The Social–Psychological Bases of Anticonsumption Attitudes

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes that the increasing number of individuals voluntarily reducing their levels of consumption may be motivated by underlying social–psychological stress related to living in a consumer society. Of the three primary motivational bases of the self (esteem, efficacy, and authenticity), it is argued that only self-esteem and self-efficacy can be acquired through consumption. The current growth of the voluntary simplicity movement, it is argued, is among those individuals who have met the need for esteem and efficacy through consumption, but have failed to achieve a sense of authenticity. Evidence from interviews with participants in the voluntary simplicity movement is presented in support of this proposition. Anticonsumption attitudes, it is concluded, result from a process of self-inquiry triggered by the failure to feel authentic through one’s consumption activities. Implications of anticonsumption attitudes in reaction to consumer culture are discussed. © 2002 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Although anticonsumption attitudes take many forms, one current manifestation that is growing in popularity is the practice of “voluntary simplicity” (VS). VS, which is both a system of beliefs and a practice, is centered on the idea that personal satisfaction, fulfillment, and happiness result from a commitment to the nonmaterial aspects of life. This belief is put into practice by minimizing consumption of material goods, exercising self-reliance, developing one’s intellect, and other nonmater-
Voluntary simplicity involves both inner and outer condition. It means singleness of purpose, sincerity and honesty within, as well as avoidance of exterior clutter, of many possessions irrelevant to the chief purpose of life” (1981, p. 23). Other figures in the VS movement describe voluntary simplicity as a process of “paring down to the essentials of life, what is important to you,” and as “a confrontation with your values” (Mazza, 1997, p. 12).

The research reported here attempts to explain the motivations of individuals who identify with this movement. After briefly discussing some of the historical underpinnings of VS, a theoretical orientation that draws on both social–psychological understandings of motivations of the self, and Maslow’s theory of the hierarchy of needs, is introduced. The next section describes the research methods employed. Then the data, collected through surveys, interviews, and ethnographic observations of participants in the VS movement, are discussed.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Various religious traditions have long practiced forms of simplicity, but with the exception of Henry David Thoreau’s (1854/1992) musings over his simple life on Walden Pond, the first formal statement on the topic of VS did not appear until 1936. In an article originally published in Visva-Bharati Quarterly and later reprinted in the alternative living publication The Coevolution Quarterly (1977), Richard Gregg traced the lineage of simple living to Jesus, Buddha, Lao Tse, Moses, Mohammed, and to more recent saints and leaders such as Francis of Assisi, Hindu rishis, Hebrew prophets, Moslem Sufis, and even to Lenin and Gandhi. According to Gregg, in 1936 modern production and commerce had created a “‘mental climate’ not favorable either to a clear understanding of the value of simplicity or to its practice” (1977, p. 20). Gregg felt that individuals have little opportunity to affect directly production and distribution, and that consequently consumption “is the area within which every person can exercise . . . control over the forces of economic production and distribution” (1977, p. 23).

Among academics, the topic of consumption has been taken up by, among others, Veblen (1899), Galbraith (1958), and Marcuse (1966). Marcuse, who argued that the manufactured desire to possess things becomes a biological need, claimed that the irony is that “these things, or products, promote a false consciousness which is immune against its
falsehood,' producing a way of life based on what Marcuse calls 'one-
dimensional thought and behavior’” (Gottlieb, 1993, p. 92).1 In a similar
though less radical manner, Galbraith asked “Who can say for sure that
the deprivation which afflicts [a person] with hunger is more painful
than the deprivation which afflicts [the person] with envy of [her/his]
neighbor’s new car” (Galbraith, 1958, p.162).

The warnings of Marcuse and others were heeded by many in the 1970s who practiced a countercultural form of VS related to the back-to-the-land and anticorporate mentalities of the ‘60s generation. More recently, VS has experienced a rebirth as evidenced by the proliferation of books in publication on the topic. Many of these books promise potential readers that they will be able to “create a more peaceful . . . life,” “enhance their lives and comfort their souls,” “scale down and enjoy more,” “excavate their authentic selves,” and “find order, freedom, and fulfillment” through simplifying their lives. But is the current popularity of VS due to a repackaging of the ideas popular in the 1970s, or is there something unique about VS’s popularity at this historical junc-
ture?

