Simplicity and the City: Understanding the Voluntary Simplicity Movement in Melbourne

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Simplicity and the City: Understanding the Voluntary Simplicity Movement in Melbourne

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the lifestyle of members of the voluntary simplicity movement in an urban setting. I sought to understand how they practiced simplicity in their day to day lives, how simplicity effected their emotional life, how simplicity influenced their values, how simplicity influenced their interaction with the city, and what their general ethos was. This study was conducted to understand how it is possible for individuals to live ecologically and socially responsible lives in settings that, by in large, reject their values.

I conducted fifteen face to face in-depth interviews in Melbourne in April 2010. From these interviews I organized my findings into six key areas: reasons for simplifying, simplicity in practice, struggles with simplicity, simplicity in the city, the desire to continue simplifying, and how simplicity enriches life.

In general the need to simplify usually comes from a clash between one’s internal values and the values and lifestyle of western/consumer culture. Urban simple livers are able to simplify largely because they feel the need to “walk their talk” and because they have been able to define a clear alternative to consumer culture for themselves. Simple livers are often able to think about the global impacts of their lifestyle, aiding them in how they live their lives. Simplifiers practice simplicity at two levels, on the theoretical and practical level. Urban simplifiers generally find that living in an urban environment aids, rather than detracts, from their attempts to live simply. And, as members of an urban setting, simplifiers are doing social change work as they “live by example,” helping to subtly transform the city into a more sustainable place. Simple livers do struggle with simplicity and problems arise due to their lifestyle – the most significant ones being their relationships with their partners and their friends. Simplifiers believe that simplicity has enriched their lives.

Such findings indicate that it is possible to live simply in an urban setting. It also suggest that the voluntary simplicity movement has the potential to grow slowly, both because it is possible where one is situated and because urban simplifiers promote it by living their daily lives and being observed.

Keywords: Voluntary, Simplicity, Urban

Codes: 528, 539, 537
1.0 Introduction

_The surface of the earth is soft and impresible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels. How worn and dusty then, must be the highways of the world, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity! I did not wish to take a cabin passage, but rather to go before the mast and on the deck of the world, for there I could best see the moonlight amid the mountains. I do not wish to go below now._ (Thoreau in Walden 1966, 62)

During Thoreau’s famous time at Walden, where he lived in a small home and reduced life down to just the essentials, what is most inspiring about his writing and musings is that he was able to carve out a life of his own. Thoreau urged his readers to, as he had done, break from the societal chains of conformity and follow a path of their own choosing. To do this would ultimately make life more enriching.

However, if one fast forwards to 150 years after Walden was written to Australian society today it is still seems that very few have taken Thoreau’s advice to live deliberately. If one takes a look at Australian cities, it would seem that from the large masses that cross streets looking at nothing in particular, listening to I-pods, and dressed in the same uniform as the ads they pass, most urbanites seem to be conformist. In his exploration of, and essay entitled “The Metropolis and Mental Life” sociologist Georg Simmel described the conformity that occurs in and are caused cities – and likely now in all of modern western settings – as the “blasé attitude” (in _The Sociology of Georg Simmel_ 1950, 414). Individuals, Simmel believes, are unable to behave like individuals because they build up a resistance due to the complexities of modern life making them uninvolved with others and themselves. This attitude that so obviously pervades Australian urban life is a marker of conformity. And while this may not cause great alarm, the effects of conformity and the urban attitude have long helped to contribute to the degradation of the planet. As reports like the IPCC and _Climate Code Red_ have informed us, climate change is a direct result of the western lifestyle – something that many Australians adopt merely because they are members of western society.

But, there is a group of individuals who do feel the need to reject societal norms and live lives that they feel they either want or need to lead. Those who adopt a practice of voluntary simplicity (simple livers or simplifiers) reject consumer culture. Simplifiers prioritize the reduction of the environmental and social cost of their lives first and yet, unlike Thoreau alone in his cabin, live among other Australians in small towns and cities. As these individuals take a non-conformist approach to life it is important to understand who exactly they are. Their low impact lifestyles have broad implications for how the ecological crisis and

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1 Though he regularly had visitors and would travel to town, he was – for the most part, on his own and lived in a setting less populated than 2010 urban Australia.
social justice issues can be managed at a personal and cultural level. This paper, and my study, is an attempt to understand the lifestyle of simplifiers and who exactly they are in modern Australian society today. Specifically, the simplifiers living in urban settings, which is often more complex than a rural setting, attempting to pursue a life of simplicity.

1.1 An Overview of Consumption and Voluntary Simplicity

Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss define Australia’s addiction to over consumption in their book *Affluenza: When Too Much is Never Enough* as a symptom known as:

> Af-flu-en-za n. 1. The bloated, sluggish and unfilled feeling that results from efforts to keep up with the Joneses. 2. An epidemic of stress, overwork, waste and indebtedness caused by dogged pursuit of the Australian dream. 3. An unsustainable addiction to economic growth. (2005, p. 3)

This disease, which permeates throughout Australian culture, is rooted in an anthropocentric view of the world – one that dismisses the scarcity of resources and privileges happiness through material wealth. Known as the 10,000 dollar syndrome, many Australians believe that they will be happier if they just make 10,000 more dollars, even after they have just received a 10,000 dollar raise. (Denniss & Hamilton 2005, p. 5) The drive to make more money and to consume more, largely due to mainstream conceptions of success and happiness, has led to environmental degradation, overuse of resources, and a path for an unsustainable future which will be unable to support future generations of animals, plants, and humans. (Spratt & Sutton 2008, p. 51)

Modern thinkers like Hamilton and classic thinkers like Henry David Thoreau argue that living a life of over consumption is also emotionally unsatisfying and unfulfilling. In his 2004 paper ‘Carpe Diem?’ Hamilton discusses what he calls the ‘Deferred Happiness Syndrome’. This social phenomena occurs when individuals tell themselves that they will forgo personal happiness and gratification by staying in a job or a place that is unpleasant for them because they must save for their retirement – when they will one day be happy. Of Australian full time workers aged 30-59 over 30 percent suffer from deferred happiness syndrome (p. 3). Individuals who are consciously forgoing happiness to sustain their current consumption habits and for the future do so because they widely believe that they do not have enough to buy everything they want. Hamilton and Mail found that 62 percent of Australians believe that they do not have enough money to buy everything they want (Hamilton and Mail
This belief stretched across Australians of all income groups in spite of the fact that Australians are richer than ever (Hamilton and Mail 2003, p. 1). Hamilton and Mail argue that the belief that individuals must consume more to be happy has led to their unhappiness. Thoreau, centuries ago in America, pointed to this as proof that capitalism enslaved individuals and kept them from finding personal happiness in ‘Life without Principle’:

> If I should sell my forenoons and afternoons to society, as most appear to do, I am sure that for me there would be nothing left worth living for…. I wish to suggest that a man may be very industrious, and yet not spend his time well. There is no more fatal blunderer than he who consumes the greater part of his life getting his living. (in Bode 1982, p. 626)

For Thoreau, living for money and not focusing on what truly gave one fulfillment led to unhappiness and was not the life that one should live. As Thoreau and Hamilton look at their own societies, they both see the mainstream capitalistic values that individuals hold as corrosive – not only to the environment, but to individuals’ well being.

However, while most of Australian society may be consumers, there has been a push back. ‘Downshifting’ – the idea that individuals can work less and reduce their consumption – has gained a large following in Australia since 1990. For the 23 percent of Australians that have downshifted there are a variety of reasons report Hamilton and Mail in ‘Downshifting in Australia: A Sea-Change in the Pursuit of Happiness’ (2003, p. 13). Hamilton and Mail’s study found that downshifting in Australia has occurred among all income groups in a mostly proportional way. Hamilton and Mail also found that downshifters reduce their lifestyle mainly because they want more time with their family (35%), a desire for a healthier lifestyle (23%), and to have more control and personal fulfillment in their lives (16%) (2003, p. 21). Only 7% of people do so for environmental reasons and only 5% downshift for post-materialist reasons (2003, p. 21). They also found that while downshifters may miss the money they once made, only 8% of downshifters report being unhappy.

One group of extreme downshifting, or what Amitai Etzioni calls “strong simplifiers”, are those who follow a path of voluntary simplicity (1998, p. 622). Heavily inspired by thinkers like Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Gandhi, the voluntary simplicity movement gained a large intellectual following in the United States during the early 1980s (Alexander 2009, p. 12-15). Duane Elgin, one of the leading thinkers in the movement
explains that “To live more voluntarily is to live more deliberately, intentionally, and purposefully – in short, it is to live more consciously” (in Northwest Earth Institute 2008, p. 15). Thinkers in the movement like Elgin believe that if individuals live more simply they will be more able to enjoy their life and carve out real meaning (Elgin, in Northwest Earth Institute 2008, p. 15). To live simply, Elgin argues, does not mean to live a life of poverty. Rather, following voluntary simplicity leads to a life of richness in spite of material wealth. One of the most important tenants of voluntary simplicity is the idea of ‘ecological living’ (Elgin, p. 17). To live ecologically is to live sustainably and “…to continuously balance two aspects of life – maintaining ourselves (creating a workable existence) and surpassing ourselves (creating a meaningful existence).” (Elgin, p. 17) For simplifiers, this type of living means to reduce one’s impact on the earth and only use what is absolutely necessary. It is in this way that individuals can find real meaning in their lives and spend time on the things that are important to them (Luhrs, in Northwest Earth Institute 2008, p. 19). While voluntary simplicity appears to just be a more ecologically focused form of downshifting, it also has a more hostile attitude towards consumption. Samuel Alexander, in the *Voluntary Simplicity: The Poetic Alternative to Consumer Culture* writes that “Voluntary simplicity is a post-consumerist living strategy that rejects the materialistic lifestyle of consumer culture and affirms what is often just called ‘the simple life,’…” (2009, p. 3). He continues, “The rejection of consumerism arises from the recognition that ordinary western consumption habits are destroying the planet; that lives of high consumption are unethical in a world of great human need; and that the meaning of life does not and cannot consist in the consumption or accumulation of material things” (2009, p. 3). This strong rejection of consumerism often leads simplifiers to “providing for material needs as simply and directly as possible”, working fewer hours, and generally spending less in the market (Alexander 2009, p. 4).

1.3 Traits of Simplifiers

Voluntary simplicity has been best described as a “new social movement.” Rather than taking a centralized or hierarchal approach to social change, new social movements focus on changing society in non-hierarchal ways that try to make cultural changes through direct democracy. They are often small-scale and de-centralized and their primary means of making social change is by shifting culture – all ways that the voluntary simplicity movement, by focusing on life changes, seeks to effect culture and social change (Sandlin
Simplifiers are engaged in a constant process of moral identity formation—as they form attitudes oppositional to the dominant society’s, they constantly re-evaluate their values and ultimately reinforce them through their practice of simplicity (Sandlin and Walther 2009, p. 312).

Simplifiers also have broader identity traits as a group. Sandlin and Walther explain that for simplifiers morality is deeply tied to responsibility (2009, p. 302). Mary Grigsby, in her seminal 2004 sociological work *Buying Time and Getting By: The Voluntary Simplicity Movement*, sheds light on several key traits about simplifiers:

- They are a group that have a middle class or affluent background by their society’s standards.
- They are typically members of their society’s (for her work it is the United States’) dominant class. They are white, educated, middle and upper middle class, heterosexuals.
- They simultaneously reject mainstream culture yet still embrace some mainstream values.
- Part of the experience of simplicity for them is that they feel as if they are dealing with and combating societal problems.
- Simplifiers believe that culture, and not specific individuals, are to blame for the culture of consumption and related global problems.

Grigsby finds that although simplifiers have values that are quite opposed to their society’s norm, they still look and still have some mainstream values. She writes:

> “Voluntary simplicity moral identity preserves connection to a mainstream identity in some ways. This serves the interest of simple livers in maintain economic and cultural capital recognized negotiable in the dominant culture, but elaborates it to accommodate a lifestyle and values that reject work for a wage or occupation and typical middle-class status goods consumption... It embraces ecological and social right livelihood as the path to become an authentic, fulfilled self who builds sustainable communities and saves the planet from environmental disaster.” (2004, 56)

This is what marks simplifiers as being different from mainstream consumers in their societies and those who pull out from, and reject society all together. While simplifiers don’t share some values of the dominant consumer culture, they do share some other mainstream values and they do live amongst those who wholly embrace consumer culture.

Rural simplifiers, too, do not see themselves as wholly opting out from both society and the market (Shaw and Moraes 2009, 221). Rather, they engage with the markets and more importantly they engage with others around them (Shaw and Moraes 2009, p. 221).
Shaw and Moraes find that rural simplifiers choose their setting for primarily to create stronger communities and to get in touch with nature:

*The voluntary simplifiers in this study hold on to a strong ‘sense of community’ both through local links and communion with nature, and despite their individualized consumption practices participants in this study seek to re-establish some of the symbiotic links between their communities and markets as they attempt to reclaim, although in a different manner, some of the lost communal norms and morals through purposeful market interactions.* (2009, 218)

The need to connect with nature and to form communities is, presumably, more difficult and not easily facilitated in an urban setting, rural simplifiers assume. As Shaw and Moraes explain in their study, the core mindset and values that members in the voluntary simplicity movement has can be best fulfilled in a rural setting (2009, p. 216).

1.4 Purpose of Study

Because of a lack of information specifically exploring the relationship between urban life and voluntary simplicity I intend to learn about and seek to understand the lifestyle of urban simplifiers. This means learning about: their ethos, what has motivated them to lead a life of simplicity, descriptions of how they live simply on a practical level, their relationship with the city, and their relationship with others. Understanding these things about urban simplifiers will give insight into how they live their lives and ultimately determine whether or not it is possible to live simply in an urban setting.

