

CHAPTER ONE

Voluntary Simplicity: A Cultural Movement

People in the voluntary simplicity movement are concerned about environmental degradation, critical of conspicuous consumption and “careerism,” and dissatisfied with the quality of life afforded by full participation in mass consumer society. Simple livers, as participants in voluntary simplicity are often called, maintain that a voluntary simplicity lifestyle is more fulfilling for the individual, creates a stronger community, and decreases environmental damage.

People in the movement believe that overconsumption is promoted by the dominant culture, which is materialistic, competitive, and destructive of the planet and human fulfillment (Elgin 1993a; Andrews 1997; Dominguez and Robin 1992). Simple livers say that there is no built-in or culturally established concept of “enough” in the dominant culture, which implicitly accepts a goal of working long hours for a wage under conditions that are often deadening and stressful. Dominguez and Robin and many in the movement maintain that work for pay for someone else is rarely fulfilling and undermines authenticity. They believe the economic drive for profit above all else promotes conspicuous consumption detached from any true measure of quality of life and long-term consequences. Participants in voluntary simplicity say they prefer to determine what is enough for themselves and earn only what they need to get by.

The voluntary simplicity movement offers ideology and techniques for arriving at a personal definition of what is enough and promises a more fulfilling life to those who consume in more sustainable ways, reduce clutter, and minimize activities they don't find meaningful. Simple livers try to get by on less conspicuous consumption and less income from waged work in order to buy time for the well-being of the global environment, and for themselves to pursue more fulfilling and pleasurable activities.

The alternative values and practices simple livers use to describe how they define voluntary simplicity provide insight into why these mostly educated, middle-class, white women and men ranging in age from their twenties to their eighties say they embrace voluntary simplicity, attend simplicity meetings, and seek to bring their use of money and time into alignment with their values.

What Is Voluntary Simplicity?

These are the accounts of some of the people in the movement about what voluntary simplicity is and why they practice it. Kevin, a rosy-complexioned, grey-bearded man in his seventies, who wears tan shorts and a T-shirt, fixes his intense blue-grey eyes full of a gentle kindness on mine and leans back against the wooden bench he and his wife Nita built into the compact basement apartment they share in the house Nita owns. He crosses his muscular arms across his chest and says,

Well, the basic purpose [of voluntary simplicity] is to live more simply, live closer to the earth, and live simply enough so it takes very little to actually earn where you are so you can spend your time doing things you like to do rather than things that become the mandates that you do. I simplified my life, I stripped down, but I felt great, stripped down to my bike, had no money, but big deal. My security was not in my wallet, my security was in my head. And I found this was an easy way to live, the availability of just about everything was there no matter what you do. This is the way I've lived since 1970.

Nita, her reddish brown hair parted in the middle and pulled back neatly into a bun at the nape of her neck, is a youthful sixty-two. She wears a white blouse and one of her own creations, a full skirt with intricate embroidery around the bottom. As she leans forward

over her knitting, eager to share why she practices voluntary simplicity, her dangling earrings sway gently. Her bright blue eyes and freckled face are as expressive of her strong feelings as are her words. She speaks rapidly and forcefully as she explains,

One of the things I tell people [is], “I am founding mother of Over Extended Anonymous.” And I say, “If I was just doing things I didn’t want to do I would cut them out. But everything I’m doing is stuff I really want to do.” For me I think it’s being in a place that is not any bigger than you need physically or philosophically. I think some people need big space but I’m not one of them. Getting the stuff pared down so you have what’s important to you. But it’s not like you’re taking care of and herding a bunch of stuff that does not matter. And using time in a way that seems really interesting and kind of fulfilling and appropriate. So you’re not spending a lot of either time and money doing stuff you don’t really want to do. I think it is a cumulative process. I can get up in the morning and there is a lot I want to do, and need to do, but there is not much that I have to do! So I think that’s sort of nice!

Emily sits across the table from me in her sunny dining room in the three-bedroom home she owns in a working-class neighborhood. A bowl of fresh cherries picked from the cherry tree in her back yard graces the space between us on the table. The pink sweatshirt she has on emphasizes her white skin and rosy cheeks framed by short, smooth, dark brown hair. She cradles a cup of coffee in her hands, a quizzical look on her face as she mulls over how to explain why she opted out of corporate employment in her early fifties to adopt simple living. She speaks slowly and thoughtfully,

I feel like what it is giving me now is ownership of my life and not just in a freedom-from-job aspect—that’s sort of a minor, or maybe a medium part of it, but it is thinking about your life in new ways. And once you think about how to spend your money, I think then, for me, it opened up how I do a lot of other things, what possessions I have around, the people that I associate with, and it brought more of my other values to the fore.

