

THE MOTIVATIONS AND CHALLENGES OF LIVING SIMPLY IN A CONSUMING SOCIETY

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **KELLY R. CHI: The Motivations and Challenges of Living Simply in a Consuming Society**

(Under the direction of Jan Yopp, Barbara Friedman and Stephen Birdsall)

Voluntary simplicity, a cultural movement that focuses on buying less and working less, blossomed in the mid-1990s as increasing numbers of Americans voiced dissatisfaction with excessive consumerism and working long hours. While the movement is not formalized today, many Americans do live simply, according to some of the simplicity literature. Practices range from buying only environmentally friendly products, following religious guidelines, or living in communal settings. Though the weakening U.S. economy makes simplicity an attractive or necessary way of life, the daily lives of simplifiers are underreported in the mainstream media. Since 2003, newspaper articles on simplicity have diminished, and existing articles lack context on the varied motivations and challenges of the simplicity movement and how some Americans live simply. This thesis and its series of articles aims to fill that gap by looking at simplicity research as well as the stories of local people in family and community settings.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction.....	2
Justification of Study.....	5
Literature Review.....	8
Research Questions and Methodology.....	27
Chapter 1: <b>Simplicity revisited</b> .....	30
Chapter 2: <b>Simple Living or Simply Living?</b> .....	41
Chapter 3: <b>Simple Living, community-style</b> .....	51
Reflections and Conclusions.....	59
Interviews.....	64
Bibliography.....	66

## INTRODUCTION

According to a special report by the United Nations a decade ago, human consumption was deflating environmental resources, creating tremendous waste, and worsening the inequality gap of resources between the rich and poor ("Overview: Changing Today's Consumption Patterns--for Tomorrow's Human Development", 1998). The effects of ever-increasing consumption, the report warned, would only worsen if people did not redistribute resources from high-income to low-income consumers and did not shift priority from consuming to gain status in society to consuming to meet basic needs.

At about the same time, in a national survey and focus group sessions throughout the U.S. commissioned by the Merck Family Fund in 1995, Americans agreed the culture of excessive materialism contributed to environmental damage. An overwhelming majority surveyed—88 percent—agreed that “protecting the environment will require most of us to make major changes in the way we live” (“Yearning for Balance: Views of Americans on Consumption, Materialism, and the Environment”, p. 5). But respondents were less likely to admit their own materialism. Far fewer—51 percent—agreed that their own buying habits had a negative effect on the environment, indicating that many people had broad concern for change but almost a not-in-my-backyard mentality. Still, the survey found nearly a third of respondents reported that in recent years they had “downshifted,” meaning they decided to earn or spend less, many stating they were seeking less stress and more time with family. In a 2004 survey commissioned by the

Center for a New American Dream, nearly half of respondents reported having downshifted, many for the same reasons ("New American Dream Survey Report").

The ideas of downshifting and living simply are not new and have been invented and reinvented since at least the beginning of recorded history. Countless religious and philosophical leaders, from ancient Greek philosopher Socrates to ancient Indian philosopher Buddha to Jesus in the Old Testament, have encouraged a life that embraces ideas and values rather than material goods (Shi, 1985b). The meaning of simplicity has shifted in different historical and cultural contexts. For example, in Taoism, a Chinese religious philosophy that originated around 3rd century B.C., simplicity is likened to an uncarved block of wood, something in its whole or pure state (Fowler, 2005). Simplicity could mean living an ascetic existence in the woods, as it did for Henry David Thoreau, a 19th century philosopher inspired by ancient Greek and Oriental writings (Shi, 1985b). Simplicity has been embraced paradoxically during the times of economic growth and amid a culture of growing consumption. In the 1950s and 1960s, for example, simple living as embraced by the “hippie” culture was motivated by war, racism, runaway technology, and corporate mentality (Shi, 1985b).

Crusaders throughout history have used simplicity to encourage people to consume less. During the 20th century especially, Americans became increasingly aware of the effects of consumption on environmental degradation, but in the last 10 years, it appears downshifting or moving to a less materialistic life has been sporadic.

So can Americans voluntarily shift to a life of simplicity to offset the ecological and social effects of rampant consumption? It seems that change hasn’t been and won’t be easy. The social and economic infrastructure in cities—for example, the limited

accessibility to public transportation in suburbs or the lack of affordable housing—are commonly cited impediments to living the simple life (Craig-Lees & Hill, 2002).

What does a life of simplicity look like amid a background of frenzied work and spending to increase social status? Though it can be viewed by some as anti-consumerist in an economic system built for ever-increasing production and consumption, simplicity is inextricably tied to consumerism. A body of marketing and psychology research aims to determine the demographics and practices of voluntary simplifiers (Craig-Lees & Hill, 2002; Shaw & Newholm, 2003). Simplicity for some involves the materialism of convenience, organization, and durability (Doherty & Etzioni, 2003; Grigsby, 2004). For some, it involves having bigger homes or more closets to hold clutter, or technology such as laptops and cell phones that help save time and make life easier. Since the 1990s, magazines such as *Real Simple* have published tips and, perhaps ironically, touted products for living more simply.

Though the ideal of simplicity is flexible, the true cultural movement tends to leave off the materialism of convenience. Even in the late 1990s, the movement was not new. Spiritual and environmental ideals behind simplicity were touted in how-to books, nine-step programs, and newsletters. Duane Elgin's 1981 book *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich*, which draws on the living traditions of religious and anti-consumerist philosophical groups, provided some momentum for movement. Other sources of media inspiring to the group: a PBS special called "Affluenza" in 1997 and a quarterly report published by the Center for a New American Dream called *Enough!* (Doherty & Etzioni, 2003). The report is now called "Balance."



What happened to voluntary simplicity? In 1977, Elgin and Mitchell wrote that the movement would not be a fad because “its roots reach far too deeply into the needs and ideals of people everywhere to be regarded as a transitory process to a passing societal condition” (p. 13). According to Elgin’s estimates, 20 million people in the U.S. fully subscribe to simple living (December 2007). Mainstream media coverage survived past the late 1990s (Erikson, 2000; Grigsby, 2004), but simplicity has likely fallen into the shadows of the green movement.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore if there exists today a more modern movement of simplicity through the stories of local people who were drawn into or have chosen to live a simpler life by virtue of religion or other factors. Their stories reveal anecdotally and realistically whether a long-term shift to simplicity is possible, sustainable, and even satisfying in a U.S. society that has increased its consumption and materialism. Such people have reared their children among the temptations of a consumer-driven society and have balanced their beliefs of simplicity within their communities.

## JUSTIFICATION OF STUDY

Climbing housing and health care costs, excessive materialism, and rising debt are making the American dream of financial independence harder to achieve. Last year, the number of house foreclosure filings jumped to an estimated 2.2 million, a 75 percent increase from 2006. Last December alone the rate of reported filings nearly doubled, according to online database RealtyTrac, Inc., capping off five consecutive months of increased filings (2008). In 2007, the average American household carried \$9,900 in credit card debt (Shuggart, 2007). Rates of uninsured and people living below the federal poverty level have climbed in recent years ("Statistical Abstract: U.S. Statistics in Brief", 2008).

It's clear that, from the dire economic pressures on an increasing number of Americans, a shift to simple living may have appeal for many people and may be borne out of necessity for others. It seems that Americans have become dissatisfied with the work-spend cycle and are willing to make changes. According to a national survey conducted by the Center for a New American Dream in 2004, a majority of Americans said having the good life entails spending more time with family and friends and less time working. Seventy-seven percent said they were willing to use possessions longer instead of buying new ones, and 58 percent were willing to spend more time on community service projects and less time shopping. It's unclear how many have followed through with these changes, but in the same survey an estimated 49 percent of Americans reported having voluntarily downshifted in the last five years.

Despite national surveys indicating that simplicity is a timely topic, articles in newspapers have diminished in recent years. A search of American newspapers using

NewsBank database revealed “voluntary simplicity” in the text of 82 hits in 2007, a substantial decrease from 173 hits in 2000. The method was not flawless in that some articles are counted multiple times in the total number of hits. Simplicity articles published in 2007 and 2008 tended to be consumer-oriented articles, offering quick tips on how to eliminate clutter, rather than giving context behind the movement as well as the varied motivations of those involved (Jackson, 2008; Snyder, 2008). Recent articles that do mention voluntary simplicity tend to mention it in passing, focusing instead on non-consumption and other environmental fads that might include or appeal to people who live simply (Beavan, 2007; Green, 2007; Levine, 2006; vanderZee, 2006). Earlier newspaper articles, published in the late 1990s and early 2000s, highlighted voluntary simplicity as a lifestyle trend and gave some historical context and motivation behind the cultural movement (Erikson, 2000; Greenwood, March 9, 2002). The articles featured newly downshifted couples and individuals who were motivated to live simply more as a reaction to working long hours and not having time for family (Irvine, 2004; Shimron, 2000). Less often, the articles described the religious and environmental motivations for living simply. At the time the articles were published, it was unclear whether the trend of simple living could be increased or even sustained over time.

The proposed thesis, a series of articles, will add to our understanding of simplicity by focusing on people who have implemented long-term changes to simplify their lives and have created communities that make it easier to do so. The articles will help us understand the range of how simplifiers practice, the competing values of simplification within families and among members of communities, and the thoughts of

simplifiers on whether this life is achievable and sustainable in today's consuming society.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Defining simplicity

Scholars tend to agree that simplicity is hard to define (Doherty & Etzioni, 2003; Elgin, 1993a, , 1993b; Shi, 1985a). David Shi, author of *The Simple Life*, writes that the definition of simple living is not fixed—instead it represents “a shifting cluster of ideas, sentiments, and activities” (1985, p. 3). In tracing the history of simple living in America, Shi writes that these ideas have included hostility and suspicion of luxury, reverence for nature, preference for rural over urban ways of life and work, desire for personal self-reliance through frugality, conscientious consumption, and an aesthetic taste for plain and functional goods (1985).

