Voluntary Simplicity and the Ethics of Consumption

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ABSTRACT

The increased levels of consumption that have accompanied our consumer-oriented culture have also given rise to some consumers questioning their individual consumption choices, with many opting for greater consumption simplicity. This link between consideration of actual consumption levels and consumer choices is evident among a group of consumers known as *ethical consumers*. Ethical consumers consider a range of ethical issues in their consumer behavioral choices. Particularly prevalent is voluntary simplification due to concerns for the extent and nature of consumption. Through the presentation of findings from two qualitative studies exploring known ethical consumers, the relationship of consumer attitudes to consumption levels, and how these attitudes impact approaches to consumer behavior, are discussed.

In much of the developed world consumption has moved beyond its primary utilitarian function of serving basic human needs. This situation has provided marketing with a central role in cultural life, as individuals use consumer goods to create an identity, build relationships, and structure psychological events (Lunt & Livingstone, 1992). Peter Corrigan introduces his *Sociology of Consumption* thusly: "Although consumption takes place in all human cultures, it is only in the present [20th] century that consumption on a truly mass scale has begun to appear as a fundamental, rather than merely epiphenomenal, charac-

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teristic of society" (1997, p. 1). These developments have provided the premise for many consumers' growing critique of their own consumption as displayed in their purchase or nonpurchase behavior. Thus, as society has increasingly been described as a consumer culture, the notions of consumers as voters, consumers as activists and dissenters, and consumers as voluntary simplifiers and downshifters have appeared. It is this shift in consumer attitudes with regard to their voluntarily simplified levels of consumption that have an important impact on marketing practices, and are the focus of the present article. Understanding of consumer attitudes and behavior with regard to their voluntarily reduced consumption levels is limited. Some research has focused on specific dimensions of reduced consumption, such as downshifting (Schor, 1998); voluntary simplicity (Etzioni, 1998); and consumer selection of more ethical alternatives, including environmental products (e.g., Friedman, 1996; Mintel Special Report, 1994; Smith, 1990; Strong, 1997). But the relationship between ethical concerns and voluntary simplicity has been neglected. The aim of the present article is to address this gap in understanding by highlighting the important link that often exists between ethical concerns and voluntarily simplified behaviors. This will be achieved through the discussion of findings from two qualitative studies, with interview excerpts used to illustrate the relationship between ethical attitudes and simplified behavior.

ETHICAL CONSUMERS AND SIMPLIFIED BEHAVIOURS

The growing awareness among consumers of the environmental and social impact of their own consumption has not surprisingly led many to reevaluate their consumer choices.[1] The inextricable link between consumption and ethical problems, such as environmental degeneration and fairness in world trade, has resulted in the emergence of a group of consumers commonly referred to as ethical consumers. Although ethical consumers are concerned about consumption levels per se, radical anticonsumerism may not be an option for them in a society that requires or demands some level of consuming. Important decisions for these consumers, therefore, surround the issue of whether to consume with sensitivity through the selection of more ethical alternatives or whether to reduce levels of consumption to a more sustainable level through voluntary simplicity. In the view of Sorell and Hendry (1994), the latter would be the preferred option. They say, "might not the morally urgent thing be to reduce consumption rather than to refine it?" (p. 80). Such arguments raise the notion of a contradiction between the terms *ethical* and *consumption,* and question any moral imperative of product-by-

[1]Marketing interest in the ethics of consumption in the U.K. can be illustrated by the continuing publications on the subject by Mintel Marketing Intelligence (1993; 1994; 1999; 2000a; 2000b; 2001).

product or company-by-company screening. The Ethical Consumer Research Association (ECRA), however, would argue that consumer power is necessary as a means of achieving specific desirable outcomes within the existing market system (Ethical Consumer, 1999). Such views often portray customers as voters.

In this article it is suggested that such a fine distinction cannot be made between the *extent* and *nature* of consumption in affluent consumer societies. Rather, in attempting to address their concerns, individual consumers may adopt one or more behavioral approaches, including downshifting, voluntary simplicity, and/or more sustainable levels of consumption through the selection of more ethical alternatives. This highlights the need for research to examine the relationships and impact of ethical concerns on behavioral choices. As a contribution toward addressing this aim, each of these differing behavioral approaches and their impact on consumer choice is discussed below.