Fred is clearly tired when we meet at seven o’clock in the evening. He says the work he does installing portable toilets is so physically

taxing to him at forty-one, that he knows he can't keep doing it much longer. Fatigue lines his forehead and the creases around his soft brown eyes where they meet the sides of his brown beard. His shoulders slope over the table where he sits holding a glass between his hands on the table. We are in a restaurant where he wanted to meet for the interview. He felt the room he rents would be too cramped for comfort. As he warms to the topic some of the fatigue appears to drop away and he raises his shoulders and smiles a wry smile, sighs, tilts back his head, and tells me why he embraces voluntary simplicity:

Well I guess being part of it for me is . . . it's become cliché: "Live simply so others may simply live." So it is that mix of environmentalism, but it is also corporate warfare [warfare against corporate interests promoting conspicuous consumption]. I'm very much inclined not to buy into "I'm a good person if I bought a brand new car, but if I didn't I'm not." More or less it is just a matter of self-respect. I don't know that I could live much differently and be at peace with myself. For me it's a place that I'm not a weirdo.

Barbara's dark brown eyes flash with the memory she is preparing to recount to me and as she swings her head quickly to glance at her husband Lewis, her long, straight, dark brown hair arcs out around her shoulders. Barbara and Lewis, who are both twenty-seven, often talk into each other's comments, one picking up where the other left off. At the time they decided to adopt voluntary simplicity Barbara was working on her Ph.D. in sociology and Lewis was completing his master's in environmental economics and debating whether to continue for a Ph.D. Barbara ended up deciding not to complete writing her dissertation and Lewis decided not to go on for a Ph.D. Instead, they decided to get jobs and invest in rental property. They aim to quit work in a few years and do volunteer work and other things they enjoy. Barbara's face is scrubbed clean and she has a peachy pink glow beneath her skin running from cheek to cheek across her nose. She is wearing a dark green, long-sleeved cotton top and jeans. She is barefoot and her long, slim legs are stretched out straight as she sits on the sofa in the living room of their home, a unit in the triplex they have bought. The door to the living room is open and a gentle breeze flows through the room as a neighborhood cat wanders in. Barbara says,

We were both in [graduate programs preparing for teaching and research in academia] for lifestyle. [We thought] this would be

a nice way to work. We get all this time off in the summer and you don't have to be so stressed out in the day. But what we saw all around us was people who were stressed and did not have always fulfilling family lives. It took a long time before they got to the point where they could enjoy and relax. And we are not passionate enough about our subject. It wasn't enough.

Lewis, sitting in a chair opposite the coffee table from Barbara, nods his head as he intently follows what she is saying. His hair is dark brown, almost black, and closely cropped and he is clean shaven. He, like Barbara, is medium height and appears physically fit. He wears a navy blue cotton top and sweatpants without shoes. His legs are stretched out in front of him and crossed at the ankles. His expression is one of excitement, a smile on his face, his dark brown eyes alight with the memory of the moment as he shares the following account of what happened when he and Barbara read *Your Money or Your Life* (YMOL)¹ a popular simple living self-help book, together:

We started to get really excited 'cause we started to think, well hey, we have choices, and we have options and you know maybe I don't need to finish this program that I am so miserable in. What I see as the goal, our version is not to live the simple life right now but to build the foundation for a simple life right now. And by reducing our need for material things through conscious decisions—that is what is going to help us do that. But in general I think it is about reducing personal resource requirements as far as material possessions so you have time for yourself and hopefully time for others. I see simplicity benefiting the individual and society itself. Right now most people in our lives are so wrapped up in being so busy without any end in sight. And I think a lot of people tell themselves they are going to get beyond this stage and they won't be so busy. But why is that true? It's not, unless you have a plan. And we have a plan!

Barbara picks up where Lewis left off and adds,

For us it means, not that we are having a simple life right now, but that we have a goal. And we have just changed things around, yesterday. We think we're going to live in cohousing and we just bought a lot. But really all along the goal is to get through working so we can have time. For us the pivotal part

of YMOL is well, we don't have to work forever. We saw each other on and off all day in school and that is why we got married. We want to see each other. So for us it may be when we say "simplicity," we don't know exactly what the future will hold. It may evolve.

Wearing overalls, Brad sits with his arms outstretched on the table in front of him in the kitchen of the house he, his partner Jane, and friend Sandra rent near the campus where they are studying. He takes a deep breath as he prepares to outline why he chooses voluntary simplicity as a way of life. He has a direct gaze and a presence that makes me feel he is comfortable with himself and with me. At twenty-one he is nearing completion of his B.A. and planning to study sustainable agriculture in the future, aiming to have his own farm someday. He speaks looking directly at me, with no hesitation and with clear conviction and confidence in his voice:

The basic idea is to practice what we preach, to find out what you think, and to make all of your decisions based on that. To take a job that you really believe is doing the right thing. To the best of your ability, to cut down on your driving and your consumption, if you don't fully believe in these things. And to remove all the clutter that we have in modern society from your life so you can become a better person or become closer to what you actually want to do, so you get control. Self realized. The ideal would be to do what you want to be doing all the time.