Some have argued that in the 1970s VS was nothing more than a reaction to tight economic times (Phillips, 1977). Although not all seg-
ments of the population have benefited from the strength of the economy in the mid to late 1990s, it seems unlikely that tight economic conditions are motivating individuals to pursue VS. For those experiencing eco-
nomic hardship, their form of simplicity is more involuntary than the voluntary form being practiced by an increasing number of middle- and upper-class Americans. Therefore, if voluntary simplicity has been re-
born, as some suggest (Harwood Group, 1995; Mazza, 1997; Schor,
1998), and which its recent appearance in the popular media indicates, there must be a new reason that people are attracted to the idea of simplifying their lives.

One explanation for the recent flurry of interest in the ideas of vol-
untary simplicity is that people experiencing unhappiness and discon-
tent are linking these feelings to the media- and culture-driven mes-
sages to consume increasing amounts of goods and at greater rates. A participant in a VS course who was interviewed as part of the research reported here spoke of having felt as if she had been lied to: “I grew up being told that if I had all the right things, I would be happy.” If the sentiment of this individual is shared by others, it may be a sign that North American consumers are confronting the fact that consumption is not a means to self-creation—at least not to the creation of a healthy self. Chronic stress from the relentless pursuit of wealth for the purpose of consuming material goods in order to create a particular self-image

1As cited in Gottlieb (1993, p. 346n), “the ‘one-dimensional thought and behavior’ quote is from
Herbert Marcuse, One Dimensional Man, p. 12. The ‘second nature of man’ quote is from Herbert
Marcuse, An Essay on Liberation . . . p. 11.”
leaves people dissatisfied. This realization is motivating some individuals to seek ways of increasing feelings of fulfillment in their lives through steps such as participation in the types of VS courses that were observed as part of this study.

The results of a content analysis of books in publication on the topic of VS support this assertion. Table 1 demonstrates the increased popularity in VS from the 1970s to the present, but it also reveals an important change in the content of the books being published. With the use of an Internet source listing all books in publication, all books through 1998 that focused in some way on voluntarily simplifying one’s life were identified. After reading through synopses of each book, four different topical categories were created. Titles and synopses were then reread in order to place each publication into one of the four categories. Table 1 reports the frequencies for each of the four different categories, distinguishing between those published before 1995 and those published in 1995 or later.

Table 1 is intended to illustrate a possible trend in the publication of books on the subject of voluntary simplicity. No statistical analyses were performed on the data, so the conclusions drawn are speculative. Nevertheless, given the methods employed, it appears that the years from 1995 to 1998 saw a dramatic increase in the number of books published on the subject of voluntary simplicity. Of greater interest is the changing trend in the content of these books. Before 1995, the spiritual/religious and virtues-of-simplicity categories dominated what was written. Some of these books were explicit appeals to Christians to reduce their levels of consumption for religious reasons (Sider, 1982), whereas others were general moral and ethical appeals (Degrote-Sorenson, Sorenson, & Sorenson, 1992). Table 1 also indicates that very few of the books before 1993 were published by a major publisher—a sign that the ideas

### Table 1. Frequencies of Topical Categories and Publishers (Large vs. Small) of Voluntary Simplicity Books by Time Period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Spirituality/Religious Aspects of Simplicity</th>
<th>Virtues of Simplicity</th>
<th>Reduce Stress/Increase Fulfillment</th>
<th>Strategies to Simplify</th>
<th>% Published by Major Publisher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1973–1994</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
<td>77.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N = 26)</td>
<td>(10)</td>
<td>(13)</td>
<td>(0)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995–1998</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>(8)</td>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>(9)</td>
<td>(8)</td>
<td>(10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
<td>34.5%</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
</tr>
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<td>(N = 58)</td>
<td>(18)</td>
<td>(20)</td>
<td>(19)</td>
<td>(11)</td>
<td>(12)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3Table 1 was constructed from a computer-assisted search of all books containing the keyword “simplicity.” Brief descriptions of each book facilitated the elimination from consideration those books not related in some way to the ideas of voluntary simplicity, and aided in the categorizing process. This approach excluded certain books addressing the environmental impacts of consumption (e.g., Mazur, 1994). Out of print books were not included in the analysis.
simplicity had not yet become mainstream enough to warrant the attention of major publishers.²

After 1994, the frequency of books emphasizing the spiritual/religious or the virtuous aspects of simplicity both declined. In The Waste Makers, Packard (1960) had predicted that people who are encouraged to spend their income on unnecessary goods would not want to feel guilty about their excesses, and that as a result they may be inclined to adopt a system of morality that condones consumption. If this had occurred by 1993, it stands as a possible explanation for the demise in appeals to people’s spiritual, religious, and moral convictions. After all, if American morality had been redefined to accommodate continually increasing levels of consumption, then appeals to morality, religion, and virtue might not be as effective.

