianism debate is important to the voluntary simplicity movement. For the largely nebulous and often apolitical voluntary simplicity movement there is no single issue around which to revolve. The recurrent theme that I discovered in a study of online fora on Simple Living (see chapter eight) was a headstrong individualism which resisted external classification. As it became clear, this often leads to voluntary simplifiers, who, despite engaging in various community-related activities do not associate themselves with any movement as such (see also eg: Craig-Lees & Hill 2002). This is despite the fact that awareness of a general ‘alternative’ movement is widespread in urban areas. The broad range of social movements sympathetic to voluntary simplicity (and isolationism) would suggest that both communitarian and liberal arguments are redundant.

As many of those who view social movements as fluid and highly contingent engagements with others have suggested (eg, Melucci 1989, Polletta 2006), what an individual says or does is in large part influenced by how, where, when and with whom
something is discussed. As both individuals and movements seek to regain lost freedoms and connections with others, people begin to relate to community through multiple groupings (Etzioni 1996a). ‘Community’, in this sense, is a relational concept with multiple potential meanings. But this approach is not necessarily ‘anti-communitarian’ in the broader sense. The creation of multiple categories of social movements (and lack of a single source of identity) in intellectual fields is amenable to the traditional communitarian critique (Sandel 1982) which suggests that loyalties are less enduring despite being more numerous (as a result of liberalism). People have moved on from the onerous elements of communitarianism, but any form of social critique is still amenable to the ‘communitarian’ discourse.³ This has arguably allowed voluntary simplicity intellectuals to view voluntary simplicity as a host term for a multitude of related movements whilst retaining some well-worn principles (eg frugality, work reduction).

Some social movements (such as voluntary simplicity) are more open to difference and introspection than others (many religious movements, for example). The point is that there are many different structures which support community but which appear (to some) to be self-centred or narcissistic. This is not a rejection of communitarianism (or liberalism) per se. Rather, as “new social movement” and “pluralist” (Touraine 1981, Melucci 1989, Eliasoph & Lichterman 2003, Lichterman 1996) theorists all suggest, individual desires are central to understanding why movements are formed and can be sustained. It is difficult to argue, therefore, that individual intentions can be ignored in the pursuit of values, many of which are not contrary to the general thrust of a ‘moral good’.

³ Voluntary simplicity is an alternative lifestyle; therefore, most if not all approaches (positive or negative) appeal to some form of moral good (even if it is individualised).
As I have suggested until this point, respect for pluralism assists both social movements and theorists who seek to explain their presence. As argued earlier, communitarians of the 1990s attempted to recapture the ‘pragmatism’ label. With the affirmation of a global market economy and liberalisation of welfare states, communitarians viewed a declining sense of citizenship as the vital middle ground between the existing theoretical traditions (Etzioni 1993, 1996a, 1996b). This moves the debate away from a consideration of abstract philosophical concepts to more tangible ideas such as wealth inequality and democratic engagement. Amitai Etzioni (1993, 1996a, 1996b), also a theorist of voluntary simplicity (1998), contends that the decline of civic engagement has necessitated involvement in local communities within civil society. Government here is seen to have a “neutral” role, as long as civil society remains intact.

For Etzioni, a civil society without guiding moral principles can lead to liberal claims of “majoritarianism” (1996b: 164) (that is, adherence to practices based upon collective obedience rather than moral rectitude). Continual collective ‘justification’ (1996b: 164) is essential to maintain the moral basis of community. However, Etzioni emphasises that without political recognition, in the form of government policy or civil recognition, such communities can only hope to “curtail” the excesses of liberalism (1996a: 10). On one hand, Etzioni is willing to concede the presence of communities that are based partly upon ‘creativity’ and reflexivity (1996b: 167). This is the clearest move away from the ‘embeddedness’ thesis earlier derided by liberals. On the other hand, however, Etzioni appears to repeat the claims of Lasch and others which are critical of identity politics. Etzioni reminds the reader that the individual still lives within a “community of
communities” (1996a: 10) through which all problems must eventually be overcome. Sections of Etzioni’s article on the specific topic of voluntary simplicity (quoted by Grigsby 2000: 10-11) highlight this uneasy conflation of self-expression and commitment to others. On one hand, referring to Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs, Etzioni accepts that the “hierarchy is crowned with self-expression” (Etzioni 1998: 632). On the other, Etzioni views the ultimate purpose of voluntary simplicity as a “reallocation of wealth”, where the wealthiest willingly “give up some consumer goods and some income” (1998: 640).

What can be gleaned from Etzioni’s work is a mixture of pluralist, socialist and libertarian rhetoric, pasted together as a result of the generally indisputable values of each concept. Very few could disagree with notions of “creativity”, “equality” and “personal fulfilment”. Yet, Etzioni’s view would not satisfy liberals who would undoubtedly view the ‘creativity’ compromise with suspicion. The pragmatic communitarian approach is seeking on one hand to dispel the ‘majoritarian’ liberal critique whilst alluding to the fundamental weakness of civil society. It is not clear, as commentators on both sides of the theoretical spectrum have implied (Cohen 2000, Etzioni 1996a, 1996b), that this even resembles a form of what could be called liberalism or communitarianism. It is an approach which treads lightly on established ideological differences, but ultimately requires a political backstop in the form of a critique of shallow identity politics.
The result is an uneasy (though arguably necessary) commitment to pluralism, coupled with a general social critique of capitalism. This would be more furtive middle ground if all social change were purely achieved by appeals to systems of government and democratic process. The rise of voluntary simplifiers is evidence to the contrary. Whilst it is true that postmaterialism has become institutionalised (and communitarians like Etzioni are justified to argue for greater democratic participation), many voluntary simplifiers would be unaware of the very concept used to describe their lifestyles, let alone any concerted civic campaign. This is not to say that voluntary simplifiers are unaware of the powers which influence government policy. Rather, a form of what might be termed ‘introspective altruism’ has emerged which does not fall within the adapted rationale of recent communitarians (or liberals for that matter).[^4] Clearly, recent communitarians like Etzioni still fall into the trap of invoking the state, ‘citizenship’ or even political engagement as the potential basis for personal association or community. Indeed, issues such as race or gender remain amenable to this liberal/communitarian dynamic. Systemic disadvantage with regard to the gender pay gap, for example, necessitates a response which appeals to a kind of equality under law (as ‘rights’).

For Etzioni, there is a potential concern for a lack of significant political consequence in the formation of numerous smaller communities. Given this uncertainty over political significance, it is clear that the relative concession of ground by more recent communitarians with regard to ‘autonomy’ does not (necessarily) extend to the notion of politics without ‘consequence’. Indeed, Etzioni’s appeal to economic equality is itself a

[^4]: A theory which seeks to explain and justify this approach (Hamilton 2008), is explored in chapter six.
more ‘traditional’ communitarian rationale which appeals to an incontestable moral ideal. Etzioni is rejecting the pessimistic or onerous forms of communitarianism traditionally espoused by theorists (eg. Lasch 1979, Macintyre 1981). However, he is an advocate of social attachments and their influence on society as a whole. It is not clear, however, that voluntary simplifiers of liberal and/or communitarian persuasion are driven by such ‘big picture’ classifications of theory. Appeals to the preservation of ‘personal life’ are now a staple of most ‘self-help’ books (see eg. Schor 1991, 1998, Lichterman 1992). And as Inglehart’s theory of postmaterialism would suggest, economic uncertainty and cultural difference are not major concerns for voluntary simplifiers. If anything, the theoretical debate has helped forge a form of voluntary simplicity that is more pluralist and ‘positive’ than the existing theories have achieved. The quest for ‘self-actualisation’, rather, has become an open-ended vehicle to acquire whatever an individual believes to be lacking.

However, it would be difficult to argue, as does Lasch, that this task is inherently vacuous or aimless. The rationale of the postmaterialist individual does not manifest itself as a pre-packaged conception of ‘individualism’ or ‘community’ even if public representations of these desires may appear as such. Voluntary simplicity therefore stands as a movement which often rejects both the concept of ‘necessary political consequence’ and ‘individualism without constraints’, which I will explore in chapter eight.
IV. Democratic Pluralism

As I argued in the previous section, the eventual convergence of communitarian and liberal perspectives has opened the path to “democratic pluralism” (Mouffe 1992) in which multiple understandings of democracy and civil society have credence. Aside from its fundamental refutation of traditional communitarian theory, the ‘pluralist’ approach signals a clear desire to leave the philosophically intransigent debates behind. On one hand, Mouffe (1992: 233) implores communitarians to replace the notion of a “common good” with a “common bond”, with the latter providing some consideration of individual liberty. On the other, referring to communitarian Charles Taylor, Mouffe reminds liberals that an individual’s freedom is only possible “within a certain kind of civilization” (Taylor in Mouffe 1992: 230), principally one which maintains the institutions that sustain individual liberty. Surprisingly, however, the niggling conceptual issues which commenced with the intellectualisation of postmaterialism remain. Reflection upon the nature of collective communication is itself a partial construction. The pluralist argument nonetheless insists upon reconciling the positive elements of liberalism and communitarianism. By inference, it rejects the deep pessimism characteristic of communitarian writers such as Macintyre (1981). It equally rejects the liberal dismissal of collective ‘judgement’ (Crowder 2006), however uncontentious.

The hint of optimism in Mouffe’s thesis still relies on a great deal of good faith on the part of citizens. A ‘common bond’ would need to withstand elements which many regard as extreme. It is not clear whether the presence of a ‘traditional’ communitarian (such as...
a religious fundamentalist) is viable in an environment which mandates or otherwise respects pluralism. If the communitarian (represented by the fundamentalist) does not accept the premise that a “common bond” exists in the pluralist mould, the communitarian may do everything in his power to subvert the concepts which underlie such a ‘bond’. In this sense, the pluralist argument is more in line with Etzioni’s notion of a “productive tension” between the “I” and “We” (1996b: 156). It is equally unclear whether all individuals have the capacity to enjoy the liberal conceptualisation of the public realm, particularly in light of personal background. Even individuals free from material constraint are not clear of this issue. Inglehart’s ‘socialisation’ hypothesis makes the acceptance of a ‘common bond’ tenuous, given that individual motivations are not necessarily known by individuals themselves. This could cloud the motives of individuals in contentious discussions and consequently arouse suspicion in different parties. The pluralist argument is amenable to this grey area to an extent, but critical moments of reflection are likely to sharpen existing conceptual issues and therefore encourage disengagement. This thesis argues that these intractable issues remain because conceptual issues themselves are viewed independent of an individual’s personal and social history.

There is still some evidence that the liberal/communitarian debate is contrary to understanding the process of individual and social change. The conclusions rendered often highlight the ‘end’ point of intellectual debates, while debates are, in fact, perennially in process. A historical example is required to demonstrate this new conceptual contingency. Feminism, since the 1960s, has been characterised by an
emphasis on the importance of individual liberties. These liberties have been deemed to be essential to undermine the heteronormative constraints of domesticity. Critics of market oriented feminism, such as Clive Hamilton (2005: 27), however, have suggested that the liberalism which has manifested itself throughout society merely resolves in favour of consumerism which (in many cases) explicitly reinforces traditional gender roles. Personal liberties are vital, Hamilton implies, but liberty operationalised in the name of empowerment can service capitalism without critique.

Here then is the classic moral dilemma lamented by liberals and communitarians alike. Theory is undesirable in the sense that individualism and communitarianism have both played parts in social change. A number of presumptions have been made by feminists about the intrinsic value of the public and private spheres for women. For Jeff Weintraub (1997: 36), this dichotomy wrongly presumes an inverse relationship between these spheres, in which an individual’s involvement in one sphere necessarily negates their involvement in the other. Clearly, it would be more reasonable to suggest that (i) Personal liberties (as a principle and a way of life) have emancipated women from some situations which undermine personal liberties and rights for women more generally, and that (ii) Personal liberties have set in train forms of culture which implicitly reinforce certain regressive forms (eg female sexual empowerment in advertising as a way of reinforcing the notion of women as ‘objects’ rather than ‘subjects’ of desire) and implicitly undermine traditional structures as a potential source of identity. The point here is that it makes little sense to attribute social and personal ills to any single factor. It is imperative to apply theories of individualism and communitarianism over time, in a
balanced manner and in a context of a broader personal narrative. To suggest that women are either emancipated from domesticity or objects of consumerism inadvertently ignores the totality of experiences that each perspective purports to represent. If one was to explore the buying habits and attitudes to advertising of a woman who grew up during the 1960s, for example, each experience would warrant a nuanced explanation. And most crucially, the effect of the experience upon the individual is not always discernible to the casual observer.

This debate about feminism, in essence, suggests that the experiences of reflective individuals are able to be interpreted in many ways (by the individuals themselves) but do not necessarily undermine the genuineness which underpin them. That an individual may claim to adhere to ‘liberal’ and ‘communitarian’ principles at various points of their lives says little about the ‘intrinsic’ value of concepts. The experiences in isolation provide only a small window into the lives of people and therefore cannot definitively explain the benefit and/or vices of freedoms and moral controls. ‘Life stories’ (see chapter eight) go some way to eroding theoretical divisions. Francesca Polletta (2006: 7) distinguishes “narratives” from “frames, ideologies and discourse”, suggesting an opening for research that goes beyond traditional conceptual assumptions. Stories which emerge from narratives are distinct from regular intellectual analysis in the sense that stories are personally defined and depend largely upon the context in which they are exhibited. Therefore, the question of the impacts of liberalism or communitarianism is not as important as the contexts of the stories that inform these discourses. The telling of stories itself has an impact on both the current and future value sets of individuals. Paul
Lichterman sums up the importance of storytelling as both a clarifying force and a source of personal inspiration:

Stories are more than reasons deployed strategically to avoid upsetting cultural expectations; culture does more than police the telling of stories. At least sometimes, people live deeply, even exclusively in a story. They become their reasons (Lichterman 2006: 547).

With this in mind, what is most ‘virtuous’ becomes less important than what can be made of an amalgam of past occurrences. Narrative ‘strategy’ is both ‘used’ and ‘embodied’. Used in this way, theory can be used through a contextualised technique which ties in with Bevington & Dixon’s (2005) notion of a “movement-relevant theory”. Here, movement connotes both individuals and groups which interact with and/or without political consequence. This is not to say, either, that liberalism and communitarianism are ‘equal’ in measure. If these concepts are in any way equal, they are equally fallible. Rather, it is to suggest that if one can accept that a person’s beliefs and attitudes are predicated upon their present as well as past circumstances, one can equally accept that interpretations of theory will continually play an unpredictable role in the manifestation of these attitudes. Some critical moments will be more important than others, but it is essential to examine these experiences in totality before theoretical linkages can be made.