As a small, but growing movement in the western world, it is important to understand how this group is living an Australian context. Although simplifiers have been studied quite well in the U.S., it is necessary to look at simplifiers specifically in an Australian context to understand how the movement is working in other parts of the western world. While there are other studies that focus on downshifting in Australia, a more focused study on voluntary simplicity is required. Additionally, most of the world’s people, and an overwhelming majority of Australians, are living in urban settings. As leaders begin to come up with cultural solutions to climate change, it is important that we interrogate if it is possible for people to find ways to live sustainably in their current settings. Because voluntary simplicity encourages a low consumption and ultimately low impact lifestyle, it must be studied in an urban setting to determine how one might go about living sustainably in a large city. Also, because of population growth, limited land that can support human life year long, and the limits of land in Australia, it may not always be possible nor is it always more sustainable for
individuals to live on large plots of lands in rural settings. Exploring how individuals are attempting to live sustainably in an urban setting will give us strategies and insight in possibly living the most realistically low impact life that does not venture too far from traditional western societal norms.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Choosing a City

Although my project is a broad study of voluntary simplicity in an urban setting, I chose to conduct my interviews in Melbourne only. This was for practical reasons. Although I did try to establish contacts in Sydney there were no active voluntary simplicity networks or sustainable groups with strong simplicity tenets that I could find. In Melbourne, however, I made contact with the Life Poet’s Simplicity Collective, a voluntary simplicity network/group. I was also able to find, through the CERES² (Center for Education and Research in Environmental Studies) and newsletter, individuals who defined themselves as voluntary simplifiers. I also discovered the faith-based simplicity network Manna Gum. These are the resources and networks I used to set up interviews. Of Australia’s two largest cities, simplifiers were easier to find in Melbourne, making it a suitable location to explore urban simplifiers. As a capital city, the second-largest city in Australia, one of Australia’s main business hubs, and with a population of 4 million people, Melbourne fit the profile of an “urban setting.”

2.2 Finding Interviewees

I started off primarily working through the Life Poet’s Simplicity Collective to find subjects to interview. The Life Poet’s Simplicity Collective was a good place to find urban simplifiers because it is a Melbourne based voluntary simplicity network. Additionally, while these simplifiers are all connected through Samuel Alexander’s – the executive director and founder of the collective - writings, emails, and blog post, at the time I am writing this they have never all met in one large social setting nor do they regularly meet and discuss simplicity. This, for me, ensured that among this group there would be a real diversity of opinion and that individual views shared their own opinions during interviews about voluntary simplicity rather than one that was collectively formed by their participation in a group.

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² CERES runs a 10 acre park in East Brunswick. It is car free and there one can find a café, food operatives, lectures on sustainability and the environment, and help with their bike. As one interviewee told me “It’s a great place to find the sustainable mob.”
Alexander sent out an email to the group briefly describing me and asking if anyone would interested in talking to me for my research. (see Appendix A) He then forwarded their names to me and I contacted them by email (see Appendix B). In this email, I informed them that if they were practicing voluntary simplicity for either environmental or post-materialist reasons than I would like to interview. I scheduled interviews with those who responded positively. I also got one interview from an article that I read in the CERES newsletter written by someone identifying as a simplifier. I also contacted Manna Gum, a Christian non-profit with strong simplicity values. Additionally, I used the snowballing method to obtain interviewees. Simplifiers told me about their friends and sent them my information. If they were interested and identified themselves as a simplifier I set up interviews with them. In total I conducted fifteen interviews. I felt this to be an adequate number because of the scope of this project and because of the depth of the interviews.

2.3 Designing Interview Questions and Conducting the Interviews

To design my interview questions I first started by reading other studies, largely psychological and sociological works, as well as simplicity literature in order to discover what was significant to learn about urban simplifiers. From this research I determined that it would be best for me to conduct intensive in-depth interviews so that I could fully understand both the lifestyle of simplifiers and their broader ethics. I decided that it would be most important to learn about urban simplicity in broad six categories: their reasons for simplifying their lives, how they are currently living, what they do to simplify their lives, struggles they have had with their simplification journey, how simplification has changed their relationships with others, and how they plan to continue their simplification journey. In each of these categories I created questions that would allow me to engage in with simplifiers over these issues in a variety of ways. (see Appendix C) My intention was to design an interview that allowed simplifiers to define simplicity for me, explain why and how they were simplifying their lives, give me a broad overview of their simplicity journey, their views about the city/their own relationship with the city, and explain their emotional relationship with simplicity in a variety of ways. To do this I used a mix of questions that directly asked them about simplicity - like asking them why they started to simplify their lives - and I asked them broader questions to prepare them to discuss their thoughts and views before directly engaging with them on how they felt simplicity was related - before asking them how they thought living in the city effected the way they tried to simplify their lives I first asked them to explain to me what they liked or disliked about Melbourne. This interview design allowed
me to access the thoughts of simplifiers - on an intellectual level and on a personal emotional level.

Each (intensive and in-depth) interview lasted forty-five to one hundred minutes. On average interviews lasted approximately sixty minutes. During my interviews I asked questions in the same group order each time. Although the specific ordering of the questions did change some between interviews because of the prompts or follow up questions I needed to ask each interviewee. During these interviews, I tried to establish an emotional flow. As I questioned interviewees about their deep emotions (for most the most visibly and audibly emotionally taxing parts of their interview were about the struggles or relationships that interviewees faced) after they were done discussing that issue I would usually move on to the lightest question in my question guide - asking interviewees what they enjoyed doing for fun. This, I found, helped interviewees to rebuild their emotional strengths after talking about highly emotional interviews, and kept them from being too emotionally taxed to deeply answer further questions. The interviews were done at places that the interviewees suggested. I met with them in cafes, parks, and office spaces. However, the majority of interviews were conducted in the interviewees’ homes. I made audio recordings and took notes during the interviews.

2.4 Organizing Data

To organize my interview data I started by first creating profiles on each interviewee. I used the broad categories that my questions were in and typed up their answers from my notes. I also included general information about the participants and profiles on what they looked like and where we met for our interview. These profiles, that contained all of their answers to my category inquiries, were created from my handwritten notes taken during the interviews. They contained summaries of what individuals said, some important quotes that I hand wrote, and stories that individuals told me. After this, I then selected a category and wrote out all of the answers from each interviewee. Here, I consolidated likeminded answers and – also noting which participants gave the answer - and used a tally system to keep track of how many interviewees provided similar answers. This was in handwritten tables. I then looked at these and sought to make further points of comparison. I also looked at the groups of people who answered questions a specific way in order to see if there were any similarities in their backgrounds or lifestyles. After this, I created a broad outline of what answers I would include in the report and how I would organize them. I then looked - using the profiles - at specific stories that best demonstrated the answers and views of simplifiers. After finding
those stories and quotes I created the final outline each that specific results/discussion section. I then listened to interviews and transcribed the quotes I would use for each section. I then wrote that section of my findings. I did this for each section of the report: reasons for simplifying, the lifestyle of simplifiers, struggles with simplicity, simplicity and the city, continuing the need to simplify, and the enrichment of simplicity.

2.5 Organization of Paper

I organized my paper into six broad sections because I thought this was the best way to understand the values, beliefs, and lifestyle of an urban simplifier. Although it does not include all questions that I asked, it does, I feel, give adequate description simplifiers’ lifestyles considering the scope of the project. In writing my project I decided that it would be best to primarily rely on quotes, rather than statistics, to demonstrate the viewpoints of urban simplifiers. First, this was done because research has shown, and simplicity scholars believe, that while there are similarities between simplifiers it is a way of life and movement that is defined by the way that individuals practice it and define simplicity for themselves, so I did not think it was appropriate to rely primarily on statistics because of the multiplicity of answers and definitions I received and desired to include. Secondly, and more importantly, because simplicity is something individually practiced, defined, and owned I felt it was important to hear directly from simplifiers in order to understand them in their own words.

Throughout the report, however, I also include quantified results to broadly demonstrate what proportion of urban simplifiers feels a certain way or beliefs are best demonstrated by the voice of one simplifier. Unless otherwise noted the following terms that I use throughout the report stand for a specific range of simplifiers: Almost all means that thirteen or fourteen simplifiers, most means ten to twelve interviewees, a large proportion or significant amount means that eight to nine simplifiers, some means four to seven, and a few means three or less interviewees. While this is necessary for the report, it is important to note that whenever I include a thought or idea - even if only a few or one simplifier’s views are represented - I include it because it gives the reader insight into the ethos and lifestyle of an urban simplifier. These views, even if they are minor ones, are also important to understand largely because the emphasis interviewees placed on them when they told them to me. I also feel that it will provide the viewer with the diverse opinions present among urban simplifiers.

For the most part, the style of this paper will not use tables or figures to demonstrate results unless absolutely necessary. Because the data deals with simplifiers’ lifestyles - a
complex issue - I will use quotes and summaries of what simplifiers have said so that the complexity of their words are not reduced. While this may at first seem more difficult for the reader, this is done so that the reader can better hear what urban simple livers have attempted to communicate about their lives and because it will – hopefully - allow the reader to more richly understand the lives of urban simplifiers.

2.6 The Participants

In order to protect the privacy of all participants their names as well as key facts about them have been changed or altered. These changes do not compromise the data or findings in any way.

The simplifiers that I talked to were, for the most part a diverse group of individuals. Some facts about the participants of this study:

- fourteen out of fifteen simplifiers had university degrees
- ten out of fifteen had advanced degrees
- Participants practice of voluntary simplicity ranged from 2 months to 40 years
- All were of European descent
- Simplifiers ranged in age from their late 20s to their middle 60s

When one looks at an urban simplifier there is no way to spot them on the street or in a lineup. Aesthetically, they are a non-descript group and move like any other urbanite in the masses as they travel on the streets of Melbourne. Although simplifiers are radically opposed to their culture’s dominant consumerist values, they do not look or seem this way until you talk to them and get to know what their values and views are.

Discussion/Results

3.0 Reasons for Simplifying

For simple livers, the reason to voluntarily simplify their lives cannot be reduced to one simple reason. For all simple livers interviewed there were several reasons that motivated

3 It is important to keep in mind that because simplicity is self-defined by members of the movement, I did not create a list of conditions for what constituted a start for when simplifiers began to live simply. Instead, I allowed simplifiers to define when they started simplifying their lives themselves. This will be more clearly defined in the section “Simplicity in Practice.”
them to reduce their lives. However, for almost all interviewees there was a factor stronger than most others that spurred them to simplify their lives. The strong or lead reasons that interviewees decided to simplify their lives was because of their concern for environmental and/or social justice, an experience abroad in a developing or underdeveloped nation, and a suspicion and uneasiness with consumer culture.

3.1 Concern for Environmental and/or Social Justice

Every simplifier I talked to mentioned sustainability or and environmental justice when describing to me their reasons for simplifying. Although some did not identify environmental and social justice issues as their primary motivating factor for reducing the impact on the planet and others, for some their concern for such issues is what most sharply caused them to make a change in their lives. For Bill, a graduate student in his late 20s, his concerns about an unjust world spurred him to find ways to make actual life changes:

“Well, here I was studying all [this] critical and radical literature as a student looking into macro-economic or macro-legal reform. And I started to be struck by the challenge that my situation as a person who was trying to live within a legal framework that was unjust and unsustainable...It started to make me think...[that] it’s not enough for me to develop theories on macro-economic or macro-legal reform. I felt it was an obligation on me to figure out how to live in this unjust and unsustainable legal framework.”

Bill’s transition to a simple life was caused both by his concern for the world and the need to do something about those concerns at an individual level. Although many in society feel that there are unjust and unsustainable practices occurring in the world, simplifiers confront these problems and try to ease the harm being done to others and the planet by changing their own personal lives. Unlike those who are simply sympathetic, those who come up with theories of change, and those who protest and lobby for change, simplifiers are motivated by the injustices happening in the world to make changes in their own life. Fiona, who comes from a direct action background and is still a community activist in her early 40s, feels that:

*There’s got to be some other way rather than just kind of demanding that people do something... There’s got to be a way that you take responsibility yourself and do something yourself rather than expecting other people to change or do something different.*

Fiona’s attraction to simplicity stems from her belief that social change work on a community, state, national, and global level should first start at the personal level. To
confront and help solve what she believes are the vast environmental problems our world faces (such as peak oil) she is leading a life of simplicity.

Kevin, a doctor in his 50s who has been leading a life of simplicity for nearly 30 years, lives simply because of his deep connection to the planet:

… I experienced for the first time the mysterious connection with the planet. It was like a freak thing with me. It was never something I saw coming or would ever think happened… And it was an instant connection. It resonated with everything that I knew about healing and love. And I just knew intuitively with my sixth sense that’s where I needed to go. And I connected with the planet that way and I started to realize that the connection with the planet was the way to simplicity. Nature is the most simple expression of creation there is and you don’t get any more simple than nature. That’s the essence of beauty in simplicity.

For simplifiers like Kevin, the transition to simplicity is primarily motivated by a spiritual connection with nature and the planet. Kevin’s connection with the planet helped him to realize that not only was the traditional consumptive western lifestyle preventing him from further connecting with the planet, but that it was also damaging the planet – something he so deeply connected to. Continuing a traditional western life no longer appeals to simplifiers like Kevin because their connection - and ultimately concern for – the planet is too great.

Those simplifiers who are primarily motivated to reject the consumptive life because of social and ecological concerns largely feel that simplifying their life allows them to actively confront global injustice in a very personal and real way. Gordy (an engineer in his early 50s who lives in a traditional suburban home with his wife and kids) in thinking about consumer lifestyles and ecological injustice decided to live more simply because he thought “There has to be a better way.”