DOWNSHIFTING OR VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

The terms *voluntary simplicity* and *downshifting* have often been referred to in discussions on reduced consumption styles. Any distinction between these two behavioral approaches is unclear, not least because both advocate a reduced consumption life-style. Whereas for Schor (1998), for example, downshifting seems to center on voluntarily reduced income and a commensurate low level of consumption, Etzioni (1998) suggests it is the most *limited* of a group of practices of voluntary simplicity. For Etzioni it involves some use of items that might in other circumstances be seen as signaling poverty and may include moderate restraint of well-recompensed working hours. Before beginning a full discussion on reduced approaches to consumption it is necessary to clarify the use of these two terms within the present study.

For the purposes of this present work, Etzioni's (1998) general usage is adopted. From this perspective, *voluntary simplicity* is viewed as the generic term for a variously motivated contemporary phenomenon: the foregoing of maximum consumption and, possibly, income. Motivations for voluntary simplicity might include self-centered and/or altruistic considerations. As a form of voluntary simplicity the term downshifting is used to refer specifically to the mostly self-centered responses to the perception of the hurried and unsatisfactory lifestyle of contemporary society. Thus downshifters seek more quality time but might have little concern for wider moral issues. The term *ethical simplifiers* is used here to denote the behaviors of voluntary simplicity that respond mostly to ethical concerns.

Thus, a wide range of individuals practice voluntary simplicity for multiple reasons. It has been suggested that downshifting and ethical consumption are two, nonexclusive variations of voluntary simplicity.

Although both groups voluntarily simplify their consumption, ethical simplifiers are distinguished from downshifters by their concerns about environmental, social, and animal welfare issues.

The distinction is important because the patterns of consumer behavior are likely to be quite different. Downshifters may be assumed to be interested in achieving equilibrium between the comfort of a consumer lifestyle and nonmaterialistic satisfactions. Both Etzioni (1998) and Schor (1998) primarily cite quality of life as being a motivation for downshifting. It is desired, Etzioni (1998) says, because it "frees time and other scarce resources of non-materialistic satisfaction, from acquiring music appreciation to visiting museums, from slowing down to enjoying nature to relearning the reading of challenging books to watching a rerun of a classical movie on television" (p. 637). The behaviors may vary in extent and practice, perhaps affecting both income and expenditure. As with Schor's usage, and that of the U.K. press, downshifting may be considered quite radical (Jones, 1999; Rouse, 2000; Schor, 1998). Ethical simplifiers are less predictable, as they respond to complex and swiftly developing social and environmental debates that they see as having an impact on their role in consumer society. An individual may, for instance, adopt a more restrictive diet primarily because of a concern for animal welfare, or decide not to own a car because of concern about the negative environmental impact. This unpredictability will be additionally so because as Etzioni (1988) argues ". . . individuals experience perpetual inner tension generated by conflicts among their basic urges (or desires), among their various moral commitments, and between their urges and their moral commitments." These tensions are presumably heightened among ethical simplifiers.

However, the practice of voluntary simplicity in general, as Etzioni (1998) points out, is primarily one of living within consumer capitalism, not in complete opposition to it. Indeed, the capacity for even simplified consumption practices to be commodified should not be underrated. Miles (1998) expresses the view that "Any movement against that [consumerist] way of life is merely subsumed within the capitalist system as yet another market niche" (p. 45). The practice of ethical simplicity is not, therefore, to be seen solely in terms of anticonsumption. Etzioni (1998) further argues that voluntary simplicity may be seen as a politically acceptable way of achieving a sustainable society without coercion. This approach is not new and is, for instance, reminiscent of the role assigned to the "socially conscious consumer" (Brooker, 1976), the consumer boycott (Smith, 1990) and more recently the "green, ethical and charitable consumer" (Schlegelmilch, 1994). Zadek and Amalric (1998) argue that sustainable levels of consumption are a fundamental ingredient of sustainable development. Notions of sustainable development are of course the primary political response to threats to the global environment. Thus, there is considerable evidence to support the term *ethical simplicity* as illustrative of the inextricable link between

social and environmentally sustainable futures and voluntary simplicity.

The preceding argument does not attempt to posit that there is a clear boundary between downshifting and ethical simplicity, but rather that they reflect a significant division in motivation and behavior. The work presented here focuses on ethical simplifiers and their practices of ethical consumption.

VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY AND THE ETHICS OF CONSUMPTION

It is the premise of this article that voluntary simplicity may be demonstrated among consumers whose behavior includes some ethical consideration of the environmental and social impact of their consumption choices. It is suggested that those who begin thinking of their consumer choices in ethical terms are likely also to consider these practices in terms of sustainable futures, in turn engaging in the types of consumption practices discussed next. Such practices may include seeking technological solutions, recycling, refilling, and "buycotting" (Friedman, 1996) preferred goods and companies. Other behavioral solutions involving reduced levels of consumption include use of shared goods, second-hand purchasing, and domestic production.