The term “voluntary simplicity” was first coined by Richard Gregg, a follower of Mohandas Gandhi, who wrote in 1936 that Americans were getting too preoccupied with material things. But Gregg’s definition goes beyond materialism. Voluntary simplicity, he writes:

...involves both inner and outer condition. It means singleness of purpose, sincerity and honesty within, as well as avoidance of exterior clutter, of many possessions irrelevant to the chief purpose of life. It means an ordering and guiding of our energy and our desires, a partial restraint in some directions in order to secure greater abundance of life in other directions. It involves a deliberate organization of life for a purpose (p. 4).

In 1977, Duane Elgin and Arnold Mitchell, after observing stories in the popular press about voluntary simplicity, defined it as a way of life that,

embraces frugality of consumption, a strong sense of environmental urgency, a desire to return to living and working environments which are of a more human scale, and an intention to realize our higher human potential—both psychological and spiritual—in community with others (p. 2).

Shi and others agree that living simply means living with basic needs such as food, shelter, and water, a fact that distinguishes simplicity from involuntary simplicity or poverty (Doherty & Etzioni, 2003; Elgin, 1993a). But, according to sociologist Juliet Schor who conducted in-depth interviews of people who simplified their lives in the mid-1990s, the lifestyle might have been prompted by involuntary events such as layoffs or difficult financial times (1998). Sociologist Mary Grigsby observed a similar occurrence, during her ethnographic study of people who live simply (2004).

Materialism and consumerism are deeply intertwined with the concept of simplicity. Elgin and Mitchell wrote that though living simply implies consuming quantitatively less—an idea that hints at the environmental roots of the movement—it does not mean that the overall cost of consumption will go down drastically (1977). Material possessions, to be sure, should be supportive, rather than central to, the process of human growth (Elgin & Mitchell, 1977). Simplifying for some people could mean obtaining products of convenience and organization such as microwave ovens and laptops, shelving systems, and magazines that give tips on how to live simply (Doherty & Etzioni, 2003). The word has also cropped up in interior design and architecture in the 1990s, as a reaction to the conspicuous consumption of the 1980s (Mason, 1997). For others, shared resources and responsibilities within community living arrangements, such as cohousing developments, have helped make it easier to buy fewer possessions (Huneke, 2005).

The definition of simplicity extends beyond owning fewer or more convenient items and is thought of as a long-term process with no distinct end to be achieved (Pierce, 2000). Elgin, who decades ago conducted an informal survey of people who simplified

their lives, found that, for many, the practice of simplicity was intertwined with psychological and spiritual motivations (1993). Though the actual expression of simplicity is a personal matter, he writes, living simply means living purposefully, intentionally, and deliberately, with a minimum of needless distraction (1993, p. 24). Pierce echoes these sentiments, defining simple living and voluntary simplicity as “lifelong processes in which we turn loose of the quest for more wealth, status, and power in favor of an authentic life of inner peace and fulfillment” (2000, p. 25).

Without doubt, the journey to leading a simpler life can be very gradual, taking months and years and entailing progress and setbacks. The process—Elgin gives examples of quitting smoking, not eating meat, and buying a smaller house—can be challenging personally (1993). Could an increased awareness of materialism prompt a shift toward more simple living? Leaf Van Boven wrote that two psychological barriers would make such change difficult: Americans are somewhat or even completely blind to their own materialistic desires, and they seem to have a luxurious definition of needs (2005). The sense of necessity can be easily influenced by television advertisements and social comparisons (M. Richins, 1995).

### **Who lives simply?**

Data on the numbers of people who have shifted to simplicity are lacking. In a 1977 article, Elgin and Mitchell used national poll data about quality of life to guess that 4 to 5 million people fully adopted simplicity. Since then, polls have alluded to an increasing dissatisfaction with American spending. In 1995, a Merck Family Fund poll found that nearly a third of Americans had shifted to earning less and spending less, and a

follow-up 2004 poll indicated nearly half of Americans downshifted (Center for a New American Dream).

Demographic information on the simplicity lifestyle generally comes from self-identified simplifiers who respond to mailed or online surveys. About 65 to 70 percent of simplifiers are female, and they tend to be, on average, in their early 40s (Brown & Kasser, 2005; Elgin & Mitchell, 1977; Pierce, 2000). A study led by psychology professor Tim Kasser found that about 77 percent of simplifiers had completed college degrees, and half of this group had completed postgraduate education (2005). Other studies have confirmed that voluntary simplifiers are highly educated (Pierce, 2000).

Though the definition of simplicity is subjective and its practice relative, scholars have attempted to categorize people who have simplified their lives based on their degree of simplicity and their motivations. Doherty and Etzioni describe three variations of people who live simply: downshifters, strong simplifiers, and holistic simplifiers. Schor has very different definitions of downshifting and simplification, Elgin and Mitchell describe similar people in slightly different terms, and others have taken to using entirely new terminology.

Questionnaires and interviews have helped deduce some of the varied practices and motivations underlying the movement (Elgin, 1993a; Leonard-Barton, 1981; Pierce, 2000). In 1981, Dorothy Leonard-Barton published an 18-item voluntary simplicity index, based on Elgin and Mitchell's 1977 article, and tested the instrument on people who simplified their lives. The sample was limited to California homeowners. Of the respondents, the top four most-followed practices of simplicity were making gifts instead of buying, eating meatless meals, changing oil in their own cars, and taking classes to



increase self-reliance. Though Leonard-Barton's index is based on Elgin and Mitchell's paper, the questions ignore the psychological and spiritual aspects of simple living.

According to Doherty and Etzioni, downshifting is the least dramatic of the three types of simplification. Downshifting is initiated by economically secure people who voluntarily give up consumer goods that are considered luxuries (2003). Downshifters may dress casually or drive beat-up cars, but their actions are inconsistent and limited in scope (Doherty & Etzioni, 2003). Etzioni uses the example of person who drives a jalopy to his 50-foot yacht or wears expensive blazers with jeans. Downshifters may replace elaborate dinner parties with potlucks or cut back on weekend work. Since the shift is slight, it can be practiced by those in the middle class.

Citing the 1995 poll data along with questionnaires and interviews, Schor provides fairly different profiles of downshifters and their underlying motivations than does Etzioni. In her 1998 book on America's consumer culture, Schor writes that downshifting is practiced in a range of ways, but generally downshifters repair rather than replace things, give up their gym membership to walk with their spouses in the evenings, reuse recycled paper bags, or make their own clothes. Compared to Etzioni, Schor attributes downshifting more to a lack of balance in daily living and a need for simplicity (1998). She maintains downshifting is a response to demanding jobs and constant stress and a desire to spend more time with children, have less stress, and have a more meaningful life. The downshifting could be set into motion by a layoff. Schor tells one story of a downshifter named Alice, a married woman with children who was laid off from a high-fashion advertising job after her company was sold and who took a pay cut for another, more satisfying job. For Schor, Alice made the quintessential change that

most other downshifters went through: the realization that quality of life mattered more than money. Though material things still mattered to her, Alice found more satisfaction in her connections with friends and family and the work she was doing as a freelance writer.

According to Etzioni, strong simplifiers are people who have given up high-paying, high-stress jobs to rebuild their lives (2003). In the 1990s, the *New York Times* reported this step was a growing trend that involved a small revolt against the dominant culture of getting and spending (Goldberg, 1995). Etzioni writes strong simplifiers include employees who retire early or anyone who could earn more but is motivated to reduce their time demands and consumption. Simplifiers, or “simple-livers,” according to Schor, are more likely to be women, older, middle-class, and more highly educated than downshifters (1998). They may start simplifying for similar reasons as downshifters, but simple-livers seem to be more likely to cite the negative effects of cluttered life and its effects on the personal health and the environment. They take the shift a few steps further and are more motivated by a desire to give back to the community, Schor writes, through volunteering and giving up personal items (1998). The descriptions Schor and Etzioni give are most akin to Elgin and Mitchell’s “partial adherents” to voluntary simplicity, who share similar values with those in the movement (1977). Neither Schor nor Etzioni give estimates of how many simple-livers or strong simplifiers exist. In 1977, Elgin and Mitchell, based on poll data, suggested there were 8 to 10 million partial simplifiers.

Etzioni describes a third type of follower he calls holistic simplifiers, who have adopted the largest scope of change by moving from affluent cities or suburbs to less urbanized areas with the explicit goal of leading a more simple life. Elgin and Mitchell, however, are careful to point out that voluntary simplicity is not a “back-to-nature

movement” (1977, p. 11). Etzioni writes holistic simplifiers are motivated by the negative environmental and social effects of over-consumption, in part articulated by Elgin in his 1981 book. In the scope of practice, Etzioni’s holistic simplifier is most like Elgin and Mitchell’s “full” follower of voluntary simplicity, a person they describe as tending to recycle, bike to work, wear simple clothing, and engage in meditation (1977).

Based on informal observations, Duane Elgin and Arnold Mitchell identified five values that lie at the heart of the simplicity movement: 1.) material simplicity or non-consumption, 2.) self-determination or the desire to assume greater control over personal destiny, 3.) ecological awareness or recognition of the interdependency of people and resources, 4.) human scale, a desire for smaller-scale institutions and technologies, 5.) and personal growth or a desire to explore and develop the inner life (1977). Elgin and Mitchell write these values “will surely be held to differing degrees in differing combinations by different people” (1977, p. 10). Elgin later observed that people who live simply tend to buy a few, durable products, invest more time and energy into friends and relatives, and form a deep connection with nature (1993).