Most of the people quoted above have been inspired by books and workshops on voluntary simplicity and all have participated in study groups organized to support participants in striving for the simple life. The study groups are often referred to as "simplicity circles" (Andrews 1997) by participants.

Unlike some alternative movements which advocate withdrawing from or rejecting the mainstream, the voluntary simplicity movement advocates remaining in contact with the mainstream in some ways, such as through volunteer work, property ownership, investment, and buying goods and services from locally owned businesses. But other aspects of the mainstream, such as conspicuous consumption and seeking status and meaning through waged work, are rejected. Many in the movement advocate involvement at the grassroots level, where they believe community building can best be accomplished. The circles,

workshops, literature, and networks—among those making meaning of their beliefs and practices through identifying themselves as practitioners of voluntary simplicity—support them in carrying the ideology and lived practices into the larger community.

The Voluntary Simplicity Cultural Movement

The ideas that are being worked on in the voluntary simplicity movement by people in circles and in books and the media draw on the dominant culture, earlier ideas, and cultures of resistance found in the environmental movement and to a lesser extent the feminist and civil rights movements, and diffuse through the culture. Voluntary simplicity encompasses a broad range of prescribed practices and is characterized by flexible and emergent ideology. Among participants, simple living is seen as a process, not something that one achieves as a stable state. This produces elasticity in terms of the range of practices present within the movement and gives insider status to those seeking to simplify as well as those who are closer to the ideals of simple living found in the how-to literature and described by simple livers.

Several of the core ideas of voluntary simplicity have currency with people outside of the movement. For instance, the belief that the planet's environment is endangered and that resources need to be conserved, the belief that work for a wage is not fulfilling and often requires people to do things they do not believe are right, the belief that society is unjust, and that social resources are not equitably distributed are all ideas found among people who are not part of the voluntary simplicity movement. Practices such as recycling, doing volunteer work, and buying locally grown food and goods extend well beyond those in voluntary simplicity as common practices.

Many of these ideas did not originate in the voluntary simplicity movement. Some voluntary simplicity ideas have origins that are quite old. Both Elgin (1993a) and Shi (1985, 1986) provide interpretations of the historical context of the voluntary simplicity movement. Shi traces the ideas of the movement back to the founding of the United States. Elgin emphasizes a coming together of a constellation of ideas that gained salience in the United States in the 1960s, including both Eastern and Western influences. Shi, an historian, emphasizes the importance of the experiences in the 1970s and 1980s in forming the movement. He discusses the work of Elgin (1993a) as linked with the “ecological simplicity movement” that emerged in those two decades.

The voluntary simplicity movement has brought ideas and practices together in a way that is distinctive and emergent. It is the power these ideas have in the cultural and economic context of contemporary Western society that indicates their sociological importance. Part of the power of the movement rests with the way it resonates with the thoughts and feelings of its participants and helps them to make meaning of the conditions of their lives as white women and men possessing cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984; Lamont 1992) that locate most of them in some significant ways as middle class in the late twentieth century in a patriarchal/capitalist United States of America.

This book provides insights into the ideas and experiences identified as significant by people trying to adopt or practicing voluntary simplicity today. It shifts the focus from a linear historical interpretation that centers on voluntary simplicity as primarily constituted of ideas, to the context of social change and the process of change that occurs in the lives of simple livers. Another reason this movement is sociologically important is because it raises issues more often implicitly than explicitly about how identities and groups (communities) are constructed and structured in relation to gender, race/ethnicity, and class hierarchies. Studying the voluntary simplicity movement offers a way of exploring these issues in the lives of the people involved in the movement.

The struggles of people in the movement to define themselves as worthwhile and good people and to establish practices that enable them to understand themselves to be living in keeping with their values result from social and cultural forces felt by others living under similar cultural and economic conditions. By asking how people's social identities (their biographies) are fashioned and altered over time (as they interact, put ideas into practice, and respond to the contexts in which they are located) and examining the role voluntary simplicity plays in the process, we can gain insight into the social nature of identity construction through an alternative lens. Studying simple livers allows us to understand one response to cultural and economic conditions and thereby to look at the cultural and economic conditions in a different way.

