
MORE OR LESS: THE SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF SIMPLE LIVING

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ABSTRACT

Through exploration of literature and a series of interviews, this paper considers the case for material simplicity. It examines whether lifestyle practices that aim to reduce consumption, and emphasise the importance of relationships and social justice over material acquisition, have something worthwhile to offer modern Australian society.

Many positive benefits brought about by simplicity are identified - personal well-being, fostering of greater community connection, environmental protection, and a potential to create more social and economic equality. These are viewed in the context of impacts brought about by over-consumption, and a society burdened by some serious social challenges, inequality and environmental overload. The conceptual work is brought to life by the stories of seven Western Australians interviewed as part of this project, who relay their own experiences of simple living. They tell about the practices they undertake in their efforts to live simply, as well as their motivations, the impacts they see from their actions, and the challenges and dilemmas they face.

What emerges is a life practice that gives genuine hope for community change and brings about enormous personal satisfaction and meaning. Encouraging lifestyle decisions that are largely at odds with much mainstream thinking, simplicity involves a certain amount of struggle and challenge, and is full of practical and theoretical complexity. It also appears to be a movement well suited to our times, that encourages more responsible resource use, makes a genuine response to poverty, fosters rich community relationships and promotes environmental and social justice.

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CHAPTER ONE: AN INTRODUCTION

Australian cartoonist Michael Leunig has an art piece in which a parent introduces her baby to a friend: “We’ve named her ‘More’, so much better than all those hippy names”. Another picture in the same piece shows a sign: “convert that old worn out grandmother to cash!” The whole work is called “Nothing left except money”.¹ There are other parts too, but they are best viewed as a whole piece of art rather than described here in words. Leunig comments on a well-known element of the human condition – the quest for more money and more possessions at the expense of other elements of life.

This paper is about a response to that phenomenon, or at least about an alternative to it – the concept of intentional material simplicity, and whether that idea has something valuable to offer modern Australian society. What consequences stem from simplicity, especially in human relationships and related to personal well-being? Is some measure of material simplicity realistic in a modern society and what are the ramifications?

Can we be at peace with less?

This paper will attempt to shed light on these questions – to examine in detail the social consequences of simplicity, and to discover whether simplicity is a realistic option to pursue in attempting to foster a society of fairness, rich relationships and sustainability.

Simplicity is a relative concept, depending greatly on culture and location, individual character and surrounding circumstances.² Put basically though, simple living is a way of describing lifestyle practices that aim to use less resources and reduce material consumption. Also, simple living emphasises the importance of social equality and relationships over material and economic gain, often in contrast to the trends of mainstream society. Simplicity however is much more than frugality. According to Elgin, practicing simplicity is not so much to have a dogmatic goal of living with less, but to live with balance, seeking a life of greater fulfilment and satisfaction.³ Gandhi taught and demonstrated simplicity as a powerful way of working for compassion and justice in the

¹ Leunig, M. (2005) *A New Penguin Leunig*.

² Gregg, R.B. (1936) The Value of Voluntary Simplicity. In *Visva-Bharati Quarterly – August*. p1
Retrieved 1/4/09 from: http://www.awakeningearth.org/PDF/the_value_of_voluntary_simplicity.pdf

³ Elgin, D. (2000) *Choosing a new lifeway: Voluntary simplicity*. p3
Retrieved 1/4/09 from: <http://www.awakeningearth.org/articles/54>

human community.⁴ To be certain, simple living is about living with less material things, but as is demonstrated by the stories of those interviewed for this research it is potentially at its best also about living with more – more time, more sharing, more intent, more fairness, and for many, more meaning and joy.

Recent global and local financial events have focussed thinking about consumption, albeit in two contrary directions. Changing global financial circumstances have meant job losses and financial hardship for many. The International Labour Organisation has predicted that globally over 50 million people will become unemployed during 2009.⁵ At the same time, the financial policy of the current Australian government has seen millions of dollars of payments being made to Australians as part of two major economic stimulus packages. Along with the payments came the official exhortation to ‘spend’, and ‘stimulate the economy’. It seemed shopping had become the new patriotic duty. A recent Melbourne Age newspaper article interpreted this part of the economic strategy as urging Australians to “indulge our way of trouble”, and suggested that rather than encouraging courage or sacrifice during a crisis, the strategy encouraged self-indulgence and greed.⁶

Rising material consumption in general has had many critics. There is concern in some quarters that many people in the developed world are caught in a trap of over-consumption – more things and more money, but also more work, and less satisfaction, time and security.⁷ It is a bit like a “treadmill of rising incomes and increased consumption” – one that it is difficult to get off.⁸ It is even suggested by some social commentators that Australia is in the grip of “affluenza” - a social sickness characterised by competitive materialism, debt and waste, and fuelled by shrewd marketing and political agendas that pursue unsustainable economic growth.⁹

Some call it ‘modernity’s paradox’, an increase in wealth that runs alongside increases in health and social problems - high rates of mental health disorder, rising inequality, unemployment, and

⁴ Kripalani, K. (Ed)(1958) *All men are brothers: Life and thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi as told in his own words*. p132

⁵ United Nations Development Program (2009) *The Economic Crisis – Overview*. Retrieved 10/10/09 from: http://www.undp.org/economic_crisis/overview.shtml

⁶ Moyle, S. (2009) How about using Kev’s manna to stimulate some generosity? In *The Age Newspaper*. 7th April, 2009

⁷ Carley, M & Spapens, P. (1998) *Sharing the World: Sustainable living and global equity in the 21st Century* p136

⁸ Jackson, T. (2008a) The Challenge of Sustainable Lifestyles. In *World Watch Institute State of the World 2008*. p57

⁹ Hamilton, C & Denniss, R. (2005) *Affluenza: When too much is never enough*. p3

continuing environmental degradation.¹⁰ There is good evidence to suggest that once basic material needs are met, societal well-being has little to do with rising incomes and consumption, and in fact the rises may well have a negative impact.¹¹ Despite these arguments, movements that value simplicity are at best marginal, and large-scale policy initiatives that challenge mass consumption are rare.¹²

It is possible to romanticise about ideas about material simplicity and what it has to offer - the idea that if everyone just caught the bus, rode a bike, bought less gadgets, mended their clothes and shared home grown vegetables with their neighbours then all of us would be less stressed, more connected and our environmental concerns allayed. Perhaps these ideas hold some value, but without further analysis they are too easily dismissed. By making a more detailed examination of the philosophy and practice of material simplicity, this paper will aim to find out whether there can be positive consequences from a decrease in consumption rather than an increase.

The following chapter raises a range of literature, research and discussion relating to the broad topic of material simplicity. It focuses on the benefits brought by simplicity, on simplicity as a response to injustice and over-consumption, and how simplicity relates to broader community issues.

The paper then goes on to describe some primary research built around the stories of seven West Australians. The interviews tell a little of their stories, and these are viewed in light of the literary research to see what emerges about material simplicity and where these practices take our community both socially and personally.

¹⁰ Stanley, F. (2008) *Australia's wealth harms our children's health*.

Retrieved 25/10/08 from: http://blogs.watoday.com.au/fionastanley/2008/10/headline_here.html

¹¹ Jackson, T. (2008b) Where is the "wellbeing dividend"? Nature, structure and consumption inequalities. In *Local Environment*, 13(8), p.703

¹² Jackson, T. (2008b) p704

CHAPTER TWO: BACKGROUND

Modern English philosopher Alain De Botton tells a story about a meeting between the ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes' and Alexander the Great:

When Alexander the Great passed through Corinth, he visited the philosopher Diogenes and found him sitting under a tree, dressed in rags, with no money to his name. Alexander, the most powerful man in the world, asked if he could do anything to help him. 'Yes', replied the philosopher, 'if you could step out of the way. You are blocking the sun.' Alexander remarked that if he were not Alexander, he would certainly like to be Diogenes.¹³

A crucial feature of material simplicity is that while practices might seem from the outside to be sacrificial, it often has outcomes that can outweigh the pleasure and meaning that might be derived from material goods. At its most basic, material simplicity recognises the value of non-material things, confronting a modern society where commodities are of a high priority, and instead works at gaining meaning and pleasure from other experiences, relationships and practices.

As well as being an academic paper, this dissertation reflects somewhat of a personal mission of trying to find ways to live that make sense in a world in which there exists so much excess and still so much need and suffering. A genuine and persistent uneasiness about wealth and the continual gathering of possessions is hard to ignore. It is an uneasiness compounded by the knowledge of a world in which so many people suffer from not having enough of the basics for survival – food, water, shelter and medicines. In our own context, it is an uneasiness that surfaces at children's birthday parties, on reluctant trips to suburban shopping complexes and not surprisingly, emerges a lot at Christmas. It is more than that though – there is a nagging inside that searches for a simpler but better life that might have been lost somewhere and is wary of a greedy undercurrent that is seldom recognised. There is a deep suspicion that not only is too much consumption unfair, it also erodes many of the good things about human life and living in community.

The question arises then, whether living a life that is materially simple is a reasonable endeavour in modern Australian society. Can simplicity give some relief and hope to settle the uneasiness previously described; can it counter the greed in a way that makes a positive difference?

¹³ De Botton, A (2006) *Status Anxiety*. p120

This chapter will examine some of the philosophies and issues associated with material simplicity. It will take stock of simplicity as a movement that urges the honouring and practising of virtues that promote significant personal satisfaction and meaning, fostering of community relationships, and also as a practice attempting to respond to the negative impacts brought on by rising consumption.

The issue of whether increased consumption and wealth produces higher levels of contentment is central. As well as helping critique a consumer culture, analysis of the relationship between consumption and contentment helps discern whether the idea of simplicity can be a viable alternative. If material simplicity only produces deprivation, then other motivational forces would need to be incredibly strong for the movement to persevere¹⁴, especially if rising consumption is shown to satisfy human needs well. On the other hand, if consumerism consistently fails to bring about the kind of life satisfaction and community well-being that many believe it does, and practices of simplicity are shown to bring some positive and viable alternatives, then perhaps a new balance can be struck, with material simplicity becoming a self-promoting life practice that is both personally liberating and potentially transforming at a community level.

There is in fact plenty of literature which exposes the negative impacts of rising consumption - detailing the deleterious effects that greed and continual resource use have on a fragile ecology, on promoting individualism and on exacerbating material and social inequality both within a society and across national boundaries. Some of this literature is referred to later in this paper. Literature about using less resources, becoming materially simple and what impact these practices have on relationships, personal well-being and broader fairness in society, has not been so easy to find. This is a telling observation in itself. While climate change looms large on world wide political agendas, and what UK academic Tim Jackson calls the 'social recession' rolls on in many Western nations - increases in anxiety, depression and binge drinking, loss of trust and political apathy,¹⁵ the idea of winding back material consumption seems to be seldom considered as a realistic option.

This chapter makes an attempt to identify and shed light on the writing and research that does exist and to reveal what material simplicity can have to offer.

¹⁴ Etzioni, A. (1998) Voluntary simplicity: Characterisation, select psychological implications and societal consequences. In *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 19(5), p621

¹⁵ Jackson, T. (2009) *Prosperity without growth: The transition to a sustainable economy*. p86

WHAT'S GOOD ABOUT SIMPLICITY?

Early in the twentieth century, English writer GK Chesterton visited Times Square in New York. His criticisms were numerous, but a major one was the fact that all the colours and lights of the square were dedicated to telling about 'a meaningless flow of small commodities', not to the proclamation of what he called 'great things'.¹⁶ Practices of simple living have long been seen by those advocating them as ways for human individuals to reclaim that which they consider to be most meaningful – time, significant relationships, service to others, social equality.

Elgin writes of simplicity as finding a way to live between poverty and excess, and in doing so, to discover ways to live which support and nourish human life rather than entangle and complicate it.¹⁷ Elgin proposes that what he calls voluntary simplicity is so significant because it reacts to critical societal and personal issues in a positive and creative way. He suggests that simplicity enables a constructive and realistic response to issues of environmental overload, community disconnection, and global antagonism, and it matches with individuals' need for inner personal growth.¹⁸ Simplicity provides practical ways to reduce resource consumption and to re-use and recycle material goods, thereby protecting environments from unwarranted exploitation. At their best, practices of simplicity are said to allow people to have more time to make relational connections in local communities, to undertake volunteer and other communal tasks, to deepen relationships, and to use financial and other resources they do have to share with others and reduce inequality.

The idea of simple living is conceptually quite loose. There is neither a tidy set of rules defining what 'simple living' is, nor a discrete and identifiable movement that encompasses all that simplicity is or has been. Elgin writes about the many streams of simplicity that he sees as emerging in modern times. These include simplicity built around varying themes such as frugality, political awareness, communal living, environmental protection, spirituality, aesthetics, and compassionate equality, demonstrating the enormous breadth in this movement referred to as simple living.¹⁹ This paper cannot explore all these streams in detail. Instead it starts with the idea of material simplicity, focussing particularly on using and having less resources, and moves from there.

¹⁶ Rasmussen, L. (2008) Earth-honouring asceticism and consumption. In *Cross Currents*, 57(4), p502

¹⁷ Elgin, D. (1981) Living more simply. In Jackson, T. (2006) *The Earthscan reader in sustainable consumption*. p152

¹⁸ Elgin, D & Mitchell, A (1977) Voluntary Simplicity. In *The Co-evolution Quarterly – Summer*. p39. Retrieved 27/2/09 from: http://www.awakenearth.org/PDF/voluntary_simplicity.pdf

¹⁹ Elgin, D. (2007) *A Garden of simplicity is growing in the world*. p2. Retrieved 1/4/09 from: <http://www.awakenearth.org/articles/54>

A search for self-fulfilment, and an associated attempt to have life priorities in the right order have a close association with the various incarnations of simple living. Self-fulfilment need not be equated with selfishness or self-absorption. Australian researcher Clive Hamilton has written extensively about the 'downshifTERS' in Australia – those who choose to work less, spend less, and participate more in the lives of others, spend more time with their own families or doing things like art and gardening. One nationwide survey showed that 23% of adults between the age of 30 and 60 had chosen to voluntarily reduce their income. Motivations are varied, and include wanting a healthier lifestyle, spending more time with family and friends, or seeking to live a more environmental and less materialistic lifestyle.²⁰

Research about the downshifTERS shows that it is a growing movement and that much personal satisfaction is gained from the decisions that people have made. Also, the downshifTERS written about by Hamilton who have chosen to spend less time working to 'do what they really want to do' very often provide worthwhile contributions in voluntary roles in schools, service organisations or in informal ways in community, family and neighbourhood networks, all much needed interactions and services which provide a level of personal satisfaction to those participating as well as the building of stronger community bonds.

Decisions to 'downshift' were made for a variety of reasons – often involving a combination of factors involving health, changing values and seeking personal satisfaction. Some who had decided against such a change described the movement as selfish, while conversely those with children saw themselves as being able to give more time and affection to their children. Some of those involved in the research spoke of struggles to adapt to lower income or a loss of supposed status because of changing work arrangements, but these concerns were overwhelmed by the benefits expressed about personal satisfaction, time to spend with family and neighbours, being free of relentless work pressure and being more conscious of how money was spent.