Maintained Levels of Consumption

Some consumers look to technological solutions for more sustainable consumption choices. This behavior would include buying some green products such as catalytic converters on fuel-economic cars, clockwork radios, superefficient refrigerators, and laundry balls to replace detergents. These approaches involve *actual* consumption and aim to make full use of modern technology to reduce material and energy use as advocated in the so-called "factor four" program (Weizsäcker, Lovins, & Lovins, 1998). Also involving maintained consumption levels, consumers may opt to *buycott.* In doing so consumers can make positive purchases, such as seeking out fair-trade products and favoring small stores or local produce. These behaviors could be regarded as contributing to improved sustainability through the support of more environmentally benign practices by Majority World[2] producers or, conversely, the lower environmental impact of local production. Additionally, recycling and refilling can be considered sustainable consumption choices where, for example, these features are pertinent in product selection.

[2]*Majority World* refers to what is more commonly termed the Third World, where the majority of the world's population lives. It is preferred because of its less pejorative form.

Reduced Levels of Consumption

Distinct from the preceding solutions, other approaches require *reduced* consumption and may involve more radical lifestyle changes such as car sharing (or non-car use in favor of other methods of transport) and communal laundry use. On a less grand scale, individuals may simply share rarely used material goods such as ladders and decorating equipment (Schor, 1998). A similar practice is repairing and making things last longer (Durning, 1992; Papanek, 1995). The reuse route is taken by some through the purchase of secondhand goods. This deliberate action by those who could afford new products was criticized by Myers (1986). She argued that strategies that deny the modern consumerist world are necessarily untenable. Those who deliberately buy secondhand goods are deluding themselves when they think they bypass responsibility for their production. Although this type of behavior may additionally be criticized as making use of less energy-efficient technology, the advantages of reuse in terms of extending a product's life must be noted. Additionally, some individuals try to defy or reverse commodification. They continue with domestic production and consumption by, for instance, growing food on allotments or even, as in the United States, on "part-time farms" (Pendle, 2000). Again this may be thought of as voluntary simplicity only among those who are either sufficiently affluent to afford food in the market system, or who have had the capacity to enhance their income. The closely related issues of diet and diet restraint, ranging from reducing meat consumption to various nonmeat diets, have also been related to consumption. Although concepts of vegetarianism have been attended by much confusion (Keane & Willetts, 1995), as will be illustrated below, such trends have been significant in many affluent societies. It is noted that the high technology and boycotting approaches involving little change in actual consumption levels pale in comparison to the make-do-and-mend strategy where consumption is very clearly being reduced.

This complex of behaviors found in most affluent societies does not represent one behavioral strategy that could be studied as a coherent general practice. Rather they are a group of practices that, in some cases, derived from conflicting attitudes. These practices can be associated with the perception (individual or collective) of rising human and environmental problems, which make the selection of a single behavioral approach difficult. This position is reinforced when it is appreciated that most issues that concern the ethical consumer are complex in their own right. This is illustrated in an example given by Newholm (2000a, p. 167), where environmental and fair-trade concerns are coupled together. He notes: "In some way these concerns are applicable to every product or service yet conflicts can arise between a concern to trade fairly with Majority World countries, to promote their economies, and environmental problems of excessive transportation." This point clearly

demonstrates how the understanding of one ethical situation, such as fair trade, can be transferred to another otherwise unconnected focus of consumer concern, for example, environmental degradation. The crossover of seemingly unrelated concerns can significantly add to the complexity of consumption choices. Once decisions have been made, consumers are likely to reflect continually upon them, with this temporal dynamic further complicating the balancing of multiple ethical concerns involved in decision making. It is necessary, therefore, to consider the attitudes or ideologies that drive these varied actions.

