Voluntary Simplifiers and Non-Voluntary Simplifiers: Exploring Gender Based Differences.
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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15721/gender/v06/GCB-06

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ABSTRACT

The main project examined differences across voluntary simplifiers and non-voluntary simplifiers. The overall findings are reported elsewhere (Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002). During the study some gender differences were noted. It is these gender differences that have been identified and discussed in this paper. Marked differences were noted in the areas of relationships with family and the community, lifestyle, perceptions of specific goods and ideas about security and control.

The topic of voluntary simplistic lifestyles is becoming increasingly popular with social commentators due in part to the increasing number of affluent people electing to live materially simpler lives. Although several academics have discussed the topic, it has had little mention in the marketing literature. It has received more attention from social scientists. But, the literature reveals there is no clear understanding of this way of life. Different authors have different opinions about what should be at the essence of what constitutes VS lifestyle behaviour. Our research seeks to address this problem by gaining a fuller understanding of voluntary simplifiers (VS) in relation to non-voluntary simplifiers (NVS). The main objective of this research was to explore what self-designated voluntary simplifiers thought about their lives and their possessions in relation to non-voluntary simplifiers.

BACKGROUND

The notion of choosing to live a materially simple life is not new. The main religions of the world preach a balance between deprivation and overabundance where material possessions should not be valued more than spiritual endeavours. According to Elgin (1981), Thoreau’s Walden gave simplicity secular value. Some members of the middle class adopted this idea. This was reflected in their lifestyle. Gregg (1936) was the first to apply the label voluntary simplicity to this way of life. Essentially, voluntary simplifiers can be defined as those ‘choosing to live with less’. In contrast, non-voluntary simplifiers can be defined as those choosing not to simplify their lives materially. But in both instances the operative is choice. Leonard-Barton (1981) defined voluntary simplicity as the degree to which an individual selects a lifestyle intended to maximise their direct control over daily activities and to minimise their consumption and dependency. Etzioni (1998) described voluntary simplicity as the choice out of
free will to limit expenditures on consumer goods and services and to cultivate non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning. Thus, the element of choice is clearly the main consideration here since voluntary simplifiers have the resources to permit them to live materially rich lives.

Since the 1970s there has been an ongoing interest in this phenomenon by social researchers such as Elgin & Mitchel (1977); Daun (1983); Shama & Wisenblit (1984), Shama (1985); O’Guinn & Belk (1989); Ottman (1995); Schor (1991); Andrews & Benson, (1998); Pierce (1998). During this time, certain themes have emerged:

- The element of free choice to lead a simple life.
- Material consumption is reduced but a life of poverty is not required.
- Voluntary simplifiers have access to resources such as wealth, education, and unique skills that could be traded for high income.
- Control and personal fulfilment.
- Driven by values such as humanism, self –determination, environmentalism, spirituality, and self-development.

Interest by social researchers appears to be due to two factors. The first factor is the rise of the anti-consumerism movement. Fuelled by a variety of concerns such as the environment, over-consumption, abuse of developing nations, and extensive advertising, growing clusters of individuals began to engage in a range of anti-consumption activities. These activities ranged from specific product selection based on ethical and/or ecological considerations to overall reduced consumption and/or the boycott of specific product categories. The second factor is an increasing number of affluent consumers who while not against consumption, still elected to consume less because they wished to focus on spiritual growth or simply to work less and to have more time for family and friends. This group has been given increasing attention in recent years, particularly by the popular press.

CONSUMPTION AND GENDER

Studies examining gender differences in consumption behaviour have focused mainly on decision-making styles, such as the work by Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran (1991), Stern (1993), and Darley and Smith (1995). There have been a limited number of studies that examine the differences according to gender in relation to possession. (Rudmin,1994). The research based on the materialism concept does not offer clear directions as to possible gender differences. Studies by Fisher and Arnold (1990, 1994) suggested that the role of women as care-givers leads to the use of goods as a means of maintaining and enhancing kinship. An effect of the nurturer role could be a need to create and sustain a positive domestic environment. This in turn, can direct the need to acquire goods for this purpose. Research by Wallendorf and Arnold (1988) appears to support this as they found that men value items associated with mastering their environment and usually those items for use outside the home, whereas women valued goods that supported the home and family. Also, in his historical account of the Mormon migration in the mid-1800s, Belk (1992) noted that women were reluctant to travel without taking along their treasured household possessions. Both men and women valued possessions that allowed them to produce necessities such as tools, guns, sewing machines, and spinning wheels while women also valued heirlooms, clothes, and furniture, some of which were used to serve as links to and maintenance of family continuance.
Hill (1991) found that the possessions of homeless women served as links to past (and future) home life and loved ones were highly valued. Rudmin (1994) in his examination of ownership and gender difference lists research that shows:

- Women value possessions that reflected achievement and social relationship
- Men value possessions that reflect rivalry and trading relationships.
- Women desire less money and power and prefer opportunities for benevolence and achievement.
- Women are more sharing and more egalitarian in the sharing process.
- Women are more involved in gift giving and possessions symbolise emotional attachment and interpersonal relationships.
- For men, possessions are more instrumental and utilitarian.
- Women when giving goods they do so as acts of communication, men as acts of control.
- Women tend to give things away, men either actively or passively destroy them.

Rudmin’s (1994) own research into the semantics of ownership found some gender differences. Ownership in the sense of ‘belonging to and linking to’ was linked by women to furniture, household items, and appliances and to the ownership of familiar people. They also linked responsibility, pride, and self to the concept of ownership. Women more often used the ownership of goods to connect and to unite to others. In contrast, men used the ownership of goods to divide and separate themselves from others. Men also linked ownership more to property as rights with an emphasis on autonomy and exclusivity.

**METHODOLOGY**

Lack of systematic studies of self-designated voluntary simplifiers indicated that an exploratory approach using qualitative techniques could yield meaningful information. Thus, this research was exploratory, grounded, and descriptive. The data comprised recorded and analysed discourses.

**Sample Selection**

A common theme throughout the literature is that people who adopt the simple living lifestyle are individuals who have access to wealth resources via independent sources, capacity to earn a high income, and are well educated. According to Belk (1988), Edwards (1996) and the Harwood study (1995) findings, age appears to be a factor in the adoption of this lifestyle as the majority of voluntary simplifiers are baby-boomers. For this reason, the sample was selected from individuals:

- Whose individual earning capacity was at least $80k Australian
- Who had tertiary qualifications
- Who were aged between 40-55

In order to provide a clearer understanding of voluntary simplifiers, it was decided that non-voluntary simplifiers with the same socio-economic criteria should also be interviewed. To distinguish between voluntary simplifiers (VS) and non-voluntary simplifiers (NVS), Elgin's (1981) criteria were used. That is, individuals had to perceive themselves as:

- Practicing minimal consumption (i.e., living with less)
- Focused on people
- Community oriented
- Focused on harmony and self well being and growth
• Environmental and/or spiritually focused

Willing respondents were obtained via snowball sampling. Personal networks and organisations such as environmental, conservation, religious, and business groups were used. Potential respondents were given an initial interview. They were told we were studying lifestyle choices and given a brief outline of the topics to be discussed. Identifying voluntary simplifiers and non-voluntary simplifiers was difficult, as non-voluntary simplifiers could also be focused on obtaining harmony, spiritual fulfilment, and personal well being and growth. To solve this problem, the respondents were asked to rank themselves in relation to the statements listed below, which were derived from Elgin’s (1981) criteria.

- Criteria One: Someone who consciously seeks to keep consumption of products to an absolute minimum.
- Criteria Two: Someone who is interested in people, concerned with the well being of others, and engages in activities that improve the quality of life of others.
- Criteria Three:
  - Someone who wants to and has achieved harmony between work, family, friends, and interests, and/or
  - Someone who is concerned about and who actively engages in environment-friendly behaviour, and/or
  - Someone who values and who is achieving or working towards a spiritual goal, and/or
  - Someone who is actively working towards and who is achieving psychological well-being.

The final sample of fifty-three respondents represented extreme positions on all three criteria. This approach yielded twenty VS respondents (eight males and twelve females) and thirty-three NVS respondents (twenty-one males and twelve females). The sample was a mixture of single and partnered individuals; only five were childless and nine couples did not have children at home.