Etzioni also writes about the downshifTERS, using the label to denote one category of people within what she calls the voluntary simplicity movement.²¹ She uses 'downshifting' as a way to describe a moderate form of simplicity where people dress and eat less elaborately or perhaps work less and have a mild change of life priorities away from wealth accumulation. She then goes on to describe two other groups – 'strong simplifiers' and 'wholistic simplifiers', who are those who make more radical changes of changing employment arrangements, moving house to a different urban setting or rural area, or becoming radically anti-consumerist. While noting the differences in these

²⁰ Hamilton, C & Denniss, R. (2005) p157

²¹ Etzioni, A. (1998) pp 622-628

simplifying groups, a common thread is that they are all vehicles for personal satisfaction and self-expression as well as leading on to other pro-social outcomes, including promotion of environmental protection and equality.

Writing in 1936, Richard Gregg listed an impressive group of influential historical figures who had very few possessions – Buddha, Jesus, Moses, Mohammed, Socrates, St. Francis, Confucius, Gandhi, and many scientists and inventors.²² Perhaps a list of impressive historical figures who didn't own much may not mean a great deal to those struggling to live meaningfully in modern Australian society. What it reminds us however is that the modern value placed on wealth accumulation is not always reflected in history, and that human characteristics like wisdom, leadership, servanthood and sacrifice carry great and timeless weight. A focus on material acquisition has perhaps skewed that realisation. Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism and Islam all provide significant teaching about the dangers of wealth acquisition and the importance of justice. The knowledge that societies built around mass-consumption are only a recent phenomenon in human history is vitally important, and might help us check ourselves to see if the lives we live are as natural and necessary as we might assume.

Modern societies, including Australia, face many social challenges - environmental degradation, mental health, long term financial hardship, unemployment and family dysfunction. The thought that practices of simplicity would be some kind of panacea for these challenges would be misleading. This paper does not intend to make claims for practices of material simplicity that are beyond its intention or influence, but instead to see if these practices have a worthwhile response to offer a society increasingly burdened by over-consumption and individualism.

Practices of material simplicity provide tools for a counter-culture that seeks to reclaim traditions and behaviours that value relationships, time and many other non-material things. Tim Jackson suggests that debate about over-consumption needs to be rooted in more than practicalities and public policy. He argues that a transition to a more sustainable society is also reliant on continued debate about the basis of human well-being and the meaning of human existence, endeavours that have been pushed aside by preoccupation with “economic progress, comfort and convenience”.²³

A very local story is instructive. Indigenous author Melissa Lucashenko notes that modern Indigenous Australians largely live in dire poverty, especially relative to non-Indigenous Australia,

²² Gregg, R.B. (1936) p8

²³ Jackson, T. (2006) Consuming Paradise? Towards a social and cultural psychology of sustainable consumption. In Jackson, T. (Ed)(2006) *The Earthscan Reader in Sustainable Consumption*. p389

but still possess many more material things than their ancestors. Along with this she also notes the way in which traditional Indigenous philosophies of life have been supplanted by western ideals of work and accumulation.²⁴ Available evidence suggests that Noongar people have been present on the Swan coastal plain in Western Australia for at least 40,000 years, probably much longer, and that while inequalities and ill-health no doubt existed over that time, traditional systems of family and community provision ensured adequate shelter, food and care for members within traditional indigenous communities.²⁵ At the time of colonisation, Indigenous Western Australians may well have been physically, socially and emotionally healthier than many Europeans at the time.²⁶ A range of writings from the recently arrived Europeans settlers recorded observations of complex care for river and land resources, good health and amiable relations amongst groups from various parts of the area.²⁷ In the long histories of Indigenous communities generally, there has been a strong theme of interdependence between a strong social fabric and responsibility for the natural world.²⁸ The well-being of the Indigenous people of the Swan coastal plain rested no doubt on the quality of their social systems and life practices, not on their material possessions. Current Western Australians cannot just wind the clock back 200 years, but there is a great deal to learn from this past, and it is evident that the original inhabitants of this Swan River area lived in a society demonstrating many ideals similar to those celebrated by advocates of material simplicity, relating especially to care for the land, sharing of resources and living a materially basic lifestyle.

The concept of material simplicity provides much significant thinking and action that should be considered in refocussing community aims away from individualism and overconsumption. For example, the 'pace of life' is mentioned a number of times in writing about simplicity and consumption. A study by psychologist Robert Levine showed that as countries industrialise and get richer, the pace of life gets constantly faster – driving, walking, even the talking speed of shop assistants.²⁹ Fiona Stanley cites the pace of modern life as one of the contributors to the health problems faced by children.³⁰ Seeking more time was a common motivation for the 'downshifters'. A materially simple life that allows more time for adults to do things other than paid employment

²⁴ Lukashenko, M. (2008) *On Survival – PEN lecture series*.

Retrieved 10/11/08 from: <http://www.themonthly.com.au/tm/taxonomy/term/285>

²⁵ Department for Community Development (1994) *From crisis to prevention: The community services industry study*. p4

²⁶ Palmer, D & Buchanan, J. (2007) *From moorditch moort to capacity building: a history of capacity building in Western Australia*. p42

Retrieved 2/2/09 from: <http://www.communitydevelopmentstories.com.au>

²⁷ Carter, B (2006) *Nyungah Land: Records of Invasion & theft of Aboriginal land on the Swan River 1829-1850*. p3

²⁸ Dale, A. (2005) Conclusions. In Dale, A. & Onyx, J. (Eds.) *Social Capital & Sustainable Community Development: a dynamic balance*. p258

²⁹ Durning, A. (1992) *How much is enough: The consumer society and the future of the earth*. p47

³⁰ Stanley, F. (2008)

offers some relief in this regard, whether it is time to spend at children's schools, coaching sporting teams, doing other volunteer work, being at home more that enables more contact with neighbours, or just being less rushed. This is just one example of the way material simplicity can provide a vehicle for practical ideas to be lived out that can bring about change in personal life satisfaction and more positive relationships.

Less consumption-driven lifestyle practices at least provide an alternative to lives built around income earning and property acquisition. In his book "The high price of materialism", Tim Kasser uses a small example of how materialistic values can be related to interpersonal relationships. In a survey of college students in which they measured materialistic tendencies according to a measure called the 'Aspirational Index', and then also interviewed the same students about important relationships with partners, friends and family, students who measured as having more materialistic values, consistently reported relationships that were shorter, less satisfying and overall more negative.³¹ This is just a small study done over ten years ago in America, but it illustrates an important point – that there is for some people an inverse relationship between materialism and positive communal relationships.

This thinking is augmented by stories about communal bonds in other places. Stories from residents and visitors of some countries which experience much less material comfort and security than Australia continually emphasise the fact that strong community ties, genuine contentment with life, and family togetherness are present in places in which a great deal of material deprivation exists, not as a practice of voluntary simplicity, but as a reality of life.

A Ugandan man, who's thoughts were recorded as part of a wide ranging World Bank evaluation project, said the following about poverty and his community, emphasising the way in which it is the rise in wealth of a few people that has caused community tension, rather than poverty itself:

Poverty has always been with us in our communities. It was here in the past, long before Europeans came, and it affected many – perhaps all of us. But it was a different type of poverty. People were not helpless. They acted together and never allowed it to squeeze any member of the community. They shared a lot of things together: hunting, grazing animals, harvesting. There was enough for basic survival. But now things have changed.

³¹ Kasser, T. (2002) *The high price of materialism*. p62

Each person is on their own. A few people who have acquired wealth are very scared of sliding back into poverty.³²

These recorded experiences raise philosophical questions about how we conceive poverty and deprivation and about how we construct in our minds what a society should be like – what we should have and be and do. This is important in helping us think in a more complex fashion about the nature and usefulness of material simplicity.

Majid Rahnema is quoted by Arturo Escobar in his writing about the way in which poverty is always ‘problematized’:

The word “poverty” is, no doubt, a key word of our times, extensively used and abused by everyone ... For one reason, almost all definitions given to the word are woven around the concept of ‘lack’ or ‘deficiency.’ This notion reflects only the basic relativity of the concept. What is necessary and to whom? And who is qualified to define all that.³³

An important point then is whether it is just the lack of possessions and material comforts that is the defining feature of poverty. Rahnema’s writing about poverty points us in another direction – that more than just the deficiencies need to be considered. Escobar discusses the idea that a common characteristic of modern humans is the need to compose the world as a picture. Using the example of a World Bank leader who on arrival in Columbia could only see problems and chaos because he couldn’t compose that world as a picture he could conceive or recognise. Escobar writes how ‘Columbia refused to be composed as a picture’ and what became apparent was that the ‘real Columbia’ faded into the background and was not recognized or grasped by the new arrivals.³⁴

In this discussion it is essential to acknowledge that the pursuit of increasing material wealth and comfort and acquisition of more goods and services is not necessarily a worldwide aim or expectation. There is a great deal of satisfaction and wisdom gained in places and social systems in which rising material consumption has a much less prominent role.

Australian researcher David Potts, in the introduction to his study of life in Australia during the Great Depression, wrote about his experiences of poverty in India and Pakistan:

³² Narayan, D. (2000) *Voices of the poor: Can anyone hear us?* p222

³³ Cited in Escobar, A (1995) *Encountering Development: The making and unmaking of the third world.* p21

³⁴ Escobar, A (1995) p56

*I interviewed people in slums, villages and factories – still trailing my concern about poverty. Yet the Indians I spoke to mostly carried on their lives without being heavily burdened by insecurity and material shortages. They were often uplifted by positive personal and collective philosophies, by many paths to dignity, and by joy in family, entertainment and a strong community culture. None of this denied for me the horror of seeing refugees from Pakistan starving to death in the streets of Calcutta, with about 500 bodies a night being thrown into trucks to be taken to mass graves. Both experiences deeply affected me.*³⁵

It is these twin realities, of both the beauty and the horror that can be experienced in poor communities which relate so closely to the ideas present in simple living. Simple living at its best seeks both solidarity with the poor – to learn from them and be like them, and justice for the poor, to free resources and time, to undo immoral trading systems, so that folks who are otherwise bound by terrible hardship might be set free. Further discussion about simplicity and its relationship to poverty and injustice is the major theme of the next section of this chapter.

In Potts' study, one person from a poverty stricken area of Melbourne said the following:

*I think I can say without doubt that the Depression years were the happiest days of my life. People in general were more willing to help ... As soon as the Depression was over, people started after money again and forgot about their neighbours.*³⁶

These sentiments do not stand alone. In his study of the depression, Potts drew on over 2000 life stories, mostly one-to-one interviews, as well as autobiographies and other published material. A consistent theme emerging from his research was that amongst stories of pain and suffering, people reported the Depression times as "giving meaning to life" and that "people were happier then".³⁷

Potts suggests that a great amount of personal fulfilment emerged from the circumstances of the 1930's depression – he tells of the fulfilment coming from people entertaining themselves, of people working and struggling together towards common goal. He tells of the self-purpose and fellowship coming from people fighting political battles together³⁸ and a number of interviews tell

³⁵ Potts, D. (2006) *The myth of the great depression*. p3

³⁶ Potts, D. (2006) p173

³⁷ Potts, D. (2006) p2

³⁸ Potts, D. (2006) p341

of the way crowded streets in poorer areas were often full of children making their own fun, people sitting on front verandahs together and visiting each others houses.³⁹

Human happiness and meaning are elusive concepts, but the idea is a compelling one that discomfort, struggle and hardship may well be sources for much that is valuable in sustaining worthwhile human communities. Stories from the Depression such as those just relayed, recorded experiences from places beyond Australia in which much material poverty and suffering exists, as well as much traditional and religious wisdom strengthen these thoughts.

In some ways, simplicity draws on this wisdom, not to promote suffering, but in recognising the inherent value in some form of struggle. It gives up apparent comfort for something that runs deeper.

Along with this, simple living appears to have great potential to respond to some critical needs in a multi-layered way - enabling people and groups of people to spend their time in ways that are more satisfying, enable greater interaction and relationship forming, to have less detrimental ecological impact, and as is discussed in more detail in the next section, to give more opportunity to distribute material and financial resources in a way that is just.

SIMPLICITY AS A RESPONSE TO POVERTY AND INJUSTICE

Much motivation for simple living is drawn from a yearning to live more justly in a world that is very much unequal. It is driven by a hope that a life lived by choice in simplicity goes some way to providing resources and justice for people whose lack of resources is damaging to their health and well-being.⁴⁰

Gandhi's instruction to "live simply so others might simply live" has become somewhat of a cliché, but it does encapsulate the motivation of some for whom living simply is a way of looking and living beyond themselves. Ethicist Peter Singer is fairly straight forward about the idea of sharing resources much more fairly: "If you are paying for something to drink when safe drinking water comes out of the tap, you have money to spend on things you don't really need".⁴¹ In his most recent book, aimed at encouraging people to be more generous, Singer constructs a rational argument that contends that suffering from extreme poverty is bad, that it is within the power of

³⁹ Potts, D. (2006) p174

⁴⁰ Etzioni, A. (1998) p640

⁴¹ Singer, P (2009) *The life you can save: Acting now to end world poverty*. ix

many people to contribute something to alleviate this suffering, and therefore those who don't take personal action are doing something wrong. He goes further, arguing that when we spend money on things we don't need - extra clothes, newer cars, renovations or eating out, instead of giving that money to aid agencies that work to reduce poverty and provide clean water and health care, we are leaving children to die.⁴² Poverty alleviation is much more complicated than only giving aid agencies more money, but Singer's logic gives weight to the idea that resource consumption by those who already have enough is unfair and immoral.

Perhaps on matters of morality, self-examination is the fairest place to start.

I am an Australian of European descent, and I live with my wife and three daughters in a soundly constructed weatherboard house in a Perth suburban street. We own a thirty five year old Kingswood ute and a fifteen year old Peugeot sedan, shelves full of books, a wardrobe full of clothes and some power tools. All five of us have a bike each that we can ride. We live in a suburb listed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics' 'Index of relative socio-economic disadvantage' (derived from census data relating to indicators of disadvantage such as unemployment, low income and low educational attainment), as the second most disadvantaged local government area in the Perth metropolitan division.⁴³ Despite this we have running water – hot and cold, radio reception, a phone, a computer that connects to the internet, and toys for our children to play with. Within a kilometre of our home there are three beautiful parks with lawn and playgrounds and barbecues, and most of the time reliable public transport is available in a number of directions from our house. Our own backyard has a wooden cubby, a slide and a trampoline, as well a vegetable garden, six chickens, three ducks and a corrugated iron shed. Our children attend a well-resourced school and when they get sick we can take them to the doctor or the hospital and we have our own first aid kit and medicines. By modern Australian standards we aim to live reasonably simply, and like many others we are faced with daily dilemmas about what that really means, how we spend our time and our money, and how we might live in a way that is meaningful and joyful to us and at the same time fair to others. The long discussion that is this dissertation is part of that journey. We have many other possessions that are not listed here, and clearly have more than we need for survival. We have more than enough.

⁴² Singer, P (2009) p15

⁴³ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2006) *Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage*.