Relying on personal interviews and giving voluntary simplicity more of an environmental meaning, Dorothy Leonard-Barton classified California simple-livers into three categories: conservers, crusaders, or conformists. Conservers are people who have been brought up in a home with a very strong prohibition of waste of all kinds (Leonard-Barton, 1981). The behavior of a conserver is economically motivated and habitual. Crusaders practice voluntary simplicity out of social responsibility. They feel that others need to be educated about the world’s dwindling resources. Crusaders, in particular, motivate and help others to adopt more environmentally friendly lifestyles. Conformists,

on the other hand, engage in simplicity to fit in with their neighbors or for less well-defined reasons. They are more likely to practice simplicity inconsistently, like Etzioni's downshifters. For example, they are less likely to buy clothing second-hand but may recycle or cut down on meat consumption. And their lack of underlying motivation may prompt them to return to a more materialistic lifestyle (Leonard-Barton, 1981).

The definition of simplicity could be twisted to include a life of luxury. *Washington Post* staff writer Peter Carlson calls *Real Simple* magazine a means to promote conspicuous simplicity by interweaving advertisements for expensive and aesthetically simple goods with the magazine's editorial content (Carlson, 2000). "This is the kind of simplicity that only the rich can afford, and *Real Simple* is the kind of magazine that only the foolish would buy," he writes (2000). Columnist David Brooks anecdotally described the occurrence of conspicuous "simplicity" in a group he calls the "Liberal Gentry," or middle-aged baby boomers who have accumulated enough disposable income to buy privately owned estates in rural America to simplify their lives (2003). People in this category aim to get ahead of peers who are equally wealthy but morally inferior, according to Brooks. "When you get to the tippy-top of the status stratosphere, you reach an area in which the only way to go higher still is to go down," he writes. "This is called 'status inversion'" (2003, p. 177). Brooks does not give figures but writes that conspicuous simplicity was a growing trend in the late 1990s, when his article was originally published in the *Weekly Standard*.

### **Implications of simplicity**

#### ***Psychological***

It has been difficult for scholars to determine whether living simply per se has positive psychological effects. In one of the few quantitative studies of self-identified voluntary simplifiers, this group, which not surprisingly had higher levels of ecologically responsible behavior, reported higher levels of well-being than a “mainstream” control group matched by age, gender, and geographic location (Brown & Kasser, 2005).

Anecdotal accounts indicate that individuals are satisfied after scaling down aspects of their lives (Pierce, 2000). There is more research performed that correlates materialism with happiness. It appears, in some studies, that money can be a positive predictor of life satisfaction (Diener, Horwitz, & Emmons, 1985; Jones, 2007). Overwhelming evidence, however, indicates a negative association between consumption and levels of personal satisfaction (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002; Richins & Dawson, 1992; Watson, 2003).

Based on a December 2006 telephone survey by the Gallup Organization, Americans with higher incomes tended to report higher personal levels of satisfaction (Jones, 2007). One hundred of Forbes’ wealthiest Americans were surveyed in 1985 by psychologists at the University of Illinois, and the wealthy reported higher levels of subjective well-being than control group respondents (Diener, Horwitz, & Emmons, 1985). Though the authors reasoned that the effects of income on happiness are minimal, they acknowledged that money brings benefits, such as the ability to afford recreational activities, security against misfortunes, and personal self-esteem and power. Since the 1985 study, however, researchers have looked at life satisfaction across nations, finding that as societies reach affluence, they experience a plateau of life satisfaction and often an increase in mental and social problems (Diener & Seligman, 2004) .

Much of the psychological literature suggests acquiring more money and material goods is not met with corresponding increases in happiness, and materialism has been negatively associated with well-being and psychological health (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002; Easterlin, 1995). Materialistic people tend to own more credit cards, accrue more finance charges on those credit cards, and have loans of more than \$1,000 (Watson, 2003). In a study of educated people in their 30s, scholars found the stronger the goal for financial success, the more unsatisfied a person was with his or her family life, an effect present regardless of household income (Nickerson, Schwarz, Diener, & Kahneman, 2003). The more people agreed with statements such as “Some of the most important achievements in life include acquiring material possessions” and “Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure,” the less satisfied they were with life (Richins & Dawson, 1992). Between investing in material goods and experiences, greater personal satisfaction seems to come from investing in the latter (VanBoven & Gilovich, 2003). A possible explanation, the authors wrote, is that experiences with friends and families are more open to positive reinterpretations, remain part of one’s identity over time, and contribute more to successful social relationships.

### ***Societal***

Scholars and advocates of simple living contend that forgoing unnecessary items and donating items to charity will result in freed resources that could be given to the needy, thereby promoting social justice and equality (Shi, 1985a). Sociologist Amitai Etzioni writes that, if more widely embraced, voluntary simplicity “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” (2003,

p. 24). The Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, interpret a life of simplicity as one that promotes social justice in the reallocation of wealth (Brinton, 1994).

But from the literature, it's unclear how a loosely connected cultural movement of individuals can unite to make broader changes, such as the reallocation of wealth in society. Among the individual categories of simplifiers, crusaders could help perpetuate the movement (Leonard-Barton, 1981). Elgin and Mitchell wrote in 1977 that people who sympathize with but do not practice voluntary simplicity were a large dormant support for a movement. It's clear from the literature that individuals with well thought-out motivations will keep to the practice of simplicity longer (Leonard-Barton, 1981; Schor, 1998).

Grigsby writes that a continued focus on self-change will not be sufficient to create a larger society of simple-livers—instead, major policies must aim for cultural and structural change supporting simple living (2004). Grigsby recommends building an institutional infrastructure that can link with political parties and academic institutions. This idea may not be easy, considering one of the observed values of the movement is its support for smaller-scale institutions (1977). In order to strengthen the group, the institution should create methods for increasing awareness of differences in values and motivations among simplicity groups (Grigsby, 2004).

If more widely embraced, could simplicity be negative for society? A sudden downshifting in large droves could cause a recession, Schor acknowledges (1998). But she contends that such a scenario is unrealistic because downshifting is more likely to have a gradual onset, and, because downshifting is partly motivated by the desire to work

less, a movement will affect the number of hours worked per week instead of the overall number of jobs.

### ***Environmental***

The movement of simplicity is deeply rooted in a concern for the environment, as scholars have observed environmentally conscious behavior among people who live simply (Elgin & Mitchell, 1977; Leonard-Barton, 1981). For example, such people tend to bike to work, buy items at garage sales, recycle, make gifts, and contribute to ecology organizations (Leonard-Barton, 1981).

The relationship between consuming fewer resources and preserving the environment on the community level is not straightforward because, as literature in sustainability science suggests, the overuse and misuse of ecological systems are rarely attributable to a single cause (Anderies et al., 2007). Part of the challenge and the burgeoning science of preservation involves assessing the institutions that use and govern natural resources (Dietz, Ostrom, & Stern, 2003; Ostrom, 2007).

The complicated relationship between consumption and the environment has not deterred government officials from advising individuals to start making drastic changes. A May 2007 report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) urged individuals to reduce their consumption patterns, citing evidence that global greenhouse gas emissions have jumped 70 percent from 1970 to 2004 (Barker, Bashamakov, Bernstein, & Bogner, 2007). Two months before the IPCC report was issued, citizens and businesses in Sydney, Australia, turned off their lights for one hour, a small measure that led to a 10 percent drop in energy usage across the city and an increased awareness of



how people can slow down climate change ("World Wildlife Federation: Stopping Climate Change is Possible", 2007).

### **Practice of simplicity**

Living simply covers a spectrum, from downsizing or ridding clutter from closets to living in a way that shuns possessions and focuses on necessity. Many individuals could cite specific efforts they have taken to make their lives simpler, even if temporarily. Fewer have adopted such practices, by sharing resources in a physical community or consuming less as prescribed by religious ideals. Two communities, individuals in cohousing developments and in the Quaker faith, offer tangible examples of simple living.

### ***Cohousing***

Though the creation of a cohousing living community can be quite complex, the result is often a physical and social space that can facilitate simple living. A unique type of small-scale neighborhood of clustered houses that uses individual and group living space, cohousing is one type of intentional community that involves extensive planning by the members (Levy, 1995). By using shared resources, intentional communities such as ecovillages and cohousing provide a physical framework for living simply to minimize ecological impact.

Architects and California natives Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett, who studied similar living communities in Denmark, brought cohousing to the U.S. in the 1980s (Levy, 1995). The Cohousing Association of the United States estimates more than 100 cohousing developments in North America and eight in North Carolina with more in

the planning stages. In 2007, national media identified cohousing as a growing trend (Ganga, 2007; Olick, March 3, 2007).

McCamant and Durrett identified six features of cohousing communities: 1.) Every resident participates in the creation of the neighborhood, 2.) Neighborhoods are designed to encourage social interaction; 3.) People own small homes and share common areas and land; 4.) Residents manage the neighborhood after move-in; 5.) A non-hierarchical community structure allows for collaborative decision-making; and 6.) Members do not rely on the community for income (McCamant & Durrett, 1989).

Cohousing is different from American communes, which are often organized around strong ideological beliefs and may depend on a charismatic leader to establish the direction of the community and hold the group together (Meltzer, 2005). Cohousing developments are also different from “New Urban” communities. New Urbanism is a design movement that began in the early 1980s and aims to minimize urban sprawl and make neighborhoods more walkable (“Principles of New Urbanism”). The design of such neighborhoods is not led by future residents.

Forming cohousing communities is a complex process, but the result aims to make life simpler for residents, who tend to look for a way to reconnect with a community (Meltzer, 2000). The major steps in making a village include establishing a core group with a particular vision, choosing a legal and financial structure, finding and financing property, creating an internal community economy, and developing and moving onto land (Christian, 2003). According to one estimation, given by an intentional community researcher and resident, about 90 percent of attempted intentional

communities fail because the members lack a grasp on these economic and legal realities (Christian, 2003).