All respondents were interviewed in their homes. The interviews on average lasted about one hour; were taped, and transcribed. All respondents were asked to talk about the following topics:

- What they considered important in their life
- What aspects of their life they would like to change
- What they thought about their house, furniture, and car
- What possessions they considered to be important
- What activities they engaged in
- What factors they took into consideration when buying products

The voluntary simplifiers were also asked to discuss the following topics:

- Why they thought that were living simple lives
- How the products they used reflected this lifestyle

The interviewers were instructed to keep prompts to a minimum, using them to give direction. Scrutiny checks of the tapes by the two key researchers after each interview and a check of the raw transcribed texts allowed for interview techniques to be monitored.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The narratives themselves form the basis of the data. But, to give a more easily interpreted picture of gender differences a summary of the most
frequently mention topics are shown in Exhibit Two. Sixteen of the simplifiers lived in country (bush) settings and in houses, while all of the non-simplifiers lived in the city (central city and suburbs). Thirteen lived in units (flats). Some interesting differences in gardens and house décor were observed (Exhibit Three) although none in actual house styles.

Some general impressions were that the
- simplifiers had more second hand items – including antiques
- simplifiers had more items that were selected on the basis of each piece’s interest and style.
- simplifiers owned as many if not more ‘things’ than the non-simplifiers
- non-simplifiers home and décor acted as ‘settings’ for the individual
- simplifier home and items were used to support the individuals
- simplifiers had more home based hobbies
- non-simplifiers played more sports, games and used gyms

When asked to discuss what they considered important in their life the respondents (with the exception of six singles) started talking about their family with the most emphasis being on partners and children with only eleven (three of whom were single) mentioning members of their extended family as important. The inclusion of the extended family appeared to be driven more by the health status of the extended family members rather than the gender or simplicity status. Gender differences were more noticeable when the aspects were discussed in depth. The females in both groups with children talked at greater length and in depth about them, which was in contrast to the males of both groups. But, the VS females wanted their children’s education to ‘enrich’ them as people, whereas the NVS females saw education as a means to a materially successful life as did the NVS males. VS males seemed to be more ‘hands-off’ with a ‘water them and they will grow’ philosophy.

All eight of the VS males interviewed described community-based relationships as an extremely important aspect of their lives. Females of both groups listed their friends, as having a significant impact on their lives in contrast to the males of both groups who did not. Irrespective of gender, work featured as important in the NVS group but not in the VS group. When NVS respondents of both genders mentioned work, it was in relation to the material benefits it provided and was a central part of their own lives. More VS females discussed in depth the importance of religion and self with the emphasis on creating mind, body, and spirit contentment, whereas the VS males talked in depth about social relationships/community. The following excerpts are typical accounts of statements made by VS males:

> What things are important to me? Um.. family, community...Um in terms of wife and children... living a viable lifestyle if you like. I don’t know.. also just having a purpose in life and feeling like at the end of my life I have contributed something to the betterment of whatever situations I’ve been in

Irrespective of gender, the VS group wanted to improve their quality of life by reducing their work levels so they could engage in other interests. Many stated that they wished they had made the life choice earlier. The following excerpt is another typical account of what VS females would change in their lives:

> I don’t think I would have worked as hard. I think what I would have
done, and I mean as a professional, I would not have worked as hard. I would not have done the consulting that I did. And, I would have put more time aside for me. Because you always think when you are young that you are going to live forever and one day it is going to be worthwhile, that you are going to have ... you know, now it is more important that we experience things. Not that we were ever into materialistic things before but now for gifts, for example, we give each other an experience - caving or going somewhere. I would change that as in the past I didn’t make the most of everything.

NVS females were more likely to have healthier lifestyles and to travel more, whereas NVS males wanted to increase their investment. The following excerpt is a typical account of what NVS males would have changed in their lives.

Well, I mean it’s very anxiety provoking not having the material resources, you know. So, obviously, if I could settle that out, that would be a very practical thing to have that aspect of life taken care of. But, I just know that that’s not the total answer though. At the same time, if you still feel rotten, it doesn’t matter how much money you’ve got. It would be nice to have the material resources just taken care of and then you wouldn’t be devoting so much time working to fix those kinds of things. You could probably spend a bit more time trying to understand or have a little bit less pressure on you to be able to look at yourself a little more fully.

The area where there was a clear difference that seems to be more directly linked to gender than to lifestyle choice is the issue of ‘more time’. More time is somewhat of a problem, especially for females, which is not eliminated by being a voluntary simplifier even though one reason given for the VS lifestyle choice is to gain more time to do their ‘own thing’.