In the following chapter, I attempt to trace historical studies of voluntary simplicity. As it will become clear to the reader, the relatively new forms of “democratic pluralism” delineated above have occasionally been at odds with voluntary simplicity and environmentalism more broadly.
**Chapter 6: Academic Interpretations and Connections to Sociology**

I. The “Intensity” Model and Communitarian Resurgence

II. Across the Conceptual Divide: Lichterman’s “Culture of Personalism”

III. Inverting the Language of “Needs” and “Being”

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I. The “Intensity” Model and Communitarian Resurgence

Academic research has been greatly influenced by various developments within voluntary simplicity. The popularisation of voluntary simplicity from a movement based upon environmental issues to a nebulous concept which accounts for broad ‘value change’ within Western publics has led to questions about how voluntary simplicity should be classified. For most researchers, the activities undertaken by voluntary simplifiers form the starting point for understanding individual rationales. The earliest known studies on voluntary simplifiers and environmental sustainability attempted to identify the ‘content’ of voluntarily simplified lifestyles. This entailed, principally, the conservation forms of voluntary simplifiers (Leonard-Barton 1981, Leonard-Barton & Rogers 1980, Dunlap & van Liere 1978, Shama 1981). These studies understood the rise of voluntary simplicity in western societies as a broader response to economic trends like stagflation (Shama 1981) or an abstract “ecological worldview” (Dunlap 2008: 10). Where individual attitudes were occasionally gauged, these were usually considered in the context of conservation activities. ‘Individualism’, in these studies is generally understood as a rejection of the forces which cause energy “dependency” (Leonard-Barton 1981: 244).
Yet, in the scale deployed by Leonard-Barton to gauge voluntary simplicity lifestyles (1981: 247) there are no references to ‘self-actualisation’ except for an environmentally focused “instruction to increase self-reliance”. This is despite the fact that the vast majority of conservation activities listed would probably take place in a private setting (such as recycling and vegetarianism). It is important to remember that this form of research reflected a context prior to the self-help era of the 1990s but at the same time the premise of liberalism (consumer capitalism) increasingly came under question. This allowed a generally esoteric framework by which to analyse conservation activities whilst appealing to broader changes to society itself. Nonetheless, the influence of these early understandings of voluntary simplifiers persisted well into the era of pluralist individualism. This is arguably attributable to the popularity of “downshifting”, a low intensity form of voluntary simplicity which has been decoupled from environmental conservation (see eg. Schor 1991, 1998, Hamilton 2003, 2005). Communitarian scholar Amitai Etzioni (1998) has created a typology which attempts to recapture the ‘levels’ of environmental commitment. Etzioni has three categories which define voluntary simplifiers. “Downshifters” refer mainly to new age corporates who make relatively minor lifestyle changes, usually in the form of reducing time spent at work. “Strong simplifiers” make substantial lifestyle changes predominantly through changes in consumption activities. The “Simple Living Movement” is a “holistic” collection of independent communities which practice a more devout strand of voluntary simplicity, in which people confer (through “how-to books” and “newsletters”) to reduce consumption as a collective act. This “intensity” model (Etzioni 1998) stands in the communitarian tradition of “good works” (Kemmelmeier et al 2006). Interestingly, Etzioni’s scale
implies that those voluntary simplifiers which act independent of VS as a social movement are more ‘committed’ than those who are compelled to make lifestyle changes due to health or family issues (see Hamilton 2003, 2005 for a full discussion of the rise of ‘Downshifters’). Whilst Etzioni does not explicitly grade these different forms of voluntary simplicity, the underlying implication remains that community oriented voluntary simplicity is in some senses more substantial than individual oriented lifestyle change. This approach has strengthened a focus on consumption, conservation and ‘commitment’ as the main pillars of voluntary simplicity commitment. Zavestoski (2002) sees the primary goal of voluntary simplifiers as the formation and maintenance of “authentic” consumption. McDonald et al. (2006: 526-528) argue that Beginner Voluntary Simplifiers (BVS) form the basis of divisions between voluntary simplifiers and “Non-Voluntary Simplifiers” (NVS). NVS are, in this formulation, driven by pressures which are distinct from traditional environmental or moral concerns.

In this conceptualisation, there are three further potential classifications of contemporary simplifiers: (I) “Apprentice Simplifiers” (reflecting a gradual transition from NVS to voluntary simplicity and strong conservation routines), (II) “Partial Simplifiers” (“fragmented”, less consistent environmental practices), and, (III) “Accidental Simplification” (Suggesting that the poor or otherwise uncommitted can also practice voluntary simplicity) (McDonald et al. 2006: 526-528). The classification of “Non-Voluntary Simplifiers”, however, implies that individuals who stumble upon voluntary simplicity or are moved to a lifestyle change due to personal pressures are merely on a potential path towards voluntary simplicity in its ‘fullest’ manifestation. This ideal is
often characterised in terms of a disposition which venerates conservation. Ballantine and Creery (2010), for example, link “disposition” to forms of consumption. Intention, in this formulation, is integral to understanding the different forms of voluntary simplicity. Whilst this would appear to be inspired by the liberal tradition (i.e. ‘intention’ as ‘desire’), the context is fundamentally communitarian. The desire to ‘take action’ against undefined social ills resonates with perceived collective fragmentation. This is a claim that the aforementioned researchers would reject, given the individualistic connections to “good works” (Kemmelmeyer et al. 2006).

In spite of this element, most studies in this area have resulted in a comparison of voluntary simplifiers with little or no meaningful consideration of biographical backgrounds. Others have rejected Etzioni’s theoretical classifications in a simplistic attempt to characterise the “ethical consumer” (Shaw & Newholm 2002, also Craig-Lees & Hill 2002), but the implicit link of attitudes to anticonsumerist behaviours remains palpable. Despite having a broader understanding of “disposition” or perspective, the inextricable link to consumption as the basis of voluntary simplicity only serves to streamline dominant perspectives within the movement.

It is perhaps due to the difficulty answering the question “What is voluntary simplicity?” that variations of the communitarian model are most prevalent in academic circles. Etzioni’s (1998: 625-626) most intense “holistic” simplifiers who write the self-help books which influence ideas within the movement are very much a part of the system of
consumption which the writers refute. The didactic fervour which accompanies many books is perhaps an unconscious admission of this fact. In the most overt classifications, ‘community’ and ‘environment’ are used interchangeably as if to imply the presence of a ‘scale’ of commitment. Sub-classifications can offer additional cultural markers within the movement. Here, ‘communitarian environmentalists’ are more devout than ‘individualist environmentalists’ and nominal ‘Downshifters’ (‘Individualists’) respectively. The approach is mainly due to majority presence of voluntary simplicity literature on the subject in marketing and psychology journals, which arguably place greater emphasis upon (unambiguous) cause and effect (eg Zavestoski 2002, McDonald et al. 2006, Ballantine & Creery 2010, Bekin et al. 2005, Shaw & Newholm 2002). In most cases, this ‘cause and effect’ refers to the impact of voluntary simplicity upon consumer society itself. This is unedifying, given that, as I have attempted to show, the voluntary simplicity ‘movement’ is not unanimous in the quest for uniform consumption standards. That it is difficult to speak of any such ‘movement’ at all is evidence enough against any typical classification of voluntary simplifier. Given the recent developments surrounding postmaterialism depicted in previous sections, there are several shortcomings with the scale of environmental commitment which has become the default model for academics.

‘Levels’ of commitment depend ultimately upon what exactly is being ‘measured’. The “new environmental paradigm” (Dunlap & van Liere 1978) model focused too broadly on an “ecological worldview” whilst neglecting the individual motivations for environmental activity. Measuring environmental activities as the basis for individualist
or communitarian attitudes is tenuous. Deprivation and ethical consumption, one writer (Andrews 2013b), has pointed out are not identical. But the general view of those writing in the voluntary simplicity tradition still seem to accord with the view that simple living is not “easy living” (Pierce 2000: 24 in Johnson 2004a: 120) and requires substantial “moderation” to be taken seriously (de Geus 2003). If the question is whether individuals should or shouldn’t ‘enjoy’ conservation activities (despite being essential), this raises doubts about the imperative of the “intensity” model of voluntary simplicity itself. This does little to assuage the concerns apparently caused by consumer society. It is not clear what the ‘struggle’ entails, except that it exists and consumption and conservation are the means by which it will be achieved.

Even if a researcher were to request an explanation from a voluntary simplifier on the basis of certain activities, the activities themselves would clearly be secondary to the interaction between researcher and simplifier. This will inevitably involve a complex mixture of “refusing what one is” (Moisander & Pesonen 2002 quoting Foucault) and accepting these (imagined or otherwise) characterisations. ‘Moderation’ of consumption in one instance may be seen as ‘deprivation’ in another. What is more, it may be in an individual’s best interest to view the change in his/her consumption activities in order to achieve some semblance of self-actualisation. The manner in which this manifests itself is naturally dependent upon (social) context. Though this reflection would imply the ubiquitous presence of narcissism for some, the fact that individuals are not able to unambiguously express the rationales behind their actions would suggest that this is unlikely. Communitarians (and most VS theorists), therefore, seek to avoid the
ambiguity which is central to all voluntary simplicity lifestyles, and instead focus on individual reflection as an extension of environmental activity rather than constitutive of it. This is a fatal error, as I explained earlier, because voluntary simplifiers who do not practice any particular environmental conservation vastly outnumber those who do.

It is interesting to note an omission from an otherwise well researched doctoral thesis (Johnson 2004a, also 2004b) on the conflation of environmentalism and communitarianism. The writer outlines the six main “simplicity discourses” (2004a: 60) as “Financial Management”, “Home Organising”, “Self-Help/Human Potential”, “Religious/Spiritual Living”, “Reduced Stress/Healthy Living” and “Environmentalism”. Community, here, appears to have been subsumed by environmentalism, given that the other listed discourses typically deal with the realm of personal fulfilment. In essence, the popularisation of (and occasional scepticism toward the value of) voluntary simplicity has narrowed understandings of community in spite of parallel discourses of openness, pluralism and non-judgement. This has ironically created the groundwork for an incipient narcissism and invites invidious comparisons with an “enlightened hedonism” (Johnson 2004a: 185), characteristic of low-intensity downshifters.

The various strains of voluntary simplicity depicted by Etzioni and others share one characteristic. They all implicitly or explicitly exclude a least one form of voluntary simplifier. The dominant literature presents categories as largely independent and individuals as incapable of articulating the various categories which have (at least partly)
defined them. Individuals, here, find themselves at war with sets of universally recognised discourses. Most academics fail to realise that literature can be “movement relevant” (Bevington & Dixon 2005, Flacks 2004), especially in intellectually oriented movements such as voluntary simplicity. Put simply, this means that individuals (research participants) and movements can be aware of the notions that the researcher brings to the process. As highlighted earlier, awareness of social trends can itself lead to social change. This is linked to a process of both acknowledging and ‘refusing what one is’ (paraphrasing Foucault, Moisander & Pesonen 2002).

Few studies have considered the implications of this constant movement towards reflexivity. Nor have studies typically considered the relationship between concepts and actual dispositions. This is perhaps because such research could suggest (implicitly or explicitly) that the researcher does not believe the values that the participant (apparently) holds sincerely or simply because researchers believe that environmentally-friendly acts are ends in themselves. This approach could inadvertently accept the communitarian critique of post-materialism, and therefore provoke responses to the claim of narcissism. The lingering sensitivity of the liberalism/communitarianism debate has restricted discussion about voluntary simplifiers in academic circles. Yet, the disconnect between the highly individualistic lifestyles led by the majority of voluntary simplifiers and the implicit communitarian classifications by academics is arguably a cause of anxiety within the movement more broadly. This makes any form of research involving direct contact between voluntary simplifiers and researchers difficult to yield nuanced or potentially contradictory results.
Sandlin & Walther’s (2009) study of voluntary simplifiers on the online ‘Simple Living Forums’ offers a conceptually aware approach to the attitudes and anxieties of voluntary simplifiers. The authors find that whilst an “ethics” of “non-judgment” pervades the forums, there are numerous instances where individuals impugn the values of others (on religious or political grounds) or feel uncomfortable about their own values (narcissism or lack of communal engagement). This is not to suggest, however, that none of the individuals interviewed were comfortable with their values. The authors found that the topics of the forum referring to “public policy” and “religion” were suspended due to abuse (2009: 310). A fuller discussion of the findings in this study is discussed in a later section (see chapter eight). The preponderance of self-conscious voluntary simplifiers is largely a product of the style of research conducted by Sandlin & Walther which this author will later reconsider. It is suffice to say here that the “intensity” model is not a useful indicator for the voluntary simplicity community, given that community (amongst other things) is a concept under contention.

If anything, the Sandlin & Walther study demonstrates how voluntary simplifiers respond to changes in the intellectual landscape. Voluntary simplifiers are very much aware of the concepts used to describe them and have knowledge of concepts which imply ‘selfishness’ and ‘narcissism’. This can create a certain cognitive dissonance, where perceived views can reinforce individual flaws. Voluntary simplifiers in Sandlin & Walther’s (2009) study often emphasised the importance of self-improvement, even in cases of significant environmental activity. ‘Knowing’ that one is selfish is not the same as ‘being’ selfish, yet recognition of the latter is not necessarily a negation of the former.
Indeed, the acceptance of selfishness says little about whether an individual is communitarian (or ecologically) minded, whatever this may mean. Admitting selfishness may refer to the desire to appear blasé, in line with popular understandings of ‘genuineness’ or ‘authenticity’. The blasé attitude has links to impersonal life (Simmel 2012 [1908]), which communitarians ultimately reject. Here, the reader will notice that all concepts can be manipulated to achieve an effect on others. Recognition of the now well-known notion of a “culture of narcissism” (Lasch 1979) is arguably a vehicle for something faintly redolent of narcissism itself. In any case, those with time (presumed as a given with voluntary simplifiers) are best positioned to project anything from religious zeal to general indifference. Whether or not there is any substance to the critique within the critique is irrelevant. Hence, after all the various corners of communitarian and liberal critique satisfy their respective audiences, the communitarian rejection of the anxiety which results from such debate still maintains some purchase in the realm of voluntary simplicity. I will now turn to a more positive interpretation of this anxiety, which is epitomised by Paul Lichterman’s “culture of personalism”.