Another possible complication is the use of consensus decision-making in planning, construction, and operation of the development. In his observations of developing cohousing communities, Graham Meltzer observed that in all groups, prolonged and often intense discussion preceded most decisions (2000). Consensus decision-making is viewed as inconvenient but productive by those who practice it (Sager & Gastil, 1999). Mary Ann Renz, using in-depth interviews of cohousing members, noted that the process of making a unified decision involves “reworking and reshaping of ideas until finally something is produced that no group member may have imagined at the outset but with which every group member is willing to live” (2006, p. 371).

### ***Importance of the environment in cohousing***

Though McCamant and Durrett did not explicitly mention environmental concerns in their defining characteristics of cohousing developments, many cohousing communities share characteristics with voluntary simplifiers in their motivation to conserve and protect the environment and desire to work fewer hours (Meltzer, 2005). Environmental concerns of cohousing members are reflected in their community planning. Though the figure varies widely, cohousing residents occupy about half the built space on average compared with those living in conventional households, the key being large common areas for dining, play areas, and guest quarters (Meltzer, 2005). About 80 percent of cohousing residents have college degrees, and avoiding full-time work tends to be a personal lifestyle choice for some (Meltzer, 2005). A number of communities have successfully refurbished existing buildings or used waste building

materials or other environmentally friendly materials in construction (Meltzer, 2005).

Still, technologies such as centralized heating, thermal storage, and on-site sewer disposal have not been widely implemented (Meltzer, 2005).

Two detailed case studies that relate to both cohousing and Quaker communities show how important the environment is to individuals planning a new community, which weighs needs with the environmental impact of development and maintenance of the land. In an ethnographic study of the planning of the Arcadia cohousing community in Carrboro, N.C., anthropology graduate student Diane Kay Levy observed how members considered minimizing construction's impact on the environment (1995). The group, which included some Quaker members, was concerned about the introduction of toxins to the land and made difficult choices to clear trees so they could grade roads, and to let light on solar roof panels (Levy 1995). Concerns about cutting down trees nearly shifted building and layout plans. Some members did not feel a special connection with the land, but others had a spiritual and emotional one (Levy, 1995). In a case study of a Michigan forest managed by a Quaker-founded intentional community, the members' beliefs led some to oppose strongly clearing a shade-tolerant species of plant that posed a threat to the forest (Nelson et al., November 24, 2007). An analysis, led by John Zinda at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, concluded that taking the hands-off approach to forest management and allowing the species to proliferate has placed future threats on the forest's existence (2007). In both studies, strong beliefs about destruction of the environment created stalwarts to action.

Most articles in the popular press have focused on social benefits of cohousing—especially for aging baby boomers—the challenges of making decisions by consensus,

and the environmental choices members have made in construction. The communities have been beneficial for elderly homosexuals, hippies, and other like-minded individuals, according to a *New York Times* article (Neville, 2007). A *Los Angeles Times* article explains the difficulty of consensus in Wolf Creek Lodge, an elder cohousing development in Castro Valley, Calif., using an anecdote about how the members debated whether to allow pets (Ganga, 2007). Articles have not focused directly on the role of voluntary simplicity in the planning and operation of such communities, and the difficulty of making the transition from traditional to cohousing. This thesis will help fill that gap.

### ***Quakers in North Carolina***

The Religious Society of Friends, also known as Quakers, make up a distinctive faith that originated in England in 1652 as a response to dissatisfaction with Christian dogmas and institutions (Brinton, 1994). The Friends World Committee for Consultation estimates there are 168,000 Quakers in the Americas.

In the U.S., Quakers have been forerunners of the simplicity movement historically (Doherty & Etzioni, 2003). The original Quaker ethic, Shi writes, teaches Quakers how to live rather than make a living and how to help narrow the resource gap between the wealthy and poor (1985a). The Quaker testimony of simplicity, though open to interpretation, encourages “conservative dress, speech, and behavior” (Brinton, 1994). Quakers believe that simplicity and other behaviors come from “inner light” that is in everyone. Quakers express simplicity in their silent meetings for worship and plain meeting houses (Brinton, 1994).

The Quaker faith has historically taught a life of thrift, hard work, and sobriety, all of which would ideally promote social justice by spreading resources to the poor (Shi, 1985a). Founder of Quakerism George Fox advised the Quakers: “Neither be cumbred nor surfeited with the Riches of this World, nor bound, nor strained with them, and be married to the Lord” (Shi 1985, p. 29). As the first American Quakers worked and lived simply, they became affluent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the next generations departed from a simple life (Shi, 1985a).

The first Quakers in the Piedmont area of North Carolina arrived sometime between 1740 and 1775 and, like many pioneers, lived in log cabins without windows (Hinshaw, 1984). The families were English and Irish immigrants who journeyed south from New England and initially settled in Alamance, Chatham, Guilford, and Randolph counties (Hinshaw, 1984). At least one group, which migrated to North Carolina from the Maryland-Delaware border in the mid- to late-1700s, specifically stressed the idea of living simply. The group was led by Joseph Nichols, who, according to Quaker historian Seth Hinshaw, had originally been “quite a worldly young man.” A great religious awakening transformed Nichols’ life, and he emphasized simplicity of dress and speech.

For about two centuries leading up to the Civil War (in 1861), North Carolina Quaker groups were scattered throughout rural areas and isolated from one another. After the Civil War, and with the coming of more mechanized farm methods, they became more urbanized, and new meeting houses were built. By the end of World War II (in 1945) new meeting houses appeared and old ones were renovated out of necessity, according to Hinshaw. Cushioned pews replaced old benches. Hinshaw observed in his 1984 book that meeting houses showed great variation: “Some are ornate with stained

glass windows and others have modest steeples” (1984, p. 211). During this time, the Sunday school movement prompted many small congregations to build additions to their meeting houses or separate facilities to house fellowship halls and kitchen facilities. These additions came with some opposition, Hinshaw noted.

Opposition even from one individual can hinder progress in this religious group, which, like many cohousing communities, has a non-hierarchical social structure and makes decisions by consensus. Members decide when to have meetings, how to use finances, how to maintain the buildings they worship in, and where to bury the dead. Howard Brinton, author of *Friends for 300 Years*, wrote that unity is an organic method that produces a cross-fertilization of ideas, unlike voting which pits a larger party against a smaller one. In the monthly meeting for business, when the members make decisions pertaining to the meeting’s needs and finances, one clerk helps guide discussion (Brinton, 1994). The business meeting is preceded by a short period of worship, “in which the hard shell of egocentricity is dissolved and the group united into a living whole” (Brinton 1994, p. 106).

In local media, Quakers have made headlines when they protested wars (Shimron, 2007; Valle, 2003, April 11). Local print articles on the Quakers’ modern interpretation of simplicity in a materialistic society are lacking. This thesis will help fill that gap.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

### Research Questions

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the cultural movement of simplicity, what has happened to the movement, and how individuals and communities are living simply. The reviewed literature reveals that researchers vary in their definitions of simplicity and its motivations. Despite individuals' stated desires to save the environment or help society, people today are not easily moved to give up possessions or what they perceive as comforts and conveniences.

When I first proposed this thesis, I planned to write a three-part print series to address the following questions:

1. What are the layers of voluntary simplicity, and what motivates some people to simplify their lives?
2. In what ways does Quakerism promote simplicity and how has one group maintained simple lifestyles in a consumer-driven society?
3. In what ways do the residents of a physical community, such as a cohousing development, foster simplicity and what are the challenges?

I had expected each of my stories to address one of my research questions. I altered my original plan after meeting a Raleigh family that I interviewed for my overview article. Rebecca and Mark Fernandez had romantic, idealistic notions about the simple life and had tried to live their dreams by building a home in Maine and later one in North Carolina. They failed twice. The Fernandezes recently failed a third attempt at living simply – going car-free in the northeast suburbs with a toddler. Their story was so intriguing that I wrote a narrative about them and wrote an overview about the simplicity



movement as a separate piece. My research addresses the same questions posed earlier, but the actual interviews changed the organization of the articles. Rather than focusing on Quakers as a separate article, I incorporated the Quaker approach in the overview story. I used the Fernandezes' experience, which addresses points in my first research question, as a separate story that shows the difficulty of sustaining a simpler lifestyle—a much more compelling journey.

### **Method and limitations**

The thesis is a series of three articles. For the first article, I spent a day with a family I found through the Simple Living Network Web site. Mark and Rebecca Fernandez told me about their experiences living simply and the challenges they face today. The family decided in November 2007 to go car-free, and I read the blog written by Rebecca at [www.carfreeinraleigh.com](http://www.carfreeinraleigh.com). I kept checking it for updates until I learned that the Fernandezes had given in and bought a car. Because they felt phone calls would be disruptive to the time they spend with their son, I used email for follow-up questions.

For the second article, I wrote about cohousing communities in Orange and Durham counties that were fully operational. I had dinner residents in two communities in Durham—Eno Commons and Solterra—and visited a third community, Arcadia cohousing in Carrboro, and asked the members about simplicity. I returned to Eno Commons for follow-up interviews with two members. I asked members about the benefits and challenges of community living.

For article three, I wrote an overview about the voluntary simplicity movement, and interviewed people in the Triangle about how they are practicing simplicity. I interviewed members of the Religious Society of Friends in Chapel Hill for a faith-based

perspective on simplicity. I talked with people who have tried to start online communities that meet in the Triangle area. I used some background information from books and articles on voluntary simplicity. Experts in sociology and psychology on simplicity gave me an update on the simplicity movement.

The most challenging, and potentially limiting, aspect of the thesis was to describe simplicity because it is a subjective term and covers a spectrum of definitions. Although statistics show individual consumption patterns, little exists to show how, where, and when people take temporary or permanent steps toward a simpler lifestyle. Much of the discussion about simplicity today has been wrapped up in environmental issues. Where possible, I tried to quantify simplicity, but most examples proved to be anecdotal and personal.