Retrieved 20/9/08 from:

<http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/d3310114.nsf/4a256353001af3ed4b2562bb00121564/cbc195deddc8d84eca25740f0010e378!OpenDocument>

Residents of Sierra Leone in West Africa have an average life expectancy of 42, only just over half of people have access to clean water, and there are 7 doctors (in contrast to Australia's 249) per 100,000 people.⁴⁴ In Papua New Guinea, one of Australia's closest neighbours, less than half of the population has access to clean water, 35% of children under 5 are under-weight, and the adult literacy rate is 42%.⁴⁵ In 2004, the average yearly income for Australians was about \$27,000, while for residents of Sierra Leone it was \$210, for Papuans \$560 per year.⁴⁶ Each day 27,000 children die of diseases like diarrhoea, measles, and malaria that either don't exist in richer countries or are seldom fatal when they do. The World Bank sets its poverty line at \$1.25 per day, based on people's ability to meet their very basic physical needs - 1.4 billion people live on less than that amount.⁴⁷ Although this is an unsophisticated glimpse of the many indicators that show the levels of material poverty and inequity that exist across the globe, they are still grim. There are many people who do not have enough.

Alongside these statistics however, there are other complexities to take into account, especially in considering the benefits of living with less. As discussed in the previous section about the benefits of simplicity, there are many stories to tell about relational richness and positive community functioning that demonstrate the way in which many materially poor communities have so much else to offer. It is ignorant to somehow order the world along simple lines of life expectancy and income growth. A simple line drawn between developed and developing countries, with the latter aspiring to become the former is neither accurate nor complex enough to help in a useful discussion of the relationship between rich and poor. Nor is it helpful in determining to what we should aspire if we are to foster a society that leans more towards fairness, environmental sustainability and relational richness, rather than towards competitiveness and material luxury. Certainly our modern society has much more to learn from the worlds of those who are materially poor. As discussed in the previous section, simple living practices often seek not only justice for those in poverty, but solidarity with them and to learn from the richness of those who live with less, whether by choice or not, and to translate that somehow into their own lives.

Nevertheless, a quarter of the world's population does not have enough income to meet their basic food and health needs while the economically privileged buy bottled water in places where clean water comes from a tap and have plenty of money to spend on wine, going to concerts and changing handbags for a new fashion season.

⁴⁴ New Internationalist (2008) *World Guide, 11th Edition*. pp 600-613

⁴⁵ United Nations Development Program (2008) *Statistical update 2008/2009 - Country Fact Sheets - Papua New Guinea*. Retrieved 21/5/09 from: http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/2008/countries/country_fact_sheets/

⁴⁶ New Internationalist (2008) pp 608-612

⁴⁷ Singer, P (2009) p7

Despite what rich westerners have to learn from the communities of those who are materially poor, there is not much that is noble or right about ongoing inequality or grinding poverty. The situation does require of us more than just a desire to shift material comfort from one place to another. It requires of us to think carefully about what really contributes to the ongoing well-being of a society locally and in a global context. Simple living practices do provide opportunities for those with choices to use less resources themselves so they can be more equally shared. Etzioni suggests that voluntary simplicity makes wealth redistribution much more politically possible, with those who are more materially privileged finding value in other pursuits and life goals, and enabling resources to be directed to those who need them more, without political backlash.⁴⁸

An Australian aid worker in Afghanistan wrote the following about one of his recent travel experiences en-route to Kabul, far removed from the usual context in which he works. It illustrates a reality that is quite the opposite to what those advocating simplicity hope and work for:

While in the [airport] lounge, I took a shower in their well appointed facilities. This involved receiving a pack of three towels from the shower mistress. I would have thought one sufficient. On de-cladding and entering the shower, I was faced with a gleaming stainless steel rod set upright in the shower wall. It had a gleaming hand piece, three gleaming nozzles set in the middle, and a large gleaming shower head the size of a dinner plate ... Though the shower head was completely, excessively adequate, I was able to employ the hand piece to further wet my body, and by turning on the nozzles, I could direct spray at my chest, stomach and groin simultaneously. I was nearly delirious with excitement. If only we could get such a shower into the hands of the poor, I thought. As I toweled myself off with three separate towels, I wondered why it is that a simple shower isn't enough. How many millions of dollars were spent researching and designing this utterly unnecessary bit of bathroom junk? Why is such a thing on anyone's 'to do' list? If we are clever enough to build such a thing, can't we do something about water distribution for the 2 billion people who don't have any?

I know the answers to this idle speculation. Fancy showers make rich people feel privileged and happy, whereas the happiness of poor people is irrelevant. Fancy showers exist only in the elite domain, and so maintain the illusion so necessary for wealthy people that they have entered this domain on their own merits. If hard work were all it took to become rich,

⁴⁸ Etzioni, A. (1998) p640

*most Afghans would be millionaires. But hard work has little to do with it. Happily, within a day of my elite shower experience, I was back in Kabul, in our bathroom ... and I was washing again in a bucket under a trickle. And – that I can do that signals just how removed even I am from the really marginalised people here.*⁴⁹

There are some notable points to consider here. One is the role that goods have to play in the lives of those who are richer. Goods do have a material and functional role, where they provide the ability to enjoy something, to communicate well, to fix things, to have a hobby, to wear clothes that feel or look nice, to sit in a comfortable chair at home. As well as their function, some material goods are more 'positional' in nature – they convey a feeling of status, of being richer, and as some would assume, more deserving of reward. Positional goods play a key role not only in driving increased consumption, but also in sustaining the inequality that exists between those who have power and possessions and those who don't. Positional goods enable those who have already accumulated many possessions to keep on consuming with some sort of rationality – to be able to buy a golf set that is a little better than what they already have, or the car the next model up, or to upgrade the membership of a club for more privileges. All the while, money that could be directed towards those who have much less, is continually used by those who already have more.

The shower story is also illustrative of the way resources are used. As Sparrow asks, if we are clever enough to build this type of apparatus, why aren't those resources and energy pointed towards that which is more worthwhile, and in fact urgent? This is a similar argument to Singer's – why is the money spent on those who already have enough, instead of being directed to pressing and life-changing needs? Sparrow answers his own question as to why, but is understandably unhappy with this reality, again echoing Singer's sentiments that needless consumption in the face of tremendous poverty is indeed immoral. Mahatma Gandhi called it thievery:

*I suggest that we are thieves in a way. If I take anything that I do not need for my own immediate use, and keep it, I thieve it from somebody else. I venture to suggest that it is the fundamental law of Nature.*⁵⁰

Another worthwhile point is the place that privilege plays in the unjust relationships between those who have power and resources and those who don't. Kathryn Choules argues that discourses of social justice that ignore our places of privilege are deficient, and in the end complicit in

⁴⁹ Sparrow, P. (2009) *In a cold brown place and thinking*. Retrieved 5/2/09 from: <http://itinerantindigent.wordpress.com/2009/02/11/in-a-cold-brown-place-and-thinking/>.

⁵⁰ Cited in Kripalani, K. (Ed)(1958) p130

maintaining unjust systems – discourses about injustice often, and unfortunately, don't analyse power relationships, benefitting those in positions of power.⁵¹ Sparrow is keenly aware of his own ability to take advantage of the resources he has, and points out that despite his profession he is still very much removed from the struggles of the very poor and marginalised.

These are helpful observations in considering the role of material simplicity in modern society, and especially in facilitating the redistribution of resources to the places and projects where they are needed the most. Those who use and spend less on themselves have more resources to share with others, both close by and far away, and use less of those resources that are finite. To follow Peter Singer's logic, if those with substantial economic resources (a large percentage of Australians), chose to consistently spend less money on items that they don't really need, that money could be used to fund aid and development in communities in much greater need.

A 2004 survey detailed the level of waste which characterises Australian consumption. In the survey, Australians admitted to spending on the whole 10.5 billion dollars on goods they do not use – an average of \$1226 per household.⁵² The details of the waste survey showed that an average Australian household spends \$200 per year on clothes and shoes that are never used and 35% of people admitting to discarding more than \$500 worth of fresh food a year.⁵³ The researchers believed that these figures were likely to be underestimations given people's common feelings of guilt regarding wastefulness. The wasted \$1226 per household could, according to figures about use of donations to Oxfam, each year provide water harvesting systems that give clean water and sanitation for at least 400 families in Southern Africa.⁵⁴

Also, simplicity enables participants to locate themselves more alongside those who are marginalised, giving away at least some of the power that comes with material resources in modern society, and being in a more realistic position to understand the social or economic systems that perpetuate injustice or disadvantage.

Yearning for a more simple life however is no doubt seen by some as naive. After all, what would a large number of people in the world give for a flushing toilet and a washing machine, let alone a phone and a car? Much aid and development is dedicated to bringing about some level of material

⁵¹ Choules, K. (2007) *The Shifting Sands of Social Justice Discourse: From Situating the Problem with "Them," to Situating it with "Us"*. In *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 29(5), p461

⁵² Hamilton, C & Denniss, R. (2005) p103

⁵³ Hamilton, C., Denniss, R & Baker, D. (2004) *Wasteful Consumption in Australia. Discussion Paper No. 77.* p10

⁵⁴ Oxfam Australia (2009) *General fund – donation details*. Retrieved 5/10/09 from: <https://www.oxfam.org.au/donate/make-a-general-donation?wa=3&a=500>

utility for people – that they might have the possessions that will help them and their children stay alive and live functionally, even with some level of comfort. Surely the young people of Sierra Leone could do with a few material goods? Even within Australia, many people are no strangers to deprivation. Etzioni notes that the counter-cultures from which much of the criticism of consumerism emerges have arisen almost exclusively in wealthy societies.⁵⁵ Perhaps this discussion about the negative impacts of consumption is itself a luxury – a luxury afforded those who already have more than enough?

Daniel Miller is critical of what he sees as the moralisation present in much research and writing about over-consumption. He argues that study of over-consumption is not helpful if it is just an expression of guilt or anxiety about ‘moral evils’, and contends that much of the world’s poor need to have access to more goods – such as better housing, pharmaceuticals, books and computers. Surely the poor are not deluded in their quest to increase their income and live with more? Miller suggests that poverty is after all constituted by a lack of possessions.⁵⁶

Poverty is more than that though. In a foreword to Oxfam’s 2008 book, “Poverty to Power”, Bangladeshi economist Amartya Sen comments that poverty is not just a “shortage of income”, but in fact a collection of “unfreedoms” – the lack of freedom to find satisfactory living conditions, to have access to schools and health care and lack of power to make any change at all.⁵⁷ A World Bank survey documenting experiences of over 60,000 people from 73 different poor countries revealed that poverty was indeed a shortage of food, money and a lack of the ability to send children to school or build adequate housing, and was also largely about powerlessness, shame and being trapped in circumstances that you can never escape from.⁵⁸

Surely then, alleviation of extreme poverty is not just about providing more goods, but about addressing these issues of powerlessness and injustice. Material simplicity provides at least a starting point for developing individual and community practices that aim to tackle these imbalances. Also, as is explored more fully in the following sections, increasing consumption of material goods plays a major role in the perpetuation of economic inequality and pursuit of individualistic goals rather than community-oriented ones.

⁵⁵ Etzioni, A. (1998) p.619

⁵⁶ Miller, D. (2001) The poverty of morality. In *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 1(2), p227

⁵⁷ Green, D. (2008) *From Poverty to Power*. p xiii

⁵⁸ Singer, P. (2009) p6

Also, as discussed earlier, poverty is not only a collection of human suffering. So often 'problematised' as Escobar observed, situations of poverty and suffering have been sources of development of innovative skills, resilient movements for change and strong family and community bonds built from the need to rely on one another for survival.

It is not the aim of this thesis to argue for deprivation. The reality is however that many people in Australia consume way above what they really need and that a re-channeling of these resources has potential for addressing the startling imbalances that continue to exist in the world. Suggestion of winding back of consumption is not intended to produce suffering, but balance – some kind of sensible path between poverty and excess.

Material simplicity can also have an enormously powerfully role to play in the way people see their impact on the environment and find practical ways to reduce exploitation and waste.

In discussing environmental degradation it is not hard to find indicators of an earth under immense pressure. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change confirmed in 2007 that the earth is warming and that human activities are the reason, while global carbon dioxide emissions have doubled since 1990 and the rate is continuing to increase. Scientists are reporting that Arctic sea ice has thinned by half since 2001, two thirds of the Congo River basin rainforest (the world's second largest) will disappear in 50 years under the current rate of destruction, and increasing numbers of animal species continue to be pushed close to extinction.⁵⁹

Disturbingly but predictably, neither the responsibility for accelerating climate change nor the burden of its effects are equally shared. According to 2006 OECD figures, the United States of America is responsible for the emission of 19.8 tonnes of carbon-dioxide per person each year, 66 times as much as the 0.3 tonnes per person emitted by Bangladeshis.⁶⁰ In the first 5 months of life, the average UK citizen is responsible for the emissions of as much carbon dioxide as a Tanzanian person is for their whole lifetime.⁶¹ Also, the people most impacted by climate change are largely those who are already extremely vulnerable. For example, Bangladesh, one of the world's poorest countries, is highly susceptible to the impacts of global climate change – more frequent and severe cyclones, rising sea levels, more rainfall, more flooding, and warm weather hot spells. If the sea level rose by three feet, 16% of Bangladesh's land area would be swamped, 14% of land used for

⁵⁹ Mastny, L (2008) State of the World: A Year in Review. In *World Watch Institute State of the World 2008*. xxiv - xxvii

⁶⁰ Jackson, T. (2008a) p47

⁶¹ Boyle, D., Cordon, C & Potts, R. (2006) *Are you happy?* p19

cropping lost, and 22 million people (more than the current population of Australia) displaced.⁶² The costs of continued rampant consumption are dire for people that most Australians will not meet nor hear about, and will likely lead to life-threatening environmental insecurity for a large number of the world's poorest people.

Material simplicity encourages many practices that enable a reduction in environmental degradation by using less energy, creating less land fill, recycling or fixing rather than discarding, and generally having more contact with land and nature, making a much needed contribution to more ecologically sustainable community habits.

SIMPLICITY AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO OVER-CONSUMPTION

Greek philosopher Aristotle taught extensively on the topic of what he called 'the good life'. The 'good life' did indeed mean existing beyond just life's bare necessities, but a key element of this enjoyment was the practice of virtues, and especially the acceptance of limits. For Aristotle, 'pleonexia' - acquisitiveness that knows no limit, was a great risk to the good life and all its positive outcomes.⁶³ Acknowledgement of limits that exist on material consumption is a fundamental way in which those practicing material simplicity seek to have positive social impacts.