The simplicity books published between 1995 and 1998 seem to shift the focus to an appeal to people’s feelings of overwhelming stress, and their desire to find meaning in their consumption-driven, hectic lives. The other category dominating the post-1994 publications is “strategies to simplify.” By 1995, the stress and unease had become not only somewhat of an epidemic, thus calling attention to major publishers for the demand for simplicity books, but also so intense that people sought immediate solutions. During the mid 1990s, books on simplicity promised to provide readers with the how-to instructions and useful tips they would need to relieve immediately the symptoms of their consumption disease (e.g., Carlson & Bailey, 1998; St. James, 1995). The author of a series of books with strategies for simplifying one’s life even offers in one book the nine steps to “excavating your authentic self” (Ban Breathnach, 1998).

The rebirth of voluntary simplicity in the early and mid-90s appears to have more to do with existential crises than with economic crises. If this is the case, one would expect that people who explore voluntary simplicity do so because they are hoping to instill their lives with meaning, shift their priorities, and find alternatives to material consumption as a means of building a sense of self with which they are satisfied. In the next section, a theoretical framework that explains the social—psychological bases of the anticonsumption orientation of simplifiers is presented.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The social—psychological basis of VS’s current popularity is captured in the sense of disillusionment expressed by the interviewee quoted earlier. Feeling as if she had been promised happiness and contentment if

²“Large publisher” is somewhat arbitrarily defined as a publisher that has widespread name recognition (e.g., Harper Collins, Penguin, Bantam Doubleday, Simon & Schuster).
she pursued a consumer lifestyle, she instead felt lied to and deceived. This interviewee’s feelings are captured by Marx’s notion of alienation. One of Marx’s meanings of alienation was that because who we are is defined by what we produce, when we are separated from what we produce we are alienated from ourselves. In a system in which forms of production cut the laborer off from what she or he produces, as in capitalism, the laborer can no longer create her- or himself through production. Put differently, “labour is a means of creating what we are—of self-creation.” So in selling our labour we are selling ourselves and (parts of) our lives (Pepper, 1993, p. 85). Displacing laborers from the products of their labor leads in turn to a shift to consumption as a means of self-creation (Slater, 1998).

Data exist, in fact, suggesting that many Americans see the American identity as tied to material consumption. For example, a 1995 survey of Americans found that 89% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that “Buying and consuming is the American way,” and 72% agreed or strongly agreed that “Many of us buy and consume things as a substitute for what’s missing in our lives” (Harwood Group, 1995). For some, the lack of fulfillment, excessive stress, agitation, malaise, and despair resulting from the pressures of the culture of consumption have led to a search for a simpler and less consumptive lifestyle.

Yet, although researchers have long been demonstrating the effectiveness of tapping the self to hook new consumers or create brand loyalty, no one has yet examined what the possible negative consequences are for the self. Research has shown us that: consuming is a process of identity formation (Gentry, Baker, & Kraft, 1995; Hogg & Michell, 1996; Wong, 1997), marketers can benefit by getting consumers to see their identities as linked to a particular brand (Muniz, 1997; Simonson, 1997), the symbolic power of a product can be harnessed to confer prestige or increased self-esteem (Burroughs, 1996; Noble & Walker, 1996), and people’s sense of attachment and satisfaction can be manipulated through product acquisition (Sivadas & Venkatesh, 1995). Absent from such research is any attempt to understand how a consumer culture, in which the self is often pushed and pulled by various marketing-generated impulses, generates anticonsumption attitudes in some individuals (with the possible exception of Etzioni, 1998, and Iwata, 1997).