## **CHAPTER 1: Simplicity Revisited**

Durham resident Shirley Cheatham, 72, was born during the Depression and spent her childhood on welfare. Today, she lives frugally out of habit and environmental concerns. She is motivated to set an example for her grandchildren to reject excessive consumerism. She budgets her money to buy more local produce and is planning to have a green burial.

Jennifer Leeman spends one evening a year with her husband in a Raleigh hotel that has fireplaces because they don't have their own. This mini-vacation is their usual Christmas gift to each other, a small pleasure. Living below their means helped the Quaker family keep afloat financially when Leeman's husband was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease 10 years ago.

Motivated by environmental and social justice issues, Bruce Johnston, 27, moved from Carrboro to Earthaven Ecovillage, an off-the-grid community in Black Mountain, N.C., in 2006. In the course of a typical day, he uses no electricity except that required to power a refrigerator, a laptop computer for 20 minutes and a light bulb. He walks everywhere he goes and uses very little paper.

Whether it means reducing the number of amenities, buying "greener" products such as hybrid cars, living in neighborhoods that minimize urban sprawl, or simply cleaning out closets, people today vary in their choices and strategies to manage the

materialism that can drain their wallets and the distractions that can take over their calendars.

Cheatham, Leeman, and Johnston each practices what they would call simple living, but in slightly different ways. During an age of cheaper and plentiful gadgets, expanding waistlines, bigger houses and increasing debt, simplicity might look attractive to some people and necessary for others. And today's economic downturn that some are calling a recession might increase the number of people who turn to simplicity for financial reasons.

The notion of simplicity is not new. Religious and environmental thinkers have long challenged the notion that people need more stuff to be satisfied. In fact, simplicity had its own movement of sorts that began 30 years ago, and experts say the loosely connected cultural movement has lasted.

Using poll data, Duane Elgin, one of the first to identify a voluntary simplicity movement in the late 1970s, estimates that millions of people in the U.S. today have moved to this lifestyle. "I think gradually people are waking up to the fact that [simplicity] is not just some kind of hippie lifestyle, but rather it is fundamental to whether we have a workable future," he said. "It's immersed within the green revolution."

During the last few years, however, simplicity has been less visible, as the term has taken a back seat to language such as "the green movement," "sustainability" and "environmentally friendly." But for some people, a simple life, even with its contradictions and limitations, could be a more satisfying way to living more sustainably.

### **The motivation to live simply**

Voluntary simplicity, which usually involves life choices to consume less, work less, or both, gathered steam during the go-go 1980s. In the 1990s and into the 21st century, increasing numbers of Americans were voicing dissatisfaction with the work-spend cycle, as indicated in national polls. They sought more time with family and friends and, at the same time, were becoming aware that U.S. levels of consumption were affecting the environment. Books, newsletters, and videos promoting the alternative lifestyle of living simply started surfacing.

Sociologists who study simplicity noted three books integral to the movement: the 1981 book *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich* by Duane Elgin; the 1997 book *Circles of Simplicity: Return to the Good Life* by Cecile Andrews; and the 1992 book *Your Money or Your Life: Transforming Your Relationship With Money and Achieving Financial Independence* by Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin.

Such books motivated some individuals to live more frugally so they could have more leisure or family time. Mark and Rebecca Fernandez, who live in the northeast Raleigh suburbs, made that choice so that they could have more time for their 19-month-old son. The family also attempted to live car-free for about six months, but they ended up feeling isolated in the suburbs and recently bought a used Saturn Vue.

The simplicity movement, in part, has also inspired Rebecca Vidra, a Duke writing professor, to buy nothing new. She has been chronicling her pledge in *The Chapel Hill News* and has had to admit to some exceptions. She said ridding her environmentally friendly home of clutter has been surprisingly easy. Custom-built a few years ago, the house has been partly a source of her “green guilt” because it ended up more being

expensive than she had planned and she and her husband still have to commute to work. “The real motivation for me [for living simply] is feeling that the current environment movement is on the wrong track. I think it’s misguided,” she said, referring to the tendency of the movement to promote green consumerism instead of using less.

For James Twitchell, an advertising and English professor at the University of Florida in Gainesville, living simply is not rocket science. “If you want to consume less, you consume less,” he said.

### **Simplifiers defined**

Based on simplifiers’ motivations and habits, researchers have put people like the Fernandezes and Vidra into categories. Here’s a look at seven simplifier categories, based on separate avenues of research.

Conservers have been brought up in a home with a very strong prohibition of waste of all kinds, according to Deborah Leonard-Barton’s research of the early 1980s. The behavior of a conserver is economically motivated and habitual.

Crusaders practice voluntary simplicity out of social responsibility. They feel that others need to be educated about the world’s dwindling resources. Crusaders, in particular, motivate and help others to adopt more environmentally friendly lifestyles, according to Leonard-Barton.

Conformists, on the other hand, engage in simplicity to fit in with their neighbors or for less well-defined reasons. They are more likely to practice simplicity inconsistently than conservers and conformers. For example, they are less likely to buy clothing second-hand but may recycle or cut down on meat consumption. And their lack of underlying motivation may prompt them to return to unnecessary spending, Leonard-Barton notes.

The “conspicuous simplifier” is a term columnist David Brooks gave to middle-aged baby boomers who have accumulated enough disposable income to buy privately owned estates in rural America to simplify their lives. According to voluntary simplicity experts, *Real Simple* magazine might cater to this crowd, by including advertisements for expensive, unnecessary items. Gerald Iversen, from the non-profit Alternatives for Simple Living, calls *Real Simple* “fake simple.”

“We don’t want people to be confused,” he added.

Also using the example of *Real Simple*, Twitchell echoes Iversen’s sentiments. “If you take a look at all the books and all the magazines, [simplicity] has essentially become another way to sell stuff,” he said.

DownshifTERS represent a group of people who make relatively minor changes to consume less. Sociology professor Amitai Etzioni, who wrote a chapter in the 2003 book *Voluntary Simplicity: Responding to Consumer Culture*, said a member of this group might drive a beat-up car but might also own a boat.

A strong simplifier has given up a high-paying, high-stress job to live on much less income, stated Etzioni, who wrote that some of the motivation might include a desire for more time for personal relationships. Strong simplifiers also include people who choose to retire early and are happy to accept lower pensions for more leisure.

Holistic simplifiers embrace the voluntary simplicity movement in every way, Etzioni said. They read books, newsletters and videos on simplicity, some of which draw on philosophy from religious traditions.

Most simplifiers choose lives of reduced consumption and are motivated by environmental concerns, or sociological or religious beliefs. But the bottom line:

Simplicity isn't about poverty. Cecile Andrews, voluntary simplicity author, said the movement is generally for the middle class.

"I think of [simplicity] as the examined life," she said. "It's living consciously, making conscious decisions, and living deliberately."

### **Studying simplifiers**

Having the financial freedom to craft a more fulfilling lifestyle is a key element to simplicity, said Mary Grigsby, a sociologist from the University of Missouri in Columbia, who wrote the 2004 book *Buying Time and Getting By: The Voluntary Simplicity Movement*. The fulfillment simplifiers that experience is the incentive for them to continue their practice, she added.

According to a 2005 study in *Social Indicators Research*, 65 percent of voluntary simplifiers were female, and simplifiers had an average age of 43. Most studies of voluntary simplifiers find that the group is well-educated, and the 2005 study is no exception. About 77 percent had college degrees, and half of those had completed graduate degrees.

Twitchell, of the University of Florida in Gainesville, said the voluntary simplicity movement is for "people who have already finished consuming," a group that tends to be middle-aged or older.

In some ways, the movement of simplicity is as much about identity as it is about actual change, Grigsby said. "There's not a black and white line to me," about whether a person is or isn't a voluntary simplifier. She found a wide range of practices in the groups of simplifiers she studied. "A lot of people who adopted the identity [of voluntary simplifiers]—it's kind of like they see themselves as having a moral identity."



Many more people who simplify don't identify themselves as part of the movement. Tim Kasser, a psychologist from Knox College in Illinois who led the *Social Indicators Research* study of voluntary simplifiers, said he found simplifying characteristics in 15 percent of his "mainstream" or control group.

People who identified themselves as voluntary simplifiers did have more environmentally friendly habits than the "mainstream" controls, Kasser found. But he noted that their environmental behaviors, on average, were still not considered sustainable by some research measures.

Grigsby found mixed motivations in groups of simplifiers she studied in Seattle and Columbia, Mo. "A lot of the people I interviewed for my book had concerns about degradation of the environment," she said. "But there were other people who didn't even really focus on that. They were more concerned with overwork, feeling stressed out or never having enough time to spend with children."

### **Simplicity as community**

If simplicity still exists, where can people find it? In the Triangle, formal groups of simplifiers remain scarce. Online communities offer one way for simplifiers to connect. Several local people have used SimpleLiving.net to start simplicity circles or groups of people who read and discuss simplicity books.

Rebecca Fernandez of Raleigh tried to start a group in December 2007 without success. Differing definitions of what it means to live simply make it difficult to form groups that are headed toward similar practices, she said. "Someone who lives in an expensive home may think simple living means cooking at home," she added. Other people on SimpleLiving.net have also been unsuccessful in starting local groups.

Janet Harrison, of Strategies in Action Inc., uses Meetup.com, a Web site that brings together geographically close people of similar interests, to organize Raleigh simplicity classes at a cost of \$38 per class. She said response has been moderate.

“I’m not being bulldozed over,” she said, adding that people come to her classes with specific goals. Some want to clear their clutter, organize their lives, or enjoy nature more often. About a quarter of people who have shown interest in her classes are motivated by environmental concerns.