There is nothing new about consumption. After all, humans have needed to consume food to stay alive, material artefacts have been used to signify status and identity throughout human history, and many possessions have a functional and necessary role in people's working, family or personal life. In much of modern society however, key factors come together to create a cultural form that distinguishes today's mass consumption from the past.⁶⁴ This culture is characterised by rising trends of competitiveness in which people strive to be 'better off' than others, the natural world being seen primarily as a source of commodities, human welfare being equated with increasing consumption and material acquisition being a major route by which people participate and find belonging in a community.⁶⁵ De Botton outlines the symbols and qualities given high status in other societies and eras – the Jaguar hunters of the Amazonian jungle, the dancing gentlemen of 18th century England, the Western European saints of the first millennium, the aggressive warriors of ancient Sparta. He points out that in modern Western culture, it is the accumulation of money, power and acclaim that very often denotes status and demonstrates success. De Botton writes

⁶² Shamim, C. (2008) Alternative views of environmental security in a less developed country. In *Journal of Third World Studies*. Spring 2008, 25(1), 253 - 272

⁶³ Gorringer, T (1999) *Fair Shares: Ethics and the Global Economy*. p21

⁶⁴ Michaelis, L (2006) Ethics of Consumption. In Jackson, T. (2006) *Sustainable Consumption*. p328

⁶⁵ Michaelis, L (2006) p330

about modern society's faith in the concept of meritocracy – with achievements usually being attributed to will power, and not to providence or luck as they were in some past societies. Money and wealth has been given an almost ethical quality, in that the possessions and influence it brings supposedly reflecting the talent, worthiness and virtue of the owner.⁶⁶

Australia is by a number of measures a wealthy country. Australia's Gross Domestic Product has doubled since 1980, and it ranks third out of 177 countries on the United Nations Human Development Index⁶⁷. On average, citizens today have real incomes three times higher than Australians of the 1950's, with average earnings exceeding \$50,000 per year.⁶⁸ In the 50 years between 1950 and 2000, new house sizes in Australia almost doubled from an average of 115 square metres to 221 square metres, even though the average number of occupants per household had shrunk, from an average of 3.6 people per household to 2.6. Australians now have more inside space to live in than ever before.⁶⁹ Hugh Mackay writes that Australia has been experiencing an "epidemic of home renovation" with more and more energy, time and resources being poured into improving domestic environments, adding on rooms and going shopping. The term "retail therapy" came into common usage and the number one selling book in Australia in 2006 was "Spotless", a book about household cleaning. He argues that over the past two decades Australians in general have become increasingly disengaged from larger political and international issues and have instead escaped to the relative security of home improvements and buying things.⁷⁰

This is not to say that poverty doesn't exist in Australia – it does, and there are measures to show that Australia is much more economically unequal than it has been in the past. According to 2006 figures published by the United Nations, the 10% of Australians on the highest incomes receive over 12 times as much as the 10% of Australians on the lowest incomes, making Australia on this measure the 6th most unequal country among the 30 member nations of the OECD. Looking further from income to wealth, the wealthiest 20% of Australians own 60% of the nation's wealth, with the poorest 20% owning only 1%.⁷¹ Even considering that reality, rising wealth has been a feature of Australian society over the recent decades.

⁶⁶ De Botton, A (2004) p194

⁶⁷ United Nations (2008) *Human Development Report – Human Development Index Trends*. Retrieved 10/11/08 from: <http://hdrstats.undp.org/indicators/16.html>

⁶⁸ Hamilton, C & Denniss, R. (2005) p4

⁶⁹ Hamilton, C & Denniss, R. (2005) p20

⁷⁰ Mackay, H (2007) *Advance Australia ... Where? How we've changed, why we've changed and what will happen next*. p266

⁷¹ Stilwell, F & Jordan, K. (2007) Economic Inequality and (Un)happiness. In *Social Alternatives*, 26(4) p16

In light of this increase in wealth, a brief survey of some statistics related to health and well-being gives an interesting contrast. According to the 2004-2005 National Health Survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 37% of adults reported experiencing moderate to high levels of psychological distress, 10% reported having a long-term mental or behavioural problem, and 19% had used some form of medication to help with their mental wellbeing in the two weeks previous to the survey.⁷² The study also found that 13% of adults drank alcohol at risky levels, and that obesity was common (62% of males and 45% of females were obese) and is on the increase, having risen since the last National Health Survey in 2001.⁷³ Currently the top ten diseases affecting young men in Australia are either some form of psychological disorder or substance abuse.⁷⁴ Health statistics for Indigenous Australians are particularly grim. When compared to non-Indigenous Australians, Indigenous people have an average life expectancy that is 17 years less, an infant mortality rate that is three times higher, are twice as likely to be hospitalised for psychological or behavioural disorders, and one third have a disability or long term health problem.⁷⁵ Behind these statistics lie many stories of real and ongoing deprivation.

So, all is not well in modern Australia – psychological distress, discontentment and inequality have risen along with the gross domestic product. It seems we are far from the ‘relaxed and comfortable’ nation that was wished for by a former Prime Minister, and that the assumption that vigorous economic growth leads automatically on to community well-being is misguided.

We cannot assume that a rise in average income and consumption levels across Australia has some kind direct relationship to the negative social indicators described briefly here in this section. This would ignore the inequalities that apply to disadvantaged and marginalised people, and the particular social factors that have a significant impact on health and well-being. What it does show however is that indicators like average income levels, retail spending figures, Gross Domestic Product, and income growth figures are misleading if we expect them to show us ‘how well Australia is doing’.

In an article entitled ‘Australia’s wealth harms our children’s health’ Western Australian health researcher Fiona Stanley recently observed that many key health and well-being indicators relating

⁷² Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006a) *2004-05 National Health Survey: Summary of Results*. p8 Retrieved 25/9/08 from: [http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au?ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/3B1917236618A042CA25711F00185526/\\$File/43640_2004-05.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au?ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/3B1917236618A042CA25711F00185526/$File/43640_2004-05.pdf)

⁷³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006a) p11

⁷⁴ Hamilton, C & Denniss, R. (2005) p14

⁷⁵ Australian Human Rights Commission (2005) *Social Justice Report 2005 – Health Fact Sheet 1*. Retrieved 25/9/08 from: http://www.hreocgov.au/social_justice/sj_report/sj_report05/sjr_2005_health1.html

to obesity, depression and suicide, and Indigenous children's health, show that despite our country's wealth, the health and well-being of children and young people is not improving, and in some cases actually getting worse. She argues that the changes in society that have delivered such economic success are part of the root cause of many health and well-being problems. She cites the way the high level of wealth is distributed very unevenly, how poor families live in poor areas with little green space and less access to human services, increases in alcohol and drug consumption, high pressure workplaces, changes in family life and structures, the increasing pace of life, and the increasing role of technology. Stanley believes these changes conspire to create what she calls "modernity's paradox", with an increase in wealth, and an increase in health and social problems amongst young people and children.⁷⁶

A picture of modern Australian society as materially rich but dissatisfied and socially fragmented is not at odds with international research about the nature of material consumption and life satisfaction. Despite sustained economic growth, surveys about people's life satisfaction show that reported happiness has not risen in the last 40 years in Japan, the USA or Western Europe.⁷⁷ Jackson's work on plotting income growth compared with life satisfaction across a range of countries has demonstrated that growing consumption levels in developed countries have not been accompanied by a rise in reported life satisfaction.⁷⁸

The relationship between income and happiness seems relative rather than absolute, with satisfaction related to consumption based more on how people compare to others in their society, or people of the immediate past.⁷⁹ It is helpful to consider a core proposition of neo-classical economic theory - the principle of 'diminishing marginal utility'. The principle is that as income rises, steady increases in that income bring progressively less satisfaction.⁸⁰ For example, \$100 given to someone who has nothing means a great deal, while \$100 given to someone who is very wealthy is likely to mean much less. What this means in practice is that as wealth and income increase, the ability of humans to derive satisfaction from their economic gains is reduced. Therefore, those who are seeking satisfaction from material wealth need to accumulate more in order to be satisfied – feeding the cycle of acquisition as well as dissatisfaction.

Stillwell and Jordan also point to a number of research studies showing that to a large extent, human satisfaction with economic circumstance is derived more reliably from comparisons with

⁷⁶ Stanley, F. (2008)

⁷⁷ Green, D. (2008) p181

⁷⁸ Jackson, T. (2008b)

⁷⁹ Durning, A (1992) p39

⁸⁰ Stillwell, F & Jordan, K. (2007) p17

those who are around them, rather than in absolute terms.⁸¹ Comparisons with the lives of others, including their wealth and possessions is a natural progression for a society where material things and wealth accumulation have become increasingly prominent. It also likely that in a society where media and advertising play such a central role, the evidence of lifestyles that seem better than our own, is always on display.

Battin and Ramsay explain how in an increasingly individualistic society, there is heightened competition for possessions that demonstrate status, and with little method for redistribution, the clamour for what they call 'positional goods' intensifies.⁸² This type of conspicuous consumption, the practice of buying particular goods to demonstrate one's status and ability to spend, increases aspirations among those who don't have the ability to spend so freely, increasing dissatisfaction with what they do have.⁸³ Lack of wealth or status compared to others can inspire a great deal of dissatisfaction and anxiety in a society like Australia,⁸⁴ and no doubt is a contributing factor to the mood of those 60% of Australians who think they can't buy everything they need.⁸⁵ The dissatisfaction is therefore spread through almost all strata of income and wealth, with those who live in relatively wealthy circumstances compared to the rest of the world, anxious about their status in the local society, and those who are genuinely deprived being consistently faced with the reality of a consumer culture in which they struggle to keep up.

Etzioni suggests that there is no consistent link between climbing incomes and high levels of life satisfaction, and even that "continued psychological investment in ever-higher levels of consumption has an addictive quality"⁸⁶, evidenced by the way in which shopping for items that are not needed is a major recreational activity in affluent societies, that many people find it difficult to curb their shopping habits even if they want to, and that some stop shopping only after they have exhausted their credit options.

In looking at the way communities have been changed by increasing consumerism, Durning examined the way the functions of households in America have changed. Firstly, he concluded that "the commercialisation of the household economy has cost the world dearly", with more car trips

⁸¹ Stillwell, F & Jordan, K. (2007) p17

⁸² Battin, T & Ramsay, T. (2007) Australian affluence and the left. In *Journal of Australian Political Economy*, No.58, p12

⁸³ Stillwell, F & Jordan, K. (2007) p18

⁸⁴ De Botton, A. (2004) p5

⁸⁵ Hamilton, C. (2005) Affluenza: the new illness in Australia? In Healey, J. (Ed) (2007) 'Consumerism' *Issues in Society*, Vol. 258. p20

⁸⁶ Etzioni (1998) p631

to the shops and services, more take away food and more packaging.⁸⁷ People now produce less than they used to – less of their own clothes, food, less building and repairs. And even though people still produce children, the family role is for many increasingly diminished, with child-care taking the place of stay-at-home parenting and the extended family, who are now more likely to live further away. Households have moved from being ‘producers’ to ‘consumers’ – older houses had pantries, workshops and sewing rooms, while newer houses have compact kitchens and home entertainment centres. Beyond the individual household, Durning observes that local areas have changed shape too. Shopping malls and entertainment complexes have replaced corner shops, market places, and local restaurants – shifting away some of the places that helped create common identity and meeting places in local communities.⁸⁸ The rise of the suburban shopping complex as a new town centre is an example of what sociologist Marilyn Taylor calls the ‘commodification’ of life. Private owners now control what used to be public space, and citizens’ main role seems to be as consumers.⁸⁹ Gorringer interprets this shift as a movement away from seeing human beings as citizens whose primary duty is to participate in a community, towards being consumers, whose primary activities are economic – earn, spend, buy and acquire.⁹⁰

Material simplicity aims to challenge the cultural form of over-consumption and provide alternatives – conceiving human welfare outside of financial indicators, practising inclusivity instead of competition, enjoying the natural world rather than exploiting it, and fostering belonging in relational ways rather than through activities based around possessions or increasing consumption. In fact, practices of simplicity such as growing your own food, particularly in community gardens, or being involved in produce sharing schemes, re-using and recycling the waste of others and living with less income to allow more time for volunteer work and time with family and friends and neighbours, can play a significantly positive role in the development of those relational bonds. Intentional reduction of consumption and a commitment to living with less can have a positive effect on not only those who are practicing the simplicity, but on those who observe. As has been previously suggested, material possessions can play a major role in demonstrating status and worth in modern society, so practices of material simplicity have an important role in reshaping and rebalancing those ideas about worth. Simplicity is a way of shifting the focus of life, from material acquisition and competition to co-operation and satisfaction with less, just as Diogenes was able to do in his encounter with Alexander the Great. There is no necessity to compete with those who have less than you, there is less of a tendency to feel

⁸⁷ Durning, A (1992) p45

⁸⁸ Durning, A (1992) p46

⁸⁹ Taylor, M. (2003) *Public Policy in the Community*. p.7

⁹⁰ Gorringer, T. (1999) p22

dissatisfied, and in fact there can be hope and inspiration found in the lives of others who have less but seem just as content, or happier even.

SIMPLICITY AND COMMUNITY

As has been suggested repeatedly through this paper so far, simple living offers not only a way to reduce resource use, but a way to focus on life priorities beyond unnecessary wealth accumulation. Simple living philosophies provide some new possibilities for community relations in a modern society characterised by many social commentators as increasingly fragmented, and where there is a decreasing level of voluntary involvement, trust and contact between different generations.⁹¹

As mentioned in the introduction, there can be a tendency to romanticise about notions of simplicity and community. Talk of the close-knit communities of the ‘good old days’ is a common way of thinking about how the way people used to relate to one another in communities – a bit like a ‘paradise lost’.⁹² The reality is that previous generations had their social problems too. As Baumann writes “the community of pre-modern times was never as warm and cosy as we would like to imagine. In fact, life in feudal community was harsh and dangerous and brutal for many”.⁹³ Bearing in mind the earlier discussions about poverty, it is not necessary to assume however that because life was physically harsher that it was worse. Earlier discussion about poor communities, including reflections on the nature of Australian life during the Great Depression highlighted the fact that alongside material hardship can exist many features of community life which promote life satisfaction and meaning – solidarity, innovation, finding philosophical meaning in suffering, and community togetherness relating to the way the community functioned.

Notions of community are multi-layered and sometimes conflicted. By their nature, community bonds involve both solidarity and exclusion. Talk about community development is often built around concepts like participation, relational networks and capacity building. While these words can invoke warm and positive images, it is useful to remember that some of the most brutal regimes in human history have been characterised by excellent levels of community participation, bonding and mobilisation. For example, the rise of Nazism in Germany in the 1930’s drew on

⁹¹ MacCallum, J., Palmer, D., Wright, P., Brooker, M., Cumming-Potvin, W & Tero, C. (2006) *Intergenerational Exchange Programs and Community Building*. p1

⁹² Bauman (2001). Cited in Palmer, D & Buchanan, J. (2007) *From moorditch moort to capacity building: a history of capacity building in Western Australia*. p27

Available at: <http://www.communitydevelopmentstories.com.au>

⁹³ Malpas, J & Wickham, G. (1998) Cited in Palmer, D & Buchanan, J. (2007) p27

dissatisfaction about the fast pace of social change, economic crisis, and disenchantment with the political processes of the time. It provided citizens with a way to belong and to express their frustrations in tangible ways.⁹⁴ Idealistic commitment and unselfish devotion was a feature of the popular growth of Nazism movement, but the outcomes of the resultant regimes have been well documented - barbarism, terror, and violent xenophobia. Characteristics of movements that inflict great harm on the cause of good human community can be quite similar to the characteristics of those movements that do enormous good, and the costs of movements that aim to build and develop “community” need to be debated as vigorously as the supposed benefits.