II. Across the Conceptual Divide: Lichterman’s “Culture of Personalism”

As a concept within many ‘self-help’ books, ‘community’ has persevered, in spite of its practical departure towards individualism. The concessions made by late communitarians such as Amitai Etzioni in favour of an individual involved in multiple communities where boundaries are constantly reformulated. A question remains, however, whether a ‘community’ which fosters self-fulfilment is possible, particularly
when the resurgence of communitarian imaginaries inspire some and intimidate others. This is coupled with the possibility that community can be used to simultaneously critique and reinforce narcissistic behaviours. Nonetheless, when individuals speak of community today, they typically refer to open spaces where individuals are able to express thoughts freely whilst respecting the parameters which sustain such expression.

Paul Lichterman (1992, 1995a, 1995b, 1996, Eliasoph & Lichterman 2003) subscribes to this latter iteration of public commitment. Lichterman’s main point of argument is that individualism and personal fulfilment are not inherently contrary to a public ‘good’. Writing about the preponderance of individualistic social movements in the United States, Lichterman argues that the model which places individualism and community at opposite ends of the conceptual “see-saw” does not apply, given that “self-fulfilment” has been imbibed into culturally accepted practices. Lichterman suggests that the communitarian critique which derides narcissists is not relevant, particularly in situations where an environment to discuss and resolve individual problems is established and respected (Lichterman 1995a). In these circumstances, “highly individualized expression follows very definite norms that get passed down through patterns of group socialization” (Lichterman 1996: 23). Individuals are not necessarily self-interested in these situations. “Culture” in this way can protect and enable individuals without the burden of constant speculation over an individual’s apparent selfishness or docility. Or to put it slightly differently, “The shared ways of talking and acting in these sites are not just ‘effects’ of a culture that really exists somewhere else; they are culture in everyday process” (Lichterman 1996: 23). In this way, conceptual conjecture over the virtues of
individualism or community is streamlined through a highly individualised cultural ‘process’ which is largely inviolable from criticism. Yet, Lichterman (1995b: 529) accepts that the persistence of multiple understandings of community presents a “dilemma” which is central to the ‘culture’ itself. Here, “a practical knowledge of ‘how other cultures do things’” (Lichterman 1995b), or a reflexive analysis of culture itself can provide the basis for a relatively stable ‘culture of personalism’. Lichterman is appealing to pluralism, to be sure, but also recognises that movements can be based upon “social identities” (Lichterman 1996: 24). Rather than reinciting a bruising battle between communitarianism and liberalism, however, Lichterman contends that cultures can emerge through a distinct “group style” (Eliasoph & Lichterman 2003) which continually reformulate a framework for collective engagement.

It is essential to place the ‘culture of personalism’ thesis into context. By replacing ‘community’ with ‘culture’, Lichterman seeks to distance any form of collective engagement from the conceptual baggage of the past, which ultimately forced concessions that diminished communitarianism. The concession that Lichterman makes about potential conflict relating to “social identity” (and by inference, biography) enables reflection in a way that lends itself to the positive elements of communitarianism and pluralism. On one hand, recognition of the ‘culture’ which binds an individual or group pays heed to the “moderate communitarian proposal” which suggests that individuals are not intrinsically rational but can seek rationality through a “communitarian self” through which norms are adhered (Etzioni 1996b: 167). Here, the individual is “part conformist” and “part creative and critical” whilst ultimately retaining the communitarian label
(Etzioni 1996b: 167). On the other hand, however, the individual capable of reflection is restricted only by a commitment to cooperation-oriented pluralism. This has been the essential liberal mantra since John Stuart Mill’s “utilitarianism” or “negative freedom” which implores individuals to enjoy liberty insofar as the liberty of another is not inhibited. Unlike traditional liberalism, however, constraints in these “cultures of personalism” are (according to Lichterman) implicitly respected. This is because challenges to ‘collective’ will (which include individualism) do not undermine the culture of personalism upon which a collective is based. Eliasoph & Lichterman (2003) describe this arrangement as the creation and maintenance of a “group style”. They contend that analysis of group structures by academics should channel “form and content” (2003: 783) as the interchangeable and inevitable components of a collective. The authors do not suggest that these are automatically reconcilable. In fact, the notion of “culture in interaction” implies situations where little, if anything, is officially settled. Here, “group boundaries” (the relationship of the group to the wider world) interact with “group bonds” (what defines a “good member”). “Speech norms” address the ‘how’ component of this interaction. Communication itself becomes an extension (or refutation) of these group “boundaries” and “norms”. This, in theory, circumvents the utilitarian presumptions of pluralist theorists. Crudely put, a ‘selfish’ discourse must be prescribed and constantly reassessed for consistency with “group bonds”. The analysis offered by Eliasoph and Lichterman suggests that a degree of struggle is central to all group interaction, irrespective of the certainty with which certain views or structures are held. This could suggest that dissatisfaction with individualism could in fact reflect a deep respect for individual freedoms (especially freedom of expression).
Questions, however, arise about whether voluntary simplifiers who communicate with one another can actually be part of a ‘group’. A collective of individuals with nothing in common except for a general disappointment toward society would hardly require the label of ‘voluntary simplicity’ to describe their views. This author finds that the topics of online voluntary simplicity fora are so broad that “social commentary” and “wellbeing strategies” would be more accurate labels for discussion. It is not clear whether some online participants could be said to be voluntary simplifiers at all. The allegiance of individuals, being a product of both outside perceptions (“boundaries”) and collective will (“bonds”) is extremely tenuous. In spite of the general voluntary simplicity rhetoric against a narcissistic consumer lifestyle, voluntary simplifiers are typically very conscious of the impressions created by their lifestyle choices. Nonetheless, in the American society upon which Lichterman’s thesis is based, it may be arguable that any interaction (superficial or not) supersedes none at all. This is a slightly different issue which goes to the levels of public commitment within society itself. Lichterman’s “culture of personalism” thesis parallels the rise of “self-help” materials since the 1980s. Referring to individualism as a “culture” as opposed to a “class” (as with Inglehart’s postmaterialism) escapes the potential critique of elitism and mitigates (to some extent) the feelings of anxiety that arise from such critiques. It also negates many of the assumptions which have emerged since communitarians doubted the very possibility of an individualistic public realm. The Lichterman thesis (which emphasises individuality) operates within the scope of self-help books, many of which emphasise the notion that “people do not know what makes them happy” (Lane 1986: 531). In this sense, ‘self-help’ and the formation of weak group bonds becomes a means to transcend the divisions
which writers of late modernity have claimed were papered over by individualisation.

Individualisation, in this way, is both the source of and a means of undermining insecurities which are often unknown to self-help readers themselves. This renders a limited degree of narcissism a form of liberation and arguably, social justice (in light of the alienating effects of individualisation).

It is appropriate to point out, however, that Lichterman’s thesis rests upon the long history of individualism in the United States. As such, it is possible that Lichterman’s thesis cannot be readily applied to individuals from other nations. Its usefulness also appears to be restricted to movements with participants who possess a thoroughly postmaterialist outlook. The studies are mostly based upon environmental and religious movements which prioritise individualism. Lichterman (1995b: 527) accepts that “…cultures of community may be bounded by social parameters” such as race and class. It would be difficult to sustain a culture of personalism where backgrounds of members are materially deprived. Nonetheless, the acceptance of this form of ‘positive’ individualism and ‘practical’ communitarianism as interchangeable concepts has suited most voluntary simplifiers. This is attributable to the multifaceted nature of voluntary simplifier backgrounds and personalities. For example, a voluntary simplifier may be an environmentalist, a pacifist, a Buddhist as well as maintain an indifference to politics. Where the maintenance of such an identity in other situations would prove difficult (indeed, onerous and potentially contradictory), voluntary simplicity culture is sufficiently broad to encapsulate all facets of identity. This ‘culture’ is often streamlined through online forums which classify and set apart broader cultural differences (to be
considered in chapter eight). In one sense, the resurgence of privatism has reinforced the socially sanctioned rationale of respect and “non-judgment” (Sandlin & Walther 2009) which is essential to any community. Yet this ‘reflexive reflection’ can also lead to confusion and anxiety. In order to understand this experience, it is essential to delve into the philosophy of individualism a little further.

III. Inverting the Language of “Needs” & “Being”

As postmaterialism has become entrenched within society (despite ambiguity over what it means and why), general understanding about what it means to ‘exist’ has also gained new meanings. The language of voluntary simplicity frequently rests upon a ‘re-balancing’ of individual freedoms and collective wellbeing. The abstract tone of this rarely criticised ideal requires any critical observer to question exactly what is in need of being ‘re-balanced’. It is reasonably clear that the intricate range of individual “needs” (articulated by the theory of postmaterialism) inevitably comes into conflict with a collectivist philosophy for “being” which is not immediately observable. Traditionally, “needs”, which usually imply ‘desires’ or ‘aspirations’, stem from the tradition of individualism. Here, individual decisions are subject to a “veil of ignorance” (from society) in which “no self is completely defined or exhausted by its ends” (Rawls in Dagger 1999: 188). Put differently, for some, individual choices always precede the moral constraints and social position to which one accedes. “Being”, by contrast, is linked to the communitarian tradition which links all individual actions to some form of social or moral constraint, most notably one’s social position. An individual’s ‘being’ or
existence stems from the sociological theory of Emile Durkheim, who asserted that social forces influence individual actions, and that appeals to individual autonomy (in recognition of significant personal achievements, for example) are fundamentally misguided (2012 [1912]).

Individual ‘needs’ and ‘being’ should, to some extent, be examined with the intellectual debate in mind. It is important to remember that the postmaterialist rationale operates on the presumption of a lack of some element of life, and that this colours the aforementioned definitions of ‘needs’ and ‘being’ (thereby shifting the meanings of these concepts). In the following discussion, it is important for the reader to consider why traditional understandings of certain concepts have shifted, particularly in light of a growing popularity of alternative (or voluntary simplicity) lifestyles since the 1980s. The conceptual shift is difficult to interpret, particularly given the already abstract elements of voluntary simplicity philosophy.

To demonstrate, it is essential to consider developments on both sides of the conceptual spectrum which have arisen from the rise of postmaterialism. Clive Hamilton (2008), writing about the prospect of an internally oriented individualism, remains an optimist for the principles of individualism. *The Freedom Paradox: Towards a Post-Secular Ethics* (Hamilton 2008) is a philosophical work which, by its title at least, is a critique of individualism. Two general arguments emerge from the work. Firstly, the freedoms (appropriately) gained by disenfranchised groups in the 1960s have created an
environment in which the “preoccupation with self” (2008: 227) increasingly fosters general unhappiness amongst Western populations. Secondly, the solution to this is not a return to social conservatism, nor a stoic “cultivation” of “abilities” in the pursuit of excellence; rather, for Hamilton, the truest manifestation of individualism is predicated upon the cultivation of a “meaningful life” in which “the self and the other is permeable” (2008: 13). In other words, for Hamilton, an individual’s life should embody the virtues upon which that life is based (i.e. living a meaningful life or individual “being”) and not as a reflection on social structures or personal history. Hamilton describes this new understanding of ‘being’ through the notion of the “noumenon”, a manifestation of the inner self which only achieves its fullest potential without reflection upon the physical world (or “the world of appearances”) (Hamilton 2008: 79). ‘Being’, in this iteration, is understood as an extension of individualism.

Hamilton argues that individualism has been usurped by consumer society (manifesting as insatiable ‘needs’ within a “hedonic life”). However, this same individualism cannot, according to Hamilton, be returned through excessive social constraint or the mere mastery of one’s abilities (e.g. religious conservatism, moral doctrines or the “good life”). Hamilton’s shift of what it literally means ‘to be’ is a comment on both consumer society as well as the responses which inevitably arise from consumer society critiques. Referring to the philosophy of ‘eudaimonia’, Hamilton contends that it is only through an internally secure form of individualism (as ‘being’ without social reflection) which is capable of generating genuine individual (and by extension, collective) wellbeing. The
reason for Hamilton’s rejection of a return to ‘Stoicism’ \(^5\) can only be speculated upon but it is probably best interpreted as a warning against a return to social conservatism (as collectivist nostalgia in an alienated world). As such, this increasingly used concept stands in opposition to both the discourse of “precarity” and “individualization” (Beck 1992, 2000, Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002) as well as Inglehart’s “socialization” hypothesis. Under the ‘individualization’ thesis, ‘needs’ are understood in terms of the absence of (and occasional yearning for) social structures. Social structures, then, are in this instance regarded as a ‘need’. This rejection of and desire for ‘socially based’ reflection renders the realm of postmaterialism ever more complex. For example, when one’s rationale for “being” is reflected upon as a “need”, the meaningfulness of individualism is called into question. In this case, engagement with the philosophy of Hamilton’s ‘true individualism’ has the effect of inverting well understood concepts of freedom and constraint. If the structures one so desires are no-longer present (or never existed to begin with), the postmaterialist endeavour (that is, the critique against consumer society) may be sunk before it even begins. Even if these structures could be resurrected, however, the perceived benefits associated with involvement in these structures would arguably be utilitarian (that is, as a product of desire rather than social experience). This would (according to a traditional understanding of community) defeat the purpose of such (collectivist) structures. In this way, the reformulation of individualism through postmaterialism encompasses inconsistencies which have the potential to accentuate rather than assuage the stresses of modern life. This creates problems for the application of Hamilton’s theory in practice. When one philosophy

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\(^5\) This is understood broadly as a constraint on individuality and arguably coincides with a communitarian ‘common good’.
argues in favour of “being” without social reflection and another implies that individuals have an intermittent “need” for (non-existent) social structures, a fundamental conflict arises between how one ‘ought’ to view the world and how one inadvertently (or inevitably) views the world. Here, it becomes clear that postmaterialism is a constantly evolving theory which has been amended at multiple junctures. Ultimately, Hamilton’s equation of “being” with an individualistic rather than communitarian philosophy is a comment on late-modern life which is frequently reflected upon by voluntary simplifiers. It is only attainable by eschewing traditional notions of self, at least in the sociological sense. This development of inverted (postmaterialist) philosophies has manifested itself most clearly through the ‘self-help’ genre, but even these kinds of philosophical forays take an each-way bet on communitarianism.