Some people find simpler lifestyles through physical and religious communities that might make it easier to live simply but that don’t advertise themselves as such. For example, cohousing developments, or living communities that use shared and individual space, are built with the vision of promoting more sustainable living, a concept that overlaps with simplicity. The communities tout themselves as embracing diverse backgrounds and values, environmental or otherwise.

Shirley Cheatham, a resident in Solterra cohousing community in Durham, voiced her environmental views at a recent community dinner, saying that she feels strongly that people are allocated a certain number of resources in their lifetime. “We die after we’ve used them up,” she said, eliciting surprise and interest from her neighbors. Cheatham commutes to work five days a week but tries not to drive on the weekend. Still, being simple sometimes requires more labor intensive chores.

“I would never go back to washing clothes by hand,” she said, adding that she uses a washing machine but hangs her clothing out to dry.

Members of the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, in Chapel Hill regularly discuss the meaning of simplicity, which is one of the testimonies, or ways of life, that

Quaker leaders have emphasized since the founding of the faith in the mid 1600s. For Chapel Hill Quaker Jennifer Leeman, simplicity is tied to the Quaker belief that God is in everyone.

“That belief is very connected to our desire to live a life that fosters justice and peace for all people,” she said. “I think the typical American lifestyle is unjust. [Americans] consume more than our share of the world's resources, which means other people do not get their share,” adding that she thinks the need to protect people’s rights to have more can lead to war.

Leeman, whose family buys mostly second-hand furniture, drives two old cars and lives in a modest home, says that not worrying about possessions gives her a sense of freedom. For example, Leeman said when someone broke into her home about 12 years ago and stole only a few checkbooks, “I remember having this very positive feeling that I didn't really need to worry about someone breaking into my house to steal or about this person coming back because we don't have anything anyone would want.”

### **Simplicity’s role in satisfaction**

Most research on materialism indicates that having expensive stuff isn’t important for and can even be detrimental to happiness. In one of the few quantitative studies of voluntary simplifiers, Kasser found that self-identified voluntary simplifiers reported higher levels of subjective well-being compared to “mainstream” participants who were matched by age, gender and geographic location.

Qualitative studies by sociologists seem to agree that simplifiers are a happy bunch. Perhaps the increase in reported well-being relates to the values voluntary

simplifiers tend to have—intrinsic goals such as personal growth and community over extrinsic goals such as financial success and popularity, Kasser noted in his study.

Self-help books stress that living simply is about realizing what you value and living in a way that centers on those values. Grigsby said many people she interviewed spent time volunteering or doing hobby work with friends. “I think that what sustains the people who do it is the fulfillment they get from adopting that lifestyle,” she said. “In the ideology of the movement, this isn’t about self-denial. This is about self-fulfillment.”

Though they seem to be satisfied with life, voluntary simplifiers tend to be introverted and don’t easily promote the simple lifestyle to others, said Gerald Iversen, national coordinator for Alternatives for Simple Living, a non-profit that promotes voluntary simplicity for people of faith. Iversen made this observation after talking with hundreds of simplifiers throughout the U.S. He takes their photos and writes stories in his blog called “Faces of Simple Living.”

### **Simplicity reaching its limits**

The movement itself is a “very typical, individualistic approach to self-change,” Grigsby said. Though simplicity leaders have started organizations that have spun off into others, the life of an individual simplifier is rooted in making small changes and forming community. Simplifiers are living with limitations in a capitalist economy, and many lack the finances to organize larger efforts aimed at political and social changes, Grigsby said.

Nancy Dennis, a resident of Solterra cohousing development in Durham, has read some voluntary simplicity literature and is one simplifier who senses limitations in her own ability to make change on broader levels. She said she wants to make cohousing affordable, but she can’t see any way to do so and is limited by money and time.

As people gain more specialized knowledge and skills, it also becomes difficult to live simply, without help from others, said Dennis. Group cooperation and self-reliance are important for living a simple life. “My dad could fix anything and did,” Dennis said. “And he refused to buy new if he could ever fix something. And that was a way of life for him.”

Striving to live the ideal of simplicity can be difficult for some religious or physical communities, especially when members have different ideas of how simplicity should be practiced. Cohousing communities often take years to build because members must agree on how their ideas of need should balance with shared visions of sustainability.

For the Chapel Hill Quakers, the underlying motivations of frugality and stewardship to the environment pitted against each other nearly 20 years ago as the group planned to construct an extra building to accommodate growth in meeting attendance. Just how much physical space was needed and how many green building practices should be incorporated into the building design were matters of debate, members recalled.

Even if the practice is complex, simplicity should lead the way in creating more sustainable living, said psychology researcher Tim Kasser. “The green movement, unfortunately, has been focused on consuming differently, whereas the simplicity movement is about consuming less,” said Tim Kasser, a researcher from Knox College in Illinois who studies the psychology of materialism and simple living. “Ultimately the fact is that we’re going to have to consume less, and I don’t think all the green folks recognize that or are willing to take the risks to say it.”

## **CHAPTER 2: Simple Living or Simply Living?**

Facing yet another insurance payment and fed up with the price of gas and the time stuck in traffic, Rebecca and Mark Fernandez, of Raleigh, decided six months ago they would go car-free. Their son, Malachy, then 15 months old, didn't like car seats, anyway. They sold their 7-year-old Ford Focus for \$800, and they made the car-free lifestyle work. Sort of.

For the first month, they walked a quarter mile from their northeast Raleigh, suburban home to Food Lion, wheeling Malachy in a red plastic wagon. Mark, a full-time plumber, got rides to work with his father. Rebecca, a freelance writer and stay-at-home mom, arranged play dates at their home. The family ate at home, took walks to the park or library, and took the bus to church.

But life without a car was less than simple, as they detailed in their blog, "Car-free in Raleigh." In late December, Rebecca started feeling isolated and depressed without a car. Being able to take trips to the library or to visit with friends helped her cope with depression that had surfaced after Malachy was born. He was experiencing allergies to gluten and dairy, and specialty grocery stores were not close by. Mark started borrowing his father's truck on weekends to grocery shop and run errands.

The Fernandezes are voluntary simplifiers, people who make the choice to consume less or work less for a variety of reasons. Books and magazines about simple living and homesteading, many of them published in the 1990s during the swell of the

loosely connected cultural movement, line bookshelves in the Fernandezes' 1950s home. Inspired by stories of 1970s and '80s homesteaders, they have tried twice—and failed—to build a house for themselves. They have felt the tug of careers they could have had while opting for a reduced lifestyle. And having a child has changed the way they practice simplicity.

Since their first venture into a simplified lifestyle more than five years ago, the line between voluntary and involuntary simplicity—the latter imposed because of choices they made—has become blurred for the Fernandezes. They have seen their dollars melt away in a flurry of health-related expenses for Malachy. Buying less has never bothered them—they traded their television for a rocking chair in 2003—but some of their early decisions to drop out of college and, later on, to work less and spend more time with Malachy have left them with less financial freedom.

“I think we don't focus so much on simplicity anymore,” Rebecca admitted, adding that they plan to have more children eventually. Living frugally has become more of a requirement than a choice in the last two years, she added. Some simplicity experts question whether a life of working less is possible to sustain, especially with children, said Mary Grigsby, a sociologist at the University of Missouri at Columbia who has studied voluntary simplifiers. For the Fernandezes, sustaining this lifestyle has been a struggle.

### **The Maine story**

Mark, 27, and Rebecca, 25, married and dropped out of college in 2002 when Mark was 21 and Rebecca was only 19. Impetuous and idealistic, they dreamed of

owning their own log cabin in Maine, trying to replicate the “back-to-the-land” experience Helen and Scott Nearing wrote about in their 1990 book *Living the Good Life*.

Rebecca found a plot of uncleared land in Houlton, Maine—\$1,000 for 10 acres—and reserved spots for a two-day workshop in Seattle, Wash., on building log homes. Rebecca was graduated from high school at 16 and completed three years of a computer science degree at the University of Pittsburgh. Mark was leaving after three years into his civil engineering degree but had become disenchanted with his future, in part, after having spent a summer internship working in a cubicle for the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection.

The Fernandezes got rid of three-quarters of their possessions, many of them wedding gifts, and crammed the remaining necessities into their Ford Focus. On a 12-hour drive from Pittsburgh to Houlton, they picked up their new living quarters: a used trailer with a broken heater they found on the Internet. They signed the paperwork for the land on a crisp fall day in September 2002, and then the seller drove off. The log cabin workshop they planned to attend didn’t seem that far off—only March 2003. They remember feeling a sense of peace and happiness as they looked down the road and saw nothing but trees and land. “Everything we could see felt like ours, even though we didn’t own it,” Mark recalled.

The plan was to live in the trailer until they could attend the workshop and earn enough money to build a cabin. Until then, they had no running water and would have to drive to town to buy five-gallon jugs of water. They had no phone. They had no idea how to change the holding tank connected to the trailer’s toilet. But they were equipped with *The Tightwad Gazette*, a book that started as a series of newsletters about how to



live cheaply. And they had back issues of *Mother Earth News*, a magazine aimed at increasing self-reliance and living simply, dating to 1981.

The Fernandezes knew they were moving toward the unknown, but it didn't matter. "I was frustrated with the general life situation that the average American family seemed to have: long work hours, lots of stuff and not much happiness," Rebecca said. "It seemed like an interesting alternative lifestyle to explore. And I was really drawn to the idea of having both parents at home, a family working together, instead of one or both parents working in an office somewhere all day."

The first weeks in Maine drifted by as Mark kept applying to jobs and heard no response. The temperatures at night dropped to 20 below, and the days grew shorter. The Fernandezes had one sleeping bag made for zero-degree weather that they shared at night. They didn't have \$150 to fix the heater.