A useful definition for community development in light of these comments comes from West Australian Jim Ife. Community development can be seen as the establishment (or re-establishment) of the structures where human social needs can be met – beneficial relationships, human rights and living of a fulfilling life.⁹⁵ This may well mean that community development work involves being deeply critical of the community in which we function - looking beyond current responses to the challenges that human communities face, and finding new ways of building community relations.⁹⁶ Looking at community development through a lens of living more simply is a useful tool in helping this kind of criticism and in providing another creative response to the challenges our communities face. If envisaging new responses to developing community requires a certain amount of questioning, then the ability to legitimately critique an economic system so reliant on consumption and wealth accumulation becomes very valuable, and personal and community alternatives a genuine force for beneficial community change.

A recent publication from the British-based Sustainable Development Commission began with the following statement: “Every society clings to a myth by which it lives. Ours is the myth of economic growth”.⁹⁷ While stating his belief that many poor countries are in urgent need of economic development, the publication’s author Tim Jackson questions whether continually rising levels of income and consumption in places that are already rich is a sensible policy goal in a world with finite resources and an ecology that is being degraded. Jackson even argues that the current financial turmoil was not just the fault of rogue elements in the financial system, lack of vigilance by leaders and regulators, but undone by growth itself. For example, the continued extending of credit was largely predicated on a need to stimulate economic growth - growth

⁹⁴ Pakulski, J. (1991) *Social Movements: The Politics of Moral Protest*. p93

⁹⁵ Ife, J. & Tesoriero, F. (2006) *Community Development: Community-based alternatives in an age of Globalisation*, p2

⁹⁶ Ife, J. & Tesoriero, F. (2006) x

⁹⁷ Jackson, T (2009) p5

motivated the freedoms that were granted in financial regulation, now recognised as the freedoms that led to great irresponsibility.⁹⁸

Economics as a discourse is no neutral player in societal decisions. Escobar writes the following:

*Needless to say, economists do not see their science as a cultural discourse. In their long and illustrious realist tradition, their knowledge is taken to be a neutral representation of the world and a truth about it.*⁹⁹

Economic thought has many incarnations, but Escobar's point is an important one. It is foolish to think that economic thought is somehow divorced from cultural influences and human bias - economic reality is not a static truth that can necessarily be objectively described. One failure of modern public discussion about economic and social concerns, is that there can be a tendency to see economic reality in one dimension only. Somehow, the need for economic growth, a company profit, or a financial outcome, can override all other considerations. The following quote from the New Economics Foundation summarises this discussion well. It emphasises that mainstream models of economic growth have a threshold, and once that is reached, further development in that direction is not only environmentally unsustainable, it has little positive impact on citizens:

*There is a threshold to the economic model of development. In this model, once a certain level of per capita GDP has been achieved, further economic growth constitutes bad growth – causing more harm than good and effectively undermining the well-being of future generations with little or no benefit to the current generation.*¹⁰⁰

Practices of simple living would seemingly have a lot to offer the endeavour to put a rein on that 'bad growth', by promoting lifestyles that can exist within social and ecological limits, thereby not undermining the well-being of current or future generations, and in providing incentive to construct economic policies and systems that are not based on increasing consumption.

Peter Singer quotes an interesting study involving two groups of people. One group of participants were primed to think about money – having piles of money nearby, having a screensaver showing money, unscrambling phrases about money, while another group did activities that were not about money. The 'money group' was notably less helpful to others and more self-sufficient – took longer

⁹⁸ Jackson, T (2009) p6

⁹⁹ Escobar, A (1995) p56

¹⁰⁰ Marks, N & Thompson, S. (2006) *The Happy Planet Index*. p24

to both ask for help and give help, left greater distance between chairs when seated in a group, and when invited to donate some of the earnings from the study, gave less. The researchers followed up the experiment with discussion about how as societies began to use money more, the need to rely on family and friends diminished. It promoted individualism and eroded behaviours that were more communal in nature.¹⁰¹

Richard Eckersley observes that “most societies [in history] have tended to reinforce values that emphasise social obligation and self-restraint and discourage those that promote self-indulgence and anti-social behaviour”. He goes on to observe that dominant features of western societies, and indeed increasingly others as well, encourage decision making based on “what’s in it for me”, a preoccupation with personal expectations and satisfaction, and economic decisions overriding almost everything else.¹⁰² Many of the practices associated with consumer society – mass advertising, deregulation of employment conditions, and reliance on retail spending to stimulate growth, encourage competition and individualism, while leaving co-operative behaviour behind.¹⁰³ It is this competition and individualism that not only drives mass consumption, that can erode many of the traditions and behaviours that characterise a well functioning society – community connection, strong families, social co-operation and environmental integrity.

It is important to acknowledge the positive changes that have been brought by aspects of modern life, and equally crucial to examine what other social consequences stem from modern economic systems. The negative impacts of consumption have been laid out earlier in this chapter, but along with this we can acknowledge many of the advantages brought about by a society which uses its wealth to provide public facilities like parks and gardens, libraries, and education and health systems that can deliver high quality care and education. One of the key considerations is thinking about how a society can use resources in a better way to develop systems and facilities that do foster personal and community well-being without promoting over-consumption and greed.

Jackson writes about prosperity as the ability of humans to flourish - physically, psychologically and socially. While material wealth beyond sustenance does not seem necessary for this flourishing, it is evident that material possessions are what Jackson calls a ‘vital language’ with which we communicate about relationships, community and what really matters to us. If then, flourishing is about meaningful participation in society, and that participation is facilitated by material possessions, why then does evidence not show that life satisfaction is increasing in richer

¹⁰¹ Singer, P (2009) p2009

¹⁰² Eckersley, R. (2004) *Well and Good*. p51

¹⁰³ Jackson, T. (2008b) p56

countries?¹⁰⁴ Reflecting back to earlier writing in this chapter, Australian health statistics show increases in substance abuse, depression, anxiety and obesity, and ever increasing consumption of goods and services don't seem to have delivered the satisfaction some thought they would.

Jackson quotes Sen's work on living standards, which contends that the material requirements for 'physical flourishing' don't change much across societies – healthy food, shelter and other physical requirements. However, the material requirements for social and psychological functioning change a lot across various societies. Socialising, communicating and what Sen calls 'living without shame' requires a bigger and more expensive bundle of goods in richer societies. If then commodities are such a key part of social functioning, and the baseline for what is 'acceptable' is always the current level, there will never be a point where 'enough is enough', driving material consumption continually upwards, and an acceptable level of material goods always out of reach for some.¹⁰⁵ This is an essential point on which this discussion of simplicity and community relations can turn. If the expanding list of material possessions required for social functioning can be slowed and then transformed to encompass human endeavours beyond materialism and consumption, then there is enormous possibilities for social change. Efforts to promote simple living do provide examples that it is possible to change and to be satisfied.

A useful theme for this discussion is that of balance. The issue at stake is to try and build communities – through economic development, through public policy and through community action, where striving for continuing rising levels of material comfort is not the main activity, where satisfaction is derived from a range of non-material sources, and where economic decisions are made with social and environmental consequences at the forefront of considerations.

Reflecting on the previous sections of this chapter, the reach of simple living practices is potentially broad and multilayered – addressing economic inequality, enabling solidarity with those who have less, providing more time for volunteerism and social co-operation in neighbourhoods. Living more simply is a practice which aims to shift meaning away from material possessions to the non-material, to nurture relationships, and to redistribute resources. In these endeavours, it provides enormous possibilities for community change in an age and place that seems desperately in need of those things.

¹⁰⁴ Jackson, T (2009) p86

¹⁰⁵ Jackson, T. (2009) p87

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

In the literature reviewed so far, some definite themes have emerged. One is that simplicity is not necessarily about deprivation, but rather about living within natural limits and celebrating what is most important about human life and community. Another is that simplicity provides a realistic and practical response to ongoing poverty and injustice. Rising material consumption has some serious and deleterious impacts on modern society – socially and environmentally. Not all the impacts of rising consumption are negative, but those that are should not be ignored, and the practices of material simplicity give some hope and ideas for change.

This is no uncomplicated issue. It collides with discussion about poverty and its complexities, about morality and choice, and in thinking about the complications and dilemmas of attempting to build a local and global community that is fair and inclusive.

This is not a discrete movement with an easily identifiable ethos and a set of agreed assumptions and goals. Rather, it is a set of loosely associated experiences and practices that exist in a range of circumstances and contexts, and for myriad reasons. The dissertation now turns to the telling the stories of those who were interviewed as part of this research, with the stories serving as illustrative sources that compliment the conceptual work done through this examination of the literature.

CHAPTER THREE: THE STORIES

This chapter aims to be both descriptive and analytical. It aims to faithfully relay the experiences, philosophies and practices of material simplicity which were talked about by those who were interviewed, as well as to tell about how the interviewees deal with the joys and complexities that arise from their lifestyles and decisions. Also, this chapter aims to 'unpack' these descriptions and joys and complexities - to examine the thinking behind what people say and how various themes and ideas link together. What is common or contrasting about the stories? How do they reflect or challenge those themes that were written about in chapter two? And together, what do the literature and previous research along with these local stories tell us about simple living and its social consequences in modern Western Australian society?

FINDING AND RECORDING THE STORIES

These people were chosen to be interviewed because they were suggested by a number of others as people worth talking to about simple living. Essentially, this was an exercise in searching out a group of people with knowledge and experience in this subject area, and telling their stories.

In order to find people suitable for interview, a snowballing process was undertaken. Snowballing is a purposive sampling technique designed to uncover a broad range of informants in a particular field.¹⁰⁶ A small number of people with interest, knowledge or reputation are contacted and asked to name other prospective informants, who are then in turn asked to name further informants. From these names, a group of people to be approached as research subjects is selected.

In this study, 12 people were initially contacted and asked to identify up to five other potential informants. Those people were then contacted and asked for suggestions also. People approached to be interviewed were those identified by a number of others as having particular interest and experience in the practice and philosophy of material simplicity. Seven people were approached and all were willing to be interviewed.

The sample size for this study is small and not designed to be representative of the broader Western Australian community, but does contain some measure of diversity. The group interviewed included both males and females, people ranging in age from 24 to 84, and included people living

¹⁰⁶ Babbie, E (2007) *The Practice of Social Research*.

in shared housing, some living alone and some with small children. Among the seven participants, there were three distinct smaller groups – two single young people in their twenties, three parents of young children, and two older people who were born before the Great Depression.

This primary research required approval from the Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee, this approval was granted, and the research carried out according to ethical requirements. Participation in the study was completely voluntary and written informed consent gained before any interviews took place. Each participant was interviewed once for about an hour, and all of the participants asked to be interviewed at their homes. All of the interviews were audio taped and transcribed, and it is from these transcriptions that the following collection of observations and quotes were taken. All interviewees were willing to be identified in the study except for one. That person chose to remain anonymous, not out of a concern for privacy, but because of not wanting to be singled out as ‘anyone special’. That person’s name has been changed for the purposes of this dissertation, and no other identifying details were used.

The participants

Seven people were interviewed:

Harry is 27 years old and lives in a shared house with some other people about his age, as part of an intentional network of houses in Lockridge, a suburb in the north east of Perth.

Bonnie is 24 years old and is living in Geraldton at the moment, but most of the time she lives in the household network in Lockridge too.

Tammy is 34 years old, is married and has two young children. She lives in Padbury, in the northern suburbs of Perth.

Peter is in his 40s, is married and has 3 children. He lives in the hills to the east of Perth.

Dave is 40, is married with two young children, and lives in Bullcreek, in the southern suburbs of Perth

Rose is 77 and lives in a unit by herself in a southern coastal town.

Ian is 84 and lives in a house on a property shared with a number of other households on the south coast of Western Australia.

The interviews sought to enable these people to tell their stories of simple living. I asked them to describe what they do to try and live simply, and then went on to explore what the impact of those practices have been personally and on relationships with family, friends and in their neighbourhoods. I also asked about what they felt were the really positive outcomes of their lifestyle decisions, and also about some of the struggles and difficulties they experience.

There are many quotes from the interviewees in this section, because truly these people spoke in so many intriguing and insightful ways about the joys they experience, the depth behind their thinking and action, as well as the dilemmas and contradictions they face. Their own words, rather than mine, express these sentiments the best.

WHAT PEOPLE DO

As a starting point participants were asked to describe ‘what they do’ to live simply and through the interviews a range of practices were described and elaborated on. These descriptions, and the issues arising from them are explored in more depth later in this chapter, but it is worth at the beginning briefly summarising how people described ‘what they do’.

Many people grow their own food, especially fruit and vegetables, some keep poultry for eggs and meat, and many also talked about buying food that is locally grown, and making as much food as possible with fresh ingredients. One interviewee talked about her ‘dumpster diving’ escapades – rescuing wasted food from large supermarket bins, and another talked about the importance of food in social situations. There were conversations about home-made and second hand goods of all sorts, from clothes and blankets, to furniture and houses, and about limiting waste and reducing unnecessary material consumption. There was also much discussion about attitudes to life – about living more slowly and mindfully, about being more connected to the natural world and about trying new ways of interacting in families and neighbourhoods that promote simplicity as well as more full relationships. Transport was also a common topic, with talk of sharing various modes of transport, using lots of public transport and walking, as well as limiting damaging activities like air travel. Some people spoke of the retention or revival of older practical skills that enable people to make good use of what they already have, and others talked of new technology and systems that foster much better use of energy and water. Time was a topic of conversation too, relating to reducing or giving up paid work, and the careful consideration of getting life priorities in order.

POSITIVE OUTCOMES

General Satisfaction

Many interviewees spoke of the enormous personal satisfaction gained from their simple living endeavours. Many difficulties were mentioned too, but the overwhelming feeling was that the interviewees gain a great deal of personal satisfaction from the way they live. Thinking back to the multiple possibilities for fostering satisfaction and well-being associated with simplicity that was written about in chapter two, this is not surprising. The research about the downshifter had highlighted a significant movement of people who spent less, worked less and seemed significantly happier for their change of focus. Elgin, Etzioni and many others have suggested that the positive psychological outcomes for simplicity were substantial. As was also suggested in chapter two, happiness and well-being are elusive concepts, and some of the elements of a meaningful life are experienced in situations of discomfort and struggle. All of these points were borne out in the interviews.

The experiences of satisfaction came in different forms. Ian talked simply about contentment in general with the way life had turned out:

But I have a very happy life here, a very fulfilling life.

Harry described a general satisfaction too, talking about a 'quality of life' stemming from having less materially and adopting a 'less is more' attitude:

And I think satisfying is the word. I think the quality of the life that you have increases greatly even as you use less ... because very often the food or the things are of better quality if you are discerning about how you use material resources.

I think less of quality is so much more satisfying than 'more of poor quality'. And the patterns of life that are associated with 'more of poor quality' are also kind of frantic and because you're not gaining the quality of life that you deeply desire out of the things that you have, then you're continually driven to seek more of it ... I think there's more satisfaction inherently in good quality things, and possessing those. That's a better pattern of consumption.

Dave talked of the satisfaction gained from trying to stand against waste and greed:

Once your conscience is awoken to the fact that you've been born into a society that is completely unsustainable and whose very existence has a consequence for the rest of the world ... and to be doing some things about it you've just gotta be happy with that, and say well at least I'm trying in my faltering way.