The Hamiltonian amendment to the language on which postmaterialism rests does not negate the appeal of community for many. “Being” remains a notion which is central to the communitarian agenda of social centeredness, in which the self cannot exist without community (i.e. as “unencumbered”) (Sandel 1984a, 1984b, Etzioni 1996a, 1996b, Macintyre 1981, Taylor 1989, Arai & Pedlar 2003). This traditional understanding of community is generally sceptical about what these ‘individualistic’ interpretations of community have to offer. Many have not experienced community nor have little idea about how it should be defined, yet desire it and stress its importance in an essentially private setting. Whilst this suggests a complete loss of community structures, new forms of interaction (especially online) render such a conclusion unreasonable. Indeed, if Hamilton’s vision of an introspective form of “being” is to be realised in a world where
postmaterialist individualism is the norm, it would be difficult to completely distance such claims from the communitarian tradition (that is, known moral principles based upon constraint). Indeed, the basis of adhering to the principles raised in Hamilton’s work cannot be sustained without a degree of contradiction. It is also plausible that individuals will value community and personal liberties interchangeably, reflecting upon the concepts as ‘needs’ and as constitutive of ‘being’ depending upon the context in which she finds herself.

In the advent of postmaterialism, ‘needs’ and ‘being’ have come to encapsulate several meanings which make the task of pinning attitudes and practices to communitarian or liberal theory ever more complex. This makes modern day groups more nebulous in structure and without a distinct moral centre which traditionally characterises communities. But the absence of a traditional ‘self’ (in online settings especially) allows for more flexible interpretations of communal bonds, more in line with Lichterman’s ‘culture of personalism’ than Hamilton’s understanding of ‘being’. Both theories, it will be shown, have at times been compromised by the popularisation of postmaterialism in Western societies. I merely wish here to urge caution about simplistic understandings of postmaterialism and the possibility that a person’s attitudes and life experiences cannot be explained without some ambiguity. More to the point, any use of theory should not supersede the consideration of a person’s life experiences both as a basis for social commentary and as a source of reflection for individuals. Both Hamilton’s notion of “being” and Lichterman’s “culture of personalism” are, empirically speaking, impossible to prove.
It will suffice at this point to suggest that individual lifestyle change and voluntary simplicity is based largely upon a conscious emphasis upon and/or rejection of ‘needs’ as a concept. This is due in large part to the difficulty in individuals distinguishing between ‘wants’ and ‘needs’ offered by consumer society and the source of lifestyle change in the first place, a concept which has become a standard critique for writers (see Hamilton 2003, 2005, 2008, Schor 1991, 1998, Lane 1994, 2000). Much of the existing literature sees the reduction of work hours and fulfilment of personal goals, commonly known as ‘Downshifting’, as the means of reconciling these ‘wants’ and ‘needs’. The pursuit of “the good life” which this bond involves is universally recognised but lacks a specific definition. Hamilton (2008) makes the reasonable point that the “good” life, stemming from the tradition of communitarianism and social constraint is fundamentally different from the “meaningful” life (an uninterrupted form of individualism with unexpected benefits to social cohesion). This confusion is reinforced, according to Hamilton (2008), even in the pursuit of a morally “good” life. This is perhaps the clearest indication of an internal debate within voluntary simplicity, which goes beyond a generalised critique of consumer society. This debate, as alluded to above, is at the centre of attempting to define an ‘optimal’ voluntarily simplified lifestyle. The implication for voluntary simplifiers is both psychological and sociological: Individuals are driven by both actual needs and a sense that these are not ‘needs’ which can simply be ‘fulfilled’.

Hamilton’s argument is a difficult one but is sensitive to the ways that individuals conflate the ‘good’ and the ‘meaningful’ for their own gain. There is a potential, nonetheless, that Hamilton’s discourse of ‘meaningfulness’ will itself be (mis)used
irrespective of claims concerning the presence of a moral falsehood in individual motivations. Defining individual needs in one context to be used in another in practice becomes a precarious interplay of public and private selves. The position that an individual adopts in light of Hamilton’s distinction between a “good” or “meaningful” life is therefore not as straightforward as it may seem. This is in fact linked to the philosophical premise offered by writers like Hamilton (2003, 2005, 2008). The central theme that he advocates, for example, is that consumption undermines both the common good (environmental degradation, community breakdown) and personal fulfilment (described in broad philosophical terms). For Hamilton (2008), the “hedonic life” (characterised by individualised consumerism) and the “good life” (characterised by constraint) are both flawed in their attempts to provide meaning to individuals. The “meaningful life”, by contrast, combines the introspective potential of individualism with environmental consciousness to form a situation where “the self and other is permeable” (Hamilton 2008: 13). This is a reasonable position, but questions arise when one considers potential responses by voluntary simplifiers to this critique. An unreflective form of individualism (if it exists) which Hamilton seems to advocate offers no guarantee of ‘communitarian’ sentiments toward others. Communitarianism is viewed, rather, as a natural extension of genuine and “meaningful” form of individualism. Hamilton’s view, and the approach taken by self-help writers more generally requires a great deal of good faith on the part of the individual. Any individual could conceivably purport to live a “meaningful” life in which various elements of individualism and community are fulfilled by the purpose of a chosen lifestyle, but the ultimate intention of the individual might be to distinguish himself from others. “Meaningfulness”, in this way, becomes a
discourse manipulable by anyone. A man who rejects consumer society on the grounds that it disregards the welfare of a majority, for example, is faced with a potential dilemma. If the man opts to live an isolated lifestyle, away from the corrupting influences of consumerism and status, there is a sense that the individualism that results is based upon a ‘negative’ freedom or frustration with a lack of communitarian spirit. This reveals yet another question. The individual, seeking his independent lifestyle would in fact prefer another life which is not (according to him) a viable proposition. Here, the individual’s desires would appear to go unfulfilled, unless of course, one accepts the possibility that the individual enjoys the critique of consumer society and longing for communitarian society as an extension of his preferred individualistic lifestyle! This would appear to reposition the debate towards a situation where an individual must choose between idealism and pragmatism (as opposed to the debate between individualism and communitarianism). It is still unclear whether this constitutes a move toward communitarianism, individualism or Hamilton’s “meaningful life”. In one sense, it appears that the individual’s understanding of communitarianism has moved well into the realms of aspiration or personal contemplation but remains a potential source of community activism. It is equally arguable, however, that the approach delineated above signifies the presence of a society predicated upon selfish individualism, in which individuals appeal to collective imaginaries for personal gratification. The convenient counter factual at play is that the observer of this individual effectively has no idea about the extent of his feelings toward the social structures for which he (apparently) longs. Hamilton would undoubtedly argue that this actually justifies his distinction between “good” and “meaningful” lives, even though the distinction itself provides little
protection by way of conceptual integrity. The degree of abstraction in this analysis may appear trivial, but ultimately serves to demonstrate the complicated relationship between individualism and communitarianism in the voluntary simplicity movement. The displacement of ‘needs’ and ‘being’ which is central to Hamilton’s (2008) prescription for a ‘meaningful’ life is pivotal to understanding the continued anxieties experienced by voluntary simplifiers. It goes to the question about whether a ‘self-centred’ individual can also be ‘good’ without the guilt or anxiety over his/her own continuous process of ‘self-actualisation’. The anxiety ultimately arises from confusion over what constitutes a ‘good’ life, in particular, the relationship between ‘being good’ and ‘living well’.

In reality, the first substantive attempt at a theory of voluntary simplicity did little to reconcile these perspectives. The emergence of early movement literature in the 1970s clearly did little to clarify the meanings or purpose of voluntary simplicity. There are very few movement based writings on the subject of voluntary simplicity prior to the 1980s. Though voluntary simplicity is often associated with Buddhism and existentialist philosophy, these explanations are usually deployed to explain more recent cultural developments (as Hamilton, and indeed, this thesis does). Rather, contemporary understandings of voluntary simplicity are more closely tied to postmaterialism and cultural developments which have taken place since the 1970s. Movement intellectuals Duane Elgin & Arnold Mitchell (1977) identify five features of the movement: “Material simplicity”, “Human Scale”, “Self-Determination”, “Ecological Awareness”, and “Personal Growth” (1977: 4-9). “Self-determination”, as interpreted by the authors, is linked to the rejection of work as a source of meaning and recognition of “…greater local
self-determination and grass roots political action” of collectives (7). The use of concepts here is not especially careful, given that the principles of individualism and communitarianism appear to be present within the same point. Moreover, “personal growth”, which seeks to “sweep away impediments to inner growth” (8-9) would to some degree, appear to be driven by the very forces it seeks to reject. The other elements refer to more esoteric understandings of sustainability, in which humans remain in balance with nature in a material as well as a psychological sense. The approach taken by Elgin & Mitchell emphasises the importance of all movement features equally. Yet, the individualism implied by “personal growth” in practice bears no allegiance to the other features of voluntary simplicity, especially those in relation to environmentalism and community engagement. Similarly, one cannot hope to achieve “inner growth” if this is defined as an ‘objective’ independent of all collective action or engagement with the outside world. Indeed, if the reader recalls Hamilton’s (2008) conception of individualistic “being”, engagement with the ‘other’ remains essential (albeit as a by-product of individualism). As this thesis has argued, “inner growth”, when operationalised, implies a fundamental dissatisfaction with the (‘outer’) social world which inadvertently undermines its purpose (as it leads to self-exclusion and arguably, indifference). The point here is that voluntary simplicity, as a movement was not conceptually equipped to deal with its popularisation in the 1980s. This dissatisfaction applies whether one views a concept such as individualism as distinct (‘exclusive’) or as part of a suite of parallel concepts. Its initial ambiguity was reasonable in the sense that the movement remained esoteric and less bound to conceptual consistency. The absence of a nebulous ‘happiness’ discourse characteristic of contemporary ‘self-help’ books in
the typology offered by Elgin & Mitchell is perhaps the best evidence of voluntary simplicity as an (initially) little known lifestyle. Elgin & Mitchell (1977: 2) themselves did not see their early discussion paper as “predictive or definitive” but rather as an exercise in “social conjecture and pattern recognition”. It is doubtful that this work would today be viewed in this light. Elgin & Mitchell (1977) (and subsequently Elgin 1981) are more prescriptive than many self-help books from a range of disciplines. Nevertheless, the non-committal approach advocated since the Elgin & Mitchell article would be revisited in the era of post 1990s self-help books, but not before a communitarian resurgence which scorned this approach as selfish and vain.

In the following chapter, I consider the potential effects of the aforementioned cultural developments on self-help literature (Andrews 2013a, 2013b); contrary to the theoretical debates of old, however, elements of individualism, communitarianism and pluralism are featured as part of a vision for a greater purpose.
Chapter 7: Connecting Individualism and Communitarianism to Social Trends

I. ‘Self-help’ as Generic Conceptual Toolbox

II. A Self-help Study in the Tradition of Voluntary Simplicity: Andrews’s (2013a) *Living Room Revolution*

III. Theme 1: The Social Justification for Voluntary Simplicity

IV. Theme 2: The Communitarian Imperative

V. Theme 3: Communication as Process and Outcome

VI. Discussion

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I. ‘Self-help’ as Generic Conceptual Toolbox

The resurgence of individualism as a ‘non-judgemental’ alternative to communitarianism has settled upon a cautious form of moral pluralism. Moral pluralism is defined here as a cross between Lichterman’s individual oriented ‘culture of personalism’ thesis and the general communitarian vision for an open forum for genuine discussion between individuals (eg Etzioni 1996a, 1996b). Pluralists view these positions as reconcilable, contending that any perceived conceptual disparities should be superseded by a will to recognise and tolerate different understandings of culture. Tolerance, however, is an ambiguous concept which highlights the didactic approach to self-help in the pre-neoliberal era. More to the point, tolerance evokes a simultaneous compromise and affirmation of the self (Lasch 1979: 11). On one hand, the self is (in part) defined by
what one believes that they cannot change, irrespective of communal engagement. On the other, the self is affirmed by the recognition that the ‘inferior’ beliefs of others have no effect upon one’s own values. Self-help materials use ‘tolerance’ interchangeably so that ‘compromise’ is understood to function as ‘affirmation’ and vice versa. Self-help, it will be shown, attempts to reconcile the various iterations of individualism and communitarianism through an often didactic tone, but surprisingly manages to resist judgement of voluntary simplifier lifestyles.

This conflation of motivation and tolerance resembles what might be termed a ‘circumspect humility’ but potentially operates as a product of the regressive elements of narcissism and moralism. There is, however, a fundamental difference between what is ‘culturally’ acceptable and the various ways in which ‘culture’ is accepted. There is a sense in which culture that is ‘lived’ (embodied) operates differently to the ways that culture is ‘used’. Put differently, the near universal acceptance of a ‘culture’ of personalism and nonjudgment is not evidence of its preponderance in actual usage. A self-help book may, for instance, champion individualism whilst maintaining a didactic or judgemental tone. Lichterman (1992) rightly suggests that self-help readers do not uncritically accept the principles of self-help. Self-help readers do constitute an “interpretive community” (Lichterman 1992: 424) where judgement of what constitutes a “good” book is based upon its relevance to an individual’s daily life rather than high ideals in themselves. Some readers often find, for example, that books may contain a “nugget” of useful information in spite of offering overly “simplistic” solutions with “mass-market appeal” (Lichterman 1992: 430). The following section will conclude that
self-help writers expect readers to take this approach, which consequently allows writers to tailor their ideal conception of voluntary simplicity to a range of lifestyles.

In spite of the fact that literature is accountable to no one in particular, three themes are present with surprising regularity. The themes are an attempt by self-help authors to reconcile individualism, communitarianism and pluralism. The themes which I identify are: ‘Introspective altruism’, ‘Positive affirmation’, and ‘Focused community spaces’. In brief, ‘introspective altruism’ refers to the value placed upon altruistic contemplation in the private sphere, which includes a concern for social justice and environmental sustainability. ‘Positive affirmation’ refers to a desire to restrict contemplation and/or actions to one particular (or ‘esoteric’) concern rather than an umbrella term with broad implications (eg the value one places upon neighbourhood networks as opposed to ‘capitalism’ or impending environmental disaster). Positive affirmation has more in common with the ‘positive’ ‘embeddedness’ thesis of the early communitarians, in which community is a function of specific forms of collective activity. ‘Focused community spaces’ refers to the typical method of communication for communally minded voluntary simplifiers (usually involving pluralism). These community spaces are akin to Cecile Andrews’s (1998) discussion of “simplicity circles”, in which individuals meet formally to discuss all manner of issues/problems on their path to a voluntarily simplified lifestyle. Whilst it is true that voluntary simplifiers do not necessarily follow the philosophies prescribed in self-help books, the sheer quantity and relative consistency of the material would suggest some resemblance to the ways that voluntary simplifiers live. It is possible to fulfil all three approaches (especially through anonymous online activity) but
it seems more likely that individuals will settle for a single approach in practice. In the following section, I show how different voluntary simplicity discourses from across the political spectrum are ably reconciled in what appears to be an attempt to satisfy all kinds of voluntary simplifiers.