People are realizing that wealth and material possessions cannot overcome their feelings of stress, unhappiness, and lack of fulfillment. Some North American consumers are confronting the fact that consumption is not a means to self-creation—at least not to the creation of a healthy self. Although some “simplifiers” have acquired their lifestyles through the socialization of antimaterial values, many are motivated to simplify as a result of feelings of personal or family crisis; as a result of years of stress, fatigue, and unhappiness; or as a result of disillusionment with the relentless pursuit of wealth for the purpose of consuming material goods in order to create a particular self-image.
As noted earlier, researchers have long understood the significance of self-esteem in the consumption process. The emphasis on self-esteem, however, has overlooked the importance of self-efficacy and authenticity as essential elements of the self (Gecas, 1986, 1991). In particular, simplifiers may be motivated by an inability to feel authentic through their consumption activities. One course participant captured this failure in the following statement:

Myths that we tell each other—such as don't wear cruddy shoes to an interview—lead us to believe that something external to who we are is going to make us. And I had certainly unconsciously bought into that... I had all the stuff that was supposed to make me successful—my car and my clothes, the house in the right neighborhood and belonging to the right health club. All the external framework was excellent and inside I kind of had this pit eating away at me.

In the creation and maintenance of a healthy self, we seek to be viewed in a positive light by ourselves and others, we desire to feel as if we have control over our lives and our immediate environment, and we strive for a feeling that we are being true to ourselves. For Marx, labor in a capitalist economy strips the laborer of the first of these two; and Hochschild’s research on the management of emotions (1983) suggests that, at least in the service sector of the economy, many jobs force employees to put on an act, thus stripping them of their feelings of authenticity.

The argument made earlier—that failing to undertake successful self “creation” and maintenance through labor or production has resulted in individuals shifting to consumption to meet these needs—now becomes clearer. Laborers in the capitalist work force have difficulty obtaining the levels of self-esteem, efficacy, and authenticity that they desire; consequently they seek esteem, efficacy, and authenticity through the consumption of material goods. Yet, although esteem and efficacy can easily be achieved through consumption, some people experience difficulty in obtaining an authentic feeling of themselves through consumption. The simplifiers described below demonstrate this inasmuch as they shifted from consumption to interpersonal relationships, greater involvement in community activities, more time spent with family and friends, and hobbies such as gardening, crafts, and other creative outlets, to meet their needs for feelings of authenticity.

The relationships of esteem, efficacy, and authenticity to anticonsumption attitudes can be seen through an adapted and expanded version of Maslow’s (1970) hierarchy of needs. Figure 1 suggests that consumption is effective at meeting lower-order needs, as well as two of Maslow’s higher-order needs: belongingness and love needs, and esteem needs. In the top third of the pyramid, self-actualization needs are broken down into the need for efficacy and authenticity—the other two of...
the three motivational bases of the self as described by Gecas (1986, 1991). The right side of the figure illustrates that consumption, at least for many of the simplifiers in the study reported here, is ineffective at meeting authenticity needs.

A significant amount of research demonstrates that various self-processes function to drive consumption behavior (Aaker, 1999; Belk, 1984; Burroughs, 1996; Noble & Walker, 1996). Yet none of this research examines consumption’s inadequacy as a means of achieving authenticity, though Belk (1996) has recently emphasized the superficiality of the hyperreality that dominates consumer spaces in postindustrial globalized capitalism. The increasing popularity of VS may be an outcome of consumption’s negative outcomes for the self. The qualitative data that are described next, derived from interviews and a survey of participants in VS classes, support the notion that some individuals may have difficulty in achieving an authentic feeling of self through consumption.

METHODS

Self-selected participants in “voluntary simplicity” courses offered in the workplace by a nonprofit organization in the Pacific Northwest of the United States were observed, interviewed, and surveyed. In order to make comparisons between this group and traditional consumers, questionnaires were also administered to students at two different institutions of higher education, also in the Pacific Northwest. The respondents...
in the VS workplace courses are referred to as the simplicity sample. Student respondents are referred to as the student sample.

For the simplicity sample, the data were collected with the use of questionnaires administered during 22 different introductory meetings at which participants sat through a presentation of the overview of the course, and received the course reading materials. At each of these meetings, a participant was chosen to be the class coordinator. Attendees at these meetings received the questionnaire. A brief description of the purpose of the questionnaire was provided, and participants were directed to complete the questionnaire and bring it to the first class session so the class coordinator could collect it. Class coordinators were instructed to place all of the returned questionnaires into a postage-paid envelope, which was provided. An exact response rate through this method is difficult to determine, because not all attendees at the introductory meetings decided to participate in the class. A conservative estimate would count all individuals at the introductory meetings who received questionnaires. With the use of this approach, the response rate is determined to be 73 percent (N = 179; 244 questionnaires were administered).