He also talked about a wholeness, linking these ideas to spiritual well-being and nature:

I think we experience more joy in our day-to-day life through engaging simple things. I think we're more connected to nature. I think there's a spiritual wholeness about simplicity.

Bonnie talked about the pleasure she took from what she did – going to op-shops, going dumpster diving and the practices of growing and preparing food that she undertook:

I love it, I really enjoy living like this, and it's certainly not for lack of something better to do. Like I could work a job that is full time and earn more money and all that kind of stuff. But I don't want to, I really want to have more time to live slowly and live simply and work hard in the things that feel like they're about life ... I feel incredibly privileged most of the time.

Bonnie also described how while she attempted to live material simply, her aim wasn't to be deprived, but in fact to celebrate life more:

I'm generally quite decadent in most things that I do which kind of ... I think definitely don't think living simply means ... I'm not into being like a Spartan or anything like that, I'm well into decadence which is partly why I love dumpster diving because it means that I can get all this stuff that I wouldn't necessarily feel like I could buy.

What is evident, even in this short collection of quotes above, is a theme of a life that is somehow richer – a life spiritually more whole, a life of experiencing more quality, more fulfilment, more fun, more joy. Bonnie talks about her simple living practices as ‘*the things that feel like their about life*’, and in her interview expanded upon these things – about sharing resources with neighbours, about working in the community garden she's a part of, and about food practices that emphasise locally grown, fresh, organic produce. Dave connected his simplicity with spiritual wholeness and

the natural world, and he too expanded on that, in the way he builds spaces and habits into his life to reflect, to intentionally have time for people and to be outside and particularly in the bush. It became very obvious as I worked through the interviews just how much pleasure these people got out of what they did, and they spoke with passion about it. This was not the complete picture, but genuine satisfaction was abundantly clear.

Being freer and calmer

People also spoke about being calmer and freer because of their simplicity.

Tammy spoke about the way in which materially simplifying life in her household allowed them to be less 'cluttered'. Practically, it meant less things in their house, less cleaning, less appliances, and perhaps even less noise - in her case, she has two sons and most of their friends had computers and games machines that seemed to always be on.

Your life's less complicated I think actually. It really doesn't take me long to clean my house. Where as I know my mum and dad still live in a 5 x 3 and they're old and they get a cleaner in to clean for them, but it's a massive job and I just think if you simplify your life, then it frees you up from stuff and the maintenance that stuff requires. It can just free you a bit I think.

I'm not saying that we're completely laid back and always available ... but life's less frenetic than I think if we were chasing after a bigger house and bigger car and x-boxes and things, I think. And slightly quieter too!

Dave spoke of being able to consciously live more slowly, and being more likely to go to the park than the shops:

At it's best, simple living is a slowing and a rejection of an overly hyped pace of life. There's a richness in that in terms of time with those I love and value in a day out walking in the park, rather than a day of shopping at Garden City.

He also spoke about how living simply has played a role in improving mental health:

Having a personal history of anxiety problems, simple living for me is partly about personal health and well-being. I've got a number of practices there of trying to intentionally build

little spaces ... like I made a commitment to myself not to walk too fast. Does it really matter if it takes me 10 more seconds to walk back to a room – no. And simple living says how you want to be is someone who has space and time, and if you stop me around school and want to tell me something, I'll turn to you and give you my attention and listen.

For Dave, and for others, the idea of simplicity had a real connection to this idea of taking of more time. On the surface, this has no obvious tangible connection to have less possessions, but at a philosophical level it does – working less has allowed more time to be with family and others, and is connected to an ongoing intention in their household to consume less, as well as to make the most of their time and resources, not by cramming more into the days, but by living more mindfully and intentionally making space and time to enjoy being together.

Sharing money, time and other resources

Use of resources was raised in chapter two, highlighting how simple living enabled resources to be shared more fairly. Tammy, Ian and Rose all talked about how spending less meant that they had more money to use for other things, mostly sharing with others through making donations:

So the main reason we started doing it was so that we would have enough money to give to projects that like TEAR (an aid and development agency) support, and other organisations so that other people can live a better life.

So what I'm doing now I'm giving money away which I wouldn't normally have been able to do. Supporting all sorts of organisations, with money ...

I probably save a lot of money, not on food necessarily, but I live without the cost of running a car. I very rarely eat out ... and I seem to have enough money to give away.

Rose had a sign on her fridge – 'live simply so others might simply live' – she pointed it out to me and told me that it summed up her philosophy on life pretty well, with her living as simply as she could so she can share with others.

Three of the interviewees were parents with young children, and had a variety of combinations of paid work in their family. One was a dad who had taken a year off from paid work, one was a mum who had recently stopped doing any paid work, and the other was a dad who had paid employment four days per week. All three described how having less paid work meant more time

with their kids and other family, and more time being able to contribute to volunteer tasks, like babysitting other people's children, helping neighbours with things, and being involved in other community organisations.

Tammy talked about the conscious choice they made as family to not be spending all their time as parents in paid work, and therefore being available to undertake other very important tasks:

Because we live simply, I don't have to work. That was a choice, so I'm able to be a little bit more involved in the school, or babysit for friends kids. And we do a little bit of fostering which I could probably have done if I was working, but it makes me more available for that kind of stuff.

She also spoke about benefits to their family life:

Especially our older one understands that he gets to have a lot of extra time with mum and dad and gets to do fun things with us like going to the park more regularly and that kind of thing. He knows that a lot of his friends don't do that and their parents work long hours ... 'cause they do enjoy, especially time with their dad because he's the fun captain, but they say they like having me around to pick them up from school and that kind of stuff as well.

Dave also sees his employment arrangements as enabling him to undertake other tasks:

So to have a day a week where it's not coming at a cost of family time on the weekend, to potter around, to talk to you for an hour, or whatever. I'm happy to have a bit less financial reward in the interests of more space and time.

He also saw simplicity as a way of working towards more sharing of time and resources with neighbours:

I just think we're at an interesting point where people are over being stuck in big empty houses on their own in streets where they don't know anyone, and that there's a receptiveness there to changing that. It's intimately tied in with the simple living notion because, you know ... lets share our tools and lets share our veggies and lets not drive to our friends house on the other side of Perth, lets just invite the neighbours over for dinner.

Peter talked about how his time has been freed up to spend time with others and doing things he considers to be a higher priority than working and earning more money:

I'd like to think that it means having more time for people. And I guess I'm not believing that it means that you're not busy – I think it means that you're busy doing things that are more important to living in this world.

He went on to describe time spent with his own children, with neighbours, being at his own home and having the space to think about what was most important, and also being involved in other community and volunteer work. He also wondered about people who do more paid work than they do:

Often we sit down and say, how do people do it if they're both working full-time and they're trying to raise kids. I can't understand that.

Ian, who lives in an intentional community on a shared property with a number of other households, made comment about the resistance from the shire when the community was established over 20 years ago, but later in the interview described how what transpired was among other things, a community of people who were able to share their time voluntarily with each other and with others:

We had a lot of opposition from the shire – we were going to bring drugs, disease, debauchery, dole-bludgers, dogs and all that sort of thing, and none of these happened ... and eventually we got past the shire and we established our community.

And we've become well known here, because most of us, far from being the dole-bludgers the council expected, most of us have thrown ourselves into the community in some way or another ... voluntarily largely or as artists or whatever.

A feature of modern life in Australia that is often raised in many circles is that there is some kind of breakdown in social fabric, with a resultant lessening of community connection, decline in volunteerism, and a widening distance between generations and other social groupings.¹⁰⁷ In sociology and community development research and commentary, these type of ideas are often described by the concept of 'social capital' – a way of thinking about the positive reciprocity and

¹⁰⁷ MacCallum, J. et al (2006) p1

trust existing between the people of a community, what Ife and Tesoriero call the 'glue that holds communities together'¹⁰⁸. The quotes above tell a story that is contrary to the tide of disconnection – of people making time to volunteer and to consciously try and build better relationships within their own families and neighbourhood networks.

Every one of these people who were interviewed talked in some way about relational and community involvements beyond themselves – growing seedlings for the local environment centre, having cups of tea with neighbours, helping at the local school, recycling timber to help build a community hall, regularly participating in a local community garden project. These are the types of things referred to by those who theorise that much has been lost from modern society because volunteerism and strong neighbourhood and family networks are in decline. The connection between living simply, the voluntary and community work people are involved in, and the importance of that in building social capital - the 'glue' - was not often explicitly conveyed during our discussions, but when these stories and ideas are lined up together, it is a link that becomes clear. These small endeavours will not solve all the social challenges our modern society faces on their own, and neither are they intended to, but as is argued by social capital theorist Robert Putnam, these are vital tools in building communities characterised by trust, connection between generations and strong social bonds within families and beyond them.¹⁰⁹

A genuine alternative to over-consumption

Harry spoke about an alternative vision for households beyond consumption and busyness:

To me there's a whole vision of life that is about people in places living in ways that are a lot more satisfying and ultimately just ... that houses become not simply places where you sleep in and have products that you've bought, but sites of production and sites of learning, places in which people enjoy spending time rather than just come home and crash in.

Tammy expresses her satisfaction about trying to simplify in terms of a contrast to what she sees as the emptiness of over-consumption:

¹⁰⁸ Ife, J. & Tesoriero, F. (2006) p17

¹⁰⁹ Kenny, S. (2006) *Developing Communities for the Future*. p108

I wouldn't want to live any different really. It's just empty. I think chasing after material goods and success and popularity, that kind of thing, it's just so empty ... there's nothing in it. It has no appeal to me at all.

Dave spoke in similar terms:

What has consumerism actually given me? As someone who's kind of grown up through the 80s and 90s, it's pretty hollow, 'cause stuff just doesn't in the end mean much to you. To own something is a very fleeting source of any contentment.

The literature about over-consumption highlights many costs – environmental degradation, competitive materialism, dissatisfaction and inequality among them. Dave and Tammy emphasised what they see as the inherent emptiness in over-consumption. Harry's perspective was particularly encouraging and suggested a way forward out of some of the negative traps of consumption-based lifestyle and an alternative vision linked to better relationships, a balanced view of paid work, and households being productive places. A notable feature of this vision is its wholistic nature and this is a theme that became evident through the interviews. Simplicity is not only a way of consuming less, or not only a way of doing less environmental damage, or not only a way of having more time to spend on local community projects. It is not only about having more frequent contact with neighbours, or learning new skills of sustainability. It can be all these things together and many of them flow into one another or bring about new and sometimes unexpected change. As has been said previously, these facets of simplicity are not a codified set of conditions to which people sign up, but a wide array of practices, philosophies and benefits which link to each other in multiple ways.

Protecting the environment

Protecting the environment was a major motivation for participants in their efforts to live simply, as an act of social justice, as a means of protecting a fragile and finite resource, and for the love of nature itself. This included trying to practice re-use and recycling in order to produce less waste, to leave the natural environment as it is, to lower carbon emissions by being responsible about transport options, and having an underlying philosophy of aiming to live more within ecological limits. All the interviewees seemed strongly motivated to just keep trying to limit their energy and resource use as much as possible.

When asked why she chose to live simply, Rose said this:

It's my perception that our wonderful lonely planet needs our help – we have to do it for the planet. We can't go on ...

This meant enough for her to travel across Australia by bus instead of plane to visit family in the Eastern states:

It would be a lot cheaper to go by plane, which my family are constantly reminding me of. But I've met so many people who want to have everything organic and those same people never grow anything, and they fly at the drop of a hat, to go and see their football team for one night and all of that in Melbourne. And that plane, well this is my idea, is dropping poisonous stuff out the back end, over all the organic gardens that other people grow.

Ian talked about limiting the amount of energy involved in transporting goods from one place to another by growing vegetables at home:

If you buy a lettuce in Denmark, it's grown in Manjimup, picked at night goes in a truck to Perth to be at the markets by 6am. It arrives here about midday, so it's fairly quick but there's a lot of energy gone into moving that lettuce. So if you grow your own, you're cutting all that out.

Harry talked about trying to live within ecological limits, and spending time working out what that actually entails:

I'm interested in living a life that's proportionate to the ecological limits of the planet, particularly the place that I live. A lot of my explorations in life are directed to exploring what are the limits of natural systems.

The downshifter were described in Chapter two as providing a visible alternative for others to gain ideas from. In a similar way, Dave talked about how their neighbours are involved in conversations about reducing negative environmental impact:

There's a good little dialogue developing in our street where all the houses are from the same vintage and a number of people are trying to reduce their (ecological) footprint in different ways.

Peter spoke about their attempts to limit development of the natural environment:

We've sort of tried to limit how much we kind of develop this acre since we've been here. Some people say well you should clear a few more trees from here and do that sort of stuff, but we're just happy just to have enough space for us to live and just put in a few fruit trees and that, and leave the rest. There's birds and other animals living here ... and the house, again I've had a few people telling me you know it's a pretty small house ... you know, it's good for us, we're just happy with the way it is.

Taken together, the stories of those interviewed told of genuine benefits at personal, familial, community, and even global levels. Elgin wrote about the multi-layered way in which simplicity responded to critical needs – for psychological well-being, for community connection, and in finding personal ways to respond to global challenges. It seems that these layers are strongly evident, even in the lives of these seven people.

FURTHER THEMES THAT EMERGED

About the limited nature of what they do

Having highlighted the remarkable and multi-layered benefits brought about by people's simple living endeavours, it is interesting that a number of participants spoke about the fact that what they did was quite small compared to what they saw as needing to be done. While all seemed to take the decisions and practices we were discussing very seriously, many spoke about the limited nature of those things. In reflecting on what difference she thought her life made, Bonnie said the following:

Everything that I do is very small – there's probably a little bit less stuff in land fill, there's a patch of soil out the front that is much nicer, full of worms and good stuff, than before I came. I guess mainly I hope to live a life that is going to be inspiring to other people.

Dave was pragmatic about the level of change possible from only personal action:

There's some frustration and you feel like you're tinkering around the edges of the problem. And in terms of three levels – the personal action, the community action and the national global, we're talking mostly about personal action. Whereas the solution lies at all of those levels operating together

Commenting on his desire to live more within the earth's ecological limits, Harry said this:

I feel like we do very little in actual fact. That's why I think it's a communal concern. Only in as much as we're able to co-operate effectively can we truly make that kind of jump. I don't think much individual or even household work does effect those limits. That's not to say that I don't think it's valuable, it's just that I see that I don't live within that at all.

Ian used the metaphor of ripples on a pond in describing the unknown influence of his own practices:

In a sense I'm like a stone plopped into a pool and the rings go out, but as the rings expand they become less and less noticeable. So I really don't know what influence it's having on others.

Some people are modest. Also, people are realistic about the serious challenges facing human societies and the seemingly negligible effects single acts make in tackling these challenges. The quotes above provide useful thoughts in this regard. In a conversation about reducing consumption and environmental overload, Dave talked about the multiple levels of action – personal, communal and global, believing that all three are necessary to bring about some positive change. All three. Of course communal and global action are necessary, but they are less likely to come to pass without the personal commitments to individual action by people such as these. Bonnie talks about her 'small' acts – reducing waste, improving soil, but also about being inspiring – that her small acts might, and having now met Bonnie, no doubt they will, provide enormous inspiration to others. Those others will aim to commit small acts too that bring not only personal change but contribute to community change and political pressure and global movements that might make very much bigger differences to the issues they care so much about.