The voluntary simplicity movement does not formally recruit new members, imposes no strict guidelines or criteria for inclusion, has no officially sanctioned leaders, is not centralized or hierarchically organized, and is not aimed primarily at changing public policy. Schwalbe (1996) points to similar criteria, which characterize the mythopoetic men's cultural movement, as evidence that this movement is more cultural than social. Many participants are uncomfortable with the label

“movement” applied to voluntary simplicity but end up accepting it for lack of a better way of talking about it. Most people practicing voluntary simplicity view it as the practice of bringing one’s own personal values together with daily practice and maintain that it is through example that the movement will gain participants. Most disavow desire to indoctrinate others into thinking as they do relative to voluntary simplicity. For these reasons I choose not to refer to the voluntary simplicity movement as a social movement. It is a “loosely bounded” (Neitz 1994, 127) cultural movement that can best be understood through asking to what extent it is able to establish group boundaries and collective agents and whether people act as carriers of the values and practices of the movement.

The term “cultural movement” seems appropriate for the voluntary simplicity activities for several reasons. Those practicing voluntary simplicity view themselves as cultural change agents who will influence others to change by their example rather than through efforts to convert others. The alternative they say they represent is consistently defined against a construction of the dominant culture, particularly consumer culture. It is also responding to critiques of the dominant culture in less discursively direct ways. And perhaps most important the simple lives act as carriers of culture through circles and other networks in which they participate.

The more obvious sources for the development of a sense of group consciousness and for recruitment that supports the cultural movement are the simplicity workshops and support groups in which people in the movement often participate, and the movement literature that they read. In December 1997 there were 108 circles listed on the “Web of Simplicity” internet site, most in urban areas and most using either Andrews (1997) or Dominguez and Robin (1992) as guides for group meetings. In February of 1999, 218 study groups or circles were listed. In June of 2002, over 650 study groups were included in the database. The *Simple Living Journal* lists circles nationwide that have asked to be listed. The Seattle Phinney Neighborhood Association maintained records of known circles in the city until 1997. They discontinued updating the list because circles form and disband so frequently it was taking too much staff time to maintain the list. Any of these available records represent only a small percent of the total. The movement has resulted in circles forming in communities nationwide and in some other countries. Most circles use several specific readings that lead them to focus on a generally consistent constellation of concerns, at least initially.

Previous Research

Recently the movement has generated some interest among consumer economists and policy analysts who believe it offers useful prescriptions for reducing personal debt, combating environmental degradation, and influencing production practices that are more sensitive to long-term quality of life and sustainability (Goodwin, Ackerman and Kiron 1997; Schor 1998; Blanchard 1994). An excerpt of Duane Elgin's (1993a) quasi-scholarly work which describes the movement and advocates voluntary simplicity appears in *The Consumer Society*, a 1997 volume edited by Neva R. Goodwin, Frank Ackerman, and David Kiron. Elgin's chapter in this volume is titled "Living More Simply and Civilization Revitalization." It is drawn from a section of his book, *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That Is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich* (1993a). This appears to be the first published work to apply the name "voluntary simplicity" to this contemporary movement. Elgin adopted the term from Richard Gregg, a student of Ghandi's teaching who, in 1936, wrote a book titled *The Value of Voluntary Simplicity*. Responses to a survey questionnaire in *Co-Evolution Quarterly* in the summer 1977 issue provided data for Elgin's analysis of the movement. He argues that the data points toward a social trend that is gathering momentum and maintains that people practicing voluntary simplicity are "pioneers of an alternative way of living" (1993a: 109). His is an evolutionary theory of human life that incorporates the element of choice as central. His later work, *Awakening Earth* (1993b), is devoted to outlining the theory in more detail. In the late 1970s, when he gathered the data for *Voluntary Simplicity* and in 1981 when it was first published, he was employed as a social science researcher at Stanford Research Institute.

Elgin (1993a) found that most people involved in simplicity groups are white, middle class, and female. In a 1996 interview for the journal *Yes! A Journal of Positive Futures*, he indicated that women outnumber men in the movement two to one (van Gelder 1996). The survey data Elgin bases his findings on are limited to responses from subscribers to *Co-Evolution Quarterly*.

Etzioni (1998) draws from a range of secondary material about trends in contemporary society, including the works of Schor (1991), Elgin (1993a), and Ray (1997), among others, as well as media accounts of the voluntary simplicity movement, to support his assertion there is a broad social trend toward voluntary simplicity underway in affluent Western countries. He theorizes about the causes for the trend and

what its impacts may be, arguing that the search for alternatives to consumerism as the goal of capitalism is the driving force of the trend.

Etzioni identifies three variations of this trend. First, “downshifTERS” represent a moderate form “in which people downshift their consumptive rich lifestyle, but not necessarily into a low gear” (621). For example, they dress down or drive beat-up cars, but might also own a boat (622). Another group are “strong simplifiers who have given up high-paying, high-stress jobs as lawyers, business people, investment bankers, and so on, to live on less, often much less, income. These people give up high levels of income and socioeconomic status; one former wall Street analyst restricts his spending to \$6,000 a year” (624).² The third variation in the trend toward simplicity is the actual voluntary simplicity movement (625). Etzioni maintains that those in the simple living movement are the “most dedicated, holistic simplifiers” and “adjust their whole life patterns according to the ethos of voluntary simplicity” (625).