They used most of their money to get to Maine, and for food they had a stash of oatmeal and a three-pound bag of small candy bars. When the candy bars ran out, they lived on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. At one point, they were so hungry that they asked a worker at a potato house along the road for some damaged potatoes. The small, toothless man said, "Oh, you want potatoes?" He opened up a huge sliding door to a potato house, and hundred of potatoes fell out. "Here, take all you want." The man could see the hunger in their eyes, Mark recalled. The Fernandezes grabbed all the potatoes they could carry.

Mark finally got a job delivering food for Schwan's, which he started on Halloween 2002. But with the log cabin workshop still months away, the Fernandezes decided living in the trailer without heat wasn't working out. They moved into an

apartment for \$250 a month, about 10 minutes from their plot of land. Rebecca got a job scanning newspapers for information. Time passed, and they checked on their trailer less and less often. It was cold, and the nights felt long. They felt like outsiders in their town.

### **Another Try at Homesteading**

In February 2003, the Fernandezes sold their Maine property and moved back to Raleigh, where Mark grew up, figuring there would be more work there. They attended the log cabin workshop shortly after moving back. Mark worked on and off for his dad's plumbing business. Rebecca's parents pushed her to go back to college, and she did, earning a degree in technical writing from North Carolina State University.

They continued to rent for about two years, switching apartments whenever they could find something cheaper. "Of course, there was a reason why it was cheaper," Mark said. They still wanted to own their own home. They were in debt from student loans and didn't qualify for a decent mortgage. The workshop on building a log cabin taught them it was possible to work full-time and build a home on evenings and weekends. Logs were expensive, so they decided it would be cheaper to build a ranch-style home, 1,100 square feet, using two-by-fours. In 2005, they decided to try homesteading again.

Mark had experience in construction and landscaping, so they figured they could build the house. They bought another trailer and parked it on a new plot of land in Oxford, N.C., about 50 miles north of Raleigh. Living in a trailer seemed like it would be quite temporary because this time the Fernandezes had more money for a house. Rebecca commuted to Raleigh three times a week to work at Red Hat, a software company, and Mark commuted 40 minutes each way to his job. Rebecca was excelling in her work and getting promoted, eventually making \$45,000 a year.

The couple lived off Mark's salary, about \$40,000 a year, and spent Rebecca's salary on their home, which Mark was building by himself. But both were occupied by their full-time jobs, and time was passing quickly. They had set up a schedule for finishing but started to fall behind. On weekends, they would put off work and go to Barnes and Noble to read and relax or to the mall for a distraction. "Eventually I think we realized we didn't like living in the country," Mark said. "I think it finally clicked."

They had laid the foundation and were putting up the wood framing. In the meantime, Rebecca found out she was pregnant. Though he was able to do a lot of construction on his own, Mark started to realize he needed a crew for framing and other work, and it was difficult to find subcontractors in the country. Rebecca was frustrated and "trailer crazy" after working from home some days. The Fernandezes' homestead in North Carolina remains a sore point even today.

"When you get to the point where your eight-months-pregnant wife is helping you lift a wall up that's half the house, you kinda think, 'Hmm, maybe I should have hired someone to do this,'" Rebecca said.

The tipping point came when Rebecca gave birth. Mark had to go back to his job the day after, and Rebecca was taking care of Malachy by herself. "He was screaming nonstop," she said. "And we were having all kinds of problems with breastfeeding, and it was important for me to do that. We were seeing specialists, and it was getting really expensive." After two more weeks in the trailer with Malachy, the Fernandezes moved to Raleigh.

Rebecca finished her maternity leave and returned to full-time work. Mark quit his job to raise Malachy for the first seven months. Rebecca began to feel the demands of

career and parenting. She said she felt like it was difficult to have the kind of career she wanted to have and be the mom she wanted to be. “When I was working, I would feel guilty that I wasn’t spending as much time with him as I wanted to,” she said.

### **The Motivation to Keep It Simple**

Family motivates the choices the Fernandezes have made and continue to make to live simply and frugally. The family was inspired to go car-free, in part, after reading the 1992 book *Your Money or Your Life*, by Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin. The book—commonly read by voluntary simplifiers, according to sociologists who study such groups—offers steps to become financially independent. The authors, who themselves gave up successful careers to live more meaningfully, encourage readers to calculate the actual money they spend and earn and compare it with their life satisfaction. Rebecca figured she and Mark put \$42,000 into their Ford Focus, including the purchase price, in the seven years they owned it.

Rebecca said she believes people tend to spend money on things without thinking, “‘Would I rather have an extra three hours to spend with my husband or a new outfit from Gymboree for my toddler?’ We (people in general) never stop to do the math, taking into account things like taxes and commute time, to figure out how much time we really spend working to buy things that we will likely use for a few months and then pass along to Goodwill,” she said.

When Malachy was 7 months old, the Fernandezes switched around their work schedules so that Rebecca could have more time with him. She quit her job, and Mark started work full-time. Work had become less satisfying for her, and she felt like she

couldn't have a career and be a good parent at the same time. Rebecca still does contract work on occasion for the money.

"A lot of times I get frustrated because there are so many things I'd like to do," Rebecca said. "I'd love to go get a graduate degree or be a professor or whatever. But I'd also like to have lots of kids, so I feel like it's difficult for me to be the kind of mom I want to be and have the kind of career I'd like to have." And Mark plans to go back to college to finish his degree in civil engineering, but "gosh, it's hard with a kid," he said.

The Fernandezes feel that putting Malachy in a daycare center would mean missing out on his development. Rebecca said when she was working full-time, she would spend only two hours with Malachy. "That's a very limited amount of time to build a relationship," she said. She also didn't like the idea of other children the same age and with the same needs competing with Malachy for a caregiver's attention.

In October 2007 the Fernandezes moved into their current home, a small, affordable ranch house in northeast Raleigh, but in a rough neighborhood that they would leave if they could afford to. SWAT teams have descended on their neighbor's home several times in the last year. Recently someone broke into the Fernandezes' home while they were out one afternoon grocery shopping and stole their two computers. A few days later, they discovered that Malachy's plastic red wagon was missing from their backyard, an added blow.

"I felt betrayed," Mark said, adding that he trusted his neighbors. The Fernandezes, each half Hispanic and half Caucasian, said they don't mind living in a racially diverse neighborhood, but the neighbors generally keep to themselves.

“I was thinking how it’s almost easier to focus on things like voluntary simplicity and simple living when you live somewhere like Five Points (a neighborhood just north of downtown Raleigh and inside the Beltline corridor) or when you have a comfortable upper-middle-class lifestyle,” Rebecca said. “When you are making choices between eating out and cooking at home, or having a second car versus a bike, or going to the movies versus reading books,” she added.

Such decisions don’t feel like choices to the Fernandezes—they feel like necessities. “Money has been a lot tighter now than it ever has before,” Rebecca said, “especially with his (Malachy’s) special diet and all that stuff.”

### **So what’s simple?**

For Mark, simple living “really boils down to time. What give us the most free time,” he said. “You’ve gotta be honest with yourself.” He added that having a child has made them appreciate how precious their time is.

After three months of being car-free, the Fernandezes caved in early March and bought a used Saturn Vue, a sport utility vehicle. They needed a vehicle after Malachy was sick with flu for a month straight and was too contagious for the Fernandezes to carpool to places with their friends. “I hope to continue to make lots of ‘car free’ trips and to pull my fair share of carpooling,” Rebecca wrote in her blog, “but the reality is, we’re just not ready to live without a car, particularly with a young child. We made it work — for over three months — and it did work. But we also gave up a lot of freedom and community to make that happen.”

The car was a big decision for the Fernandezes, who have wished for a car-sharing program in Raleigh or better public transportation. Rebecca will need to take on

extra contract work to help pay for the SUV and is considering doing some part-time childcare. But they still won't be driving that often, so she isn't as worried about the costs. "We are still content most days to stay at home," she said.

Rebecca said she is optimistic about the future but admits they will struggle financially for the next few years. In May, Mark will be continuing his education at a community college. "I really look forward to the time when we have the luxury to focus on simplifying our lives again, rather than just being so focused on surviving from week to week," she added.

The Fernandezes spent a recent Saturday afternoon wheeling Malachy to a nearby park. When they took him out of his stroller, he avoided the playground and walked toward the basketball court, where a group of young adults were engaged in a pick-up game. Mark and Rebecca watched him totter slowly toward the players, his body awkwardly negotiating the uneven ground, his belly full and protruding, and his corduroys bulging from the cloth diaper underneath. Mark retrieved him, as he got too close. Together they slid down the green tubular slide on the playground. Some of Mark and Rebecca's friends started filtering into the playground with their children, who all started to play together.

Though they have had to make purchases that they said will allow them to spend more time with Malachy, the Fernandezes believe part of simplicity is not consuming mindlessly and being comfortable with simple pleasures like parks and libraries.

"Not always being on the go," she said. "Somehow, I find that this slowing down helps me to enjoy every aspect of life much more."

### **CHAPTER 3: Simple living, community-style**

Chaos seemed to be the appetizer for dinner at Eno Commons cohousing neighborhood in Durham. A “dinner mom,” the neighbors call her, made sure none of the children got too rambunctious while several people finished cooking in the kitchen of the common house and laying out the evening’s fare: chicken sausages with and without a honey mustard glaze, a baked spinach quiche topped with tomatoes, and mini blueberry pancakes.

A crowd of about 25 adults and 10 children drifted into the dining area, chatting and finding seats. The kitchen leader called for a moment of silence, but the din of children laughing outside leaked through the closed windows of the common house. “That’s about as silent as I can do,” the kitchen leader said, and then chaos resumed as people laughed and moved closer to the food.

While dinner for 22 households has a somewhat disorganized feel, Eno Commons residents such as Katherine Lee view the evening meal as one way to build a strong community.