3.2 Experiences Abroad

For some simplifiers, experiences abroad in developing and underdeveloped nations powerfully shape the way they live their lives when they return home to the west. This is firstly because it makes them think in global terms. Adam, a former engineer in his late 30s, worked in developing parts of China and India during the late 90s and early 2000s. His experiences abroad helped him to think more globally:

If you look at it in global terms, our way of living in Australia… I see in global terms that we’re extreme here. But I tend to see things in global terms more easily and more naturally… I have that natural tendency to see things in those global terms because of the experience I’ve had working in different parts of the [world] but also just my outlook on life.
Adam’s ability to see things more globally is what inspires him to live his life differently. Unlike many westerners who never live in or work with people in developing nations, simplifiers (who often travel to these places because of their work with large multi-national corporations) are able to observe the differences in lifestyles that others have, forcing them to think in global terms about their individual lifestyle. Their experiences abroad, however, can be quite different even though it impacts their way of living when they return to Australia in similar ways. For Grace, a simplifier in her early 40s, realizing that you didn’t need to live a life of high consumption to be content motivated her to simplify her life. One meeting in particular that she had in China powerfully impacted the way that she lives and thinks now:

*Having spent so much time in China it always comes back to me that there was this girl there who lived nowhere near as lavishly as I do... She had a ... much simpler, much smaller place - and in China it's not anywhere near as much wealth as we've got here in that middle class that she was in. And she said to me ‘aren’t we lucky to have been born in the countries we've been born in where we've got so much available.’ I thought ‘Wow. my goodness gracious! You think you're doing really well off and here I am living umpteen times above that, with a little apartment two or three times the size of yours.’ And yeah. It always comes back to me and how I live and, you know, how I get by on far less and I’d like to try and do that.”*

Grace’s experience abroad was a lesson in global thinking – it helped her to realize that there are other ways to live happily that don’t fit in with the Australia’s dominant conception. The ability to think about the one’s life and one’s own consumption patterns in this way is a marker of the way that urban simplifiers think about their own life and what causes them to reduce their own impact on the planet.

Another type of experience abroad that causes individuals to live more simply is when they witness poverty and are able to put a human face on the impacts of western life. Allison, a nurse in her late 20s, explains an experience that she had abroad that still shapes her views to this day:

*When I was 18 I spent a year living in Malaysia volunteering at a school for disabled children... So that was a huge turning point ... As a teenager I was able to experience living simply and not feeling like I was missing out. Because I was living with, a community -- you know the people that I was living with were also, compared to our experience here in Australia, living very very simply. Since I was able to have first hand experience with, the joy of uncomplicated existence and that was also tempered by a lot of suffering and community experiences and injustices and inadequacies and that sort of thing... I had this experience through these very formative years... of inequality in the world. Which I feel, [is] likely due to our over consumption here in places like Australia. And how, you know, and make that direct link for myself to being able to access cheap “made in china or cheap “made in Malaysia”*
merchandise which actually doesn’t cost as much money and enables us to accumulate but actually there is this huge cost and [in terms of] social justice... I suppose that was a beginning point.

For simplifiers, having experiences abroad and spending time with or working with the monetarily impoverished help them to put a human face on global suffering and, what they believe are the impacts of their own western lifestyle. Phillip, a family man in his late 30s who runs a non-profit, feels that issues of poverty and our lifestyle are deeply connected:

The thing that we’ve always been aware of, both in thinking about poverty issues overseas and here, is the way so much is related to the impact of the lifestyles of the wealthy western world. So, you can’t understand poverty in developing world without understanding affluence in the west and the way that they’re linked. So the impacts of the way that we live particularly and the way that we consume resources from the natural developing world is something that I’ve done a lot of work on in Laos and Cambodia [with] natural resources extraction and the way that creates poverty in those countries.

Phillip’s experiences working with the impoverished in Australia has also shaped the way he understands the links between consumer lifestyles and how he believes it effects individuals:

...from working with people with addictions you begin to see that addiction … doesn’t just happen in a vacuum, it’s actually just an extension - a logical extension of a consumer culture… A lot of the issues that we have both locally and overseas relate back to the way that we live.

No longer wanting to cause harm to others, simplifiers who have had powerful experiences abroad in underdeveloped and developing nations reject Australia’s dominant culture for one that they believe is more just. Their lifestyle helps them to feel that they are, in real ways, confronting issues of global social injustice that are deeply important to them. Their ability to think outside of themselves and “think globally” inspires them to consider the impact of their lives, make a change to simplify their life, and to continue living a life of simplicity.

3.3 Suspicion and Uneasiness with Consumer Culture

Every simplifier I spoke with rejected modern Australian consumer culture. The dominant mantra “The more you have, the happier you are” to them is an illusion and untrue. Their realization that consuming does not make one happier was at the root of why many simplifiers decided to make a lifestyle change. For some, unhappiness with their work life and staying on what they see as the constantly moving treadmill influenced them to make a change in their lives. Lindsay, a former lawyer in her late 20s, felt that it was “…intolerable to be sitting in an office day in, day out. And it was getting to the point where whatever
amount of money I was earning wasn’t making up for the inconvenience.” Lindsay’s own personal experience with the unhappiness that consumer culture causes brought her to the realization that consuming and having more does not make you happier, largely because of the lifestyle that it requires. Monica, a naturopath in her early 40s who simplified because she felt her 5 days a week work life was too unhealthy, believes that the consumer culture in Australia has trapped individuals and is leading them down the wrong path:

“I would say the majority of people I see who work in the city work too much. [They] don’t give themselves permission to have more time for what they really value… If your job is making you [so] sick that you have the option of going to the doctor and going on anti-depressants because you hate your job so much… So it’s worth staying in this... job to be drugged up on anti-depressants [instead of] actually be free and the live the life you want to lead?

Simplifiers like Monica strongly believe that consumer culture has fooled individuals into leading unfulfilling and unhealthy lives that do not bring greater happiness. For these individuals, this realization has motivated them to live with less so that they can lead lives that they are really happy with rather than spend time endlessly working to purchase luxury items.

Others are suspicious of the consumer lifestyle in Australia and reject it because they believe that it keeps you from getting to deeper levels of living. Leary, a bookseller in his late 30s, explains:

...Well, it just seems that there [is]... so much of this very very busy life going on, you know? A life of over consumption in so many different ways and also a life of ignorance of what a consumptive type of life [is], and what’s being lost in that process. Whether it being outside of you or whether [it is] the environment being destroyed at a rapid rate. Or whether it being inside - people not being able to get to deeper levels of living.

Simplifiers are motivated to change their lifestyle because they feel that the promises of consumer culture are old wives’ tales. Whether it’s from experience, directly seeing the effects of consumer culture, or just passively observing it, what starts as a suspicion of the promises that consumer culture offers develops, for simple livers, into a rejection of that culture. Ultimately, voluntary simplicity is adopted because urban simple livers are motivated to search for their own path to fulfillment and happiness in life because of what they feel is the real truth: having more is not always better.
3.4 Other Reasons for Simplifying

One other reason that individuals decide to simplify their lives is because of big life changes that happen. Paul, a professor who started his simplification journey fort years ago, says that after being in the hospital for several months and being treated for illness he did not have - coming close to death – it changed his outlook on life. Instead of after that experience he says that he had a greater respect for humanity and decided, in part because of this experience, to change the way he lived his life. For Carrie, a mother and graduate student in her early 30s, having a child (Zane) made her see the world differently and helped to put her on the path to simplicity:

The big difference was having Zane born as well. It really changed my priorities… I think I basically realized that I’d been pretty much living for myself up until that time and it was time for those things to pretty much change. I suppose on one level why do you have a child if you’re not gonna try and make the world worthwhile for that child?

These life changes worked to readjust the way that these two simplifiers looked at and understood the world around them. Although they already had ecological concerns prior to their life changes, having these powerful experiences gave them the push to make real changes in the way they lived their lives. Much like simplifiers who have experiences abroad or become disillusioned with the rat race they’re in, what helps individuals to move towards a simple life is not just being ecologically or socially concerned, but it’s moving that up your list of priorities and finding a way to implement that in your daily life.

Spirituality also plays an important role in motivating individuals to live more simply. Of the simplifiers I interviewed for this study, 12 out of 15 mentioned eastern philosophy or Buddhism during our interview and discussed (some briefly some more in depth) how that helped them to see the world differently and detach from material things. Some were interested in eastern philosophy and religions before simplification and others post-simplification. Some interviewees (4 out of 15) drew inspiration from their Christian values. For some in this group simplicity was borne out of the anti-abundance Christian movement while for others it was intertwined with Christian social justice values. Religion helped to motivate most individuals to either decide whether a consumptive lifestyle was an appropriate life path and to teach them how to detach themselves from material objects.

Simplifiers also decided to make lifestyle changes because of the simplicity literature that they read. Most simplifiers told me that various books on simplicity, learning and reading
about simplicity through blogs, and reading about Melbourne’s Simplicity Collective online was an important step in their transition to a simple lifestyle. Reading this literature helped to solidify their internal beliefs and allowed them to seriously consider simplicity as their life path. More than that, for those who were slowly downshifting or felt that they might be the only one who was suspicious of consumer culture voluntary simplicity literature aided them because they knew they were no longer alone. For urban simplifiers discovering that there are others who share their value and that there is an entire intellectual and cultural movement helped to make their transition to a simple life possible.

3.5 Doing It

Although the above reasons explain the moral and philosophical motivations for why individuals decided to live more simply, it does not wholly explain what underpins these values and helps urbanites to live simply in practical ways. Underlying all of these broader philosophical reasons for making the transition to a simple life, individuals did so because they wanted to ‘walk their talk’ and because they redefined what it meant to live a happy life.

Multiple interviewees used the phrase, and told me it was important to, “walk your talk”. Overwhelmingly simplifiers believe that it is futile to have values and sympathies without at least trying to make your life reflect those values. For Bill, who spent many hours researching and thinking about unjust and unsustainable practices in Australia as a student, he got to a point where he “…felt it’s not enough to sit here and theorize about legal or political or economic change without having some sense of how one is supposed to live his life.” Making a firm life change and simplifying his life allowed him to outwardly express beliefs he holds internally. Some simplifiers expressed that they not only felt strongly that they needed to walk their talk, but that they felt a strong obligation to live simply because of their awareness about the impacts of a consumptive lifestyle and because of their knowledge about the illusions of a consumer lifestyle. Adam explained that he has to actively try to live a simple life because “…being conceptually aware of something creates this personal sense of obligation to act in a way that is in accord with that understanding.” Because simplifiers feel they can see the impacts that Australian consumer culture has on individual fulfillment, the environment, and others around the globe it gives them the motivation and even requires that they change their lives. Although there are those who are sympathetic to sustainable or social justice issues, simplifiers diverge from this group because they eliminate the dissonance between their values and their day to day life. Part of the underlying ethic of urban simplifiers
is the strong belief that merely having knowledge or being sympathetic towards an issue is not adequate; individuals must make life changes.

Urban simplifiers also acquire a life of simplicity because they have redefined for themselves what it means to live a happy life, and more broadly, what it means to “really live.” For Lindsay, her realization that a traditional urban Australian life was not for her helped her to redefine what it means to really live:

*I feel like it’s not my sort of life really. Where I’m sitting at home, I get up in the dark. I get on the train, sit there and don’t talk to anyone. And then come to work and sit at my desk, and granted I talk to some people, but I’m mostly sitting there staring at the computer, then I go home. And do that day after day, there’s not a lot of opportunity to form a lot of connection with people and feel engaged in my own life.*

Lindsay’s unsatisfactory experience living a traditional work/consumerist life made her realize that she wasn’t happy, and that really living and being engaged with one’s own life had to be different than the one she was living. Although Lindsay is a recent simplifier (she quit her main job and drastically reduced her work schedule only a week before I interviewed her), her rejection of what consumer culture defines as living and her own search/adoption of her own definition is what helped her to take the lunge and abandon traditional societal norms. For Alexander, forming his own definition of what it means to really live and rejecting consumer culture is what seems to have most inspired him to start living a simple life:

*The more important driver for me is the psychological recognition that happiness or well being simply is not met… is not emoted by high livers of material consumption. I know having more stuff, and stuff in itself, doesn’t make us any happier. I know that personally and I know that from the research.*

For simplifiers, having a clearly articulated definition of what it means to live, or a clearly articulated reason for why they don’t believe in consumer culture, seems to be the most powerful step in their transition to simple living. Although there are some who dislike consumption or believe that there are better ways to live, simplifiers differ and live simply because they have been able to clearly formulate reasons – typically personal and for the most part for very personal reasons and experiences – for why they want to reject the dominant Australian lifestyle and live a lower impact, socially just, and uncluttered lifestyle. Without the ability to define a better alternative for themselves I suspect many simplifiers would live like others in their society do – suspicious of consumer culture and aware of its negative effects, but without trapped for a lack of a better alternative.
4.0 Urban Simplifiers in Practice: The Lifestyle of Simplifiers

Urban simplifiers practice simplicity on a practical and a theoretical level. The practical level involves the way that they live their day to day lives and how they put their values into practice in real ways. The theoretical level involves the broad principles and ideas about their life that they try to put into practice. While there are some individuals who simplify on a practical level and others who simplify on a theoretical level, the mark of a simplifier is that they have simplified on a practical and a theoretical level - embracing simplicity as a journey for all parts of their lives. In this section, I will broadly summarize the practical and theoretical ways urban simplifiers live rather using direct quotes.

4.1 The Theoretical Level

Before simplifiers ever start practically living simply, they first adopt simplicity on a theoretical level. As all urban simplifiers started to discuss their simplicity journey, they began by talking about when they started to think about and adopt a voluntary simplicity mindset. Although these initial mindset that simplifiers have were covered in the section “Reasons for Simplifying”, those were the broad ideas that simplifiers felt about why they needed to live simply. As they adopted simplicity as their path, urban simple livers began to come up with a theoretical mindset to help them put their social and ecological concerns into practice. It is when simplifiers first start to use this theoretical framework for putting their values into day to day actions that urban simple livers have first start simplifying their lives. Because simplicity is self-defined, simplifiers have put it into theoretical framework in several different ways. Summarized below are a few frameworks with a brief explanation of its practical or broad philosophical connections:

- Savor what you have: Instead of collecting lots of things and wasting money and resources, enjoy what you have and only get the things you really need.
- Live as expensively on as low of an income as possible: reduce your disposable income and live on less, but buy products as responsibly as possible to help care for the earth and people.
- Detach from material items: rather than becoming attached to ‘things’, be able to give away material possessions without much struggle.
- Rationally calculate what is simplest: weigh the cost (social, environmental, personal) and make the decision that yields the most efficient results of three.