II. A Self-Help Study in the Tradition of Voluntary Simplicity: Andrews’s (2013a)

Living Room Revolution

In a preview article for her new book about the virtues of a voluntarily simplified lifestyle, Cecile Andrews invokes what is redolent of a political party manifesto in search of middle ground:

What they’re (people are) thinking about, of course, is the imperative to reduce consumerism – something that’s destroying the planet. Unfortunately, instead of seeing this as an opportunity for a richer life, many see it (voluntary simplicity) as “self-deprivation!” Of course simplicity is about much more than “cutting back.” It’s “the examined life,” asking ourselves what’s important and what matters. But still, what people hear is: “Deprive yourself! No more fun!”

It’s the cry of a desperate population – one that doesn’t understand what happiness is. But this is where the “new” simplicity comes in (Andrews 2013b).

The declaration of a “new” simplicity may, for the politically minded at least, conjure up images of a political party purporting to have learned the lessons of past electoral failure. Britain’s “New Labour” led by Tony Blair during the mid-1990s made the reconciliation between the principles of social democracy and open markets the new political standard, even though the compatibility of both concepts remained highly dubious. Andrews makes no such claim, but the underlying disquiet between “new” and “old” forms of voluntary simplicity shares many of the qualities of conflicted parties around the world.
There are those who believe in the incontestability of stoicism, material constraint and community as well as those who believe in the broader potential of voluntary simplicity (as an infinitely broad ‘lifestyle choice’). Like a political campaign manager, Andrews sets up the future of voluntary simplicity as a dichotomy between those who would restrict voluntary simplicity to a select few and voluntary simplicity as an open, universal and engaging value set with both personal and wider political ramifications.

Simultaneously, however, the work is didactic in tone, and arguably falls afoul of many of the ambiguities which Andrews attempts to avoid. Voluntary simplicity, in practice, bears little resemblance to the social movements which seek to establish a place in the political process. The three general themes central to Living Room Revolution, which I elaborate upon in the following section, highlight this tension. The ‘social justification for voluntary simplicity’ is a move away from more common anticonsumerist polemics. Andrews achieves this through a focus on economic inequality and social justice. The ‘communitarian imperative’ concerns the inextricability of community from individual actions (essentially a revision of the communitarian “embeddedness” thesis delineated earlier). The final theme I identify, ‘communication as process and outcome’, champions open discussion and implicitly reinforces a ‘civic minded’ individualism in lieu of more elaborate collective activity. If the reader recalls Eliasoph & Lichterman’s (2003) description of “group style”, there is evidence of the author attempting to reconcile “boundaries”, “bonds” and “speech norms”, akin to most social movements. The intensely private nature of some voluntary simplifiers does not appear to faze Andrews. She is assisted by the fact that, generally speaking, “social justice”, “individualism” and “pluralism” are all desirable concepts, despite being principles which are difficult to
reconcile. The author covers a great number of issues which makes the rationales of personal anecdotes given difficult to follow. As I have tried to show throughout this thesis, economic change (postmaterialism and inequality), alienation from community, anti-consumerism and questions of existential purpose are concepts which emerge from a broad range of academic traditions and have been interpreted differently over time. The reference to each of these elements in Andrews’s book is a more transparent example of the problems with voluntary simplicity highlighted in Chapters 1 & 2 of this thesis. This leads to a mixed message in Andrews’s work, and by the end, the reader is left unsure about whether he/she can truly ‘have it all’.

III. Theme 1: The Social Justification for Voluntary simplicity

Andrews (2013a) begins *Living Room Revolution* with a broad critique of individualism. Recounting a negative experience in which she was verbally abused by a stranger in a public place, Andrews asserts that a ubiquitous “culture” of competition is symptomatic of global issues including “climate change, environmental devastation, poverty, unhappiness and wars” (1-2). Drawing upon studies in psychology and economics, Andrews reminds the reader that individuals are not inherently selfish but are conditioned as such through interpersonal relations and institutions which people fail to critique. The goal of the voluntary simplicity movement, according to Andrews, should be a fundamental change in “culture” and the “institutions” within society in order to engender “empathy, solidarity, fairness and trust” (9). What is striking about the opening chapters of Andrews’s work is the attempt to link personal beliefs with material inequality. Given
that inequality (according to Andrews) is the source of problems ranging from drug abuse
to gun crime, Andrews is convinced that it is the enduring (individualistic) “culture of
competition” which must be changed above all (13).

The communitarian outlook which Andrews espouses is not novel. But it is rare for a
voluntary simplicity writer to seemingly hinge all meaningful change on the emergence
of a new collectivist culture, particularly given the title of the considered work. Andrews
clearly feels justified in this quest, citing research which shows that Americans believe
that they are “happy” despite research to the contrary which shows poor scores on matters
of “anxiety”, “anger”, “sadness” and “stress” (14). By channelling Robert Lane’s (1994)
assertion that “people don’t know what makes them happy” and attaching all manner of
social ills to individualism, Andrews makes two responses possible without the social
guilt usually associated with ‘therapy’ based self-help books. Firstly, social critique is
linked principally to alienation from community but any solution cannot rely upon
individualism as a solution in itself. Individualism, discussed below, is viewed as a
natural product of community despite being regarded negatively at some length.
Secondly, the Andrews approach inadvertently makes a very broad range of social
critiques possible, many of which go beyond the general commentary of environmental
activists and theories which associate voluntary simplicity with conservation. The broad
critique of alienation and inequality upon which Andrews’s work centres acts as a
window into a communitarian/pluralist hybrid model of voluntary simplicity (as opposed
to a purely communitarian manifesto). So, whilst Andrews employs the discourse of
‘traditional’ communitarians, the purpose of Living Room Revolution is to identify a
multitude of social ills, which will act as the first step towards a more caring and socially responsible milieu. I will consider the implications of this second point in a later section.

IV. Theme 2: The Communitarian Imperative

Andrews’s critique of individualism renders community the prism through which all actions of a voluntarily simplified lifestyle must be taken. The four factors which Andrews claims influence “real happiness” are “connection”, “calling”, “celebration” and “control” (15). The motivational verve which underpins the tone of these concepts makes it difficult to ascertain liberal or communitarian rationales previously highlighted by this thesis. The basic thrust of each, however, is relatively straightforward. ‘Connection’ means “social connections with others”. ‘Calling’ refers to “work…that brings (people) meaning and purpose”. “Celebration” concerns people’s “enjoyment and delight in their daily activities”. ‘Control’ is a broader concept with various components. On one hand, ‘control’ refers to both meeting one’s “basic needs of safety…survival and self-respect” principally through creating and accomplishing individual goals. On the other, control is achieved through having influence upon decision making in community and “feeling we are being listened to” in the process (15).

On the surface of these definitions, ‘celebration’ appears to be the only concept which addresses individualism and personal fulfilment in isolation. ‘Calling’ is similar to ‘celebration’ in scope but the former addresses a social component (i.e. as redemption, righting various wrongs or ‘making a difference’). The separation of ‘calling’ and
‘celebration’ may appear benign but a book which decries the misguided nature of happiness seeking arguably renders any form of individualism difficult to sustain. Nonetheless, for Andrews, collective action and personal fulfilment are not either/or propositions. Indeed, for most, the idea of maintaining a deeply held interest and relaxation or enjoyment of life is not especially controversial (or enlightening). Most would not need to become voluntary simplifiers or even experience ‘lifestyle change’ if this were the case. But this is not the issue at hand. The vital question about whether an individual who lives a life of isolation (i.e. ‘celebration’) can experience “real happiness” is given no genuine consideration. Perhaps the reason for silence on this point is attributable to the overarching principle which, according to Andrews, supersedes even the traditional communitarian outlook which is essential for achieving happiness.

V. Theme 3: Communication as Process and Outcome

Being active in the realm of adult education herself, Andrews believes that the “study circle”, an organised discussion involving groups of people with similar interests, is the basis for both personal happiness and broader social change. In some instances, the author is relatively uninterested in the ‘content’ of “civil discourse”; for Andrews collective engagement is its own reward. Sometimes, the rhetoric deployed by Andrews is officious, as if to demonstrate a religious commitment to community:

Creating congenial political meetings should be a goal of the whole community…We should have T-Shirts, parades, signs, et., saying “Bring Back Civility”. We should schedule community meetings, write letters to the editor, and post the issue on neighbourhood blogs. Get people talking. Above all, bring it up in your conversations with people. Say something like “I’ve been wondering about what we can do about
our increasingly uncivil public life. Have you any thoughts about this lately?” (2013: 121)

In this formulation, the formal depiction of community (“meetings”, “parades”) is blended with the informal (“conversations”). The expectation of a universally positive and uncritical approach to communitarianism is clearly based upon a belief that the alternative is an uncaring world without an identifiable social conscience.

VI. Discussion

Andrews’s work is a clear example of the conundrum faced by those attempting to grapple with the theories of communitarianism and liberalism, as well as in voluntary simplicity more broadly. On one hand, Andrews distinguishes the different facets of an individual’s life which contribute to happiness. Whilst the author fails to explicitly categorise these factors (i.e “connection” referring to communitarianism and “celebration” referring to individualism), these are generally regarded as separate features which should be accounted for, most likely through introspection. On the other hand, Andrews casts the communitarian ‘net’ so widely and ultimately presumes the outcome of any introspection. This highlights once again the practical, yet occasionally dubious application of Lichterman’s (1996) “culture of personalism”, Etzioni’s (1996b) ‘moderate’ communitarianism and other ‘centrist’ interpretations of postmaterialist ideals. If a voluntary simplifier, writer or political movement begins to define themselves against that which they oppose, they implicitly begin to represent some form of the derided ideology. As such, the depictions of community and individualism in books and
culture are reflections on worlds which are indescribable from such mediums, but which inspire those influenced by it to influence others.
Chapter 8: Individualism and Community in Online Forums: An Empirical Investigation

I. Reflexivity in Research: The Sandlin & Walther (2009) study

II. Public Sociology & Storytelling

III. simplelivingforum.net: An Overview

IV. Methodology

V. Theme 1: “Your ‘enough’ Story”: The Personalised Narrative for Public Consumption

VI. Theme 2: The “Ethics” of “Nonjudgement” in Practice: Encouragement as Limited Community

VII. Theme 3: The Allure of the Unfinished Narrative: ‘Reworking’ the “Banality of Endless Possibility”

I. Reflexivity in Research: The Sandlin & Walther (2009) study

This thesis has argued that the goal of both identity and reflexivity which characterises most social movements has not been replicated in studies of voluntary simplicity. Authors frequently rely upon either environmental activity (eg Etzioni 1998) or accept individual motives uncritically. One article (Sandlin & Walther 2009), appropriately entitled “Complicated Simplicity”, adopts a critical approach to identity formation. Drawing upon another article about the rationales of the “green consumer” (Moisander &
Pesonen 2002), Sandlin & Walther (2009) contend that identity for voluntary simplifiers is based upon two distinct factors. Firstly, individuals seek to distinguish themselves from the “hegemony of consumerism” by creating a “moral identity” (Sandlin & Walther 2009: 301). This (as identified earlier in this thesis) involves a process of “refusing what we are” (Moisander & Pesonen 2002: 330 citing Foucault). Secondly, identity formation involves “promoting new forms of subjectivity” which essentially leads to “a permanent questioning and reinventing of the self” (Moisander & Pesonen 2002: 330 cited in Sandlin & Walther 2009: 301). “Moral identity” and “new forms of subjectivity”, here, are in constant competition but are never actually resolved. This is because “practices of the self” (the “ethical rules” through which the “ethical self” is constituted) (Foucault cited in Sandlin & Walther 2009: 301) are continuously changing (or are affirmed).

Whilst this approach borders on Lasch’s (1979) scathing critique of the “banality” of “endless possibility”, Sandlin & Walther (2009: 303) actually view it as the basis for analysing both “moral identity development” and “collective identity development”. The approach effectively recognises that individuals attempt to maintain multiple identities and that these identities are not automatically reconcilable (though this can be presented as such). It also reflects a non-committal approach on the issue of value change: An inconsistency regarding the principles that one holds may epitomise alienation and narcissism as much as it represents genuine attempts to achieve community (through an “ethics” of “nonjudgement”). In the cases which Sandlin & Walther analyse, elements of identity reflection (or ‘narcissism’) and “movement relevant” (Bevington & Dixon 2005)
discourse (continually reformulated values) each feature without a resolved mindset that could be described as ‘liberal’ or ‘communitarian’.

II. Public Sociology and Storytelling

The cognitive dissonance within the rationales of voluntary simplifiers highlighted by the Sandlin & Walther study makes the process of storytelling itself central to value formation. Notions of selfishness and elitism associated with ‘lifestyle change’ have been accepted in the public realm generally, which has distanced research from both critical and public engagement. This marginalises studies in the cast of developing or transient values, particularly given the cynicism toward sociology for the same reason. Michael Burawoy (2005) distinguishes four types of sociological research: professional, policy, critical and public. ‘Professional’ based sociology must adhere to “scientific norms” and appeal to an established academic audience. ‘Policy’ based sociology addresses social problems as understood by its “clients” (eg. government or think-tanks and their concern with unemployment). Professional and policy based sociology reflect “instrumental knowledge” or the “means” of problem solving (Burawoy 2004: 106, Kleidman 2006: 70). Critical and public sociology, by contrast, create “reflexive knowledge” which “questions underlying assumptions and focuses on values and ultimate goals” (Kleidman 2006:70). Whereas ‘critical’ sociology seeks principally to impugn “the assumptions, theories, and methods of mainstream sociology” (Kleidman 2006: 70), ‘public’ sociology involves a “double conversation” with both the concerns of critical sociologists as well as “a conversation with publics…who are themselves involved in
conversation” (Burawoy 2005: 7). In a way, this latter iteration of “reflexive knowledge” is at the heart of voluntary simplicity lifestyles.

Irrespective of whether this is understood as narcissism or community-focussed self-improvement, the desire to resist classification is arguably a goal of both academics and voluntary simplifiers. Academics (particularly those with a radical mindset) rarely wish to be regarded as closed minded. After all, this kind of implicit exclusion is felt by academics as much as it is by many voluntary simplifiers. It is surprising, then, that reflexive, let alone public sociology is rare outside of the self-help genre. Perhaps academics feel that engagement with publics is already covered by movement intellectuals already involved with the movement. This would be unsatisfactory, given that movement intellectuals are not particularly interested in debates within sociology.