Amartya Sen has written about the 'bundle of goods' necessary for social functioning in various societies, and how in more affluent societies that bundle is so much bigger, leading of course to increased consumption. A significant contribution that these people make is to change attitudes about what that bundle of goods might be, and that abundant life can exist with a much smaller bundle.

Motivations

Responses about motivations for aiming to live simply were a little varied but mostly centred around seeking to live more fairly in an unequal world, and environmental concerns. Interestingly, while the outcomes of self-fulfilment so obviously expressed and described earlier in this chapter were a big part of conversations, these ideas were not raised much in talk about motivation. Satisfaction was an outcome, not a motivation.

Harry talked to about his recognition of injustice at an earlier age and trying to make some kind of contribution to addressing that:

For me it was really a concern for global justice kinds of issues that initially got me interested in it. So as a 17 year old, my simplistic analysis was that, and perhaps not entirely simplistic, was that my over-consumption had an effect on people who had too little in other parts of the world. For me it's always been about people and the kinds of systems that might create a more just economy for people ... more just distribution

Bonnie too talked about concerns for poverty and injustice which stem from her faith:

I guess partly it's borne out of faith stuff for me and what I feel like is a just response to what's happening in our world. Feel pretty troubled about issues of poverty and inequality and injustice and climate change. I just can't live a life that is complicit with things that I know are unjust.

Dave spoke about some of his motivation in similar terms:

Yeah justice issues – is this a just and fair way to live? And for us that's out of a Christian understanding of fairness and justice and what's the right treatment of the world and its people.

Peter also referred to his faith in talking about motivations and reasons behind lifestyle decisions:

For me a lot of it comes back to what Jesus taught. You know, just I guess trying to say well look, life is more than having something that's new or a lovely house and a great car. Life's a lot more than that and we're encouraged to take that to heart and actually live in view of that.

You just sort of think well OK if we can share more of the world, by consuming or desiring less. If we can make this world a better place by making more time to be busy doing other things rather than just looking after yourself then that's something that Jesus was encouraging us to do.

Peter Singer has argued for greater generosity from those living in wealthy circumstances, and he is not alone in that call. Simple living practices can be seen as one of the most obvious responses. All of the interviewees made some statement or other connecting their own decisions about money and possessions with an ability to divert money and resources away from their own situation towards people in much greater need. Their lifestyle practices are a way of bringing to life their philosophies of social justice.

Also, it was stated in chapter two that there is much traditional wisdom and religious teaching which emphasises the need for justice and the goodness of a life lived beyond material success. Indeed faith can be a significant catalyst for change. Faith and belief allow people to be attached to an entity - a being or a movement bigger than themselves – encouraging people to reflect on their place in a much larger universe. It often fosters a sense of selflessness, a character trait completely counter to the selfishness fed by a great deal of modern marketing. For some of the interviewees, the teachings of their faith added support and motivation to their efforts of living in a way that promotes justice and fairness for others.

Using less money

It may seem obvious, but many interviewees spoke about just spending less money, by trying to live with less, making things themselves, or using second-hand and recycled things.

Tammy spoke about using less money by thinking carefully about their family really needed, and buying second hand things as often as possible:

We just tend to, you know, kind of think really carefully before we spend our money ... try to buy second hand for most things if we can, from op shops or through the quokka or whatever if we do need something. And we just try to reduce as much as we can our electricity and our water use.

Rose spoke of a similar frugality:

I buy nearly everything I can at op shops. I don't buy new clothes ... recently I bought a new pair of shoes. I make my own jumpers, I spin wool ... I live without the cost of running a car. I very rarely eat out.

Dave also spoke about needing less as an individual family by making use of community facilities and being able to share with others:

We make use of the local parks and the local library instead of buying lots of books. We live in a society where there's just stacks provided, that mean like you don't all need to have everything. I share my tools with my neighbours and use their lawnmower

Preservation of skills

Linked to the using of less resources, was a significant intent by many to retain skills for making things themselves and being to some extent self-sufficient. This talk of the importance of skills spanned the generations. Rose, aged 77, made many references to what she called 'old-fashioned' skills.

I'd hate to think that all the old fashioned skills – darning socks and dress making and doing things by hand would be lost. I'd hate that, because a lot of young people wouldn't know where to lay their hands on a needle and cotton to sew a button on and as for darning socks, you throw them away, and a lot of people don't make holes in their socks because they don't give their feet any workout. I make holes in my socks because I do a lot of walking.

For Rose, simple living was largely defined by preservation of skills and knowledge, describing simple living practices in this way:

Keeping up with the knowledge that allows one to make the right decisions to protect our one and only planet.

Interestingly, it was Bonnie from Lockridge, the youngest of those who were interviewed who also spoke at length about the retention and reclaiming of skills from the past:

I'm pretty keen on doing things like preserving food and fermenting food and that kind of stuff so that you can get food that's local when it's in season so it's inexpensive and learn how to make those things last over a year and ... skills that are pretty simple but just aren't part of our culture anymore that I feel like I really want to revive in my life and in the life of our community.

Peter made an observation on the same theme, and particularly about what he saw as a fading Australian tradition of 'making do with what we have', and connected it with the kinds of innovation he'd seen in poorer communities, overseas and within Australia:

Australia used to have a great tradition of just fixing things and keeping them going. But that's sort of falling away because you can just go and get stuff. You see, like in India, what people do to get things going, or even up in the central desert, what they do up there.

Ian, 84, spoke of his childhood and learning to make his own things, and of the buildings on the communal land on which he lives now:

When I was ten my father showed me how to use all the tools and things. And he said, that's very good son you're doing well - now you can make all your own toys. So, all my toys from then on were what I made, none of this buying something from a shop and giving it to me.

About half the houses here are occupied by the people who built them. They're all built by hand. I built some of this furniture here and all these shelves and everything, not that they're high-class carpentry but they're functional.

Ian also made comment about practical skills enabling less unnecessary consumption, and in fostering more satisfaction:

I think that people need to directly think about their lives. Is it necessary to do this, is it necessary to buy all these gadgets? And so on, and can you make it yourself rather than go to the shop and buy something? And you get more satisfaction out of making it yourself, so it just means learning a few skills ...

While Rose had made comment that she feared for the loss of many of these traditional skills, the stories of people like Bonnie provide genuine hope. While Rose is critical of a younger generation

who from her point of view seems wasteful and perhaps ignorant, there is much cause for inspiration in the lives of people such as Bonnie and Harry, who have worked hard to learn and practice the types of skills which Rose talks of, and to pass them on to others. Even among the three parents who were in their 30s and 40s, there was a great deal of evidence that these were people who had a large range of skills in growing food, developing household systems to save energy and water, and in recycling and re-using things that otherwise might be wasted.

Food

Everyone interviewed talked in some way about food. This was not a specific question of the interview but issues around food were raised independently by all seven of the participants. Some were to do with the practices of growing and preparing their own food. All of the interviewees grow at least some of their own food on their land, and three of them grow a large amount of their own fruit and vegetables. A number of people made their own bread, one ground her own flour, many of them made cakes and biscuits at home and some did their own butchery. Others tried to eat food which had lower 'food miles' - food that is grown or produced as locally as possible, leading to lower ecological impact of transport costs and greater support and knowledge of local food systems. Rose gave a complex description of one of her food preservation strategies involving hundreds of tomatoes she'd grown and some flattened cardboard boxes she got from the back of the local fruit shop. Her drying and preserving methods allowed her to extend the time she was able to use tomatoes from her own garden to a quite a number of months.

Harry talked about the importance of local food too, and also about the produce from his own garden, which is large part of his simple living agenda. He underlined again the satisfaction gained from these endeavours – about being able to produce fresh food from his own garden, and about some of the other food practices their household undertakes:

We attempt to shop at places that are more community or locally oriented, and source from local people and local growers. One of the things that we're beginning at the moment is doing bulk food buying and try to be more conscious of where we get those things from. So we've only just begun so we've bought some 60 litre containers for grain and stuff like that. Managed to source organic wheat that's only 230 k's away. Stuff like that is all part of that design to try and attempt to have a lower impact.

I feel really pleased when I can sit down to a lunch or a meal that has been primarily derived from my garden ... there's so many elements of satisfaction in that.

Bonnie talked about dumpster diving, the practice of rescuing wasted food from supermarket and other shop bins and using it or sharing it. Echoing her thoughts from earlier on, dumpster diving for her is not only about reducing waste and food costs, there is an amount of inherent pleasure in it.

I'm pretty passionate about dumpster diving and feel like the way our society's structured at the moment there's a heck of a lot of waste and using that waste which is, actually a lot of it is really good food ... it's good. Obviously our costs of living becomes a lot less and there's less food going into landfill and I just find it really fun.

Peter spoke about growing some of their own food and using the simple resources they had to grow and prepare food:

We try and grow some of the food if we can. We've got chickens. Depending where you are you know it's good to be able to get food off the land. In winter time we've got a nice little fire place in the lounge room here which not only keeps the place warm but we do a lot of cooking on it, and we're able to get wood around the place.

Peter's also added another perspective, emphasising that food was a vehicle for health and relationships rather than a priority in itself:

I guess we try not to spend too much time sort of worrying about trying to eat luxury food, but try not to make food the important thing. I mean what's food for? For keeping yourself healthy and for sharing and celebrating with other people

It was notable that at four of the homes that I visited for the interviews, I was given some home-cooked food of some description – a pizza made completely from vegetables from the community garden next door, some home-made biscuits, a chocolate cake, and some home-made soup with some hand-made bread.

The food practices described were not only important for their better ecological impact or saving of money or minimising of waste. Very often, they resulted in greater pleasure, satisfaction or health – Bonnie and her dumpster diving, Harry and Rose and their home-grown food, Peter and his fireplace. Again, the multiple links and benefits of the practices are evident.

The depression

The two older interviewees had both experienced childhood during the depression of the 1930s. Reflecting back to Chapter two, the Depression was raised as a topic because of some particular research into the way the Depression experience was described by many who had lived through as not only a traumatic event, but also as one which was character-building, and involved a great deal of positive communal relations and actions. This interview wasn't specifically about the Depression, so our discussion was not detailed, but Rose and Ian both made comment, not about the positive communal relations, but about how they saw their upbringing in those circumstances as an advantage in aiming to live simply. Rose said the following:

My mother was raised in a very poor part of London. People were put out into the street with 6 children and snow on the ground because they hadn't paid the rent, that kind of thing so it was very much part of their lives. But it hasn't been difficult for me Cameron at all. I've probably never been a great spender of money. It's always astonishing to think that people want to know about something that was just life 50 years ago.

Ian expressed some similar sentiments about the benefits passed onto him from his upbringing:

Well, I think living fairly simply is an important thing in this time. We've got more affluence now than the world has ever known. And to talk living simply, for people brought up in affluence, is hard. It was easy for me, going through the depression. That was our way of life. It was the way I was brought up, but it is harder for the people who are growing up in this era.

Simplicity and complexity

There was a great depth and complexity in much of what the respondents spoke about. Systems that people have created to grow their own food, to be more energy efficient, or in sharing resources with others, can be quite complex. Some of our conversations revolved around the various complexities of soil and compost and creating truly local food systems. Others were about the intrinsic complexity of seeking to live more communally and with more conscious recognition of the need to share resources and time. A number of interviewees recognised that there are difficult choices to be made in aiming to live simply, about travel to visit relatives and friends or about spending money on making houses more energy and water efficient. Many recognised that making good decisions about what is needed to live justly in a modern world is not always clear-

cut. As was discussed in chapter two, issues of wealth and poverty are complex – doing justice is not simply about moving material resources from one place to another, and situations of material poverty must not always be described in deficit terms. Also, many decisions made by interviewees are taken on ethical grounds regarding issues constantly open to challenge and argument.

Dave spoke about the role that needs and wants play in life and the dilemmas faced in deciding how these apply to various possessions they have:

What do we need? We need warmth, shelter, food ... nothing much. All the rest sort of is wants, and some of the wants do seem to make sense to function well in our society and others don't add any joy or happiness or effectiveness to, to life. We are early in that journey, because as soon as you talk about needs and wants, I think about my kayak collection, which is clearly not a need. So, how do we do that?

In his article 'Poverty of Morality', Daniel Miller argues that despite the negative ramifications of over-consumption, there is still a great deal of inherent good in material things.¹¹⁰ He suggests that it is too simplistic to assume that consumption is just mindless, arguing that people buy, use and keep things for many good reasons, often for the benefit of other people in their family, friendship group and beyond. It is true, talk of mass consumption can ignore the fact that people do buy things for many reasons, some of them well thought out, selfless and which improve life significantly for themselves and for others.

In the above quote, Dave mentions his kayak collection. He owns a number of types of kayaks, collected over a number of years. Paddling is a sport which he has been involved with for a long time, which brings him a lot of joy and helps keep him fit, has been part of his employment, and in which he has been involved at working with young people through recreational and adventure activities. Owning kayaks is not a basic need for Dave, which he recognises, but they fulfil a significant role in his life.

This discussion brings to mind questions about what is really at the core of simple living. Does true simple living involve stripping back completely all our material possessions so that we only have what we need for survival? Or perhaps, as well as the practicalities of aiming to live with less, it is to a large degree about how possessions are viewed and the way in which simplicity can bring a more critical attitude to acquisition.

¹¹⁰ Miller, D. (2001) p230

Simplicity need not be a complete rejection of possessions or even of wealth, but a rejection of continual acquisition as a goal, and a compulsion to earn, spend and consume without limit or criticism. Particular possessions may well fulfil a vital role for people in their personal or communal life, and are not necessarily contrary to a simple living ethos. Even amongst the seven interviews there was variation in what they owned – some had no car, some had one or two in a household. Some people's houses were very small, some were bigger.

Aristotle taught about the good life as the 'acceptance of limits' and modern attempts to live simply are a way of trying to redefine those limits in a society that some see has just gone too far with consumption. The simplicity ethos of those who were interviewed played a key role for many of them in making judgements about what those limits actually are.

Bonnie spoke about the practical complexities inherent in her food practices:

I mean just for example, in the way I cook at the moment, a lot of the things that I do, I might start the day before, soaking grains, or flour or beans or whatever, as opposed to putting a TV dinner in the microwave, so its, yeah, for me I think it's a lot more work trying to live an existence that is simpler. It's more complex.

Tammy had a similar experience:

I have to put a bit more thought into my meals, in order to not have to spend a fortune. Have to do a bit more baking and that kind of stuff. So in a way a bit more thought and energy goes into living it in a way. But it's still kind of freeing.

It may be a temptation for some, especially if they have little first hand experience of those who aim to practice simplicity, as envisaging that people doing so are some how 'opting out' of society, are perhaps taking an easy option of working less or maybe they are a bit lazy or deficient in some way. Nothing could be further from the truth, among this group of people at least – people have in fact 'opted in' to more community involvement, taken on learning new skills, and sometimes more menial or physical work, and in the end are more satisfied by their efforts.