While each of these statements may seem like simply broad mottos, they are all ways that individuals have defined simplicity for themselves to guide them when making everyday
lifestyle choices. These broad themes are essential not only to the success of practicing voluntary simplicity, but also a requirement. The theoretical framework that simplifiers have devised is the bridge between their broad values and their day to day practices - without this framework it is unlikely that simplifiers would be able to simplify their lives in the ways that they have because it is difficult to put large philosophical concepts (like social justice) into practice without first devising a strategy to help one conceptualize and do it. These frameworks guide urban simpler livers and ensure that they can live the just and sustainable lives that they want to. It also provides them with the mental fortitude to avoid temptations and simplify their lifestyles.

4.2 The Practical Level

4.2.1 The Home

Simplifiers lived in what they described as share houses (3 of 15), small apartments (5 of 15), small houses (3 of 15), and average sized Australian homes (4 of 15). Simplifiers chose their homes for a variety of reasons: size, proximity to work and places of interest, proximity to public transportation, ability to grow food, and affordability. For simplifiers, it was important to have homes that met their needs and helped them to simplify their lives. For those focused on reducing the amount of clutter they had, housework they had to ‘waste’ time doing, and energy they consumed it was important to choose homes that allowed were small. Others chose their home close to places of interest (like markets and work) to reduce the time and energy they had to consume to get to where they needed to go. And still, others selected their homes based on the amount of space it would give them to grow vegetables - avoiding homes that had small concrete porches in lieu of large backyards. For urban simplifiers (particularly when they have the means to choose) the type of house they live in is directly related to how they choose to simplify their lives. Furthermore, urban simplifiers try to reduce the amount of energy and water they consume in their homes.

4.2.2 Transportation

All urban simplifiers noted that they either walk, bike, or use public transportation to get around the city. Although eight simplifiers did own cars (mostly those with families) they also said that they did not use them very often. Grace said that it was typical for her to only

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4 In this section each category will be a brief, and broad summary of the different ways that simplifiers have chosen to practice simplicity. To see a larger summary of the specific ways that simplifiers are putting their values into practice see Appendix D.
fill her car up every two to three months. Most simplifiers with cars did desire to get rid of their cars.

4.23 Food

Urban simplifiers focus on how they get their food and the social and ecological impact that their food carries. Almost all simplifiers mentioned that they buy organic and a large proportion belong to food co-ops around the city. Urban simplifiers make use of the space that they have - twelve out of fifteen grow food. Some simplifiers owned chickens which they found helped them in the garden and provided them with a constant supply of protein. Additionally, a large portion was either vegetarian or had a mostly vegetarian diet. Some simplifiers felt it was important to buy fair trade products as well. Almost all simplifiers felt that it was important to eat in ways that were socially and ecologically responsible and felt that, for the most part, it was easy to do this in Melbourne.

4.24 Shopping

Even though they live in Melbourne, a city filled with malls and shopping centers, it should come as no surprise that as an anti-consumption group all urban simplifiers said that they either avoided shopping centers or did not go to them frequently. Almost all simplifiers referred to shopping and/or shopping centers as “a waste of time”, “a distraction”, or something that was “pointless”. Instead, simplifiers bought things that they needed from opportunity (opp) shops. A few mentioned that they volunteered at opps shops to get first pick at things that came in.

Simplifiers also looked for things that had less minimal packaging - going to wholesale stores. And, for simplifiers looking to reduce waste and save money the hard rubbish days in their neighborhoods and across the city gave them the opportunity to find things like free furniture.

4.25 Fun/Leisure

Urban simplifiers also have low impact hobbies and recreational activities. Many activities that give them pleasure are cheap, functional (like cooking), and take place in the home. Even when simplifiers choose something that could potentially have a high economic or environmental cost they find low-cost ways of doing things. Rather than going to expensive concerts simplifiers choose to go to free shows across the city. Instead of going to Indonesia to surf simplifiers surf around Melbourne and Victoria. Although some activities
that simplifiers have do have high economic cost, they typically look for low cost solutions or only do it occasionally.

4.2.6 Work

Simplifiers have a broad range of jobs. Although almost all are college educated and most have, or are working on, higher level degrees their work is not strictly professional. However, among this group of urban simplifiers:

- 5 of 15 teach, part-time or full-time, at a university or do research for a university
- 3 of 15 are in the medical profession (nurse, naturopath, and doctor)
- 2 of 15 are consultants
- 2 of 15 are artisans
- 1 of 15 runs a non-profit
- 1 of 15 runs his own business
- 1 of 15 works as a professional at a textile company

Several urban simplifiers (eight of fifteen) are self-employed. All who are self-employed work part time. And of the entire group, nine work part time (less than five days a week or cyclically). There are two simplifiers in the group who are currently students.

In general, urban simplifiers are in professions that they desire to be in. Their professions either give them the flexibility in schedule that they want, or it allows them to do work that they feel is socially important. This is largely because the urban simplifiers that I interviewed either carefully chose their profession or left other professions - such as being a lawyer full time or working with multi-national companies - that they were dissatisfied with. For those who did come from a professional/executive\(^5\) background their dissatisfaction with their work is what largely caused them to start their simplicity journey. Paul, who worked as an engineer in Europe, started to question the environmental impacts of what his work and his company’s products were doing to the environment. Others who left a professional/executive background felt that traveling around was a lifestyle that left them unfulfilled; there was little time to develop strong relationships and themselves. Ralph and Adam, who both came from a professional/executive background noted that they needed to feel intellectually stimulated and that they were making real contributions to society with their work. Throughout their simplicity journey they have been able to do professional work that is still well paid but that

\(^{5}\) Professional/executive careers are jobs that are typically with a national or multi-national corporation. It is likely that people working with these corporations make – or are very likely to make – a six-figure income USD.
also allows them to do work that is, at the very least, socially and environmentally responsible.

Although all simplifiers have traditional work that they do to provide themselves with an income, almost all of them are involved in community groups. Some of these groups advocate for social change - like transition groups - while others focus on bringing people together in sustainable ways - like community gardens and food swaps. These groups, which are either focused on sustainability or social justice at the community, city, or global level, allows urban simplifiers the opportunity to work on issues that they passionately care about or to interact with other likeminded people in their neighborhoods or across the city. This participation in community groups is an important part of the work that urban simplifiers do even though it may be unpaid. For those involved in such groups, they enjoy those interactions and the work that they are doing in the city.

For urban simplifiers, the relationship between how they live practically in one part of their lives bleeds into and affects how they live simply in other parts of their lives. Fiona, who waits until the end of the day to buy reduced price food at grocery stores that is soon to be thrown out, find that this practice helps her to reduce waste, save money, and keeps her from having to use a refrigerator because she buys food in small quantities, reducing her energy consumption. As simplifiers find practical ways to put their theoretical ideas into practice, and as individuals who see the world as a large system, they create strategies that are interconnected and help them to live all parts of their lives simply.

5.0 Struggles with the Simple Life

Although simplicity is a path that all simplifiers feel they must take and believe in very strongly, this does not mean it is without struggles. Paul believes the term 'voluntary simplicity' is a bit of a misnomer because it is not always easier or simple to choose a life of simplicity. The problems that simplifiers face are real and range, for them, from minor nuisances to big problems with ramifications for themselves and others. However, because this a life that simplifiers have voluntary chosen and believe in, simplifiers try to find solutions to their problems. There are seven main struggles that the simple livers I interviewed identified as either preventing them from living as simply as they would like or causing problems in their lives: Being outside of one's controlled settings, difficulty giving up hobbies and luxury items, the desire to consume, social loneliness and isolation, finances, relationships with friends, and relationships with partners.
5.1 Being Outside of One's Controlled Environment

Most of the simplifiers I talked to live in homes that are controlled environments that aid their simplicity. Some don't have televisions, computers, or full size fridges - all things that help them to reduce the amount of energy that they use. Although this way of living aids simplifiers in their quest to live more simply, it can sometimes be hard for them to live a life of simplicity outside of the controlled environment that they have created. Fiona, who typically resides in a small one bedroom flat or studio apartment, recently spent time alone at friend’s home for a few days and found it quite difficult to stick to live as simply as she typically does:

> Since I’ve sold my flat I’ve been staying at a friend’s place while she’s overseas and when I got there I couldn’t cope with it because she had so much stuff in it… ‘Oh no, how am I going to cope with this for like ten days being stuck in a kind of normal house with a big flat screen TV and a family style fridge/freezer.’ And I’m thinking ‘oh no this is gonna be terrible’ but then gradually you become seduced by it. You know the other night I spent five hours watching episodes of ‘Flights of the Conchords’ and you know a film which I would never … And there I was being terribly kind of indulgent because I could. Because the stuff was there.

For Fiona, the seductions that were around her prevented her from living as simply as she is accustomed to. Although she notes that it is only a temporary thing which is why she may have acted out, her actions do suggest that part of what makes simplifiers successful in living as simply as they would like is because they have placed themselves in controlled settings which help to truncate any urges they may have to live more extravagantly. It's clear from Fiona’s behavior outside of her normal settings that simplifiers do have consumerist urges - as Kevin says because it is "learned behavior from childhood" for those raised in a consumerist culture. However, simplifiers are able to tackle these urges largely by staying in their simplified setting and even taking holidays which they feel to be simple and low impact - camping in state. Fiona believes that the solution to this problem will be to return to her normal environment.

5.2 Difficult Giving Up Hobbies and Luxury Items

As urbanites transition to simpler lifestyle it becomes difficult for them to justify some of their hobbies and luxury items that they buy and that they believe are harmful socially or to the environment. Simplifiers expressed to me that while this is not the one of their biggest struggles, it is at times difficult to justify to themselves things that they really like to do or
have and often hard to give them up. However, while this may be a problem for simplifiers it is one that they have been able to solve. For Alexander, giving up going to India has been a challenge:

*I love India. So I’m thinking about going back there again. Rather than going for say two weeks every year I’m thinking it’s far more environmentally beneficial to save up my leave and go every three years for six weeks. So I cut my emissions by two-thirds. If I’m gonna go, I go for an extended period of time and the lowest environmental cost... And that’s the sort of way I often think about lowering the impact of my life.*

Alexander has negotiated with himself and finds - what seems to be - a better option: spending a longer time in India giving him a more enriching experience, a longer holiday, and reducing his ecological footprint. For Monica, a voracious reader, it was initially hard for her to stop purchasing books. However, she has found that libraries are the way to go and give her access to books that she needs. The negotiations that simplifiers make with themselves on these issues help them to resolve an inner conflict and can often be just as rewarding. However, for simplifiers it can be hard to negotiate 'simple' solutions. For Adam, a once avid snowboarder, he found it impossible to justify snowboarding environmentally because of the long trips overseas required to find decent powder. He no longer snowboards. While there was no way of compromising on this issue, Adam seems generally happy that he has taken a low impact way of life. For simplifiers, giving up luxury items and hobbies can be difficult, but for them it requires either rethinking how they should do something or a redefinition of what "fun" is for them. For Adam, snowboarding would not be as fun and as pleasurable for him because of his awareness of the high environmental cost. He now surfs in the local area - an alternative he finds more sustainable. Such losses and tradeoffs can be a struggle, but it cures the larger moral struggle and cognitive dissonance that they face when they act in a way that does not fit in with their internal belief system.

5.3 The Desire to Buy

Like most raised in a consumer culture simplifiers have the urge to buy things. Several simple livers admitted this. Although this is not his most significant struggle, it is a problem simplifiers face from time to time. However, simplifiers have largely found solutions to these problems - blocking out advertising and staying away for shopping centers. Multiple
simplifiers that I talked to noted that they do not watch television because of the advertisements and try to avoid advertisements (or look through it and avoid it by not letting ads affect them) as much as possible. They also avoid malls, shopping centers, and general window shopping which they feel helps to reduce their desire to buy things. For some simplifiers, one solution is to have less disposable incomes. Phillip explains:

*We have less disposable income. Which ultimately is good for us and the world because it means we have to consume less. Once you get on a lower income and your paying more for things then you set in a built in limit to your consumption, which is actually what we need because…most people live up to their means. I guess we built in having a low level of income which is the easiest way to consume less. The most sure way of having to consume less…*

For Phillip, and for others living with low disposable incomes, the easiest way to fight that desire to purchase is to not be able to do it. Living in a controlled environment that prevents one from purchasing helps them to cut off desires and live a more simple existence.

5.4 Social Loneliness and Isolation

Living in an urban setting - as opposed to an intentional community or commune - can often cause simplifiers to feels as if they are the only one who is opposed to the dominant culture. While this is a larger problem written about in simplicity literature and recognized by voluntary simplicity scholars it is a notion supported by the simplifiers interviewed for this study. Feeling on the outside with one's life happens not only in a broad sense that they differ from society, but also with family as well. Grace explains some of the awkwardness around Christmas since she typically asks that gifts not be given:

*I find it difficult at Christmas time, and when…the rest of the family … expect lots of gifts and that sort of stuff. While I appreciate that - and you know it’s nice to get gifts and things. They just don’t understand it – that I don’t want to be considered a consumer. I don’t want to buy into that whole lifestyle and that I don’t want to have to get them the latest toys. I find it very hard, and that leads to a little bit of discord.*

For Grace and simplifiers like her, it can often be awkward and troubling to feel as if they are the only one who has their values. For some urban simplifiers, this causes them to question
whether or not they are even on the right path and whether their feelings are legitimate. However, simplifiers seem to have a great capacity to fight this social isolation and loneliness. For simplifiers reading information on the news and in academic studies about the effects of consumer culture on individual emotion, the environment, and others around the globe reinforces their belief that they are really doing the right thing. Furthermore, simplifiers take comfort in the fact that simplicity and issues of sustainability are being more widely disseminated throughout Australian culture. With the popularity of Clive Hamilton's and Richard Denniss' *Affluenza* and with, sustainability rhetoric becoming more mainstream, it often helps them to feel that they are not alone. Furthermore, for many simplifiers that I talked to reading simplicity literature, blogs, and discovering Simplicity groups helped to strengthen their resolve and led them to understand that they are not the only ones who are concerned about consumer culture. Many also felt that Melbourne as a city was open to more people, was becoming more eco-minded (Melbourne is home to the yearly Sustainable Living Festival) and that it has a vibrant alternative community which helped them to find others who shared some of their values about Australian culture (if not simplicity as a whole).