It is also possible, however, that the individualism/communitarian divide in the minds of voluntary simplifiers is simply too stark to yield responses in the Burawoy’s vision of public sociology. Sandlin & Walther (2009) and Moisander & Pesonen (2002) show that individuals attempt to maintain “moral identity” whilst creating “new forms of subjectivity”. Regardless of what a research project entails, the researcher will emerge with responses which respect both of these principles. Whilst the liberal/communitarian debate has been broadly rejected, the now inseparable rationale of “moral identity” and “new forms of subjectivity” is similar to previous debates. In reality, self-help writers traverse each of Burawoy’s four ‘sociologies’, usually without much consideration about
how engagement with one will impact upon its promulgation of another (as with Andrews). Voluntary simplifiers, however, are not necessarily bound to conceptual consistency in the same way as a self-help writer. Motives can be separated to accord with the norms of a given situation, whilst offering some semblance of a personal or collective revelation. The extent to which this can be understood or explained by the researcher, however, is potentially limited.

Francesca Polletta (2006: 34) makes a similar point: “Movement stories turn the strange into the new. This does not mean, however, that they fully explain the new…Stories contain rather than resolve ambiguity.” It is difficult to see how any research project aiming to discover the liberal or communitarian tendencies within individuals, in light of the nature of storytelling itself. Polletta (2006: 9) contends that “stories are bracketed in a flow of discourse”, adding that “they (stories) call the listeners attention to the reality they reveal.” The ‘discourse’ here only helps to project this ‘reality’ but never truly explains it. This leaves voluntary simplicity in a precarious bind. On one hand, more research on the value orientations of voluntary simplifiers is required, particularly given the inherent ‘ambiguity’ of the values themselves. On the other, the ‘discourse’ primarily used to present this ‘ambiguity’ is not suitable for explaining reality.

If storytelling is inherently ambiguous as examples within voluntary simplicity have shown (i.e. Sandlin & Walther 2009), research may be best suited to situations without a researcher actually present. This is because a discourse of ‘engagement’ which is central
to public sociology invariably creates a communitarian bias because discussions over what ‘really’ constitutes voluntary simplicity is a “framing” process. A truly ‘public’ sociology, in this sense, is one where the researcher plays a minimal role (or none at all). Reflection over what constitutes ‘individualism’, ‘community’ or even ‘genuineness’ is likely (in a research environment) to generate a degree of intellectual dissonance which would render any meaningful researcher/participant engagement impossible. Quasi-anonymous discussions between voluntary simplifiers on matters related to the aforementioned concepts, however, is another matter entirely.

III. simplelivingforum.net : an overview

The ubiquity of ‘self-help’ books makes online fora a popular mode of communication between voluntary simplifiers. A cursory online search of ‘voluntary simplicity’ or ‘simple living’ reveals many websites some of which include: Simple Living Network (www.financialintegrity.org), Down to Earth Simple Living Forums (https://simpleliving.threads.net/), Aussies Living Simply (www.aussieslivingsimply.com.au), Frugal Village Forums (www.frugalvillage.com/threads/forum.php) and The Simplicity Collective (simplicitycollective.com/join). All require some type of formal registration to contribute but usually allow the participant to remain anonymous. Some fora are essentially private, which prevents non-members from viewing the posts of members. The Simple Living Forums (www.simplelivingforum.net) website offers a very broad range of topics which accords with recent trends within voluntary simplicity. Like most the SLF does not
require personal details in order to register, instead favouring a screen name and location of the participant. Members are able to communicate privately via an indirect email ‘request’ generator as email addresses are not made publicly available. The SLF is moderated by various senior members who are able to assess reports of abuse, delete posts and suspend memberships. Nonetheless, personal information is not required to register memberships, which suggests that the impact of suspensions is limited in any case. Interestingly, the guidelines are as concerned with offensive material (i.e. invective designed to offend) as matters concerning free speech. The guidelines remind the participant that the SLF is officially located in the United States and that other countries may not recognise (or permit) such displays of “free speech”. The guidelines are designed to allow discussion of particular topics (such as ‘public policy’) as well as spontaneous reporting of personal developments (eg. new books read, purchases made, events attended).

The forum itself is wide-ranging in content: topics vary from the personal minutiae of everyday life to discussions of political issues. Topics are specific but some crossover is predictable given the abstract nature of voluntary simplicity theory. A space is also provided for general discussion but use of the designated topics is encouraged by the forum moderators. Topic threads typically report on a particular development in the life of the voluntary simplifier who created it (eg. household management and personal achievements) but discussion of current events and public policy is also common. The forum has an ‘in quote’ response function, which allows other voluntary simplifiers to draw attention to specific quotes of previous posts in responses. Naturally, this affords
voluntary simplifiers the opportunity to respond to any post within the named thread, not only the original post. This is conducive to fluid discussion which potentially mixes one-on-one and open discussions. Whilst this dynamic would clearly influence face-to-face discussions, participants are generally comfortable with the flow of online (typically delayed) responses. This is probably because responses are usually positive and rules concerning civility are enforced (though evidence of removed posts often remains). There is some semblance of what might be regarded as a hierarchy, with a set of labels determined by the number of posts that a voluntary simplifier makes (e.g., senior member, etc.). However, in the absence of a reward system, this is probably designed to engender commitment to the forum rather than to order voluntary simplifiers. The classification of ‘new’ voluntary simplifiers provides a basis for personal introductions and encouragement from senior members. The anonymity of forum membership generally allows an open discussion of potentially uncomfortable or embarrassing subjects. This is a freedom often not provided by face-to-face conversation and contributes to the positive and encouraging environment of the forum.

IV. Methodology

My methodological approach to the Simple Living Forums is underpinned by an understanding of the reflexive nature of comments made by voluntary simplifiers as well as the growth of storytelling culture as an end in itself (Lichterman 2006). My objective, therefore, was to consider potential tensions between reflexive commentary and an open and generally uncritical culture of openness and storytelling.
Central to this type of abstract analysis is an understanding of the ways in which a researcher’s presence directly or inadvertently influences reflections made by voluntary simplifiers. Researcher engagement would likely add an additional layer of reflexivity to commentary made on the online forums. This research took as a starting point the ways that voluntary simplifiers seek to make their lifestyle change known to others. Firstly, I attempted to identify commonalities in the way/s that voluntary simplifiers make public statements about their lifestyle change. Secondly, following from the findings of Sandlin & Walther (2009), I looked for instances of judgement and non-judgement in commentary made by voluntary simplifiers. Finally, I questioned the potential impact/s of potential cultures of judgement and non-judgement on self-expression and goal setting for voluntary simplifiers. Given that there has been a paucity of research on voluntary simplifier reflexivity and culture/s of storytelling, I refrained from the use of definite typologies in my analysis of personal motivations (such as individualism or communitarianism). Instead, I searched for both (i) potential tensions between competing ideas within statements made by voluntary simplifiers, and, (ii) the ways that difference and conflict (where it exists) is interpreted and mediated between voluntary simplifiers and its implications for online interactions. The overarching aim of this approach is to identify the strength of voluntary simplicity culture and to draw conclusions about its status in the public realm.

Practically, these insights informed my sampling in the following ways. I chose posts according to Sandlin & Walther’s (2009) three formal principles of selecting content from online blogs. In short, these are (1) Coherence of public storytelling, (2) Cultures of
judgement and non-judgement and, (3) Narratives of self-affirmation. Overall, 57 posts were read and 13 were included in the analysis because they commented specifically on voluntary simplicity lifestyles, its contribution to community and personal fulfilment.

Analysis conformed to the basic principles of framework analysis (Ritchie & Lewis 2003). So my analysis was undertaken thematically, concentrating on the ‘common sense’ content in the blogs (Spencer & Pahl 2006: 220). This analytical device helped me to sort through the data according to the key themes of individualism and community.

The ethical considerations of this study are unique, in part due to the frequently expressive and abstract expressions of voluntary simplicity values. By the same token, statements made on online fora are public to all, including non-members. As such, this presents a situation in which the ‘personal’ is willingly made ‘public’, usually without fear or embarrassment on the part of the forum participant. This understandably raises an increasingly common debate on the ethical use of internet based research. Bryman (2008: 654) points out that, as a general rule, “the more the venue is acknowledged to be public, the less obligation there is on the researcher to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of individuals using the venue, or to seek their informed consent.” On the other hand, some researchers have indicated potential issues with “lurking” (or “non-participant observation” {Bryman 2008: 654}) and the assumption that use of comments made in a public space will necessarily be met with approval by participants (eg. Hudson & Bruckman 2004, Sanders 2005). Others have nuanced this debate further still, by
suggesting that public comments may be used without formally seeking consent, “provided (that) anonymity of individuals is respected” (Hewson et al. 2003 in Bryman 2008: 654).

Much of the debate described above depends on the sensitivity of comments made by participants as well as the degree of importance that participants place upon privacy. The simplelivingforum.net website has a dedicated space in which researchers conducting conventional research (eg. focus groups, questionnaires, etc) are able to contact members. This is not designed to prohibit non-participant observation; rather, forum moderators are wary of recruitment for formal research in informal settings. Steps have been taken to balance individual privacy and public engagement. As most (with the exception of certain moderators) can make use of pseudonyms (or ‘screen names’) and private communication between forum members is possible via email exchange (on the same site), the line that distinguishes what forum members regard as ‘public’ or ‘private’ appears to have been demarcated. Whilst seeking consent for use of public comments would eliminate all doubt over the willingness of unaware participants, it should be pointed out that members themselves are easily able to make comments privately.

As I have suggested throughout this thesis, direct engagement between voluntary simplifiers and researchers can have a significant effect on the nature of responses even when such responses are relatively uncontroversial. This often has more to do with the historical debate between individualism and communitarianism than it does with the circulation of sensitive information. This writer is yet to discover research in the field of
voluntary simplicity which takes ‘culture’ as a starting point. I have argued that this partly explains why researchers tend to view acts of consumption/conservation as the basis for voluntary simplicity values (over expression of values directly). It is for this reason that I have viewed anonymous, unprompted comments about the motivations of voluntary simplifiers as the most direct way of analysing voluntary simplicity culture. Moreover, the main aim of my research is to prove (or disprove) the existence of a particular voluntary simplicity culture. This also means that the ‘content’ of any participant’s comment/s is often viewed as secondary to the cultural forces which underpin it.

As such, the conclusions that I draw relate not to the specific story of any one individual but to the trend/s to which voluntary simplifiers abide (or reject). The themes that I consider are (i) The public performance of storytelling, (ii) Cultures of judgement and non-judgement, and, (iii) Incomplete narratives as self-affirmation. Importantly, the ‘what’ components of voluntary simplicity (i.e. voluntary simplicity activities, who) do not automatically represent particular value sets. The reason why people seek to make public statements about essentially personal beliefs is one of the main objectives of this study. In essence, a hypothetical statement of principle (such as “I don’t like people”), does not solely reflect one’s consumption activities or the totality of one’s personal beliefs. Rather, it represents a kind of public justification which is reinforced through communication (either direct and/or imagined). Therefore, my approach to the following section seeks to discover the patterns of communication between voluntary simplifiers within a space with often indirect (and sometimes non-existent) interaction.
The following section explores three elements of voluntary simplicity practice on the SLF website. The first concerns the tone of responses to posts by voluntary simplifiers, which echoes Sandlin & Walther’s (2009) findings of an “ethics” of “nonjudgement”. The second element considers the ways in which voluntary simplifiers potentially shape or bracket personal narratives for public consumption. The final element involves a deep awareness of the various communitarian and liberal strands which accompany personal philosophy and which the voluntary simplifier attempts to reconcile through discourses of ‘self-improvement’ and ‘freedom’. Through this process, an outline emerges which resembles to a large degree a culmination of the developments within postmaterialism since the 1970s. From the initial postmaterialist ‘shift’ to unspecified communitarian retort and finally an equally vague call to pluralistic ‘non-judgement’, voluntary simplifiers typically attempt to construct and justify a personal narrative.

V. Theme 1: “Your ‘enough’ Story”: The Personalised Narrative for Public Consumption

By and large, the most popular aspect of ‘simple living’ forums is the ‘coming out’ process, through which voluntary simplifiers declare various life changes. Notwithstanding the similarity of many such posts, the authors sometimes insert personal details which seek to add a degree of authenticity. The title of this section, derived in part from a thread on the simpleliving.net forum, is designed to incorporate the vast majority of voluntary simplifiers (arguably, most people in general). This author has yet
to discover an overtly critical reaction to an introductory post, and most are usually acknowledged by at least one forum user. Posts are often written in short-hand as voluntary simplifiers attempt to account for different aspects of their lives. One posted:

I am interested to hear what your incentives are as it might also help me stay on track. mine are:

Clearer mind, I hate clutter.
less anxiety - I don't seem to worry about future financial situations as much.
the money I save can be put towards holidays, I do like to travel.
healthier diet, I feel and look healthier since I started home growing produce.
Not having to work so hard, more time spent at home, I would hate to join the rat race again.
much more content, less stressed, more relaxed.
i am still very much a beginner but already reaping the rewards, thank you for reading my post.

As is the case with most public forums, however, the potential for ‘trolling’ is part of introductory messages. One new member posted a message which purported to exhibit severe mental health issues. When another member suggested a suicide support service along with some general advice, the author’s sarcasm toward the voluntary simplicity movement was unambiguous:

Oh! I know exactly what you mean bud, cheers! Yes, I want my mind to be at peace all the time, no matter what. I don’t want my mind to get affected and over react in certain situations. I want to keep calm, I want my mind to KEEP CALM.
Despite the provocative tone of the comment above, the critique resembles the ways in which voluntary simplifiers express themselves, at least online. Contrary to the theoretical conundrums highlighted by this thesis, most voluntary simplifiers are initially influenced by material conditions (i.e. unintentional hoarding), stress and relationship breakdowns. In all likelihood, the post by the individual above demonstrates that some non-simplifiers view forum discussions as a kind of personal weakness, and voluntary simplicity itself as a form of low-grade therapy. The forum itself is seemingly unaffected by such criticism, perhaps given that various critiques of narcissism are well known within the public realm. In this sense, the continuing good nature of the vast majority of participants represents a subtle rebuke to the cut and thrust of political disputes.

Especially modest introductions, for example, are among the most warmly received. One new member who introduced herself only as “a simple mom trying to live simple” received eleven welcome messages. The importance placed upon engagement as an end in itself strongly resembles the kind of community described by Andrews and others but does not compel users to engage further or even to respond to the various welcoming responses. In its fullest manifestation, the simple living forum epitomises the maintenance of “group style” (Eliasoph & Lichterman 2003) as well as a “culture of personalism” (Lichterman 1995a, 1996).