The focus of Etzioni’s research is not on the voluntary simplicity movement itself, but on the broad trend he believes it is indicative of. For this reason he does not explore the movement in any detail beyond pointing out that it is “a small, loosely connected social movement, sometimes called the ‘simple living’ movement (that) has developed, complete with its own how-to books, nine-step programs, and newsletters . . .” (626). He maintains, “The rise of voluntary simplicity in advanced (or late) stages of capitalism, and for the privileged members of these societies, can be explained by a psychological theory of Maslow (1968), who suggests that human needs are organized in a hierarchy. At the base of the hierarchy are basic creature comforts, such as the need for food, shelter, and clothing. Higher up is the need for love and esteem. The hierarchy is crowned with self-expression” (632). It is the highest level needs that he believes voluntary simplicity can contribute to fulfilling.

Simple livers too believe that adopting voluntary simplicity requires having experienced having enough. They also point out it requires arriving at the understanding that fulfillment does not come from having more material things or from work aimed at making money or gaining status. They don’t usually draw on Maslow’s theory but they claim that having experienced affluence enabled them to recognize its limitations. Still, questions about how simple livers come to make the choice to adopt voluntary simplicity remain unanswered by Etzioni. After all, most people in affluent Western societies who have the option of maintaining a consumerist lifestyle and holding status occupations don’t opt for voluntary simplicity.

Etzioni maintains that voluntary simplicity “if constituted on a large scale, would significantly enhance society’s ability to protect the environment” because simplifiers use far fewer resources than conspicuous consumers (638). He also asserts that the more “voluntary simplicity is embraced as a lifestyle by a given population, the greater the potential for realization of a basic element of social justice, that of basic socio-economic equality” (639). He writes further,

Voluntary simplicity, if more widely embraced, might well be the best new source to help create the societal conditions under which the limited reallocation of wealth, needed to ensure the basic needs of all, could become politically possible. The reason is as basic and simple as it is essential: to the extent that the privileged (those whose basic creature comforts are well sated and who are engaging in conspicuous consumption) will find value, meaning, and satisfaction in other pursuits, those that are not labor or capital intensive can be expected to be more willing to give up some consumer goods and some income. The “freed” resources, in turn, can be shifted to those whose basic needs have not been sated, without undue political resistance or backlash. (640)

Etzioni maintains that a combination of voluntary simplicity personal practice and policies that support basic needs for all can result in increased environmental sustainability and social justice. He does not look inside the movement critically or explore it from the participants’ perspective as I do. Those in voluntary simplicity, including those whom I interviewed, don’t generally talk about policy initiatives, instead focusing on the individual as the primary mechanism for change.

Etzioni’s knowledge of the movement comes primarily from Elgin and media accounts rather than from empirical analysis of the movement based on close observation. His focus is on theorizing broad trends, not on the detailed understanding of the cultural and economic processes as they shape and are shaped by groups of people in their daily lives. I, too, am interested, at least in part, in understanding the social forces at work in the lives of simple lives but this research is centrally concerned with understanding derived from the particular and grounded experiences of people in the voluntary simplicity movement. This research draws on analysis derived from close observation and participation in simplicity circles and workshops. I turn to the accounts of simple lives about why they adopt voluntary simplicity, and what

simple living practices are, as the starting point for understanding the significance of the movement.

Schor's recent work, *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting, and the New Consumer* (1998), includes a brief description of her interviews with a small but unspecified number of people in the voluntary simplicity movement in Seattle. She points to the movement as one that offers insights into how some middle-class people can resist overconsumption. Schor says she can't estimate the size or demographic composition of the movement with any accuracy but suggests that simple lives tend to be middle-class whites, have at least a college education, are more likely to be women, are unlikely to have young children living at home, and are more likely to be single, to have grown children, and to be "a little bit older."

Schor's primary concern is reducing debt and overconsumption among the middle class. She focuses on consumer culture and status consumption as pressures the middle class must resist and believes that if they can resist them, this will result in a slow change in corporate economic practices and divert cultural and social capital toward community service. Her assessment of the voluntary simplicity movement recognizes that it does not represent the society at large because, she says, simple lives have high levels of cultural and human capital which enable them to live on less. She also believes the absence of children from their lives is key to their ability to live as they do.

Schor's work came out not long after I began my research and confirmed the basic demographic features of the movement that my data suggests. But the usefulness of this data is limited for providing a sociological understanding of the movement or a sense of the reasons people come to participate in voluntary simplicity and the collective capacity of the movement.