The student sample is a crude proxy for a general sample used to make comparisons to the simplicity sample. The student sample consists of respondents, who voluntarily completed the questionnaire, from five different sociology courses at two different campuses. The two campuses—one a branch campus of a state university and the other a community college in a large urban area—largely draw nontraditional students. At both campuses, some students have returned to school after raising a family, some have returned to school to advance their existing careers, some have returned to school in order to change careers, and others are straight out of high school, pursuing a degree for the first time. Although student samples can be limiting, the characteristics of the students at these two campuses provide a decent general sample.

In completing the questionnaires, some students were allowed to take the questionnaire home, whereas others were asked to complete the questionnaire in class. The former approach resulted in a slightly lower response rate, lowering the overall response rate for the student sample to 86% (N = 111; 129 questionnaires were administered). Neither the student nor the simplicity sample can be considered a random sample. The student sample was a convenience sample of a fairly narrow population, and the simplicity sample relied on a random selection of course locations, but not random selection from a population of individuals expressing interest in courses about voluntary simplicity. Therefore, generalizing findings from either sample must be done with caution. The questionnaire administered to the student and simplicity samples contained, among other measures not discussed here, a self-concept measurement instrument.
SELF-CONCEPT AND AUTHENTICITY IN SIMPLIFIERS

Individuals with self-concepts largely defined by identities tied to likes, tastes, preferences, hobbies, and social activities will presumably tend to seek the self-needs described in the previous section through material consumption. For example, in asking individuals to respond to the question “Who are you?” (Bugental & Zeleń, 1958; Kuhn & McPartland, 1954) an individual who responds “I am a homeowner,” “I am a gun collector,” or “I am a person who likes to ski,” likely engages in consumption as a means of self-affirmation (Gentry et al., 1995). Individuals for whom consumption is not resulting in a realization of the self’s need for esteem, efficacy, or authenticity are likely candidates to be found enrolled in a VS course.

After analyzing the results of a survey of 179 participants in such a course and 111 students in a comparison group, these assumptions were confirmed. With the use of an adaptation of Gordon’s (1968) scheme for coding the Twenty Statements Test of the self-concept, Table 2 reports the mean number of identities per respondent for the student sample and the simplicity sample. In general, respondents in the student and simplicity samples have quite similar self-concept contents. Those in the student sample were more likely to describe self-concepts reflecting their occupations (likely due to the fact that responses of “student” were coded as “occupation”), and their senses of moral worth and self-determination.

Simplicity sample respondents were more likely to indicate self-concepts reflecting their age, judgments/tastes/likes, intellectual concerns, athletic/artistic activities, and behaviors. Students were more likely to view themselves in terms of their senses of moral worth and self-determination—elements of the self-concept not likely to be affirmed through consumption. Simplicity sample respondents, on the other hand, were more likely to define themselves with traits for which affirmation is typically sought through consumption. These include judgments, tastes, likes, and athletic and artistic activities.

The assumptions are further confirmed through interviews with participants in the VS courses. For example, interviewees tended to identify dissatisfaction with their lives as a motivating factor in their decision to take a VS course. Many also indicated that they were looking for ways to increase their life satisfaction. One interviewee who was asked why he thought the courses were so popular explained that “people are seeking avenues for change, and the comfort of others who are similarly seeking. People are surprised at how many others share their ideas.” Another noted that “people are drawn to voluntary simplicity because they experience a general dissatisfaction with their lives, a spiritual emptiness, and they don’t know where to go with it.” The interviewee quoted earlier, who described her feeling of a pit eating away at her

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Base of text

Short

Standard

Base of RF
Table 2. Comparison of Identity Types in Student and Simplicity Sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Student Sample</th>
<th>Simplicity Sample</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Student Sample</th>
<th>Simplicity Sample</th>
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<td>.09</td>
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<td>Physical self/body</td>
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<td>Desired Self</td>
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</table>