VI. Theme 2: The “Ethics” of “Nonjudgement” in Practice: Encouragement as Limited Community
As the previous section highlighted, the view of community on online voluntary simplicity forums is regarded as compatible with individual freedom and self-expression. Voluntary simplicity forums are nonetheless concerned with the wider world and often discuss community events and political developments. As this author has demonstrated previously, disdain for narcissistic attitudes is widely known and is manifested as a set of derisive clichés. Forums, too, are conscious of this critique. The author of one post, purporting to be a student researching voluntary simplifiers was met with a curt response from a senior member. Research is not permitted on the public forum as this would undermine the freedom of self-expression described earlier. One member became suspicious, suggesting that the post “seems more like a marketing dept (department)…trying to get better at spamming” than a genuine student. Whether or not the original author was in fact a marketer is secondary to the view of voluntary simplifiers that community should be organic, authentic and ultimately distinguishable from cultures of consumerism.

Suspicion over the scope and purpose of community also extends to members of the forum. One member, promoting a series of lectures at a US university, provided a link to the course materials for all members. The coordinator claimed that the lectures would support a “consciousness raising style” with engagement more characteristic of a seminar than a university lecture. This form of engagement resembles the “study circles” approach advocated by Andrews (1998). The responses (at least online) to these lectures were the most guarded (and perhaps, critical) on the forums. One respondent familiar with the style of groups wished the member well, but hoped that the member would be “left with participants at the end of the course.” The response continued, “People will
drop out, but if you end up with a small group who (sic) is highly interested, thats (sic) better than 12 who just want to get their finances in order.” Comment on the worthiness of participants was not the only point of scepticism, however. Another respondent claimed,

I just skimmed the…book’s table of content. I have to say that (it) is a limiting point of view. Earth sustainability seems to be the overarching principle(sic), which by definition is a “this is good for us, something we should do” rather than “this is fun and leads to a rich, self actualized life.”

The respondent nonetheless wished the coordinator luck and suggested that he could “always go off on tangents about why simple living is personally rewarding”. Another respondent who had taken courses from the same institution sought to downplay the importance of the course, suggesting that,

…it is not that serious of a course. Basically we just read a few articles in the class book about Voluntary Simplicity. Then we come to class to discuss them and the issues they highlight. At the end of each class session we pick some task to do – clean out the closet or whatever. It is always something small that can be done in a week or less.

The member added that the best part of the course was the opportunity to engage with other voluntary simplifiers.

Another claimed to have previously dropped out of the course because some of the other participants were not (apparently) familiar with the basics of recycling.

The coordinator subsequently reminded the respondents that he/she was in fact “just coordinating” the course. He/she reminded the forum that “I am going to hold my tongue
for the most part” and that “the class is more about self-discovery and exploration than
my ‘wisdom!’ ha ha”

What is most interesting about these exchanges is the universal recognition for the
potential for hubris associated with professionalised knowledge of voluntary simplicity
and the ways in which the “ethic of non-judgement” is called into question when
considering such knowledge. The implicit disdain for those lacking knowledge,
disregard for knowledge seen as external to a “self actualized life” and indifference to the
menial tasks proposed by the training is largely absent from voluntary simplicity forums.
On the contrary, voluntary simplicity forums are, for the most part, devoted to these kinds
of discussions! Sections on the simplelivingforum.net website are dedicated to disaster
preparedness, various books and materials directly and indirectly related to voluntary
simplicity and discussions about the vicissitudes of household management. The author
of this thesis suggests that the objections many members had to the course were not based
upon a resistance to training or even community. Rather, voluntary simplifiers resisted
any perceived attempt by others to shape their own world-view. This can be seen to be
the greatest evidence of a distinct “group style” (Eliasoph & Lichterman 2003) of “non-
judgement” (Sandlin & Walther 2009).

VII. Theme 3: The Allure of the Unfinished Narrative: ‘Reworking’ the “Banal of Endless Possibility”
The previous section attempted to demonstrate the risks to harmony on voluntary simplicity forums. Voluntary simplifiers are, generally speaking, warm and sincere in nature, but occasionally bristle at the notion that one source of information can achieve everlasting happiness. Front of mind for voluntary simplifiers are the advertising slogans for products which purport to deliver such happiness. The invidious comparisons and competition which excessive consumption is seen to represent, is for voluntary simplifiers extended to other parts of their lives, especially in interactions and in the quest for self-actualisation. As such, voluntary simplicity stands as a mixture of headstrong individualism and a form of extreme modesty which most are pleased to exhibit.

When Christopher Lasch (1979) helped arm a public consciousness of “narcissism”, cultures of introspection (of which voluntary simplicity is one) were compelled to reformulate what constituted a ‘good’ person. The growing popularity of leisure and stress relief among high-end consumers blurred the lines between consumption and self-actualisation. Where 1980s downshifters may have been able to proclaim ‘the world is my oyster’, voluntary simplifiers today are just as likely to declare ‘I am not yet worthy of the world’.

In a forum thread entitled, “What I now know about myself”, voluntary simplifiers were invited to assess their perceived ‘level’ of self-actualisation. The difference between assuredness (of values, interests, purpose) and uncertainty is generally subjective. Nonetheless, this form of self-reflection resonates, to some extent, with Lasch’s critique of a culture which prevents self-actualisation and promises only the “banality of endless
possibility”. Many of the respondents to the aforementioned thread were decidedly more concerned with the acquisition of knowledge, made possible by conveying an (arguably incongruous) ‘informed modesty’. Indeed, ‘knowing that one does not know’ does not necessarily imply an incipient arrogance, but this factor needs to be considered given high public recognition of narcissism.

The comments of members ranged from simple clichés to more cryptic philosophies which tended to be presented in a short hand format similar to many introductory statements. One member wrote (in response to the thread’s title):

1. I can be kind without giving away all my energy
2. It’s ok to start over- even after the 8th, 12th or 100th time
3. People talk a lot of talk but they don’t walk the walk when it’s time- it’s nothing personal against me
4. I like order- chaos sends me into overdrive. This can be at home, in my office, even in my car. I like it clean, neat and organised and if it’s not, it greatly affects my energy and mood

Points 3 and 4 illustrate the popularisation of modesty as a principle which complements an individual’s desire for personal space and control. For this member, conflict is a function of personal turmoils rather than as a breakdown in community. Other people, in this formulation, are secondary to personal fulfilment. Despite a sense of modesty (“It’s ok to start over”), failure is not really possible as this would, according to the member, be a function of personal weakness rather than community dysfunction. To be clear, the
member is not especially keen to critique others, but retains an internal dialogue which resembles ‘self-interest’ more than any ‘greater good’.

The language of modesty is not restricted to the individually minded, however. Many of those who could reasonably be classified as ‘communitarian’ are willing to disclose personal insecurities. One such member wrote,

I am quiet by nature and love silence - up to a point. Community is important to me. I need balance and order in my life. Messes unsettles (sic) me except in the natural world.
I prefer information and nonfiction over fiction. I blame that on the internet.
I am no longer a dog person and prefer cats and birds.
I don't get ostentatious, excessive or wasteful houses, cars, lifestyles.
I have to have some exposure to the natural world every day.
DH (Dear Hubby) says I am much too silly so I must be. Looking at life as absurd is a natural state for me.

This formulation defers to well-worn communitarian critiques of consumer society. The tone, in particular, is judgemental both in respect to the use of the word “blame” (where ‘attribute’ would imply neutrality) and the appeal to clichés (“excessive…houses, cars, lifestyles”). However, the admission that her husband “says (that) I am much too silly so I must be” seems inconsistent with the headstrong critic of consumer society for whom information (and rationalism) is seen as a priority. The author of this thesis sees a fundamental similarity within the expressions of both aforementioned members. (False) modesty regulates ego and defrays potential criticisms relating to expressions of liberal or communitarian values. The benefit is both personal (self-improvement, purpose) and social (self-effacement reinforcing the ‘ethic of nonjudgement’).
Chapter 9: Analysis and Conclusion

I. Circumspect Humility

Modesty, like postmaterialism, is often associated with the highest forms of human character (Brooks 2011). The same, however, could also be said about an individual’s intelligence and their ability to express themselves without fear of social consequence (Hamilton 2008). The examples in the above research suggest that voluntary simplifiers are users of the language of communitarianism and individualism in the pursuit of highly individualistic lifestyles. But this in itself proves little about how narcissistic or socially engaged a voluntary simplifier might be. Rather, it reflects a reflexive approach to identity formation. Developments in the intellectual culture surrounding postmaterialism have given voluntary simplifiers a means to exhibit interest in a moral individualism (drawing upon elements of Hamilton’s philosophical individualism and Eliasoph & Lichterman’s “group style”). On the other hand, these very forms of individualism are firmly grounded in the language of communitarianism. Where Lasch’s (1979) “culture of
narcissism” bemoaned the paucity of feeling toward anything of real substance, voluntary simplifiers turn this ‘paucity of feeling’ into a project from which various challenges and achievements can be elicited. What this says about voluntary simplicity as a contemporary sociological phenomenon depends on the framework that an analyst might use.

If, like early communitarians (Lasch 1979), an analyst views the ‘post-narcissist’ as ‘unconscious narcissist’ modesty is of little consequence; informed reflections (in line with the conclusions drawn above) merely reconceptualise an individual’s apathy. This perspective is a rebuke of voluntary simplicity as a whole along with its recognition as the alternative to consumer society. Expressions of self-improvement or collective solidarity are, in this interpretation, “emotivist” (Macintyre 1981: 19), or, ideas about self or community which are designed to mask the absence of collective solidarity itself.

It should be pointed out, however, that Macintyre’s “emotivism” is not so much a factor in voluntary simplicity culture as it is a point of scepticism within this thesis. There is little evidence of self-aggrandisement on online fora, and any perception (real or otherwise) of officious communication is generally criticised by members. It is true that the language of self-improvement and non-judgement solves a number of problems for different kinds of voluntary simplifiers. Modesty makes ‘self-interested’ individuals more approachable which allows voluntary simplifiers with similar experiences to contribute to discussions. The unintentional benefit of the often clichéd ‘self-help’ genre
to the voluntary simplicity movement has been a growing disdain for simple solutions to life’s challenges. This has compelled all voluntary simplifiers to cast their own ideological nets more widely, not necessarily in spirit but usually in practice. For the ‘communally-minded’, self-improvement is already a part of various anti-consumerist, religious and philosophical frameworks which appeal to personal ‘revelations’ and the “good life” (Hamilton 2008). Simultaneously, however, self-improvement provides a bulwark against ‘majoritarian’ communitarianism. Even the most judgemental voluntary simplifier is unlikely to castigate another as this would undermine the ‘collective’ goal of self-improvement as well as the general ability to propose potentially unusual or unpopular ideas in an open forum.

The above is an illustration of a fairly benign culture with few unique features. It could easily be applied to community groups or even workplaces. As a consequence, voluntary simplicity forums share more in common with Paul Lichterman’s (1996) depiction of a “culture of personalism” than any singular political philosophy. This thesis has found that “personalism” has effectively broadened voluntary simplicity into a reflexive culture without a fixed political base. There are a number of potential threats to the relative harmony of voluntary simplicity culture, however. ‘Trolling’ and marketing on online forums is fairly uncommon but voluntary simplifiers are especially sensitive to both judgement and perceived manipulation. Many forums require formal online registration to participate in online posts, which (in some cases) limits the anonymity of participants. If this were to become a feature of all voluntary simplicity forums, viewpoints would become accountable to society at large (given the efficiency of internet search engine
results). In such instances, the self-regulation associated with posts could undermine the distinct “group style” (Eliasoph & Lichterman 2003) which characterises the open forum.

A second problem, evidenced above, is the relationship between voluntary simplicity culture and ‘professional’ (self-help, scholarly) knowledge of voluntary simplicity. It is surprising that voluntary simplifiers are perhaps the most frequent consumers of materials regarding their own culture but remain sceptical about ‘professionalised’ knowledge on the subject. The reactions to the university course revealed a more judgemental, critical and even competitive side to voluntary simplifiers. The most plausible explanation, offered above, is that the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge, for voluntary simplifiers, should be tied to an individual’s personal beliefs and motivations. Whilst this can include ‘professionalised’ knowledge, it should always be framed in terms of personal motivation rather than as an echoing of another’s perceived ideological agenda. This confirms Lichterman’s (1992) finding that self-help readers do not accept ideas presented in books uncritically, but instead relate to ideas through personal motivations and significant life events. As Lichterman (1992: 427) states, self-help allows readers “to simultaneously trust and discount the books, all the while maintaining an open-minded, experimental attitude toward new titles as they appear.” This thesis takes a more critical stance toward this kind of contemplation. There is nothing inherently wrong with an open mind. But if ideas can be picked and discarded at will, this has the potential to re-open claims of Lasch and other communitarians. Hence, whilst voluntary simplicity culture thrives upon openness, friendship and personal fulfilment, uneasiness about the worth of knowledge (both in terms of ‘professional’ knowledge and ‘throwaway’
sentiments common to self-help books) restricts individual ideals to immediate goals and concerns (i.e. ‘What I am doing/ what is happening to me now’). Viewing oneself as ‘a work in progress’ is, in many cases, a form of individualised conformity in which judgement of people and social ills is limited and generalised. Whilst voluntary simplicity forums provide a touchstone for discussing personal beliefs, the medium arguably reinforces similar forms of constraint which prevail outside of voluntary simplicity circles.

II. Theoretical Implications

Most sociological theory operates on the presumption of an individually identifiable or publically recognisable self. From the communitarian--leaning strictures of Durkheim to the transient and multifaceted interpretations of self offered by Giddens and Beck, the ‘self’ remains a topic of sociological (rather than philosophical) discussion. The voluntary simplicity movement is unique, at least, in its indifference to both ‘public’ and ‘private’ selves. The theoretical debate between communitarianism and liberalism of the 1980s could not have foreseen the development of online cultures and the ‘personalist’ culture that it would engender. Individuals today, are able to enter anonymous conversations, feel a mix of social conventions and experience all or none of the consequences which these conversations invoke. And yet, the question which emerges from this relates to which theory best explains online voluntary simplicity culture. Elements of all theories discussed in this thesis are part of the conceptual tableau of voluntary simplicity. Given that the theories range from Hamilton’s (2008) philosophical
and introspective “meaningful life” to Lasch’s (1979) assessment of a growing “culture of narcissism”, the versatility of online culture can be inferred. On the surface, this disproves the proposed effects of narcissism on public culture if not its influence upon an individual’s sense of self.