ATTITUDES TO (OVER)CONSUMPTION

As illustrated above, attitudes toward (over)consumption may not center on a single concern, but rather a group of concerns about aspects of consumer culture. Such expressions of, for example, "anti-capitalism" and "sustainability" have been illustrated in the popular U.K. media (Jones, 1996; Zobel, 1999). Findings from the present article reveal not only expressions of concern about commercialism and profit motives, but also about *commodity fetishism* that is closely linked to the pressures of *fashion* (Khan, 1998; McClellan, 1997). Indeed, among those interviewed who preferred the jumble of secondhand goods in their home to designer decorations, furnishings, and coordinated dishwashers, refrigerators, ranges, televisions, etc., we might see an *anti-ensembleism*[3] noted by Corrigan (1997). Diderot (Gabriel & Lang, 1995) noted a similar compulsion toward matching or harmonizing possessions in the 18th century. The philosopher reported a personal dissatisfaction with the result of the comprehensive changes he made to his study when he tried to harmonize it with a magnificent robe he received as a gift.

CONCERNED CONSUMERS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

In what follows, two empirical studies of ethical consumers are drawn on to examine their approaches to consumption choices. Both studies were carried out in the U.K. between 1996 and 1999. One study draws on two focus-group discussions involving a total of 15 ethical consumers, and the other on 16 in-depth case studies of ethical consumers.[4] Both studies used a sample of known ethical consumers. The use of a purposive sample was necessitated by the nature of the ethical research

[3]Ensemble marketing (Corrigan, 1997, p. 106) promotes the principle of unity of collection. Thus furnishings, soft furnishings, electrical goods, ornaments, etc., are coordinated. Not only is each item individually designed but it is also integrated into a whole ensemble. This coordination has increasingly been the preserve of producers. Antiensembalism is any of a number of adverse consumer reactions to this trend.

[4]For a full methodology see Shaw and Clarke (1999) and Newholm (2000a), respectively.

focus, which required an accentuated population deemed to hold existing views and attitudes on levels of consumption behavior. Both of the methodologies detailed are qualitative in nature, and findings obtained fully complemented each other, thus further strengthening the conclusions drawn.[5]

All of the respondents under study saw a need to, believed they did, or had demonstrated an ability to, cut back on consumption in response to their perception of a problem. One member of a focus group put this succinctly, saying, "we don't consider ourselves as big consumers." In what follows, respondent's attitudes and simplifying behaviors are reviewed in terms of three contentious consumption issues: diet, car or non-car travel, and the use of secondhand products. Following this the two main behavioral approaches of reduced consumption and maintained consumption are contrasted. This section concludes with a review of the more general aspects of respondents' voluntary ethical simplicity.

Concerns to Simplify Diet

The question of diet is inevitably infused with issues of personal health, food quality, animal welfare, the environment and biodiversity, global equity, and power relationships. It is often not possible to separate individuals' more self-interested concerns from their wider social concerns. However, a concern for a more equitable distribution of food was a factor evident in many of the diet changes interviewees described. This is illustrated in the following quote that is typical of those arguing against excessive meat production.

> I become a vegetarian, well a vegetarian I eat fish, about 15 years ago, more. Really I suppose reasons were concerns for justice, which grew out of my political awareness and my faith awareness. And it was, I stopped eating meat that was grain feed, because (a) it was uneconomic, and (b) it was at the time when farming was bigger and countries were exporting grain. Which was, you know, twenty pounds of actual feeding a cow to be slaughtered to get one pound of beef protein. When in fact that twenty pounds of grain could have been used feed human beings in that country and so on.

As Keane and Willetts (1995) found, some individuals use the term *vegetarian* with considerable latitude. Indeed, the above focus group member reported very occasionally eating "organic" meat. However, he fairly clearly articulates the connection between his voluntarily simpli-

[5]It is possible that some people downshift or hold sustainable consumption attitudes purely as a self-interested response to their own position in consumer society—their overwork and their dissatisfaction with what they have consumed. We can say nothing from our studies of people who are merely concerned with their own quality of life. Our focus is on those who perceive some more general social difficulties and make some behavioral response.

fied diet and an ethical notion of fair food distribution. A strict vegan in one of the case studies presented a similar argument.

> As long as I do not need to participate in the factory farming/meat industry, I won't. Would people kill an animal themselves? I also think the government should not subsidize the meat industry, at £200 per head of cattle, and the full cost should be passed on to the consumer because it is also an uneconomic method of producing food.

However, this respondent argued that if the object of being vegetarian or vegan were to reduce meat production then lots of people cutting down would be more effective than a few absolutely abstaining from meat. Unlike the previous respondent, who said that a concern for animals themselves "really didn't figure" in his decision, the second held more widely founded concerns.