(*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001)

despite having all the possessions she believed would make her happy, identified her dissatisfaction as a result of seeking fulfillment through consuming material goods and explained that voluntary simplicity is a way to begin considering other sources of satisfaction. Other interviewees posited that people are simply tired of the pressure to consume. “My experience is that people are fed up with the kind of consumer culture that we have and are hungry to find a new lifestyle and way of relating to the earth,” said one interviewee. Another interviewee also pointed to culture as the cause of the general malaise people feel with regard to their lives:

Culturally we’re sad and lonely people in front of our TVs and in our cars. We long for connection and to discover that others have the same feelings we have. My personal suspicion is that a lot of people are starting to sense that they’ve done everything by the rules, have all the conveniences, and yet something isn’t right. People don’t walk around
going “This is good, things are right.” There shouldn’t be a permeating sense of hopelessness, we have the resources to get whatever we need.

Another interviewee pointed more directly to people’s desire to reduce their impact on the earth and to have a greater sense of efficacy in their lives. “I think that people find voluntary simplicity appealing because they like the aspect of sustaining the earth’s resources,” he said. “It’s exciting to take control of your life, to take control over consumption choices and your lifestyle. I think that thrift is a big American value—and it ties into respect for the earth.” The sense of efficacy realized by this interviewee was mirrored by another interviewee who explained how she came to realize a lack of authenticity in her life: “We had a big house and a housekeeper . . . and I was driving up and down the freeway to work and back all the time when I realized, ‘This is not me, this is not who I am.’”

Others suspected that many people are at a sort of crisis point in their lives at which they realize some change must take place in order to maintain their sanity. As one interviewee described it, “most of the people who come into the courses are at some point in their life—a new job, a marriage, a new home, a new child or a child has left home—but it is some event that forces people to sit down and say ‘wow, I can’t handle this, there must be a better way.’”

The themes that emerged from the interviews support the notion that individuals who realize they are unsuccessfully meeting their self-needs through consumption seek alternative means of self-fulfillment. Others, of course, may feel no failure to meet their self-needs at all. Yet others may feel unfulfilled but nevertheless continue to seek fulfillment through consumption. One interviewee—a woman who later became a volunteer for the organization offering the courses and who made significant career- and family-related lifestyle changes as a result of participating in the voluntary simplicity course—explained the different states in which people may find themselves:

One is they have everything and just put on a smile to say “I am happy,” but inside they are being eaten away. [An]other [is] they . . . go “oh my god, I collected all the wrong things now I have to get rid of them and get the right things.” A new marriage, little red sports car, a younger companion—this is what we typically frame as the mid-life crisis. But they still believe that stuff will make them happy. Or, and I think this is the case with lots of people who are moving on to find themselves, they have all the stuff and still aren’t happy, and they are really open to looking at the key issues that are preventing them [from being happy]. And I think there are a lot of people at that place . . .

Which of the three approaches described above an individual takes may be influenced by traditional social–demographic factors. Based on the interviews, participation in a VS class seems to be motivated pri-
marily by a desire to alleviate a personal, and in some cases acute, feeling of distress, frustration, uneasiness, and/or malaise perceived to derive from overconsumption. Given this, the choice to participate in a voluntary simplicity class seems best described as the logical outcome of a rational decision-making process. This fails to acknowledge, however, that rational decision making is dependent on the information an individual has. Therefore, it is also important to examine how people's structural locations within society simultaneously lead them to feel unfulfilled—thus motivating consideration of courses of action to increase fulfillment—and position them to receive the information that is factored into the rational choice to participate in a voluntary simplicity class.

Participants in the VS classes observed for this research are not average Americans. They have an extremely high level of education, higher than normal incomes, and tend to be employed in the service sector of the economy as managers or in other leadership positions. The nature of the data eliminates any analysis of the causal order of these three variables, but it is likely that the education levels of the participants qualifies them for jobs with greater responsibilities and in a higher-paying sector of the economy. Already, then, it is apparent that the subjects of the simplicity study are uniquely positioned within the system of social stratification in the United States. This position, albeit a privileged one in which basic needs are easily met, has implications for the self that are not typically considered. Though researchers have confirmed a correlation between socioeconomic status and self-esteem, especially as related to work autonomy (Gecas & Seff, 1989; Kohn & Schooler, 1973), no one has identified a relationship between socioeconomic status and authenticity. Further investigation into the diminished feelings of authenticity that may come with higher levels of social status may be worthwhile.