Schor suggests that the voluntary simplicity movement may not last because simple lives may not be able to sustain their alternative lifestyles. She also believes they have the option of moving back into middle-class mainstream jobs whenever they want. But I find that the simple lifestyle is being sustained over time. I also suspect that most simple lives who have quit work probably could not move back into jobs that command salaries like they were making at the peak of their earning history after a few years out of the job market. None of the people I studied who had quit work had started working again in jobs similar to the ones they had previously held. One person who thought she might have to supplement her investment income at some point in the future made it clear she knew she could not get the kind of

management position she had held and further that it would not be her choice of work at all. She had several hobbies that offered the possibility of making some income and she planned to pursue that angle if she needed money at some point. In any case, my data suggests that most people in the movement still work or are preparing to work. Most people I interviewed did reduce and change their consumption patterns, but there is a wide range of incomes and expenditure among simple livers.

To understand the transformative capacity and emergent culture of the movement, and how participants are socially located, requires consideration of a complex set of interrelationships of patterns that unfold over the lifetimes of people in the movement. These patterns emerge out of gendered, raced, and classed biographical histories and within the economic and cultural contexts in which simple livers are located. Most people in the movement who participate in simplicity circles don't have children, but some do. It may be more difficult to practice voluntary simplicity with children. But not having children is not a central reason for either practicing or not practicing voluntary simplicity. This research suggests that there is a constellation of orientations, circumstances, experiences, and practices and choices that unfold over time to orient people toward the practice of voluntary simplicity. These include the following: being well educated; experiencing dissatisfaction in waged work; being concerned about the environment; being uncomfortable with a consumerist lifestyle; being involved in social, environmental, or care-taking types of work; close exposure to how less fortunate people live; being single; not having children; being vegetarian; and using alternative medicine. This is not a linear progression, but is a process better understood through ethnographic analysis. It involves a coming together of individual biographies; relationships with other groups, individuals, and institutions; and geographical, cultural, and economic contexts to bring participants to assume the alternative worldview and adopt the practices of voluntary simplicity.

Though identifying the characteristics held commonly by people practicing simple living can help us understand them a little better, it is grasping the patterns that characterize their lives, how the circles work, and the networks they have that provides a fuller picture of the movement and what distinguishes simple livers from other groups. The key here is to understand how the ideas and practices of simple livers are drawn from, or are responses to, the surrounding cultural and economic environment. Further, it is important to consider how the social location, gender, ethnicity, and other characteristics of movement participants may lead them to respond to the world in certain ways that are consistent with the voluntary simplicity movement.

Much of what has been written about the movement has come from readings of selected books in the how-to literature and from reading Schor's work. In an article in *The Nation*, Vanderbilt (1996, 20) bemoans the fact that five books in this genre, including Dominguez and Robin (1992), landed on the best seller list because their prescriptions are trivial. He views voluntary simplicity as a luxury afforded the affluent. He suggests that the voluntary simplicity literature is a money-making activity for the publishing companies and authors and is well suited to preparing the middle class for their downward mobility brought on by "turbo-charged capitalism, that high-tech market without borders where the number of well-paying corporate jobs shrinks and that of the lower-paying service jobs blooms," leading to a scenario where "the hourly earnings of the bottom 70 percent of all Americans will decline, even as the total national income continues to increase" (20).

In an article in *Tikkun*, Segal (1996) maintains, "Advocates of simple living are expressing a value orientation that overlaps in important ways with that of the politics of meaning. They reject the idea that the good life is to be found in ever-higher levels of consumption. They argue strongly against rampant careerism and materialism. They opt for less money, less work, more time with friends and loved ones" but they "view the attainment of a simpler, more meaningful life as an individual project, not as a matter of collective politics" (20). Segal argues that a political agenda needs to be coupled with the voluntary simplicity movement and its central objective would be a society in which fundamental human needs can be met at modest levels of income.

Utne Reader devoted much of a 1998 issue to "stuff," or the clutter that results from over consumption and, in an article titled "Don't Buy These Myths," cites voluntary simplicity as a movement "[f]or those willing, as Schor puts it, to 'struggle against the dominant cultural assumptions about consumption'" (Madison 1998, 54), but that won't work for society at large. The analyses provided in these books and articles are arrived at without benefit of a close look at simple livers and their activities from the inside.

The Scope of the Book

Looking inside the movement is important not only because it offers the opportunity to understand the meaning making of simple livers about why they adopt voluntary simplicity but because it simultaneously offers access to their detailed accounts of these matters for analysis.

Through attending workshops, participating in a circle over time, visiting circles, and doing in-depth interviews with simple livers, I aimed to capture who these simple livers are, why they embrace voluntary simplicity, how they live, and what sorts of changes voluntary simplicity makes in their lives and potentially more broadly. How people become part of the voluntary simplicity cultural movement and how their commitment to simple living develops are central concerns of this book as are broader concerns about how the meanings of modern society are contested and negotiated by the symbolic expressions and values as well as practices of groups such as these (Neitz 1994).