5.5 Finances

For a few simplifiers interviewed juggling their finances or facing uncertain economic conditions in the future was a very real and significant problem for them that did not always have a clear - or wholly viable - solution. For Phillip the cost of rising housing prices is a significant concern:

*The biggest struggle... is the economics of housing. So, house prices... are crazy. In the last 10 years they've just gone through the roof... We are so far behind the rental value it's not funny. If we got kicked out of here and wanted to move to a place equivalent to this we'd have to pay about 200 dollars a week more than we are paying now. So that's an underlying tension. We are okay now but if we lose this house? Well, what do we do? Do we... if we want to stay here we are going to have to pay a hell of a lot more in rent. Buying is completely out of the option. Or moving out to some outer suburb where rent is cheaper. For us it's a wasteland in terms of community. So that for us is the big underlying issue... The economics of housing and the cost of it.*

Because he and his family live on a low income that they have fixed to meet only what they need they are concerned and at a loss of exactly what to do if their landlord raises their rent. Although they have the option of moving further out to cheaper suburbs, for Kevin this is not
a real solution because it would mean that he would lose his connection to community. The cost of losing his community is also significant to him because of the community he has built up, relies on, and is relied upon. While juggling finances is not a problem for most simplifiers, many of them recognize that they have been able to do it because they come from high paying backgrounds (like consulting) where they saved before they made the switch to simplicity or because they are in professions that are well paying even when they work reduced hours. For simplifiers who do not come from these backgrounds, finding a solution to their financial woes during tough economic times presents a challenge and is something that these simplifiers do worry about. Although many have found that cutting back on how much they consume has been helpful, it is often not enough.

Some simplifiers are forced to make trade-offs in order to afford everything that they need. For Monica, to pay for her home without being in debt she had to work for full time - at times forcing her to spend less time with her partner - so that she can now own her own home and work 3 days a week. However, even Monica recognizes that it would be quite difficult to pay for a home in today's economic market. She admits that she feels lucky to have purchased a house when she did because the economic housing market was cheaper and more applicable to her lifestyle then. As simplifiers try to reduce their work hours and intentionally limit the amount that they make (or give what they believe to be excess income away) they have found that living in the city is considerably expensive and does pose a problem. Most of the simplifiers that I talked to mentioned that it is much cheaper to buy property in rural Australia. As simplifiers living in or near the city, it can be difficult (especially when one has a family, making it somewhat necessary to live in homes rather than share houses) to live simply without - for a short period of time - making tradeoffs in one's work/life schedule. Although much simplicity literature supports the notion that one can have a lower income and work less if they simply consume less it is often more complicated than that. There are financial constraints to living simply. If one lives in a city the cost of housing becomes considerably more expensive. If one has a family the cost of housing and the cost living again rise. And, if one has not had a high paying professional job that allows them to either save large amounts of money or earn high incomes while working less hours it becomes more difficult to simplify. Although a simplifier can choose the amount they want to work and the amount they want to consume they do not have control over broader economic conditions like the cost housing - which dramatically controls the way they can live simply.
5.6 Relationships

A significant amount of the simplifiers interviewed said that they had friends and partners who were like minded. However, for those who did identify that simplifying their lives produced some difficulties, tensions, or problems in their relationships it was one of, if not their most, significant struggle with simplicity. While some simplifiers identified struggles with their general families, most did not see this as a significant problem because of their distance from their family or because it was a minor problem in their life. For this section, the main focus will be on the two types of relationships that simple livers indicated created the most problems for them: relationships with friends and relationships with partners.

5.6.1 Relationships with Friends

For those simplifiers who made a more drastic life change (shifting from a professional executive culture to one of simplicity rather than shifting from a culture of activism to simplicity) they found that the views of their friends about life and particularly how they spent time together was a struggle. Although some participants noted that their friendship groups did change and they were fine with this, for others it was a significant struggle. Bill, a trained lawyer and now a student who is one of the more "radical" simplifiers I talked to, explains:

> When I was at university, the hostel that I was in – the college – was predominantly made up of med student and lawyers and accountants - all sort of professional in training. And met some wonderful people but now they’re making 300,000 dollars a year and when they’re like ‘can we go out for dinner’ we’re talking about a 200 dollar night out or a 100 dollar night out. … I don’t really have that money to be spending on a dinner nor if I did would I think it would be a good way to spend my money when there are alternatives. So in that sense, I found myself at times struggling with the fact that I was in a social group that were living mainstream consumerist lives in the sense that they were earning big money so they would be able to spend big money. But they’re still my friends and they’re wonderful people and I still want to hang out with them but I find myself at times in the this awkward situation where they’ll say ‘let’s go out for dinner’ and I’ll say and would at times be thinking ‘well I want to hang out with you guys but I don’t wanna spend that type of money or have that type of money.

Not only do Bill's values differ from his friends, but the way that he lives his life and his ability to spend time with people that he cares about is complicated by simplicity. Although Bill's solution to this problem is to organize different events to spend time with his friends - such as potluck dinners - it is clear that the experiences and time he spends with his friends -
and more importantly the nature of friendships - have changed. Whether they will be lost or not remains uncertain. However, a lifestyle of simplicity does affect the way individuals interact with their friends from their pre-simplified lives. The shift in the nature of the relationship - a loss in closeness - is a significant cost of simplicity. This loss, especially for those who come from a professional/executive background and have friends who are mostly in that group, can and does create the sense of social isolation and loneliness previously referenced. Every interviewee who identified a shift in their relationship with their "corporate" friends also mentioned - at some point during the interview - 'not wanting to feel like an outsider' or a concern about social isolation.

For some, who feel themselves shifting away from their pre-simplified friend group, they have dealt with this problem (for some realized for others unrealized) by making new friends who share their values. Interestingly enough, many of their new friends are often going through the process of downshifting or simplifying from professional/executive backgrounds as well. Adam found it helpful to have friends going through the same transition for the same reasons that he was:

*The people who I’ve met along the way and spend my time with have tended to change somewhat…I’ve met up with people who’ve made a similar sort of journey in life and are changing as well and we’ve kind of converged…I wonder also if part of the reason that I’ve been able to make the transition that I have? Because I’ve had a friend like Colin who’s doing things similarly. In many respects we’ve provided a support network for each other…*

For other simple livers attempting to keep their friendships alive from their pre-simplified lives, they find that being flexible helps them. However, this type negotiating is not always possible. For those who have most radically downshifted by taking drastically lower incomes (rather than drastically reducing their environment and working hours but still living on a decent income) it can be difficult to come up with solutions to this loss. For those simplifiers experiencing this problem now, the effect is noticeable and significant. It is something that they worry about. However, for those who have already been through this process, it seems to them to be more a part of life - that old relationships gradually weaken and new ones are formed and strengthen. While the nature of their professional/executive pre-simplified friendships has changed they still maintain them in new, but sometimes less prominent ways. However, leading a life of simplicity has offered and sometimes required that simplifiers
reach out to others who share their values - whether it's through forming new friendships, spending time at places like CERES, or joining community groups.

5.62 Relationships with Partners

It is apparent that it is much easier to live simply as a single person than with a partner. Most simplifiers in relationships recognize this and say it themselves. This is because the biggest struggle to live simply, among those interviewed, was negotiating the practical and theoretical tenants of voluntary simplicity with another person. For almost all simplifiers living with a partner, their partner typically shares their values. However, as almost all told me, their partner is neither as radical as they are in their beliefs nor is their partner as good at following through with their beliefs as the simplifier is. One of the core problems is that partners sometimes do not wholly understand the significance of simplicity and sometimes does not embrace it as wholly as the simplifier in the relationship does. This is true for Allison:

Also, a big part of my driving force for living simply is, one is my life experience and identifying with the poor and another part is my spirituality. He’s a staunch atheist I should point out and he’s not traveled at all other than a week in Thailand. So we come from a different understanding and I guess he perceives some of my stuff as self-flagellation. You know, like ‘why would you when you have?’… for example I try to save water by bucket bathing and ummm he’s like ‘Allison you can’t actually ship that water to the poor in Manila. The water you save you can’t take it to them. We have the water here why don’t you use it.’ And for me … part of simplicity is symbolic for me, for myself. As a reminder. And it’s difficult to communicate that. And it’s also about staying in practice which seems like that – just knowing that I don’t need – you know I don’t need gallons of water everyday to use for me. I have enough already without expending that… A reminder to self that I have enough. It's really hard to reconcile that sometimes. We’re getting better at that.”

It seems that not only is there a lack of understanding for why exactly simplicity is important, but the simplifier's partner's reaction to some of the more "radical" tenants of simplicity make the simplifier feel somewhat disrespected. Allison, who has recently moved in with her partner, seems to be experiencing this problem largely because she has begun merging her life with her partners. While there are always tensions and problems when two people begin living together and start consolidating their life, simplicity adds another layer of difficulty to that process if both partners do not wholly define "a good life" and what it means to live "a simple life" in the same way.
For those simplifiers who have been living with their partners for quite some time and have already merged their lives, while there are not huge relationship problems, simplifiers do find that there are some tensions which cause both partners stress. Ralph and his wife are currently experiencing tension over a possible house extension:

_There is one thing that has become an issue in the last – say 6 months up to now – our daughter’s growing up and you know we talk about having a second child and our house is only two bedrooms. … What we found thought. She finds, that when she is at home doing work in the day in the kitchen or in the bathroom and our daughter’s playing she can’t see her and she has this idea that it would be nice to have an open house with a bit more space and if we had a second child a third bedroom, which we originally agreed we wouldn’t terribly need because if we have two children they could share when they were young. And that’s become a bit of a tension because, for me, I feel like that’s a lot of materials that would be needed to extend the house…. We’ve had some fights about it actually, which is unusual for us. And I think we’re getting to the stage now where I’m starting to agree with her that these are things that we probably should do but let’s wait a few years, let’s make sure my transition into a different sort of job works out. I don’t want to be stuck with this huge debt to pay off…. If we can afford it it’s not a huge extravagance and if we were to buy another house it’s the same thing. The idea, it being an investment in infrastructure makes me feel that it’s not the worst thing that we could be doing, but it’s still a point of tension._

Even for those who have already gone through the process of merging their lives, because simplifiers typically value simplicity stronger than their partners do there is still tension when it comes to life decisions. Such problems, like any in a relationship, arise over a disagreement of what the next step in life will be together. However, simplicity adds another layer of tension and stress to relationships.

Simplifiers do find solutions to these problems though. For some it arises out of compromise. Ralph speaks of one such compromise that he has made:

_She [my wife] gets very cold. But there was a little a bit of tension there. But you know, I think we eventually agreed if we had kids we would probably be more relaxed about things like using heaters because you know kids, you want to keep them sleeping so that they’re not waking up during the night. We got central heating put in – I agreed to it and we had it put in for a while. Well, now that she’s a bit older we’ve sort of stopped using it”_

Although his compromise may seem minor, it is indicative of the nature of living simply with a live-in partner. As Ralph says, and other partnered simplifiers say, "If it were up to me
would I do? No. But, it’s not just up to me." When simplifiers do have more radical beliefs than their partners they are aware of this and are often to make some minor compromises because they also value that relationship. For them it becomes a negotiation between making compromises in the relationship and compromises in their values. They are willing to make minor compromises on either side, but a willingness to make a major compromise seems unlikely. This is largely because simplifiers are not attracted to nor partnered with individuals who would force them to make major compromises, and partially because making minor compromises usually suffices to diffuse simplicity related tensions on either side because their partners typically understand that the simplifier has strong values.

Simplifiers have also found that they can coax their partner into further simplifying by using the artful tact of negotiations. Allison does this:

On practicality we’re kind of pretty much in sync on a lot of things. Cause he’s an atheist left wing, you know like, white ex-middle class.. ‘conservation is good’ guy. I can use that sort of language, you know the gentrified middle class pitch for ideas for simplicity. The practice: it’s great now so we can cycle around in our relationship. And go to garage sales to get stuff and enjoy those things together.

This strategy, often used in relationships to diffuse tensions, seems to be largely working and is a good way to get around smaller issues.

However, not all interviewees found that life with their partner was much harder as a result of simplicity. For Monica, when her partner moved in with her he embraced simplicity because he realized how enjoyable and freeing it was:

…. For him it’s been a much more interesting experience. I think he’s experienced... he likes the way that I live. He enjoys it... he had a big suburban house, drove everywhere, initially had a big company job... And after he met me he started to study art and do all those sorts of things and move into the inner city with me. And he really gets it now. You can live with [less] space. You can live with less stuff. You know he would just buy indiscriminately so he was... Buy DVDs, buy books, buy this, buy that - and they would just pile up and became a nuisance. It’s been much more interesting to see how he’s adopted to this...

Phillip, who started his adult life with his partner Penny, he has not found any problems as a result of living simply because they both deeply share the same values. Additionally, he says:
For us, it's - what we do, the way we live, it's entirely a shared choice. Everything’s a reflection of our shared or mutually owed values, faith and ideas. So all of what we do shapes our ongoing conversations and we don’t do anything really without both owning it and agreeing to it.