In both studies the majority of respondents had modified their diet. Some, for instance, had reduced their meat consumption and/or taken to buying free-range animal products. Others had adopted a vegetarian or vegan diet. Some were increasingly buying organic produce.[6] Although there is disagreement on the extent of recent diet change in the UK, and there have been wildly differing estimations of the move to vegetarianism (perhaps the most surveyed of the dietary phenomena), there is a clear trend among a significant proportion of consumers. Gallup surveys in the mid-1980s found nearly a third of adults interviewed reported eating less meat than previously (Gallup, 1984). The reaction of the food industry has been fragmented but it certainly has been influenced. Novel products such as Quorn and textured vegetable protein have replaced much of the lost market for meat (Mintel Special Report, 1993). Differences of opinion among customers about novel foods, however, may be shown by contrasting arguments. One case-study respondent saw such substitutes as desirable providing the product did not contravene any of her animal-welfare requirements, such as the use of factory farmed eggs in production. Conversely, another said that as a vegan he "eats vegetables" and so by definition needed no meat substitute.

Among those who had simplified their diet some would put more emphasis on the *extent* of consumption, and choose among various levels and forms of moderation. Others placed more emphasis on the *nature* of production and concerns about the environment, factory farming, and animal welfare. For these a form of abstention from meat was more usual. Most would not easily separate the arguments. The resulting

[6]The field work was undertaken during the period when issues surrounding genetically modified organisms were just becoming the subject of public debate in the U.K. and so the associated reaction towards organic produce had not fully developed.

behaviors were therefore found to be very diverse and in some cases still liable to considerable change over time.

Getting Into and Out of Cars

One of the most contentious items on the voluntary simplicity agenda is that of transport. A significant number of the ethical consumers observed deliberately did not use or own a car. Others found ways to moderate car use. One of the case-study respondents, who might be thought to need a car because of his work as a schools inspector, articulated a common concern by saying he was becoming increasingly disturbed by private transport. He added that this was "a feeling which continues to get stronger." In some cases conflict resulted when one spouse owned a car although the other disapproved of its use.

Of those who moderated car use, some did so by using public transport, walking, cycling, owning what they argued were more efficient new vehicles, restricting their family to fewer cars than they might otherwise own, and/or by changing vehicles less frequently. One case-study respondent said that he and his partner had bought a fairly old secondhand Toyota but had approved of the make because they "knew it to be more economical and long-lasting than others."

Those who owned cars simply saw no alternative to the car and cited work commitments, other social involvements, advanced age, poor public transport, and a hilly and/or rural location as a justification. Even car owners, however, showed reticence concerning car ownership.

> I struggled for about six months before I got my car, because where I work, I work in the community and I go and see people. I was getting the bus for six months, but I was wasting so much time. I was going to see someone, especially if they weren't in, and I'd maybe spend an hour going, and it just wasn't feasible, so I got a car. And I quite like having a car now, but it was a real battle just actually getting one.

Some of those not running a car exhibited little patience with most of these arguments because they themselves had deliberately chosen an urban residence with most amenities within walking distance.

There was, however, no unanimity among the non-car owners. This point may be illustrated by considering two case studies of two respondents who, like a number of other respondents, deliberately did not own a car. They both recognized the environmental consequences of mass car ownership and did not want to contribute to the problems. They both had used other modes of travel, including public transport and taxis. They both now cycled, but in very different ways. One, having decided that the morally right behavior was to cycle rather than to drive a car, used the best equipment he could afford. He used a fine-quality off-road bike and enjoyed selecting the latest equipment in specialist cycle

stores. He spoke of keeping up his cycling to work as if against some countervailing force, and it seemed the pleasure of fine equipment was a positive factor in this struggle. To direct attention toward equipment, the other argued, was to risk treating cycling as a fetish and of seeing material objects as more important than people where "commodity becomes more important than life." Although relatively affluent, this respondent rode a serviceable machine and replaced parts only when necessary. He avoided fashionable, or even multiple cycle stores. Although he was pleased that recent trends in cycle fashion had widened its social acceptability, he expressed considerable misgivings about commercial aspirations. He frequented the old, untidy and greasy, small working bike shop as can be found in most U.K. towns. He said approvingly: "Local shops are a lot cheaper. I recently tried, but failed, to convince the man at my local shop that I needed a new bike!" Whereas the former indulged in this simple, environmentally sound form of transport, sometimes using elaborate equipment, the latter eschewed the accessories and esoteric equipment of what he saw as part of the trendy fashionable status cycling had acquired.