When asked to discuss their possessions some differences were noted. For example, when talking about their houses, VS and NVS males talked more about locality than the females in both groups. VS males talked about locality in relation to setting and community (country and ambience), whereas NVS males talked about locality in relation to convenience and benefits of city, sea, and transport, as well a the monetary value of the property. Some NVS females did talk about locality but it was more in terms of social status and lifestyle convenience. The following excerpts are typical accounts of what NVS males and females think about their houses:

What do I like about my house? The sundeck, the garden and BBQ, the privacy. It’s a good investment. Good location. It’s fine. It’s just a bit old and the rooms are not big enough.

Oh the location, the fact that it’s close to the type of stuff that I like. You know coffee shops, pubs, pet shops, and crystal shops, that sort of stuff. I like it because it’s wood and it’s comfortable, cosy, and it feels good.

VS respondents of both genders were more concerned with the character of the house and the quality of the garden (the latter skewed towards VS males). Well built and self built were items mentioned only by VS males as they had often done their own renovations. Overall, VS respondents of both genders were more interested in and attached to their homes regardless of whether they were owned or rented than were NVS respondents of both genders.
The general impression of the interviewers was that VS males and females lived "with" their homes and NVS males and females lived "on" their houses.

VS males and females talked about their furniture in a more personal, attached manner than NVS males and females. In particular, the VS females seemed more emotionally linked to their furniture. The fact that the furniture had been owned or made by someone, had belonged to a valued friend or family member, or was handcrafted was important to all but two of the VS respondents. The exceptions were both single males. All respondents mentioned comfortable in relation to furniture with the NVS males and females talking about the style/fashion of the furniture as a key feature in choice. It was noted that NVS respondents of both genders seemed to own fewer things. There were not as many ornaments, pictures on walls, and individual furniture pieces. In general, NVS houses tended to be less cluttered and more coordinated in terms of style and colour, suggesting the focus was on making an external statement rather than on gaining internal enjoyment.

The following excerpt is a typical account of what VS females think about their furniture.

Our furniture - any of the wooden stuff has been recycled timber. And, we got that from a company in Sydney and we actually know where the furniture came from. And it’s mostly recycled Oregon or Douglas fir and that came from the old tin mill in Sydney. And the other furniture is either Oregon or cedar and it comes from the old David Jones house that was demolished in Strathfield. Probably that’s what I like about it. And it’s just pieces that we’ve picked up over the years. As I said, we’ve never really had much, just pieces we’ve picked.

The following excerpt is a typical account of what VS males think about their furniture.

Hmmm- yeah the piano- love the piano, its old German- great tone, bit big - great carving- I like the candleholder...it says 'I'm here play me’. You can't ignore it...one of the keys is damaged - can't decide whether or not to fix it- but it seems to go with it somehow.

In relation to cars, reliability was the most relevant feature.

It’s pretty much gone without giving me any trouble. And, I’ve probably had it for about 7 years. I’ve made a number of safe trips and it’s reliable. So, it’s a good car.

But, the car was also a necessity for females in both groups. The following excerpt is another typical account of what VS females think about their furniture.

I have to own a car. The last one was because I was consulting and had to drive to Sydney and Cessnock and Taree. I’m driving long distances in this car too. It’s the down side of living in the country. A car is essential. This is the 2nd car I’ve owned. I buy them new and then I drive them until they’ve gone 200 kilometres plus and then they’re going to cost money to repair big time and then I trade it in on a replacement vehicle.

No substantial differences were noted in relation to what the subjects thought about their possessions. Photos dominated across groups and both genders, but females in both groups also included sentimental objects, letters and diaries. The most noticeable
difference was in relation to NVS males and how they perceived documents. In contrast to the VS males and females of both groups, the majority of the NVS males seemed preoccupied with evidence of self and ownership of property. A typical response to the “What would you take if your house was burning down” scenario was:

Well I’d make sure the wife and kids and dog were safe. The important documents like identity cards, bank-books, you know records of things.

There were substantial differences across lifestyles but not across gender in relation to activities that respondents engaged in. Reading was the activity most often mentioned by VS males and females. In contrast, reading was the activity least mentioned by NVS males and females. Instead, NVS males and females talked about theatre, travel, and restaurant usage with a reported high expenditure in these areas. The NVS males also talked more about sports activities such as golf, running, touch football and surfing. VS males and females did not mention this type of activity at all. The following excerpt is a typical account of what activities NVS females are engaged in.