Because they share decision making and live truly as one unit sharing the same values, simplicity does not cause them significant problems. However, it is unlikely that most in relationships will have a life this well merged. Unless individuals find each other through simplicity networks it is quite unlikely that there will not be arguments and tensions about how to live as a result of one’s simplicity. Because one individual is typically more radical about simplicity in the relationship, and because they desire for their life - which is slowly transitioning to "our life" with a partner - to be more simple, simplifiers will have struggles in their relationships - and sometimes these will be the biggest ones. However, as partners become more in sync and as simplifiers and their partners make compromises it seems very likely that simplicity will not pose any significant problems for them in their relationships. But, when conflict does arise it will always remain a question of how much one is willing to be flexible in their relationship or on their simplicity path.

5.7 Conclusion

Simplifiers face many struggles and complications throughout their journey, some more significant and urgent than others. However, all of these struggles come down to a debate between their values and how they should live their life practically. While it is easy to find alternatives to purchasing books, it can be hard to deal rectify struggles that involve forces outside of one's control. It's not easy for simplifiers - largely because they are a minority in our society - to control the market economy and the price of housing, nor is easy to make other people wholly share your values. As a few simplifiers noted, it is not always easy to live simply, but they do it because they feel an obligation and because they know internally that it is the only moral and just way for them to live. In spite of this though, the struggles that they face affect them in real ways: emotionally, the way they live their lives, and those that they are connected to.

It is important to note that there are two simplifiers in the study who did not feel they are currently struggling with simplicity. One, who has been on the path of simplicity for over 40 years, feels that it works for him because it is "just a part of me" - it is integrated into his life. For simplifiers currently facing struggles, as the decades go by they may find it easier to
live simply and without struggles. The other, reported that he was not a fundamentalist, but someone who was guided principles. He explains:

*I don’t have a rigid set of rules and a set of dos and don’ts. I don’t get guilted. It’s the practical realities of living in life. I do my best, but I try to balance it – my energy and my own needs as well. That’s why I don’t get guilty about the things that I do. Because, I don’t do anything I feel guilty about. I prefer not to use my car, but if I have to that’s just the way it is… So I don’t get caught up in the negative mental mindset ‘am I failing to live up to my expectations’. Because they’re not given to me externally – it’s not like God is telling me how I should live – I am ultimately responsible for my own choices. And that frees me to try to live a life that I [want]. … so. I’m not a fundamentalist.*

It is possible, that to live a struggle free existence one need not get caught up in making rules for themselves, but rather use guiding principles to live simply. However, for some simplifiers who need structure and discipline to live a simple and desire free life it is likely that this may not be adequate. However, being strong of will and letting your principles strongly guide you seems like, for some, a successful way to live simply.

As simplifiers approach struggles, it is important to keep in mind that it is not always easier - and in fact can at first be quite complicated - to live simply. However, almost all simplifiers feel that they wouldn't do it any other way in large part because they would find it hard to near impossible to live with the knowledge, beliefs, and experiences they have and fail to live a life that both honors and upholds that in practical ways.

**6.0 Simplicity in the City**

Whilst there may be differences between the simple livers in this study on a variety of issues, something they all have in common is the city of Melbourne. Because Melbourne is a large city, one of Australia’s main financial capitals, and filled with concrete it at first seems odd that a group of simplifiers - those who are trying to reduce their impact on the planet out of social or environmental concern and because of frustration with consumption - would choose to make their home in Melbourne. However, most of the individuals interviewed didn’t have any serious plans to leave the city (or their community in Melbourne) and even stipulated that if they were to leave they would need to have access to the city. While the city does hamper one’s ability to simplify in some very specific ways, for the most part urban simplifiers believe that the city actually helps them to live more simply. The relationship between urban simplifiers and the city can be broken down into seven distinct categories:
Transportation, ability to get necessities, exploiting the refuse of consumption, housing, constructing communities, connecting to nature, and thoughts on a rural life.

6.1 Transportation

Every simplifier interviewed mentioned that they liked the transportation system in Melbourne. They all believed that it allowed them to cut down on their carbon footprint because they were able to take public transportation instead of being forced to drive. Almost all noted that it was fairly easy to get around on the public transport in Melbourne, and some even noted that in other cities it is sometimes more difficult. Monica commented on this by comparing Melbourne to other cites she’s lived in, “The public transportation in Wellington is too difficult. You always need a car when you go and see someone.” Others commented that if they were to live in an urban setting they would need to drive more regularly which would be a strain on the environment and help to complicate their life. For urban simplifiers, it is very important that they have access to good public transportation that is easy to use. They feel that they get that in Melbourne.

Simple livers who use their bikes to travel to most places were quite enthusiastic about the bike paths and their ability to get around by bike. Bike riders found that there is a culture in Melbourne that supports their ability to cycle as a commuter because so many others do it. They also feel that Melbourne has a landscape that supports a commuter bike culture. Paul, an avid cyclist, felt that “If you can’t cycle in Melbourne, you probably can’t cycle anywhere” because it is so flat. Other noted that commuter cycling was becoming more popular as well. Adam, who lives in Brunswick, said that there were two bike shops opening near him within two kilometers of his home. Multiple simplifiers chose to live near public transportation so that they wouldn’t need to use a car to get around the city. Simplifiers are quite satisfied with the transport system in Melbourne, and feel that it overwhelmingly has helped to - for the most part - simplify their lives.

6.2 Ability to get Necessities

Melbourne, which is spread out and has several neighborhoods and communities, each with its own center, makes it easy for people to get goods that they need. Rather than being forced to drive far to get things, like one would need to do in a rural settings sometimes, simplifiers can simply walk or take a short bike ride to get most of what they need in their community. In fact, some simplifiers, like Phillip, feel that their setting in their community and the city allows them to live locally: “… We have a bunch of people who live within walking distance of us. And we can live very locally here… most of the things we
Because of Melbourne’s design, but also because of the immense human resources in the city, it’s easy for simplifiers to get things that they need easily. While many of them have made the deliberate choice to live close to shops that they would regularly frequent or close to public transport that will easily take them there, simplifiers believe that this is something that has facilitated their ability to live simply.

6.3 Exploiting the Refuse of Consumer Culture

Most simplifiers mentioned that they believed living in the city helped them because they have a lot of access to free things that they need. Many have found programs like freecycle to aid in their quest to cut down on consumption and live sustainability. Further, they believe that Melbourne not only has population base that supports simplicity, but that it as a center for consumption it’s very easy to find free things because the dominant consumer culture waste so much:

Carrie explains,

\textit{In terms of scrounging and scavenging there’s just so much digging in the city you can use if you choose to. \ldots I don’t know anyone out of my friendship group who’s bought any new toys for their kids. They’ve all just swapped things around. None of us are buying pots, or change tables, or couches or anything really. If you’re in a consumer society and everything’s being thrown away it’s kind of \ldots got its plusses. A lot of stuff is free.}

Leary also felt the same way:

\textit{I think there’s something about living in big cities too where if you decide to forsake what everyone else wants at that moment, you know the Joneses and everything, then all the stuff, the refuse, that’s leftover is all sort of available. And, there’s so much of it. And you just go, well why would I want to buy that or that or that or that when I could get it for next to nothing.}

Although it initially seems counterintuitive that simplifiers would live in cities - the mecca of consumption - it actually allows them to live more sustainably by reusing other’s “trash” and to cut down on their cost and consumption because they don’t need to purchase many new things. Several individuals mentioned that they had furniture in their home that they found on the street. Leary, an avid do it yourselfer, created a water tank to collect rainwater in from his garden by simply patching up a large plastic bin he found on the street. Cities have more
resources for individuals to exploit than other less populated areas do, aiding in their ability to live simply.

6.4 Housing
See section 5.5.

6.5 Constructing Communities
In comparison to living on an intentional community or living in a small sea-change or tree-change community it would, at first, appear that simplifiers are unable to find others who valued simplicity, social justice, or sustainability as much as they did. However, a significant amount of simple livers felt that in Melbourne they were able to make friends and construct communities that had the same interest they did and helped support them. Adam noted that he was able to find friends and form connections with them over simplicity. However, Melbourne allows for individuals to do more than just form friendship groups, it gives them the opportunity to thrive in communities with other likeminded people. Most participants felt that Melbourne is open minded and had many sustainably minded people. The socio-economic landscape was helpful, but also these communities. Leary believes:

...Melbourne allows people like me to exist...Melbourne has a very vibrant alternative community. You know places like CERES or something that shows how that model can then work with development and so forth and becomes a big part of the community. Like in Sydney I think those types of things are just relegated so far to the outskirts and in Melbourne they're considered important and I think people who live here can see that.

Melbournians found comfort in the fact that they weren’t just considered to be “wackos” in their city, but that they were also part of the community. Some mentioned that they didn’t feel this would be the case in Sydney. The ability to find and create community is an important process for any individual, but especially for those bucking the system. The communities in Melbourne helps individuals to feel that they aren’t alone in their feelings and that there is a place for them to live and feel comfortable. For many simplifiers, this is both essential to their success with simplicity because it gives them a community support, but it also gives them the courage to live their life. Living in Footscray, Allison found it easy to practice simplicity:

Living in Footscray I felt more free to pursue simplicity because of the community of people that were doing the same thing. You know, who were intentionally trying to [be] downward[ly] mobility. That normalized things for me such as pressures of trying to be a professional. Balancing that with living simply. Things like the desire to
give a portion of my income away. Knowing there were other people who were doing that in organizations and talking about it… Being able to just debrief some of the stuff. When you live in a world that doesn’t support simplicity and you notice things it’s easy to be gawked by that culture. Being able to have a little sub-culture that can critique it and support one another. But at the same time trying to creatively engage. Not be in some kind of commune in the country where everyone’s breastfeeding everyone else’s kids and you know what I mean…. And just perceived as absolute froot loops by the rest of society.

It’s important to simplifiers that they find acceptance and support - this helps them to find the courage to go against the cultural grain. While there are no “voluntary simplicity” houses or neighborhoods in Melbourne, there are large pockets of the city that identify with simplicity⁶.

Some simplifiers have also worked at creating their own community connections. Carrie has worked with several community groups that focus on gardening in her local area while Fiona has been able to work with different transition groups around the city. Even the Simplicity Collective was created, in part, to allow simplifiers to connect and be aware that there are others like them. Although these groups were constructed by simplifiers themselves and not filled with individuals who identify as members of the voluntary simplicity movement, simplifiers were still able to create communities that were important to them in a city, something they feel might not be possible in other cities because of the stacked landscape (as opposed to Melbourne’s spread out landscape). It also allowed them to find individuals that shared some of their values and supported them.

However, while simplifiers have been able to find communities that they feel accept them and support their values, it is not always possible to do this. While there may be communities sympathetic to their values, it is not always possible to find communities that wholly share one’s views on simplicity. Allison, in her move from Footscray, has found that her new community doesn’t live as communally as she does, hindering her ability to live simply:

⁶ In Brunswick, a neighborhood that was traditionally an Italian/Greek community, there is a strong “do it yourself” culture. In other parts of the city there are communities that value having community groups and connections - like parts of Footscray. And simplifiers find that communities in Melbourne that tend to have more immigrants and people with lower-socio-economic backgrounds are more accepting of downward mobility and sharing because everyone is living like that, and things tend to be more communal.
… living simply – knowing my neighbors and living in organic communities being really key to the success of that. So like, I used to live in my apartment in Footscray I had fantastic neighbors on either side who, you know, I could go and borrow stuff from and they’d borrow stuff from me. And we had like a vacuum cleaner co-op… Or you know, if I had guest coming over I could borrow some chairs from next door and likewise. They had a party on they could borrow some bedding for me for people to - you know like all that kind of community stuff. But interestingly enough all the people in that apartment block were people who were born outside of Australia. … and knowing you could always borrow that was a natural thing that I find definitely on this side of town – we’ve got great neighbors lovely neighbors but there’s a formality there in terms of sharing and supporting each other in really real ways.”

Although she lives in a share house and is surrounded by people who like to eat organically and are somewhat ecologically concerned, their unwillingness to embrace simplicity as she has previously has hindered her from living as simply as she would. While it is possible to find others who share your values broadly in the city it can be difficult to find those around you who are willing to take part in them and live somewhat communally. As Allison noted, there is a formality in terms of sharing resources that there would not be on an intentional community. For those simplifiers who would prefer to share and make logical choices that aid in their simplicity and their ability to reduce their environmental impact, the formality of urban life can prevent them from living as simply as they would like. This is why many simplifiers, like Adam who lives a block from CERES, find that it is important to carefully choose where you live. While Melbourne is an accepting place and while there are several communities that are filled with people who have values that are similar to those of voluntary simplicity, not every community wholly supports simplicity or radical simplicity.

6.6 Connecting to Nature

One of the hallmarks of rural simplicity is that individuals strongly feel that they need to be connected to nature. For urban simplifiers however, while a few do feel they need to connect to nature, most of them do not have a strong urge be constantly connected with nature. Instead, some simplifiers expressed a need to be connected to human communities. Fiona, who once idealized living in a rural area, discovered that it was not for her:

*I lived for a while…in a rural area. And I thought it would be great. You know close to the beach and the country side. I hated it. I was traveling back to the city all the time because I couldn’t bare it. The kind of quietness and everything… I never went to the beach. I just didn’t want to. And it’s almost like when you live in the city you have*
this kind of idealized [notion] of what it must be like to have a kind of rural existence. And when you do it in reality you actually think ‘oh no I miss the vibrancy and the excitement of the city.’ I want to be close to where stuff’s kind of happening and to where it’s kind of created...

For Fiona, and other urban simplifiers I talked to, connecting to nature was not important to them. Forming connections to human communities and living in an environment that was filled with vibrant human life and human interactions is what they crave. This is in marked contrast to rural simplifiers who desire to get away from it all. Instead, a significant amount of urban simplifiers desire to live a lifestyle that allows them to reduce their impact on the earth but also gives them access to what they feel are the positive aspects of the city: the art, the culture, the diversity, human interactions, food, and wine. They describe these aspects as the cities “vibrancy” and seem to thrive with it - filling their lives with the type of human interactions and experiences that they desire.