Good Quality Secondhand by Choice

Among the relatively affluent, the use of secondhand items can vary significantly. At one extreme revisited items of furniture or clothing receive makeovers and become fashion objects. At the other extreme some of our respondents lived in secondhand houses furnished with what is perhaps best described as a comfortable jumble of more or less serviceable items.

Contrasts were found in attitude among those reemploying consumer items. For some, secondhand clothes were worn as a sign of opposition to consumerism. However, as Etzioni (1998) states, such signals are difficult to distinguish from poverty. One case-study respondent, for instance, reported buying secondhand clothes from an affluent part of town and wearing then in a disheveled "subversive way." By contrast another respondent simply bought secondhand by choice. In the interview at her home, she pointed out that the suite of furniture on which we were sitting was secondhand. She thought it would have been foolish to throw money away for a new suite that would have been no better. She said she "did not want to value new things too highly." In recent months she and her husband had bought a washing machine, dining suite, audio system, and video recorder all secondhand. What was most important to her was not to buy poor quality. She and her husband were both teachers in well-paid posts and with no dependents. This was in her view not a political statement but a matter of practicality.

For one respondent the fact that an item of clothing was secondhand did not, as Myers (1986) said, "bypass responsibility for their production." This particular respondent increasingly took care to ensure that

the garment was made of "natural materials" and he would, "check out even the labels" of secondhand clothes he needed. In this way he confirmed that the mere fact of being secondhand did not mean that any perceived problem with the garment had been resolved. Another respondent expressed little concern about his practice of buying secondhand tools from government surplus. This was despite the fact that in general he strongly disapproved of the government's military wing.

Many respondents lived with various inconsistencies, such as the occupation of houses with limited insulation potential, and operating cars, washing machines, and other appliances with low efficiency relative to new products. These practices seem to be the opposite of the technological solutions some advocate in this respect. It is difficult to reconcile claims between those who replace appliances regularly with energy-efficient models and others who make do and mend and buy secondhand.

Maintaining but Modifying Consumption

The previous sections mostly assemble examples of respondents' reduced consumption. This section considers maintained levels of consumption by using examples of technological fixes. For example, one argument is that more efficient appliances allow the same levels of consumption but with less energy use. This section also considers fair trade as a form of maintaining by modifying consumption because it is seen as enabling poor farmers to become more environmentally conscious.

When buying new kitchen appliances, case study respondents had taken some account of the labels showing eco/efficiency ratings. One respondent, however, had investigated a special range of appliances with exceptionally high environmental credentials. These he said had proved to be very expensive and so he had bought an ordinary refrigerator with a good specification. Because he could well have afforded the exceptional product, why he did not is of interest. He said he could not justify spending on objects at the cost of his charitable, people-centered, giving. There was, therefore, a balance to be struck here between environmental and social concerns.

In many cases fair-traded products—teas, coffees, chocolates, and, more recently, bananas—were bought without question. In the following extract one case study respondent expresses his doubts.

> I very much like drinking coffee and used to be particular about buying specialty beans roasted by a local tea and coffee merchant. Then I got more into the "ethical consumer" thing and thought that I should buy Traidcraft/Cafedirect[7] or the like to at least give a higher price to growers. This is only a partial solution as I don't know if such products really benefit the grower any more than beans on the international market,

[7]Traidcraft and Cafedirect are brands of fairly traded coffee available in the U.K.

> the coffee is NOT as good as that produced locally, and I often think that I shouldn't be buying something that is grown as a cash crop and thus depriving the growers of growing real food.

The preceding quotes clearly demonstrate how many ethical concerns may exist in conflict. For the individual consumer such conflict among held concerns could also result in the questioning of the most beneficial behavioral approach(es) to consumption. Thus, although a desire for voluntary simplicity may exist, how this is enacted in consumer behavior will depend on the nature, multitude, and interaction between ethical concerns held.

Voluntary Simplicity in an Upshifting World

As with Etzioni, the above findings suggest that "[v]oluntary simplicity is observable at different levels of intensity" (Etzioni, 1998, p. 621). Our respondents varied in income by more than a factor of 10. At one extreme respondents had forgone an occasional luxury to support fairer world trade and had adopted some thrifty ways. At the other, apart from his bicycle and the clothes he was wearing, one respondents' worldly goods were packed into a small cupboard.