III. Idealism in Context

Many of the examples cited show individuals attempting to be ‘all at once’: self-conscious (individualism, narcissism), modest (communitarianism), courteous and enabling (‘personalism’) and anonymous (socially unreflective/philosophical individualism, Hamilton 2008). The reader would probably find such social encumbrances awkward at best, despite the fact that voluntary simplicity culture tends to encourage each element with great passion (eg. Andrews 2013a). The purpose of modesty when in a state of anonymity is most unusual. It is perplexing from a sociological perspective because, regardless of the theoretical underpinning, engagement with others almost always relies upon understanding (and possibly addressing) identifiable social problems. Whilst introspection and existential crisis are central features of philosophy, sociology is more interested in understanding the structural reasons behind alienation (as opposed to the rectitude of it, see eg. Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002, Giddens 1991). But individuals influenced by postmaterialist values are not constrained in the same way as sociologists outside the realm of voluntary simplicity. Postmaterialism, like much contemporary culture, has been subjected to immanent critique, in which cultural fallacies are disproved by their own general
acceptance. Postmaterialism eschewed capitalism, communitarianism critiqued postmaterialism, and new forms of individualism (“personalism”, philosophical individualism) attempted to put an end to conceptual conflict altogether. This inevitably generates a tension between the analysis of social problems (by voluntary simplifiers) and their own part/s in sustaining or alleviating them.

Until this point, this thesis has been ambivalent about the social conventions of voluntary simplifiers. This depends in large part upon whether one views anonymity in interaction as invalid or of no social bearing. Clearly, however, anonymous interaction is of significance in some respect; otherwise, modesty as a disposition would not figure as prominently as it does. That the personal consequences of online commentary are usually negligible only reinforces the presence of a “culture of personalism” (Lichterman 1996) in voluntary simplicity culture. It reflects a kind of ‘good faith’ in which most voluntary simplifiers recognise the benefit of an inclusive and non-judgemental environment. In this sense, whilst there are penalties for misbehaviour (i.e. forum bans) the real consequence of conflict is an environment characterised by suspicion (toward ‘trolls’, ‘professionals’) and cautious non-judgement. Whilst this overtly individualistic approach to online culture places few restrictions on expression (if any), the effect of communications between voluntary simplifiers more closely resembles a communitarian approach. Judgement was certainly an implicit/explicit feature of Durkheimian theory. However, the main form of ‘judgement’, in this instance, is understood as an indifference to the principle of ‘non-judgement’. This notion is circular but perceptions of ‘judgement’ are more varied (and subtle) than those in the time of classical theory. The
example of the forum member’s promotion of the university course is a clear example.

The participant who objected to the “limiting point of view” of the course material which was purported to overemphasise “sustainability” had a different understanding of ‘judgement’ to the participant who saw the course as banal, insubstantial and “not that serious”. The former a ‘liberal’ and the latter, a communitarian interpreted ‘non-judgment’ differently, but simultaneously sought to affirm the underlying principle (essentially, by critiquing the course).

At one level, this is the ‘culture of personalism’ in practice. Agreement is reached on the grounds that a source of information is ‘exclusive’ or ‘elitist’. This is the “group bond” (Eliasoph & Lichterman 2003) which characterises ‘post-narcissist’ voluntary simplicity culture. In reality, however, the two responses to the material are fundamentally different. This papers over genuine differences and potentially interesting debates, given that the critiques emerge from essentially opposing arguments about the purpose of voluntary simplicity. Communitarians like Macintyre and Etzioni and idealists such as Hamilton would clearly have something to say about the difference between the above critiques. The issue about whether ‘professional’ knowledge is rejected on the grounds of control or indifference appears significant. Yet the scepticism toward the ‘elite’ who delivers the information is, in this instance, enough to avoid conflict. This, ironically, makes even critiques of the ‘elite’ difficult to sustain. It feels as though voluntary simplifiers have created a proxy target designed specifically to create an ‘anti-conflict’ mentality. Indeed, there is a precedent for this kind of subterfuge. In most Western democracies it is often assumed that most are loathed to publicly discuss politics. The
approach taken for an issue rarely broached is typically brash and unspecific; ‘all politicians are…(corrupt, self-serving, etc)’. It is a simultaneous expression and internalisation of personal values, and it features amongst voluntary simplifiers too. The course described above was surely not only about sustainability (the coordinator highlighted this him/her self), nor was it of no significance. Rather, it represented a certain affirmation of values through criticism. Indeed, even those who view ‘all politicians’ as ‘corrupt’ are still more likely than not to be politically engaged. This encourages, in the view of this author, a kind of disingenuous engagement, one where non-judgement inadvertently morphs into indifference, in which the individual loses sight of the original principle upon which the ill-founded passivity is based. It is, simultaneously, culturally tepid and self-affirming. The problem here is that voluntary simplicity is understood to be a genuine alternative to consumer society (Andrews 2013a). There are, naturally, a range of self-help authors, such as Cecile Andrews (1998), who view voluntary simplicity as a rather forceful and unrealistic form of ‘awareness-raising’. But the resistance to ‘professional’ knowledge not from voluntary simplifiers but from academics more generally makes Andrews’s communitarian proposal a self-defeating concept.

Reaction by members of the forum to self-promotion is grounded in a sincere desire to remain an open and unintimidating place for discussion. It is arguable that subtle criticisms of those who attempt to source and report upon community activity assist voluntary simplifiers with negating criticisms of the movement as a whole. After all, similar kinds of criticism to postmaterialist culture in the vein of Christopher Lasch’s
“culture of narcissism” continue to emerge from popular authors (eg. Brooks 2003, 2011, Hamilton 2008).

It is vital to recall that voluntary simplicity exists (in part) as a direct response to problems in the world of work (Sennett 1997, 1998). Richard Sennett contended that work left people without “direction” (1997: 174), particularly as the structures which guaranteed its continuity were individualised. The lack of collective (public) engagement characterised by online fora is a reflection of a kind of insincere politeness which has, ironically, characterised the contemporary labour market. The inability to engage others without the fear associated with the consequences of earnestness is the hallmark of the world of work. As Sennett states, “people come to know such dislocations as their own lack of direction. The ethics of responsibility becomes, ironically and terribly, a subjective yardstick to measure one’s failure to cohere” (Sennett 1997: 174). This denial of self is a tragedy of sorts, even more so where such elements come to characterise voluntary simplicity values. At this point, it is useful to reprise Paul Lichterman’s evocation of the basis for individual purpose:

Stories are more than reasons deployed strategically to avoid upsetting cultural expectations; culture does more than police the telling of stories. At least sometimes, people live deeply, even exclusively in a story. They become their reasons (2006: 547).

If one’s ‘reason to be’ is not specified or is characterised in terms of a general critique of a concept nebulously sketched, indifference is surely the most likely outcome. Many advocates would view this assessment as harsh (eg. Andrews 2013a), given that engagement as an end in itself encourages new voluntary simplifiers and seeks to forge
an atmosphere of ‘openness’. An open environment is not inherently critical, however, and much time has passed since Elgin & Mitchell (1977: 2) refrained from offering a “predictive or definitive” assessment of voluntary simplicity. Nearly forty years on from this statement, little, if anything, has changed. It is arguable that being able to put an argument passionately is essential for both personal development and a robust voluntary simplicity ‘culture’. An absence of discussion of conservation and philosophy in mainstream media makes the dissemination of views more, rather than less important to the realisation of the ideals of voluntary simplifiers. Yet, if voluntary simplicity has not set out its political rationale by now, it is arguable that it never will. Philosophical approaches which internalise values, such as that of Clive Hamilton (2008) may not actually represent the world in which voluntary simplifiers would like to live, but could reflect the world in which voluntary simplifiers believe they actually live. And yet, the rebuffing of professional knowledge is fascinating, given that the interest which gives purpose to its promulgation is real and could (potentially) give rise to a political activity. This represents a half-way social movement model, one which recognises the importance of collective engagement, but subsequently individualises its social ‘outcome’. The extent to which this bothers (or not) voluntary simplifiers is masked by the “thin culture” (Lichterman 1992) of impersonal online fora. Public aversion to politics (and a two-party system) in the country in which the Simple Living Forum website is based means that any sustained political movement would be reduced to clichés in any case. The fact that asking people in public about ways to make community better (as Andrews proposes) is unrealistic but is indicative of both an absence of political culture and an individualisation of protest. The inability (and unwillingness) to forge a moral centre
around which to reinforce voluntary simplicity as a social movement is reproduced in the
cultural practices upon which voluntary simplicity is based. Hence, whilst the practices
of voluntary simplifiers resolve many of the conceptual issues relating to individualism
and communitarianism from the past, it is ill-equipped to become a fully-fledged social
movement in its own right.

IV. Values of Convenience and the New Communitarianism

This thesis has traced the cultural developments which gave rise to and limit the
voluntary simplicity movement. Postmaterialism was the result of both material
abundance and the contemporary world of work. Cultural critique (communitarianism)
impugned the symbolic and material implications of the postmaterialist culture which
resulted. Finally, new ways of explaining individual and collective motivations (most
notably the “culture of personalism” and philosophical individualism) encouraged an
“ethic” of “non-judgement” (Sandlin & Walther 2009) within voluntary simplicity
culture.

The thesis has argued that whilst the “culture of personalism” is widely respected, this
inadvertently limits the extent to which (a) voluntary simplifiers are able to express ideas
freely, and, (b) an accountable social movement can be established with a clear ‘moral
centre’. As a consequence, the online fora through which voluntary simplifiers
communicate are characterised by a mixture of inordinate politeness and general
suspicion of ‘professional knowledge’. It has been argued that this can be attributed to
(a) a muddle of cultural (communitarian) critique (against ‘elitism’), (b) anonymous (and generally unaccountable) interaction and (c) an aversion to conflict which tends to characterise the world of work more than the ‘critical’ makeup of social movements.

Community, as a concept, has been buffeted most by debates in and around voluntary simplicity since the 1970s. In reality, voluntary simplicity has not recovered from the negative communitarian critique of the late 1970s. ‘Narcissism’, ironically, remains a politicised concept of derision rather than a basis for collective action. The tragic irony of this (as argued in chapters 5-6) is a form of self-fulfilling prophesy in which voluntary simplifiers (rather than unreflective ‘non-simplifiers’) are presented as selfish. The thesis has shown that the communitarian ‘manifesto’ presented by Cecile Andrews (2013a) (advocating officious public engagement) itself relies upon concepts central to individualism which opens up critiques on the grounds of inconsistency. The deferral to a passive form of “non-judgement” is a symbolic capitulation to political, cultural and economic forces which acknowledge voluntary simplicity only for its place within the system that it already inhabits (recall Sennett 1997). It is for this reason, this thesis contends, that professional knowledge is derided by voluntary simplifiers themselves. On one hand it represents a path to community, which contemporary culture rejects (on the grounds of narcissism, see above). On the other, knowledge is an implicit refutation of the kind of ‘community’ most reflective of narcissism itself. Though most voluntary simplifiers would undoubtedly reject the premise of narcissism, it is this very form of community which is most prevalent within online fora. An observer might be forgiven for asking the purpose of voluntary simplicity if its principles are only conditionally
supported by members (that is, acceptance of principles but with the caveat that such principles are not exhaustive). This is the hallmark of the new communitarianism; on the surface, support for issues represents an alternative to consumer society. However, that ‘alternative’ represents an affront to those that it implicitly aims to convince, which in turn renders any communitarian efforts pointless. This is admittedly, as much a problem with Left-leaning politics as with social movements but the fundamental logic remains the same. A majority of voluntary simplifiers are satisfied by this model of voluntary simplicity, but questions remain over whether voluntary simplicity means anything at all.

Ultimately, this thesis questions the value of voluntary simplicity as the genuine alternative to consumer society. Most writers continue to view voluntary simplicity as the benevolent alternative to consumer capitalism but rarely stop to consider what this might entail. This thesis has shown that voluntary simplicity often includes diverse and contradictory elements (socialism, communitarianism, pluralism, neo-liberalism, philosophical individualism). This implies that any consideration of voluntary simplicity must consider different combinations of these concepts in order to begin to understand voluntary simplicity. That voluntary simplicity is not well understood by the public in general is perhaps the greatest hope for its development in the future. Public resentment toward postmaterialist alternatives is rooted in history. However, as ‘lifestyle change’ continues to lose its distinctiveness as a ‘political’ concept, voluntary simplicity is likely to increase its public appeal. This is crucial, given that voluntary simplicity currently has no particular meaning in the public realm, other than as a symbol of alternative politics or that of inevitable demographic changes (eg retirees engaging in ‘treechanging’).
order for voluntary simplifiers to become more comfortable with ‘professionalised’ knowledge on the subject, greater public acceptance of postmaterialist values is essential. There is of course a degree of public consciousness relating to the principles of voluntary simplicity. Most accept that ‘money cannot buy happiness’ and that ‘you can’t take it (wealth) with you’. If voluntary simplicity is to establish ‘community’ in its own right, these concepts should be cultivated as part of a broader agenda with a distinct ‘moral centre’. Only then will voluntary simplicity be considered a genuine alternative to consumer society.

V. Conclusion

This thesis finds that it would be more accurate to describe voluntary simplicity as an umbrella concept representing a range of causes than as a social movement with a settled agenda. The ‘movement’ grapples with the reality that, for the most part, voluntary simplicity is mostly a tool for expressing individual dissatisfaction, success, happiness and the vicissitudes of life. The theories of individualism and communitarianism have shaped public understandings of postmaterialism. The thesis contends that rather than being highly regarded for adopting a lifestyle distinct from consumer society (as most writers on the subject tend to presume), voluntary simplifiers are very much a part of the system which they often reject. This means that rules under the guise of a “culture of personalism” (Lichterman 1996) inadvertently shape the scope of voluntary simplicity. Resistance to ‘professional’ knowledge within the movement mirrors an aversion to ‘elites’ and ‘experts’ who are often derided by the general public. As a consequence,
voluntary simplicity goes without a significant ‘moral centre’ which characterises most social movements. The thesis concludes that the kind of ‘community’ with which many voluntary simplifiers engage is predicated upon an ‘unaccountable self’ which in fact shares many of the characteristics described by writers such as Lasch and MacIntyre. The type of individualism demonstrated by voluntary simplifiers communicating via online fora is usually respected by members but this is a feature designed to prevent conflict rather than to promote individuality. Until ‘judgement’ is viewed as a basis for ‘progress’ as well as constraint, voluntary simplicity will forever be regarded a ‘community in search of community’.
Bibliography