The sketching of the relationships between women and men, of how status is established, how inequality is addressed, how and what kind of community is established, and how identity is constructed through the movement provides a lens through which to view the larger culture and how change is shaped. What broad cultural and economic forces are simple livers responding to as they seek to define what constitutes being a person of worth, what a good community consists of, what relationships between people should be like, and how inequality is to be addressed? How do their locations within the matrix of class, gender, racial, and ethnic categories that structure the relative power of groups in contemporary Western countries shape voluntary simplicity?

This book provides a sense of the cultural significance of the voluntary simplicity movement through offering an understanding of what the people in the movement are doing—how they are using the movement and what they are making with it. While access to the leaders of the movement was available and I did attend a workshop by one of these leaders, Cecile Andrews, my focus is on the everyday people who read the how-to books, attend workshops, participate in circle meetings, and struggle to live simply.

The “loosely bounded” (Neitz 1994, 127) nature of the movement makes it important to look closely at four levels: “First we need to study the individuals who are carriers of the culture; second, we need to study the ideas and practices that make up the culture” (Hall and Neitz 1993, 239). Third, the circles, workshops, and other networks people participate in need to be studied. And fourth, the broader cultural and economic forces that constrain, support, and shape the movement must be considered (Benson 1977; Collins 1990, 1993). This book looks at each of these levels to provide a sociological understanding of the voluntary simplicity movement.

Methods

I used qualitative research methods of participant observation at simplicity circle meetings and workshops, intensive interviews with simple lives, and textual analysis of the popular “how-to” and inspirational literature aimed at helping and encouraging people who want to practice voluntary simplicity.

I conducted participant observation in two simplicity circles, one in Columbia, Missouri, which I attended weekly for its duration of seven weeks during the fall of 1998 and the other in Seattle, which I attended once. I also gained detailed knowledge of a third circle because I interviewed four people who were in the same circle.

I was a participant observer at three workshops attended by a total of forty-four people. The first was taught by Cecile Andrews at North Seattle Community College in Seattle, Washington, on June 29, 1998. Twenty-five people attended the workshop. I was a participant observer at a workshop on voluntary simplicity offered by Peaceworks, an organization in Columbia, Missouri, devoted to promoting peace, environmental sustainability, and social justice, in the fall of 1998 at the local public library that fourteen people attended. In the winter of 1999, as a volunteer for Peaceworks, I organized a workshop for women on voluntary simplicity at Unity Center in Columbia, Missouri, that five women, in addition to myself, attended. A women’s simplicity circle, of which I am a member, formed as a result of that workshop. I chose to be more a participant than an observer in this circle. But during the time I was writing this book I continued to think about the women’s circle I was part of in comparison to the circles that are the focus of this analysis. The women’s circle is not characteristic of simplicity circles, which are usually made up of both women and men and because all of the people in the circle, other than myself, have children. My experiences in this circle inform this analysis, especially in areas where there is a contrast with my experiences of the other circles I observed. Those contrasts are things I naturally have tried to understand.

In order to more fully understand the lives of group members, I conducted intensive interviews with fourteen people from three different circles, two in Seattle and one in Columbia, Missouri. I conducted interviews with ten people in Seattle and four people in Columbia. I designed sixty questions, many of them open ended, to guide the interview process. In most of the interviews I ended up not having to actually ask all of the questions because people discussed the areas I

wanted to learn about without being prompted. Overall the people I interviewed were eager to talk about voluntary simplicity. In two cases I interviewed couples together and those interviews lasted the longest. I interviewed myself using the same guidelines used in interviews with other respondents. This self-interview and reflexive notes provide some of the data used in writing the reflexive portions of the book but are not included in the data used to characterize the voluntary simplicity movement in the analysis.

Textual analysis of twenty of the recommended voluntary simplicity books and many of the materials frequently referenced by those in voluntary simplicity also informs the analysis. Three texts emerged as central for the movement, and became the central focus of textual analysis appearing in chapter 2, because they are the ones most often discussed by informants. These three texts are Joe Dominquez and Vicki Robin's national best seller, *Your Money or Your Life: Transforming Your Relationship with Money and Achieving Financial Independence* (1992); Duane Elgin's *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That Is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich* (1993a); and Cecile Andrews's *The Circle of Simplicity: Return to the Good Life* (1997).