Some of those with higher incomes expressed deep concerns about consumer society and their part in it. One said she realized how the cheap products for consumption were being achieved at the cost of Majority World producers. Another, who had made very significant simplifications of his life-style, explained: "It becomes an ever more disturbing issue as I am convinced that ending poverty involves inconveniencing the (relatively) rich." Both of these respondents were worried because they understood that further cutbacks could have a significant impact on their family relationships. Indeed some holding ethical concerns actually restrained them in some of their personal relationships. One focus group respondent noted

> If I mentioned what I just said at the moment to the bulk of my friends, who I consider good friends, they would think I was "off the planet." You know, they just aren't interested in considering it (ethical issues). I don't know why and yet they're friends I consider good friends, and know well in other ways, but it's as if there are barriers there, and we're not going to talk about these things, we will just live out life with what's available to us and that's that.

In a more generalized sense many respondents felt unease about commodification and pressure to consume. This is illustrated by two focus-group respondents:

> The only thing I think I was going to say was about how society in general pushes us, in the way that it pushes full-time jobs, etc., how

> we are all pushed to make money, we're pushed into being consumers, and anyone who doesn't want to do that is penalized.
>
> I'd agree with what you just brought in there, that we are all forced to be consumers therefore we are forcing each other to make decisions, dire choices as well.

Individuals with concerns about consumerism but who do not wish to entirely opt out face "dire choices." However, they do adopt behaviors that go some way to assuage their concerns. On the other hand, trying to be an ethical consumer with the restraint that implies is seen as possibly leading to feelings of failure. One focus-group respondent summed up such feelings:

> I've been subscribing to the magazine [Ethical Consumer] since Issue 1. When I first got it, I went at it all fire and gusto. At the end of the day every shopping trip was just an absolute nightmare, because there is just no way that you can totally avoid multinational companies, there is no way you can totally avoid companies that aren't doing something to somebody or something out there in the world.

Significantly some case-study respondents cautioned against guilt trips and becoming neurotic or too serious. One conjured up the "hair shirt person" as an appropriate metaphor for those who simplify, as he saw it, excessively. At one point a focus-group member said "I'm not perfect—I don't report to be perfect." A case-study respondent also expressed this feeling, saying:

> I know that products such as coffee are often subject to criticism with regard to the conditions of the workers who produce them. I am not influenced by this when buying coffee or clothes. Hell, nobody's perfect. I have never bought a McDonald's product.

Nevertheless it was a very widely held view that they were obliged to do something in respect of the social and environmental problems they perceived. Summing up this feeling, one respondent said: "I couldn't bear to do nothing." This feeling of ethical obligation is further supported by Shaw, Shiu, and Clarke (2000a) who present findings which reveal a measure of ethical obligation to be more pertinent to the prediction of behavioral intention to purchase fair-trade products than measures of an individual's attitude and normative others.

DISCUSSION

The findings reported above suggest that consumers who start from the premise that ethical issues are applicable to their consumption also con-

sider the extent of that consumption. This serves to highlight the important link between levels of consumption and ethical concerns. Likewise even with high levels of ethical simplicity some, but not all, took exceptional ethical care with their remaining consumption choices. In other words, their consumption is approached holistically if not consistently. The clear existence of such considered consumption styles across a number of ethical concerns runs contrary to the Sorell and Hendry (1994) notion that the appeal of ethical consumption is that it can be organized around *one* central ethical issue. Particularly apparent from the studies undertaken was the exceptional diversity and subtlety of the different ways in which consumers combined their ethically charged arguments to present the morality of their life-style. As a result, notions of consumer restraint, present in most of their discourses, have widely differing meanings. These differences mean that similar behavior may be underpinned by different motivations or at least different emphases. Based on the discussions presented in this article, the following main points can be drawn:

- Restraint: Individuals who try to consume ethically invariably made some form of voluntary restraint as part of an ethical approach to consumption.
- Diversity: The ethical simplifier can take a wide range of different forms by adopting a diversity of behavioral responses.
- Compulsion: a strong motivation toward action among ethical simplifiers arises from an internal moral compulsion toward integrity rather than, or in parallel to, a wish to change the world.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

As consumer life-styles are intensifying, some in affluent societies are voluntarily simplifying. This restraint in consumption styles has been well documented in the findings presented in this article. Although a restraint in consumer choices is wholly apparent, one should be wary of ascribing too much potential to the phenomenon. This may best be illustrated by Strandbakken's (1995) re-analysis of the efforts of a number of Norwegian environmentalists and life-style activists to reduce their consumption during the late 1970s. Strandbakken notes changes in consumption, both increases and significant reductions, reported by the original researchers, over a 5-year period, but introduces two significant qualifications. The first is that the group enjoyed higher-than-average consumption, manifest in relation to consumer durables and, importantly, most had moved into larger and more expensive houses and flats during the study. It may be that voluntary simplicity is most often only relative to an increasingly complex and interdependent con-

sumer society. Such a view would be entirely consistent with the findings of the present study.