At the moment money is a bit tight but it’s getting better. We’ve bit off a bit more that we can manage with this house. But, next year it should be better and, hopefully, we can be more comfortable. I want to get back to enjoying myself with stuff like travel, sailing, lunch on Sydney harbour.

When discussing the criteria used for choosing products, only minimal differences were noted across the groups and gender. Quality and price were important considerations when purchasing products. In particular, VS males and females were inclined to stock up on household goods when they were on special. Four VS males were concerned with how products were produced, frequently preferring organic and macrobiotic foods, while VS and NVS females mentioned this area the least, and NSV males did not mention this area at all. Finally, only NVS males and females mentioned brands as status, whereas VS males and females mentioned Australian brands as a choice factor. The following excerpt is a typical account of what VS females consider when choosing products.

I wait until things are in season pretty much. And, for packaged goods, I’d rather buy things that are made in Australia. I’d tend to buy tinned tomatoes that are made in Goulburn rather than in Italy.

When clarifying with the simplifiers why they thought that they were practicing voluntary simplicity, most equated this lifestyle with not spending much money on buying things even though most also admitted that they owned a lot of things. As they explored the question further, it became obvious that apart from the environmental motivated simplifiers, others talked about such things as being in control, living ‘real’ lives, and having balance and harmony in their lives. The simplifiers who had chosen the lifestyle for environmental reasons were more specific in that they had made a conscious decision to consume less and to reduce waste.

The initial aim of the study was to examine differences across voluntary simplifiers and non-voluntary simplifiers with gender differences not being specifically addressed. Nevertheless, some observations were noted. In the simplifier households with children, five of the females did not have paid outside work. Three home schooled their children. From the interviews with the seven women
simplifiers, it was clear that they carried out the bulk of the household tasks and childcare even though some of their partners cooked and took charge of sports and homework supervision. Most of the leisure activities were done as a family, including gardening. The impression was that the children were expected to contribute to and take responsibility for household maintenance chores, more so than in the non-simplifier families. The situation within the non-simplifier household was not so clear. Two of the non-simplifier males were single parents and so managed their households alone. The interviews with the nine males with partners suggested more varied situations – ranging from one who, because he worked from home, managed the children and the household to others who looked after the garden, did some cooking and attended week-end sporting activities. The major differences between the households were the use of cleaners, gardeners, and child-care.

CONCLUSIONS

The research was a general inquiry into lifestyles and consumption behaviours and not role related behaviours, so the role differences emerged within this parameter. Simplifiers, across gender agreed that they wished to spend less time working and were willing to sacrifice certain activities such as holidays, entertainment, and luxuries. While luxuries primarily involved food, perfume, cosmetics, and alcohol, they did not involve books, music, or visits to art galleries and museums for families with younger children. The value placed on family and photos did not significantly differ between groups and across gender. The areas of difference between simplifier males and females are that more females were focused on self-development, relationships with friends, and the internal ambience of their homes. This may reflect the ‘inside-outside’ dichotomy noted in the gender literature. Certainly more females than males across groups identified objects that linked them to family, friends, home, and events and also that they valued letters and diaries were valuable possessions. Within the simplifier group both genders valued their work. Significantly more non-simplifier males than females regarded documents as most important. More females valued mementos and heirlooms, indicating again that females tend to link objects with interpersonal relationships. Males across both groups value tools (computers) and equipment more than females, giving some support to the idea that possessions have more instrumental and utilitarian value for men.

Simplifiers across gender did not seem to consider security as important, whereas non-simplifiers did and this was more so for males. For example, even though five of the simplifiers lived in rented accommodation with the majority having no major investments, this did not seem to bother them. In our research, questions relating to family were not specifically asked as the role of security emerged only during analysis. However, it is useful to note that five simplifiers indicated they had monetary support from wealthy families, often in the form of school fees and house purchases, thus suggesting a possible high level of material security throughout their lives. In future research, account may need to be taken of the respondent’s family history since the respondents in this study were all middle aged, highly qualified, and affluent. If it is found there is a history of family affluence in the simplifier group regardless of gender, then material security may not actually be a central part of the simplifier’s need system.
REFERENCES