Theoretical Contribution

In this research I employ "grounded theory" (Glaser and Strauss 1967) that builds theoretical understandings inductively from the data gathered in combination with theory elaboration that involves making use of theories that "highlight some aspect of the situation under study" (Burawoy et al. 1991). Employing the process of theory elaboration I bring theories to bear on the data and synthesize, integrate, and sometimes refine existing theories in order to provide the fullest understanding of the data. Theoretically this book represents a serious attempt to bring together Collins's (1990, 1993) call for empirical analysis that explores the coconstruction of race, class, and gender and analysis of cultural movements that includes reflexivity.

Much of the literature on race, class, and gender focuses on the influence of the dominant culture and tends to overlook the dynamic identity work of transformative cultural movements. At the same time much of the literature on cultural and social movements tends to overlook how the cultural work of movements is shaped by race, class, and gender as coconstructing elements. The works that do consider them often give salience to one over others.

The theoretical approach taken draws on socialist feminist theoretical standpoint epistemology and empirical research aimed at teasing apart the intertwined and coconstructed categories of gender, race, and class inequalities (Collins 1990, 1993; Harding 1986, 1987; Smith 1987a, 1987b, 1990) and more recent studies that have often emphasized gender, race, or class inequality and are sensitive to the influence of culture in reproducing and transforming inequalities (Halle 1984; Fantasia 1988; Frankenberg 1993; Schwalbe 1996).

Feminist standpoint epistemology asserts that what we know depends on the historical location and position in social hierarchy of the knower. Women's knowledge of the world is different from men's. And knowledge among women varies based on their class, race, ethnicity, and other characteristics. This approach turns away from the "master theory" conception that one explanatory theory can reflect the knowledge of all people. This is a relationist perspective that requires knowledge that offers recognition of difference. The challenge is to understand, respect, and value diversity yet identify commonalities in the experience of different groups. This book is reflexive in two ways. It explores both the significance of the social locations of simple lovers in shaping the voluntary simplicity movement and the significance of my social location in shaping the analysis of the movement in the book.

Another theoretical tradition this book links with is work that explores the role of social and cultural movements in social transformation. Here I draw generally on culture studies aimed at understanding the relationships of cultural movements (Neitz 1994, 1999, 2000, 2002) and social movements to social change and transformation (Johnston and Klandermans 1995; Laraña, Johnston, and Gusfield 1994; McAdam 1988). Of particular importance for this research is recent work that has incorporated gender analysis into the study of such movements (McAdam 1992; Mueller 1994; Neitz 1994, 1999, 2000; Schwalbe 1996; Seager 1993; Taylor 1996). This analysis is also linked to literature theorizing new ways of understanding class in the analysis of social and cultural movements (Halle 1984; Fantasia 1988). Most of these efforts have privileged gender, race, or class but have not addressed all three. This book extends this approach by including analysis of class, gender, and race in the study of the voluntary simplicity cultural movement.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 2 describes "The Ecological Ethic and the Spirit of Voluntary Simplicity," the dominant beliefs and ideal practices of voluntary

simplicity prescribed in the literature of the movement that are used by movement participants in their efforts to live simply.

Chapter 3, “Getting a Life: Constructing a Moral Identity in the Voluntary Simplicity Movement,” analyzes the struggles of people in the movement to define themselves as worthwhile and good people and the shared characteristics and experiences of people in the movement are discussed. In this chapter I explore efforts of participants to establish practices that enable them to feel they are living in keeping with their values, and to cope with the negative impacts they believe are caused by participation in conspicuous consumption and waged work by reducing their dependence on both in a process many in the movement refer to as “getting a life.” I find that consumption is a key tool used in constructing a voluntary simplicity moral identity.

In chapter 4, “Gendered Visions of Process, Power, and Community in the Voluntary Simplicity Movement,” I analyze what sort of community simplicity circles represent and what sort of community or collective capacity voluntary simplicity generates. Tensions in the movement are found primarily along gendered lines that stem from gendered conceptions of community, and the relationships that constitute community. These tensions are revealed to be linked to more complex tensions that involve gendered conceptions of what constitutes power and how to go about creating it, what a desirable community is, and how to build such community. Differences in the ideas of men and women in how the boundaries of the movement are defined, what a desirable community is, and how such communities can be built and the tensions that result are described. I argue that women’s and men’s contrasting understandings of autonomy and community and their differing relational styles and behaviors unfold out of the differing developmental experiences (Chodorow 1978) of white, middle-class women and men in the contemporary United States. I point to the possibilities and the limitations these tensions suggest for the collective capacities of the movement.

In chapter 5, “Looking into the Shadows: The Politics of Class, Gender, and Race/Ethnicity in the Voluntary Simplicity Movement,” I argue that the relative positions of power of simple livers, based on how they are situated within the matrix of power relations defined by gender, class, race/ethnicity, and nation as categories through which power is structured, shape the voluntary simplicity movement in significant ways. I find that how simple livers are situated at the intersections of gender, race/ethnicity, and class privilege interlinks with the ideological work of voluntary simplicity to make them more likely