Important, however, is the clear existence of a controlled-consumption approach among ethical consumers. Voluntary simplicity for ethical consumers is rarely a substitute for considering the ethics of consumption but a complement to it. Such behavioral approaches are driven by an obligation to do something (often realistic) about a (variously) perceived problem. This diversity in perspective and behavior means that ethical consumers present marketers with niches rather than a single niche. This diversity in approach is illustrated by the differing purchasing strategies of two focus-group respondents.

> I consciously bought from them [Cafedirect from a supermarket], knowing at the same time that I was buying less from the sources I had previously used. But, the point was if I could help or support the supermarkets in carrying those lines then more people, people who never pass through the alternative shops, more people would see them and might try them, because they are available, there is no chance of them picking them up if they are just not on the shelf. And if my contribution could help to keep them on the shelf, then perhaps in the longer term they would be there permanently and overall demand would be increased. But it's hard for an individual to judge if that's a realistic strategy or not.

> I wouldn't buy it [Cafedirect] from Safeway, 'cause I feel I am giving them the profit of selling this. So I would wait until I was passing Oxfam and buy a few jars and stock up.

The diversity of this consumer group, and the complexity often inherent to their decision-making, highlights the need to gain an improved understanding of the heterogeneous nature of ethical consumers. This serves to highlight the potential limitations of marketing insights that rely on, for example, survey findings, which, although valuable in informing organizations of the existence of ethical consumers and their concerns, may suggest a false homogeneity within this consumer group (Newholm, 2000b). Indeed this has been illustrated through the findings outlined in this article, where, for example, two respondents both holding negative attitudes toward car use had very different approaches to cycling as an alternative method of transport. Such limited understandings could be damaging through the generation of marketing communications that recoil against the very groups they strive to reach. The range of ethical issues with which ethical consumers identify mean that they do indeed hold these concerns as survey research would suggest. However, the need to prioritize concerns when faced with conflict between issues and limited ethical product alternatives, means that concern for an ethical issue may result in the selection of a number of be-

havioral approaches. Thus, although concern may exist for many ethical issues, the need to prioritize concerns in order to manage reasonably consumer choices can result in a strategic neglect of some issues when purchasing. Organizations, therefore, require a more complete understanding of consumers and how their management of ethical concerns impacts behavioral choices, rather than the snapshot provided by survey data.

Etzioni (1998) notes the presence of voluntary simplicity motivated by concerns for quality of life and provides the theoretical link with sustainable communities. The work presented here notes the occurrence of ethical consumption and discusses the close relationship with voluntary simplicity. This contribution is therefore approached in the reverse of Etzioni's. Ethical simplicity is presented to illustrate those people whose voluntarily reduced consumption behavior includes some ethical consideration of the environment and other social concerns. Findings in the present study consistently revealed the close link between ethical concerns held and the need to evaluate levels of consumption behavior. Awareness of ethical issues, such as environmental degeneration and animal welfare, inevitably highlight for individuals questions surrounding their own levels of consumption. This, for the majority, resulted in some degree of simplicity in their approach to consumer orientated behavior. One reader of "Ethical Consumer" magazine commented: "I think it's taught me to ask myself, do I really need this, there are so many things one can do without if you really have to, not even really have to, but without too much problem." This clearly illustrates that in circles where consumption is seen as having an ethical dimension, consumption levels are invariably considered.

The challenge for future research will be to fully recognize and explore further the role of ethical simplicity. This initial qualitative research has been invaluable in establishing and illustrating the inextricable link between ethical concerns and voluntary simplicity. The issues identified will have important implications for the development of advanced communications directed at this increasingly significant consumer group. A larger sample of ethical simplifiers is prudent to access the stability of, and to further these important findings. Past research exploring the key determinants in ethical consumer choice established a model of consumer decision making (Shaw, 2000; Shaw, Shiu, & Clarke, 2000b) with the use of the theory of planned behavior as a framework (Ajzen, 1985). To build on the qualitative findings presented in this article it is suggested that this model of consumer choice be used to explain consumer intention to reduce consumption in specific contexts. This quantitative methodology using structural equation modeling will provide a statistical basis from which to derive broader inferences and generalizations pertinent to a deeper understanding of the role of voluntary simplicity in ethical consumer behavior.

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