DIFFICULTIES

While people mostly spoke with passion and positivity about their simplicity, their stories were not without struggle. Certainly, for many of them simple living meant more complex decision-making, sometimes more physical work, and a measure of inconvenience. There was also an amount of tension brought to relationships with others who have made different lifestyle choices.

Dave talked about the contradiction of attempting to retrofit houses to make them more energy and water efficient, which is also a significant financial investment:

Now there's a first contradiction of many I'm sure. You can spend a whole stack of money on making your house somehow fit better with your simplicity ethos.

He also talked about the wearying nature of having to constantly weigh up decisions about buying things:

It's also mentally wearying to be continually thinking about it. Some days you just go down the shops and do your shopping and you think I just can't be bothered today going through every item I pull off the shelf and thinking, is this a need, has this been done in a fair trade way, I just want to go to Woolies in half an hour and get my food. So it comes at a cost to keep these things in the forefront of your mind.

Harry expressed a similar sentiment:

It's difficult to be conscious about every decision of consumption that you have. We don't beat ourselves up too much and try and make those decisions when we can.

Bonnie talked about her 'really wanting' to travel overseas, but being aware of the seriously negative environmental impacts of regular plane flights.

Tammy talked about some of the challenges presented in social relations because so much interaction and conversation seems based around purchases and other consumption:

I'll be waiting outside the classroom for my child with other mums and most often the topic of discussion is about a purchase they're about to make or they've just made, so a lot of conversations are based around things, like someone's new car they've just got or

recently there was a fashion show that a group of them all went to ... they're not things that I'm that interested in, although I have to feign interest sometimes just to maintain friendships. So you do feel like a bit of an oddball in terms of trying to explain to people that that doesn't really interest you and if you were to do that I feel like it would make them feel like you were judging them.

Some people made observations about their relationships with family and friends and the tension that decisions of this nature might bring to those relationships, especially with those who find it difficult to identify with the practices and philosophies of simplicity.

I think it's very easy to become self-righteous about it and to be seen by your friends and family as judgemental of them. But how do we cope when we go to their house and we just see wastage everywhere in how they live – their over-consumption. It's just incredible.

I think the decisions we've made, particularly to do with economic security over the long term, have been difficult for our parents. But they've come to respect that more, and even be involved in our lives a lot more in that respect, like my dad helps out in the community garden now.

Most of my family don't quite understand it. I feel they think that we live this way because we can't afford to live better, and it's hard to explain that that's not why. She wouldn't say it in so many words, but I think one of my sisters thinks that we're a bit lazy for not working full time and for me not working – it's kind of implied that we could be earning more money and doing more if we were both working, so that's kind of hard ... we just live very differently.

The potential for fostering greater community connection through simple living has been emphasised several times in this paper. It should also be acknowledged that simple living presents what can be a bold challenge to fairly mainstream thinking. Tension in some relationships is perhaps almost inevitable, and many of those interviewed spoke about those tensions and the way in which making a practical stand against over-consumption can put them at odds with family members and peers.

This was not in a sense of wanting to make other people feel guilty about their own consumption or being actively judgemental. On the contrary, there was concern that they didn't want others to feel judged by their actions or words. This may be reflective of the character of the people

interviewed, but also a realistic assessment that while they may yearn for change in the lives of others, overt and personal judgement is counter-productive, and likely to be destructive to relationships, sometimes the very relationships that people are trying to build.

Both Harry and Tammy made comments about these ideas:

I guess the main impact and one that I'm usually conscious of trying to limit is that people feel judged, just by virtue of our difference, my difference ... it's people having a self – observation in the midst of my lifestyle change.

I don't talk about my thriftiness with people who don't get it because they just think you're judging them.

Tension in relationships was the struggle that seemed the most troubling for some of those interviewed, and this highlights the complex nature of what people are trying to do. Making lifestyle decisions that go against mainstream trends is difficult, and a cause of doubt and anxiety for some. The strength of conviction of those interviewed was very evident and this plays a part in their ability to try and work through and overcome those tensions, while still standing by their philosophies and practices of simplicity.

A BROADER INFLUENCE

Interviewees gave a range of ideas about how their decisions and actions might affect those around them. Bonnie talked about the interesting role their household played in the lives of local children:

Probably the people that it has the most impact on and certainly who comments on it the most, is actually the local children. They're the ones that are most interested in that we have chooks and that we have fruit trees and that we grow food and that we don't have a TV. I'm really passionate about just educating children around that kind of stuff, and just introducing them to something different. I think children I noticed in this neighbourhood, as opposed to where I grew up, are just starved for interactions with the natural world.

Dave talked a few times about the connection between some of the simple living practices they have tried to introduce and how that ties in with life in neighbourhoods:

I think connected to a simple living notion is the return to the village, the reconnection of your neighbourhood and when we moved to that street we've sort of tried to build community a little bit. It's a long long way off ... there are still some very lonely isolated people living in our street, but there's people who actually do notice that now.

Harry hoped that their household lives may be compelling enough for others to find inspiration and ideas for themselves:

And so I really long for that possibility of being able to model something that does represent real change, and is compelling for people and they can see ways in which they might be able to incorporate that and it results in something that is more satisfying for them.

Peter reflected on time spent in another place overseas, the importance of communal relationships in that place, and wanting to somehow translate that experience to here:

You come to the city and it's pretty easy to live a pretty individual life. We lived in Tonga for 2 years through Australian Volunteers and lived on this tiny island – and I guess the interpersonal stuff was just really important. I think that here, we'd like to think that we've got time for those important things in life.

Bonnie spoke especially about people in poorer communities being able to be part of community change that is less consumer based and more sustainable:

I don't want to see people because they don't have money be left behind in kind of the green revolution kind of stuff because they can't afford to get solar panels on their roof or whatever it is, yeah really important to take folk who already have it the toughest with us as well.

Much of what is said here links with what has been written earlier about the ability of personal action to have impacts well beyond individuals. Even in the examples given in these quotes above - through educating children about sustainable lifestyle alternatives, through lessening isolation in the suburbs, through bringing learning about relationships from another culture to the Australian context, through modelling a lifestyle that is less consumption based but more satisfying, simple lifestyle decisions can make genuinely good contributions to positive community functioning, and have an ability bring new ideas to others about how life might be more satisfying and whole.

'A pair of shorts' – a metaphor

Peter spoke a lot about life priorities and being allowed to focus on what is 'most important in life'. A particular story from his time as teacher in a remote community in Western Australia helped him explain:

I always remember this guy, one of our neighbours, I saw him get into a truck one day with a pair of shorts on and the truck was going to Kalgoorlie. And that's all he had, a pair of shorts. He jumped on the back of the truck and we never saw this guy for 3 months, and then later he came back from Alice Springs and he's done this big circuit from Wingellina to Kalgoorlie, across to Port Augusta up to Alice Springs and back to us. And I've often thought about that and thought, in one sense it was a good little reminder of simplicity and thought well, extended family helped out and it showed well what are the really important things in life.

In a sense, 'travelling light' is a useful metaphor for simple living. Those who travel light have less impact on the world around them, they take up less space and use less resources. Travelling light also holds possibilities for reliance on others, for sharing and the fostering of relationships of all sorts, within families and between strangers. The 'really important things in life' can mean any number of things, but the stories relayed through the interviews showed a group of people for whom those 'important things' do enormous good work towards bringing about a human community which values nature, fairness and wholistic well-being.

WHAT I LEARNED FROM THE INTERVIEWS

So then, how is it best to summarise what I learned from the interviews? What was most strongly evident?

Well, as described, there was an overwhelming feeling of personal satisfaction present in a variety of incarnations – people enjoying the fruits of their lifestyle practices, having more time for relationships, feeling they are contributing towards making the world fairer and more sustainable, and feeling calmer and less cluttered. There seemed no doubt that these feelings make an immensely valuable contribution to people's personal well-being. As was written previously, personal satisfaction was not a motivation but an outcome. It was evident that people took on these practices not out of selfishness, but largely out of a sense of servanthood - a yearning to try and live

out their own lives in a way that made a difference to others. These are differences made to people in their own street, to local schools and other community organisations, and to family members and strangers. Also, they identified practical ways they were able to make broader differences. They are able to give more of their own money away to help alleviate poverty in other places and to fund various community ventures. They aim in a variety of their own ways to preserve the natural environment rather than exploit it, to create less landfill, to use less energy and fossil fuels, to grow and eat organic or locally grown food and generally just be more connected to nature. A clue to the satisfaction described is perhaps the knowledge that a great deal of human well-being stems not from satisfying ourselves, but from what we are able to do for others.

The time and support that these people offer to the lives of others was a clear theme. These are people able to spend significant time with their own children, who are able to be involved in formal and informal voluntary work and are meaningfully engaged in relationships with those around them in all sorts of ways – helping run a local community garden, having neighbour's children feeding their chickens and helping with backyard tasks, having time to spend with neighbours, and talking with others about practical ways to live more environmentally. Of course, simple living is not some kind of prerequisite for undertaking these types of activities. Many other people who may not consider issues of simplicity important at all, can do voluntary work, spend time with their children and neighbours and serve local communities in all sorts of ways. However, it is evident that the people interviewed in this study feel very enabled to undertake a lot of these relational activities because of their lifestyle decisions. This research doesn't argue that others don't necessarily do this, but that those seeing simple living as a priority, certainly do.

It is also evident that aiming to live simply is an endeavour full of difficult choices and struggles. Many of those involve dilemmas about how to sustain good relationships with others who see the world differently, particularly in families, but also in other social situations. Those involved seem very aware these tensions and ambiguities, and the predictable place they hold in a lifestyle that is largely at odds with mainstream thinking. Some interviewees also identified a kind of weariness from having to constantly think ethically through decisions, and the complexity of thinking required to challenge themselves about what they really need to possess. Many approaches to simple living also involved quite practical complexities, and it was impressive to hear about the intricacies of people's sourcing or production of food, about use of practical skills in building, making, repairing and recycling, and employing technology and innovation to reduce energy and water use.

Those thinking that simple living is characterised by some kind of laziness or 'opting out' from society would be misguided. At least considering the stories told here, these are people who work hard at trying to live a life they consider to be absolutely necessary for a better and fairer society, a sustainable ecology and a more full life for themselves. Their motivations and rationale for what they do is strong, and fuelled by a wanting to respond strongly to injustice and the apparent emptiness of a consumption-based society, and for some of them a deep faith that sustains that motivation.

To be truthful, the importance of food was an unexpected theme. Perhaps because it is a central sustaining feature of life, it is a good first stop for lifestyle change. In a way, growing your own food, eating organic food that others have grown, sourcing food that is locally grown, buying fair trade food – all those food practices, are somewhat of a symbol. They can form the beginning of an attempt at changing lifestyle practices to try and make a positive impact on the lives of others and our own lives through habits of consumption. Humans need to consume food, although obesity statistics indicate that many societies need to change their eating habits. However the discussions about food were not so much about consuming less, but about how food systems can be changed to lower ecological impact, to be just and fair to others, to enable neighbourhood connections and to be healthier. What this shows is that simplicity is not just about using less, but about being mindful, ethical and creative in processes of consumption and in fact life in general, to aim to have a positive impact on neighbourhood relations, community and personal well-being and on the bigger stages of global injustice and environmental sustainability. Food practices are a start to that process and those ideals can be translated to many sections of life - energy use, household possessions, transport, employment and parenting arrangements.

Taken as a whole, and considering these folks are just a small sample of the many stories of simplicity being lived out in our community, these lifestyle practices hold enormously good possibilities for positive community change. It is no easy road, considering the tensions and ambiguities they face, but all of those interviewed would seemingly consider their efforts at simple living extremely necessary and ultimately worthwhile. Overall, described here is a small group of West Australians from different generations and in different family circumstances who are intentionally living in ways that provide great benefit to their own health and happiness, who make valuable contributions to their household and neighbourhoods, and work towards living within earth's fragile limits.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINAL REMARKS

At the beginning of this paper, I asked questions about whether material simplicity had something genuinely good to offer modern Australian society. Admittedly, this is a very open question. It depends a great deal on your interpretation of what is good, and on how you view modern Australian society. Further, it is difficult to be scientific about such matters. The best we can do is to be honest about some of the issues facing modern Australian society and be critical and creative about how we respond to those. Also we can take detailed account of movements, some of which may challenge mainstream thinking, which can make a contribution to positive personal and community change. Simple living is one of those movements.

Personal and community well-being have been a constant theme of this paper. The writing and research of others examined in chapter two illustrated how over-consumption seems to have failed to deliver in this regard. High rates of mental illness, rising inequality, Indigenous disadvantage and community mistrust are concerning trends for modern Australia. Chapter two also highlighted the contrasting way in which simple living has much to offer personal and community well-being, gives creative and legitimate alternatives to the environmental and social damage of over-consumption and provides a way of working towards justice in a very unequal world.

Chapter three, through the stories of those interviewed, has highlighted similar themes. The interviewees confirmed much of the theoretical discussion of chapter two. People of three generations spoke about the personal satisfaction they experience as a result of their simple living endeavours and the way their choices help them contribute to projects that alleviate poverty and improve community. Simplicity gave them practical ways to protect the environment and to build better community connections in their own ways and places. The stories also brought a layer of complexity to this discussion. The interviews revealed clearly the many tensions and choices involved in living out practices of simplicity in their families and communities, and the many creative and practical ways that people sought to do so, in their kitchens, backyards and in larger community ventures.

Whether it is through the extra time and satisfaction found by those choosing a materially simpler life, the meaning found amidst struggle, or the relational richness present in many situations of material poverty, it is evident that lack of possessions and material comfort is not always a great trauma, but in fact may be one path to some measure of personal peace and a meaningful life. This thinking does not justify the existence of extreme poverty in which so many people experience great pain and powerlessness. Simple living has something to offer here also. Simple living

provides a practical way of reducing unnecessary waste and at least potential for more fair distribution of resources. Addressing extreme poverty is more than only moving material resources from one place to another, but removing the barrier of unjustified consumption and greed, and instead focussing on contributing time, funding and energy to community tasks that alleviate poverty and suffering, is a crucial part of this task. As was discussed in chapter two, simple living at its best seeks both solidarity with the poor – to learn from them and be like them, and justice for the poor, so that folks who are otherwise bound by terrible hardship might be set free.

Due to the small scale of this research project, only seven people were interviewed and while what was presented here has provided a worthwhile discussion, there is still much more scope for exploration. Not all of what they spoke of has been written about here, and even the material that was deserves even further analysis. Possibilities for further research in this field are vast, both in examining further the literature and philosophies that show the value of simple living in our current age, and in examining the stories of the people who bring these ideas to life. There are many more stories that deserve to be told.

It makes sense really, that simple living has a lot to offer our current times. Our world is faced by an environmental crisis requiring massive change to the way we consume resources. Poverty and inequality are a persistent reality. If we are critical enough, modern Australian society is diminished by genuine social concerns about health, well-being and community. Here lies a viable alternative – a movement that encourages less resource use, enables generous sharing, fosters better relationships and promotes environmental and social justice. It is a movement also that involves struggle and dilemma, and it seems, an amount of courage.

It is a movement suited to our times.

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