The social structural situation of highly educated individuals with high incomes guarantees high status, power, and prestige within most societies. This position allows such people to command the resources needed to meet essential and nonessential needs, it allows them to command respect from others, and it allows them to acquire the symbolic possessions necessary to convey their position in society (Veblen, 1899). Yet, the participants in the VS courses seem to feel as if they are lacking something in their lives. Upon identifying this feeling, these individuals begin to consider options for resolving the feeling.

The nature of the current study, which focuses on individuals who have taken the third option described above, does not answer why individuals in this situation choose one option over another. It can be speculated, however, that there is some amount of rational decision making that occurs. Choosing to consume more in an attempt to fill the emptiness one feels or pretending that one does not have such a feeling is probably rational for those individuals who have not been exposed to...
information suggesting that the lack of fulfillment is stemming not from a lack of material possessions, but from a failure to nurture the non-material aspects of their lives. On the other hand, those who seek out VS alternatives are more than likely incorporating such information as they weigh their options.

CONCLUSION

Earlier it was suggested that one of Marx’s meanings of alienation was that because who we are is defined by what we produce, when we are separated from what we produce we are alienated from ourselves. It was then argued that the process of self-creation now takes place through consumption rather than production. The feelings of lack of fulfillment expressed by many of the participants in the VS courses observed for this research are not the outcome of their separation from the means of production; rather, having met basic needs, they are finding that higher-order needs, especially the need for authenticity, cannot be met through consumption. The form of alienation that results, at least in the case of the individuals observed for this study, is great enough to compel these individuals to relieve it through the practice of voluntary simplicity.

Despite its current popularity, there is still only a relatively small number of Americans practicing VS. At the current level of participation, the lifestyle changes of simplifiers are not likely to have significant social impacts. The research presented here points to what ultimately may be more troubling. The inability of some members of society to achieve a sense of authenticity through consumption activity may be linked to certain inherent characteristics of the capitalist system and its accompanying culture. An expanding economy demands continuously increasing levels of consumption. At one end of the socioeconomic spectrum, the economy appears to fail to provide opportunities for some members of society to meet even basic physiological needs such as nourishment and shelter. At the other end of the spectrum, among moderately wealthy individuals easily meeting their basic needs there are those who are nevertheless unable to meet higher-order needs—especially the need to feel authentic or genuine about oneself.

Back at the level of the practice of marketing, this conclusion raises some interesting questions: Which types of individuals, in which segments of society, use consumption to achieve an authentic sense of self? What is it about consuming material goods that fails to meet the need to feel authentic for these people? And most importantly, what marketing strategies will appeal to this group of people? As Rumbo argues (this volume), the fragmented world of postmodern society irrevocably splinters the authentic self. If this is the case, marketers’ challenges go beyond the mere need to find new and attention-grabbing ways to situate
one’s message amidst a sea of advertising messages. The challenge becomes one of creating messages that convince consumers of the ability of a product to provide an authentic self, and ensuring that these messages are heard above the clamor of all the other messages with which consumers are bombarded.

Even if such marketing strategies can be developed, the existence of anticonsumption attitudes may suggest that too much reliance on manipulation of the self has resulted in a backlash. Given this, in addition to research aimed at answering the questions of who attempts to achieve an authentic self through consumption and who has given up on such attempts, research is also needed that examines negative consumer responses to marketing appeals to the self. Do consumers who resist such appeals nevertheless attempt to achieve an authentic self through the consumption of goods marketed using different strategies? Knowing if simplifiers whose anticonsumerism is motivated by a lack of authenticity achieve authenticity through nonmaterial means, or if they simply shift the focus of their consumption to different objects, is also of interest.

So little about anticonsumer attitudes is currently known that the research presented here raises more questions than it answers. Nevertheless, both consumers and marketers stand to benefit by exploring the questions generated by this research. A better understanding is needed of the manner in which previously held attitudes and values interact with consumption experiences—ranging from first exposure to marketing campaigns to the point of purchase—to result in anticonsumption attitudes such as those held by simplifiers. Such a line of research would extend the preliminary findings reported here and provide guidelines for shaping the future of consumer society so that self-needs can be met by all individuals at all points along the socioeconomic spectrum.

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