For some urban simplifiers, though, they do feel as if they need to be connected to nature. However, most simplifiers noted that there are many places in Melbourne (including their own backyard) that make them feel as if they’ve left the city. Monica, who feels that nature is important, believes that it is easy to find greenspaces in Melbourne to spend time:

Nature’s important. But one thing about Melbourne is that it is quite green and you’re never far from a park. And you can go to really English-y kind of green parks like the botanical gardens but you can go to sort of more Australian landscape-y, gum trees and dirt on the ground not grass, type of parks. So you’re never far from nature in Melbourne.

Melbourne is renowned for its greenspaces. A significant amount of simplifiers noted that they are many great greenspaces in the city to spend time in and explore. But, simplifiers even feel that they can connect with nature and live a ‘rural’ existence even in a large city: Bill feels this way about his own settings. During our interview in his large backyard (by inner city Melbourne standards) he told me:

We have a garden in a backyard this big. Pretty fortunate. And I’m able to eat as much as possible from the garden and we have chickens...And also, although I’m in the middle of a very big city, look around you. Huge trees, there’s a big park there, there’s a huge park over this side, so in the sense of having some connection with nature in the middle of a big city - I feel pretty lucky here to have that connection.

Bill among other simplifiers, with their gardens and chickens, live what many would call a rural lifestyle. And, as they sit in their backyards, while there are wide streets in front of their
homes and trams running nearby, one can also hear the sound of birds and leaves bristling in the wind. Urban simplifiers who do feel the need to connect to nature have found that they can do it in the city if they look for and find homes that satisfy that requirement. In Melbourne, there are several homes that have large backyards, rather than small concrete porches, making it a possibility for simplifiers to retreat from nature in their own homes. However, most simplifiers did note that they desired to have more gardening space. Additionally, one simplifier - although satisfied with his backyard space because it did provide a bit of a retreat from nature - felt that the city did prevent him from connecting to nature in a way that he really wanted to, Leary feels that “In the city you are actually, you know, you’re always constrained by the roads and the concrete and everything.” However, most urban simplifiers either had no strong desire to connect to nature or felt that there were spaces in the city that allowed them to connect to nature.

6.7 Considering Alternatives: Thoughts on Rural Life

As simplifiers consider their lives, all of them have thought about what it would be like to live in a rural area. However, their thoughts range from absolutely positive to extreme negativity. Of the fifteen simplifiers I interviewed, six said that they would never move to a rural area. Like Fiona, this group of simplifiers craved the markers of city life - culture, diversity, creativity, and efficiency. One simplifier, Paul, felt that people in urban settings were more open minded than some of those in rural settings. It is likely that because of the diversity of the city (both ethnically and in thought) this group of simplifiers feels more at home in a city setting because they are able to navigate between groups that support their simplicity, but also engage with others and activities that are unrelated to simplicity and fulfill other parts of their life. Although simplicity is a lifestyle choice and a value system for simplifiers, it is not just who they are. Partially because of the excess time they have and partially because simplicity is just a part of who they are, simplifiers enjoy and need to live in cities so that they can tap into other interest and human resources.

Other simplifiers that were interviewed - six out of fifteen - said that they thought about moving to a rural setting, but did not strongly consider it. Adam, among others, considered moving to a rural setting because he felt it would allow him to rely less on infrastructure. Others felt that living in a rural setting would allow them to have a larger garden space. However, Lindsay and others questioned whether or not they were simply idealizing rural lifestyle in their considerations. Most (four out of six) people in this group noted that in considering life in a rural setting, they believed that they would need to have
access to a city. For some this was because of the nature of their work, but for all in this group they once again desired the “vibrancy” of the city. Others felt that there would be a large cost in terms of community if they were to leave their current setting and live in a rural setting even if it allowed them to be more self-sufficient.

There were urban simplifiers who either one day planned to or had a strong desire to live in a rural setting - three out of fifteen of the interviewees felt this way. Regina has plans to move to a rural area in New South Wales where her family lives once she retires and looks forward to having a larger veggie garden and being closer to her loved ones. For Leary, his strong desire to live simply is motivated by his need to more powerfully connect with nature:

… so you’re just stripping everything right down to its basics… you can strip away a lot of that artifice and have your own relationship to [the land]…A rural space will, number one it’s like 100 times cheaper to buy per acre. Then you can have… your relationship with that land can develop. And in the city it’s so much more difficult.

For Leary, living off the earth in an intentional community setting is not only something he strongly desires, but what he sees as his future in regards to simplicity. He feels passionately that to foster a deep relationship with the land, and to make life truly simple, a rural existence is required. This attitude is in line with Shaw’s and Moraes’ findings on rural simplifiers. However, the opinions of those urban simplifiers who plan to move a rural setting or strongly desire to is, in this study, a minority opinion. Not only do some urban simplifiers shudder at the idea of living in a rural area, but even those who have considered it feel that they would lose something by leaving the city - whether it is the excitement, the culture, or their communities and friends - the connection that most urban simple livers have to the city is strong.

6.8 Conclusion

Urban simplifiers attraction to the city comes from the “urban sensibility” that most the interviewees seem to have. Although they value simplicity and doing things themselves, they also value efficiency as part of simplicity. While they do strive to be socially responsible and reduce their ecological footprint, they do not feel the need live alone in the bush hunting and gathering food for themselves. As Monica suggest, when discussing a rural Australian simplicity blogger:

There’s this women … Rhonda, the down to earth mum and you know that is an older couple who’s retired or semi-retired who have a block of land. It just seems like they’ve created a really hard life for themselves. You know with the growing things
Monica, like other rural simplifiers, value efficiency and time as a commodity. For simplifiers, time is precious to them and they enjoy spending it in a way that makes them happy and fulfills them. While they may believe in doing things themselves (and for some this brings them great pleasure) and upholding their values, spending time doing things like knitting towels can seem tedious when they can just use old t-shirts that can no longer be worn. Urban simplifiers embrace the term “simplicity” in a modern way - it’s not about returning to modern times, but finding a way to reduce the amount of time they spend on unfulfilling task and increase the amount of time they spend nurturing their souls (something that happens when they know they are acting responsibly).

Additionally, the social geography of Melbourne is quite important to the way that individuals practice simplicity. Not only does the public transport system and the infrastructure of the city generally support and enhance a life of simplicity, but because Melbourne is a spread out city with many interconnecting communities, rather than a stacked city like New York City, simplifiers are able to form communities and strong bonds with their neighbors and others around the city - many of whom are sympathetic too or share some of the values that simplifiers share. These communities that simplifiers have tapped into are essential to their success as simplifiers and have helped them to feel as if they belong in the city - they don’t feel as if they don’t have place. For urban simplifiers, living in a city rather than an intentional community lets them feel as if they are still part of the greater Australian society. They don’t feel pushed to the margins or exiled, but as if they have a legitimate place in society. Existing in a city may in fact help them to fight feelings of social isolation because they know that they are still accepted members of society who can live by their values but also live among others. While they are opposed to many of the dominant values in society, living simply in a city allows them become part of the mosaic of Melbourne’s setting and possibly even transform the city. Carrie believes that “you should really, ideally, transform cities as much as possible.” And as Adam explains:

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7 A large portion of interviewees told me throughout the course of the interview that they valued time over money and felt time was one of or the most valuable of their possessions. This is one of the theoretical approaches that they use to live simply in practical ways.
And also, just the act of doing it kind of helps to set a precedent to do it. People see you spending time doing that and in a sense it makes that legitimate on a really small scale. … over the last 8 years since I’ve made conscious decisions to live my life more simply... there’s always been a struggle for me internally around the legitimacy of that. It’s something that I feel is still not seen as the appropriate way to live. And yet to me it makes sense… But the only way to change that is to get out and make it socially acceptable by making it a normal thing to do. And a worthwhile thing to do”

Living simply in an urban setting allows them to help to transform their culture. For many urban simplifiers, in which most agreed that they try to live by example rather than constantly evangelize, living simply in a city helps them to do their own form of social change work. Whether they actively realize it or not, as people they meet and interact with observe their lifestyle, simplifiers are helping to subtly transform the way others consider life and possibly even live their own lives. In a way, urban simplifiers are working at the most grassroots level - the personal and individual level - to do something that individuals living in rural areas or on intentional communities may not: transform the Australian urban landscape. As Allison puts it:

… the challenge for me with simplicity is being able to be a simplifier regardless of the context you’re in. I’m a city girl, I enjoy being part of the city and ... I feel like it’s really important to – as a simplifier – not hideaway with other simplifiers. Support one another most definitely, but also still be part of a wider culture. Be on the margins having lives that demonstrate that there is an alternative that’s not too scary. So I suppose it’s an evangelical thing in a way, isn’t it?”

7.0 The Desire to Continue Simplifying

In much the same way that consumers feel the desire to have more and continue shopping, urban simplifiers have the need to continue simplifying their lives. Almost all simplifiers, when asked how they planned to continue simplifying their lives, had very clear answers for what they wanted to do and what they believed they could do better. Monica really felt that there was more to do, exclaiming “I could still have less stuff. I could still have less stuff. I really could.” She made this declaration in spite of the fact that she is happy with her lifestyle. This desire to have more is not connected to her happiness as a simplifier, but more of a personal goal.

This general sentiment - to continue simplifying - was expressed in one form or another by almost all simplifiers. There plans for the future are all practical things. For some, this means changing the way they get their energy, for others this means getting rid of their
cars (that they rarely use) and reducing the impact of their transportation, but for most reducing the amount they rely on infrastructure (like food production and energy) is the primary way they want to simplify their lives. Adam explains a new tool that he purchased:

*I have a cordless drill… and the drill is no longer working. I started thinking about the reliance we have – even doing jobs at home – on high technology pieces of equipment. At the same time I also read about an old… tool – it’s called a yankee screwdriver… It’s a device… all handed operated [and] designed in the 1870s for putting in screws. Where you push on the handle and it rotates the shaft to put a screw in automatically. It’s like the manual equivalent of a cordless drill. I found one online and I ordered it as a tool that won’t be reliant on… a battery that wears out and so forth. So I look for things like that wherever I can in my life.*

Simplifiers are constantly on the lookout for ways to make their lives more ecologically and socially just and feel that they need to. For them, there is no “end point” to how much they simplify their lives nor is there really ever a point - for those who want to live a life of simplicity - when they will be able to say for themselves that they’ve completely simplified their lives. As I spoke to simple livers - asking them initially for interviews - more than one turned my request for an interview down. This is because they felt - even though they did things like work part time, lived in small houses, and rejected consumption - that they still had not simplified as much as they could. They believed that they could, and should be doing more to simplify their lives. It is likely that urban simple livers feel this way because of the nature of voluntary simplicity. Because voluntary simplicity is a broad philosophical concept - rather than one with strict rules for followers to abide by - there will never be an end or an official definition for what it means for one to “ totally simplify” one’s life. This keeps simplifiers invested in voluntary simplicity as their life path because there will always be more for them to do. Further, because simplifiers are trying to make their internal values and ideas about life external, it is hard to reduce those down to a simple to do list. Additionally, in real ways and as simplifiers learn more about the ecological and social effects of what a western lifestyle does, the meaning of a simple lifestyle is constantly redefined. Adam’s experience with his drill demonstrates, that, as he reads more and learns more he continually finds more simple ways of doing things. Because their knowledge of what is more sustainable or globally just is constantly shifting, there will always be more for simplifiers to do.

Kate Soper uses the term “alternative hedonism” to describe and define voluntary simplicity. However, simplicity is more than an alternative to consumption, it fosters in
simplifiers the same kind of ethic that consumer culture does. The need to continually find more ways to live simply is just as powerful as the need for consumers to purchase. It is truly a form of alternative hedonism because simplifiers indulge in and take pleasure in finding ways to live more simply and feel obligated to do so. This is what is what will strengthen the voluntary simplicity movement as it moves forward. Unlike other movements that gain members but lose many along the way, for those who strongly reject consumer culture and follow a path of simplicity that they find fulfilling, they will only strengthen their commitment to simplicity as their journey continues. Furthermore, as the movement gains more members, there will be more and more simplifiers without large reductions in the numbers of current simplifiers because of their passionate and strong feelings that they should continue to find ways of simplifying their lives.

8.0 How Simplicity Enriches

Simplifiers overwhelmingly find pleasure, contentment, and fulfillment from living simple lives - every urban simplifier I talked with had several reasons for why they believed simplicity fulfilled them. While there might be emotional, relational, and lifestyle cost, simplicity offers simple livers a wealth of enrichment in their lives. Simplifiers find the lives they lead enriching because it offers them control over their own live, makes them feel as if they are living responsibly, and allows them to better appreciate all aspects of life.

8.1 Control Over One’s Life

Simplifiers are content with the lives that they lead as simplifiers because they are living a life that they have designed for themselves. Unlike others - who most simple livers perceive as - living by strictly dictated societal norms and expectations, simplifiers feel that they are the ones who have made the decision to take own and control their own life. Being able to do that, and be happy while doing it, has given Monica pleasure because she:

“…can make it work. I think it’s amazing to work a modest job three days a week and live a really good lifestyle… I’ve worked hard to create this lifestyle. Earlier on and in this particular career I always knew that I didn’t want to work full time. I always knew I needed balance between my work life and my home life…I live a really good happy life.”

For others, simplicity enhances their life because it frees them from societal bonds. Bill describes the simple life as ‘freeing’:
“For me to live simply is a way of securing the freedom that I need to live the life I want to live. The freedom that I want to live - as much far as possible—doesn’t class to deeply with my [values]. I want to be free, but I also want to live best that freedom in a way that environmentally and socially responsible.”

Because simplifiers are able to make their inward values, which are oppositional to society’s, part of their outward life they feel empowered to know that they have been able to control their life in the midst of great social pressure. In the same way that car advertising tries to appeal to individual’s needs to be in the driver seat, simplifiers feel that they are in the driver’s seat of their own life, and that their existence is better than just going along with the dominant culture.

8.2 The Importance of Responsible Living

Simplicity also enriches simplifiers’ lives because it makes them feel as if they are actively dealing with problems that they are aware of in the world. Like Allison, a large proportion feels that if they did not act they would be living pointless or unworthy existences:

“I feel an immense sense of burden when I’m not living simply. I feel like I’m letting down my experiences – like things that I’ve experienced and seen and people that I’ve known. I feel a great obligation to honor those things that I’ve been taught in life through making practical choices in the here and now. You know when people travel and collect souvenirs and put them on the bookshelf. I feel like my souvenirs are the way I live my life in the day to day.”

Their choice to live simply makes urban simplifiers feel that they are being responsible and considerate in the way that they live their lives. While this can easily be confused to with attempts to live “virtuously” or in order to feel superior to others in society, this is not why responsible living enriches the lives of simplifiers. For a large proportion of simplifiers, it is because it is just something that they can do to make the world a more just place. Gordy doesn’t believe that he is radically changing the world, but that he is just doing his part as a citizen of the world:

“If you look at your environmental footprint – well you account for what everyone else does – but if you see some litter on the ground you consider picking it up and don’t drop. So, trying to make things a bit better. I’m just extending that. It’s something that an individual can do.”

Simple living gives simplifiers the opportunity to feel as if they are also contributing to society in important ways. For urban simplifiers particularly, it is important that they not
shirk their responsibility both from their own culture and society as well as the global world and environment. Living in an urban setting and being a part of the world allows Adam to feel as if he is still a contributing member because he participates through his work but also by reducing his impact on the planet. Because urban simplifiers are a group that value sustainability, social justice, and reject the illusions promoted by consumer culture, living in a responsible way let’s them live purposively, which is ultimately enriching for them.

8.3 More Appreciation for All Aspects of Life

As almost all simplicity literature suggest, when individuals simplify their lives they have more time to do activities that they find fulfilling and to really appreciate life. Philip finds simplicity enriching because it has given him more time with his young daughters:

“We’ve had a lot of time to be around home. We haven’t had to use child care with our kids - so we’ve done all our own child care. And particularly in these first years in their life it just goes - like that from when their born - it just goes quickly. And to have been able to spend a lot of time with them at this stage has been very special. It’s been fantastic.

In addition to giving simplifiers more time to spend on activities that are personally important and life enhancing for them, it also gives them the opportunity to see the world in a new way. As Grace changed her routine she began to experience the world in a new and deeper way:

…now that I’m riding [my bike] to work I can actually see the changes in the seasons … I can see that the trees are starting to blossom… I can smell the trees after the rain. So much more that you get out of life when you’re living [simply] rather than rushing past and going to spend all day in a shopping mall or whatever.

Simplicity has allowed simple livers like Grace to appreciate the life she has more and take comfort in everyday things. While it may seem self-fulfilling (most simplifiers choose to live simply because they feel they need to better appreciate and experience life), simplicity in a real way enhances the daily experiences that urban simplifiers have. They are able to make connections to the world around them that they may not have been able to previously. Adam gained a better appreciation for life and for his community through a peach tree in his backyard:

I also spent three weeks in January picking the fruit. It probably had three or four thousand peaches on it which is incredible…I spent about three weeks everyday picking the fruit and riding around on my bike and taking it to people in the area. And as I was doing that thinking ’ah this is such a big job keeping on top of all of this. This is so much fruit it’s falling on the ground. It seems wasteful not to use it.’ And as
I was doing this I was thinking ‘this is taking a lot of time. I’m not doing enough work. I should be doing more work.’ Then as I was doing it I thought ‘hang on. This is a perfectly legitimate [way] to be spending time.’ To be picking fruit, taking it around to people…it just struck me what an importance of a thing that is. In terms of building community connections…

For Adam and others, doing things that appeared to be simple actually had profound and complex emotional implications for the way they thought about the world. In part because urban simplifiers are a well educated class, but also because simplifiers desire to form deeper connections with the world, they tend to reflect more on their own life experiences. Additionally, because simplifiers challenge cultural norms and create their own definition of what it means ‘really live’, having greater control over their life, living responsibly, and appreciating life more allows simplicity to truly enrich their life experience. For those urbanites and individuals in western society who do not have a strong desire to put a firm definition on what it means to ‘really live’ or feel generally satisfied with their lives it is unlikely that simplicity would enrich their lives in the way that it has for urban simplifiers.

9.0 Conclusion

The intent of this study was to understand the lifestyle of urban simplifiers on multiple levels – to understand their ethos, how they practice simplicity, their relationship with the city, and the effect of living simply on their lives. Although answers varied widely to this question because of how simplifiers defined “simplicity” and because of how long simplifiers had been living simply, there are many similarities and common themes.

In general the need to simplify usually comes from a clash between one’s internal values and the values and lifestyle of western/consumer culture. Urban simplifiers move to, and are able, to simplify largely because they feel the need to “walk their talk” and because they have been able to find and define a clear alternative to consumer culture for themselves. Simple livers are often able to think about the global impacts of their lifestyle, aiding them in how they live their lives. Urban simplifiers practice simplicity at two levels; the theoretical and practical level. Simplifiers overwhelmingly find that living in an urban environment aids, rather than detracts, from their attempts to live simply. And, as members of an urban setting, simplifiers are doing social change work as they “live by example” – helping to subtly transform the city into a more sustainable place. Simple livers do struggle with simplicity and problems arise due to their lifestyle – the most significant ones being their relationships with their partners and their friends. However, urban simplifiers believe that simplicity has
enriched their lives because it has given them the control they desire over their lives, has allowed them to live in accord with their values, and because a life of simplicity allows them to better appreciate life.

9.1 Further Research
In order to better understand voluntary simplicity in urban settings it is essential that further research be done on simplifiers living in other capital cities. This will allow researchers to study the relationship between a specific city and simplicity, the relationship between the layout of various cities and simplicity, and well as the relationship between the population of a varying cities and the ability to practice to live simply (do cities only aid voluntary simplicity if they are only a large size).

9.2 Potential for Growth
Whether simplifiers have adopt a life simplicity for environmental, global justice, or post-materialist reasons, urban simplifiers find it fulfilling for the very same reason that Thoreau found his time at Walden to be fulfilling – because he was living in a way that he actively chose to live. It is this facet of urban simplicity – the ability to tap into one’s urban sensibility and take control over one’s life – that I believe will offer the voluntary simplicity movement potential to grow. Firstly, because urban simplifiers prove that it is possible to live a life of simplicity in an urban (and therefore in any) setting successfully. But more importantly because it offers the same promises that consumer culture does – a happy life of your choosing. As individuals burn out from their high stress jobs, get fed up with constant consumption, and find themselves wishing for more time with friends and family, voluntary simplicity offers them an alternative to change their life – in a way that they choose and that corresponds to their values– for the better.

While voluntary simplicity as a whole offers a better life, urban voluntary simplicity offers (to urbanites) something that rural simplicity or sea-changes cannot offer to those who want to, but have doubts, about simplifying their lives: the option to undergo a life change without abandoning one’s community, family, friends, and sense of place. Why urban simplicity has the potential to spread as a serious cultural movement in a way that rural voluntary simplicity does not is because – of course because more people live in cities and - it gives simplifiers a chance to do it in a setting that is comfortable. While there are considerable struggles for simplifiers, they get to undergo the initial process of simplifying their lives in a setting that they are comfortable in and understand surrounded by people that support them. Because a key part of voluntary simplicity is controlling one’s life, making the
shift from living conventionally to living simply in an urban setting can be easier because individuals get to define the terms of the arrangement. And, without having to first make a big move, it makes it easier for those considering simplicity (or tenants of voluntary simplicity) a chance to do it without feeling like they have made an irreversible life change.

As voluntary simplicity grows as a cultural movement in urban areas it has the power to also effect real social change. Although what simplifiers do may seem small to some, their actions – if and as more begin to adopt the lifestyle of simplicity – will help to change the way the west begins to seriously consider their impact on the global environment, their relationship with developing and developed nations, and their culture of consumption. With simplifiers moving about, as part of the mosaic of the urban landscape, they affect the culture and attitudes around them without dramatically offending or repulsing people. However, this change will be very slow. Voluntary simplicity has been around for over four decades in the western world and it is still not a familiar concept for most. But, the slow changes that they make will be real and long lasting ones. What’s important, though, is that the form of quiet radicalism that simplifiers promote daily helps to make sustainable and socially responsible living the norm in society. And more importantly, as simplifiers believe, make individuals in society happier and more fulfilled, helping life to become (as Ralph puts it) “a broader meditation.”

References


Appendix

Appendix A

Text of Samuel Alexander’s email on my behalf requesting interviews:

For the Melbourne members, a post-graduate sociology student has approached me about about some research he is doing. He is wanting to interview people about their views on simple living and how they are taking steps to practice voluntary simplicity. If you are willing to talk exchange emails with this student about your approach to "the simple life” then please let me know asap and I'll forward him your email address. I'm sure he'd appreciate your input.

Appendix B

Email sent to simplifiers asking them for an interview and explaining research.

I’m Gershwin Penn, the American student that Bill mentioned doing a study about Voluntary Simplicity. I’m originally from Houston, Texas but I now attend school in Massachusetts (Williams College) studying Sociology. I’m currently spending the semester in Australia studying and taking classes on sustainability and environmental action with the School for International Training. This research is for that program.

The focus of my study will be on simplifiers who are living in and around Melbourne in order to understand how simplifiers are living in an urban setting. I intend to explore the reasons why individuals have made a decision to simplify their lives, what their simplified lives are like now, and how they are living. If you simplified for environmental or post-materialistic reasons I’d really like to interview you.

Since you noted that you were interested in talking to me about your experience as a simplifier I wanted to know if I could interview you in person. For my interview I’ll
talk with you about your lifestyle now and before you simplified as well as your thoughts on voluntary simplicity broadly. At this point, I don’t expect that the interview will take longer than one hour. If possible I would like to tour your house and take a few pictures in order to get an understanding of exactly how you are living.

I’ll be in Melbourne talking with simplifiers from April 8 until April 20th. Anytime during those will work for me. Just tell me what day, time, and place works for you so we can schedule an interview. If none of those days work, then just tell me what days and times you are available. Your interview will be extremely helpful to me and my research.

Thanks,

Gershwin Penn
School for International Training
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Appendix C

Interview Guide

Reasons for Simplifying/Pre-Simple Life

1. How long ago did you start simplifying your life?

2. Why did you decide to simplify your life?
   - how long did it take you to come to this decision
   - was their anything specific that made you want to simplify your life
   - have you always felt the need to live simply since you were young, a teenager, or did it just come about more recently?

3. What was your life like before you started your simplification journey?
   - describe to me an average day
   - what were your consumption habits like?
   - Were you concerned about the impacts of decisions you made on the world, others, or your own personal fulfillment.

4. What is your profession currently and before simplification? How do you support yourself financially?

Current Living and Actions to Simplify Your Life

5. How did you first start to simplify your life?

6 What are you doing now to live simply?
   - describe to me an average day
7. If you can, explain to me what you look for when shopping or purchasing things.
   - This can range from how you decide to get food, how you travel, and how you buy things like clothing and furniture.
8. What do you like to do for fun?

Living in an Urban Setting

9. What do you enjoy about living in Melbourne?
10. What do you dislike about living in Melbourne?

11. Do you think living in Melbourne has effected how you live simply? If so, how?
   - Has it made it harder? In what way?
   - Has it made it easier? In what way?
12. Have you or have you ever considered living in a rural area?

Current Life Style and Emotions

13. How does living simply fulfill you?

Struggle on the road to Simplicity

14. Have you had any trouble maintaining a simple lifestyle/fulfilling the goals you have set up for yourself?
   - I’ve read that some simplifiers have trouble at times meeting or upholding all of their goals and that some don’t. Have you ever had trouble living simply or meeting the goals that you have set out to achieve as a simplifier?

15. How did you overcome this problem?
16. Do you have any ongoing challenges?

Simplification and Relationships

17. To what extent do your friends and family share your value of a simple life?
   - How do these people who are close to you feel about your choice to live a simple life?
     - How do you think it affects them?
   - How does their reaction affect you?
18. How has your simple living changed your relationships with friends, families, and loved ones?

Plans for the Future

19. How do you plan to continue your simplification journey? What are your next steps? Any ideas to overcome the challenges that you mentioned earlier?

General
20. How you learn about the simplicity collective/CERES/manna gum?

21. Are you involved in any other simplicity groups or networks (online or in general)?

22. Are you involved in any other environmental groups, or any groups in general?

Appendix D

Simplicity in Practice: Strategies and Ways Simplifiers Do It

Water and Energy Use

Water and Energy Usage

All simplifiers felt that it was important to reduce the amount of water and energy they consumed. Simplifiers did this by:

- Taking short showers
- Taking cold showers
- Using bucket-greywater systems
- Collecting Rainwater
- Purchasing green electricity (like wind)
- Avoiding the use of heat or air-conditioning
- Using less technology
- Reducing consumption electricity
- Reducing email and internet usage
- Responsible shopping: Purchasing things that were recyclable or that could be easily taken apart and recycled in the future

Miscellaneous

8 One simplifier noted that he turned off the water when not rinsing in the shower.

9 To reduce heating some put on more clothing while others used fireplaces to heat their homes.

10 No mobile phones, televisions, and home computers.

11 Two simplifiers noted the energy consumption of servers.
Simplifiers have also found several other ways to reduce the ecological and social impact of their lifestyles:

- Share things (anywhere from salt to vacuums with neighbors)
- Avoid taking overseas holidays
- Purchase carbon offsets when they fly or drive
- Gift-less holidays - or reducing the amount of gifts - for themselves and their children
- They create things out of materials that are typically thrown out or recycled

Fun/Leisure

- Biking
- Cooking
- Spending Time with Friends
- Bushwalking
- Gardening
- Doing things Themselves around the home
- Painting and working on crafts
- Surfing
- Enjoying Art
- Enjoying Live Music
- Reading
- Spending time in city parks
- Creating Music
- Enjoying Fine Cuisine