“I know for people my age—I’m 47—a lot of us grew up in a time where we had a connection to either a small town or a community, where, you know, it’s like the cliché, but there were simpler times and kids all playing on a street together and people growing up with a sense that they had those connections,” she recalled.



Lee has lived in Eno Commons, one of North Carolina's nine cohousing developments, for eight years. Unlike "communes," whose formations sometimes center on strong political ideologies, cohousing developments are planned by members who share some values and prefer individual space. The members of a cohousing development plan self-sufficient individual homes and common living spaces to serve their particular values. The stated visions of these communities usually involve living more sustainably, more simply, or more meaningfully through community interactions. Cohousing has sprung up rapidly in the U.S. since the late 1980s; 100 neighborhoods exist nationally and at least 100 more are in the planning or building process, according to the Cohousing Association of the United States. Neighborhoods usually have 20 to 40 households, according to the association. In North Carolina, six developments are either built or are forming in Carrboro and Durham, all of them emphasizing an environmentally friendly lifestyle.

In a backdrop of a faltering economy, an increasing awareness of global warming, and declining national happiness levels, cohousing may offer a model for a more fulfilling and greener life for those who can afford it, said Cecile Andrews, Seattle-based author who wrote the 1997 book *Circle of Simplicity: Return to the Good Life*. Though the idea of living simply has been around since the founding days of the U.S., Andrews said she thinks the economic slowdown and focus on sustainability are helping spur renewed interest in living simply.

In Triangle cohousing neighborhoods, simplicity is not an outright goal, but it's an idea that resonates with many residents who have invested time into forming a strong

community in which they can share resources. In these neighborhoods, simplicity is a practical, yet imperfect, extension of community living.

### **Avoiding traditional suburbia**

Howie Jacobson moved to Eno Commons with his wife and two kids from a New Jersey suburb in June 2005. The community dynamic and available housing at Eno Commons provided the impetus for Jacobson and his family to relocate. In his previous neighborhood, Jacobson endured unresolved disputes over issues such as barking dogs and teenagers honking their cars. Though the same types of disputes arise in a community like Eno Commons, living here “is like living in a submarine—you have to deal with them,” he said.

People move to these communities for a variety of other reasons—passive solar homes, an easy way to be part of a community, or retirement in a community that has different ages and interests. Whatever the reasons, it’s clear that cohousing communities in the area are filling up. Eno Commons and Arcadia in Carrboro are full, and only two custom homes are for sale in Solterra of Durham.

Challe Hudson and her husband and two children moved into their salmon-pink house at Eno Commons in May 2007 after a bidding war, the first time that had happened for a house there.

Within 24 hours of the house going up for sale, there were three serious buyers, Hudson recalled. Previously, the smaller homes would sit empty for a while. Hudson said her family’s 1,483-square-foot home is well-suited for their two children, who are 3 and 6 years old. Eno Commons’ larger house, 1,975 square feet, has been in great demand when an owner puts it on the market.

Square footage of single family homes varies widely across cohousing developments, according to Graham Meltzer, author of *Sustainable Cohousing: Learning from the Cohousing*. Meltzer found the average single family cohousing home to be 1,076 square feet; the rough average of cohousing houses in the Triangle is 1,600 square feet. According to the National Association of Home Builders, the average American home is about 2,430 square feet. Larger house plans are already a hot topic in online discussion boards for the planning of Footpath Cohousing in Durham, a neighborhood that will be built next to Eno Commons and will involve some of its members. Those involved say it's more affordable to build homes with set floor plans but not easy to agree on how much square footage different families will need.

While some families move to downsize, Tracey Olivetto, a resident of Arcadia Cohousing in Carrboro, was attracted to her community because it was nothing like the suburban neighborhood in Garner where she had lived years ago. Living in Garner, a suburb of Raleigh, was a “rude awakening,” said Olivetto, who grew up in the heart of Minneapolis. “I felt the isolation, the conflict between neighbors.” She began thinking of community as being important for her happiness and now has seen the environmental benefits of community sharing.

### **Resource sharing**

Like the dinner meal, sharing is both routine and spontaneous in the Triangle's cohousing communities—and helps simplify some families' lives. Part of sharing comes from the layout of houses and common areas. The 11 acres of wooded land on which Eno Commons sits holds 22 small, clustered houses that are privately owned. Lee estimated about half of the residents moved to the community from larger houses. Parking lots

partially form the outer perimeter, and the community has no garages or long driveways, a design meant to encourage spontaneous interaction. The center of the neighborhood contains a huge circular slab of concrete surrounded by a common house, outdoor playground, and community garden.

Every morning, children in Eno Commons walk alone or with their parents to a shared biodiesel van for the drive to Central Park School. One person owns the van, but the parents take turns driving it. School buses pick up students for other schools, but the van is a convenience for those who would otherwise have to drive their children to the elementary school every day.

Jacobson, an advertising consultant who works from home, regularly swipes flour or spices from the common kitchen when making meals in his home. He replaces supplies on his next trip to buy bulk items. He has keys to some of his neighbors' homes and feels comfortable going in to borrow supplies with the understanding that he'll replace what he takes. "We know who's got what," he said. "I'd have to think whether we live more simply than anyone else. I think we live more efficiently."

Not everyone in a cohousing development has this level of comfort with resource-sharing, and it isn't required, but many feel comfortable knocking on each other's doors or emailing the listserv if they need something. Community emails serve as informal classified ads of sorts; emails draw on others' expertise to borrow tools or toys, or share cars and car rides. Lee said it's easy to ask your neighbor for an egg. "Nobody's getting in a car to go drive to get a small thing," she said.

A great resource for the parents in cohousing and adding to the ease of simple living is the abundance of playgroups, which form easily. Michele Hughes, a single

mother from New Jersey, moved to a home near Eno Commons and regularly participates in community activities. “I liked the idea of shared resources and community making,” she said, adding that the community feels like a safe environment.

Duane Elgin, California-based author of the 1981 book *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich* and a former cohousing member himself, said communities should form the foundation of functional simplicity. “There are economies of scale that come with community, whether it’s political action and social action or buying food together, that is immensely more powerful and easier than when you’re isolated in pockets called the American household.”

Cecile Andrews echoes these sentiments in an article posted on her Web site, stating that the lack of community is both a cause and effect of extreme consumerism. “People feel lonely so they go to the malls to be around people. Or they go home to an empty house and turn on the TV for the sound of a human voice,” she wrote. “With community, on the other hand, people not only fill the emptiness that drives them to consume, they can begin to save money and preserve resources by sharing, bartering, or purchasing things together.”

At the same time, members choose how involved to get socially with their communities. Olivetto, of Arcadia said her community is not so different from any other neighborhood. “There’s people that I see once a year,” she said. “And no one judges anyone for keeping to themselves.”

### **Imperfect simplicity**

If cohousing communities help encourage the simple life, certain barriers and limitations do arise with living in such neighborhoods.

The first is location. With the exception of Pacifica in Carrboro, the communities are at least a few miles from amenities such as grocery stores and farmers markets. Kathy Lee, who works as an environmental educator with Eno River Association, sees a disconnect between living simply and relying on a car. Since moving to Eno Commons, Lee and her husband have bought an additional car, a decision she initially struggled with. “I still do to some extent. Right now, I work at one of the few places that I can actually walk to work from here, and I can bike to work. It doesn’t mean I do it every day. I do it when I can,” she said.

Lee has lived a good part her life in very dense urban areas such as Toronto, and she thinks urban living provides more opportunities for living simply. Though some of her neighbors bike an hour into downtown Durham to the nearest farmers market, for example, there are no sidewalks or paved edges of the road. “We get in a car to go somewhere. To go anywhere,” she said.

Affordability is another limitation of cohousing developments, though a range of home prices exists. Members of Eno Commons have paid around \$250,000 to \$275,000 for their houses and buy a share of the common house and land. Some of the larger custom homes in Arcadia and Solterra are closer to \$430,000. Nancy Dennis, of Solterra in western Durham, has rented a home but will need to move out this spring when its new owners move in. Another Solterra member, for whom she works, is helping her buy a house now so they can continue running a software business from home. But the expense of cohousing bothers her. “There’s no incentive to develop affordable housing, period, let alone affordable cohousing,” she said. “I believe that’s why we have so many homeless people now.”

Community can also make a simple life quite complicated, especially when members must reach consensus on decisions ranging from building the homes to maintaining the land and common areas. At Eno Commons, the neighborhood zip line was a topic of discussion of cost and impact. At Solterra, the community pet policy remains somewhat undefined, a common sticking point of cohousing communities, according to the Federation of Intentional Communities.

The community is as much or as little of your slice of life as you want to make it, said Olivetto, who works full-time from home and puts in the recommended four hours a month of community “sweat equity,” which usually involves cleaning the common house. Olivetto was featured in local media for cutting back on her air-conditioning for all of last summer, an environmentally driven move that is not so unusual in her community.

“The movement toward community is one that’s about well-being, but unfortunately it’s not about making a smaller environmental impact,” she said. “There’s a big shift in what makes us happy and what is the American Dream.”

As far as simplicity goes, in monthly meetings it’s “not a word that’s used,” Olivetto said. “The word that comes out is sustainability.”

## REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

*“Think of it this way. A precious jewel needs a setting. The jewel with its many facets is our inner work of psychological, intellectual and spiritual growth, and simplicity is its setting.”*

- from the 1987 book *The Treasures of Simple Living*

When I first told my sister I was writing about simplicity, she responded, “Oh, like *Real Simple*. I love that magazine!” The truth is the concept of simple living goes well beyond the magazine *Real Simple*. After my research, I’ve learned that there’s no real answer to what simplicity is and what it should look like. The word “simple” can mean “easy,” and a simple life is anything but, as I learned from people who juggle competing values within their families and communities. And writing this thesis also wasn’t simple or easy.

When I set out to report for my thesis, I found through the Simple Living Network Web site a family in Raleigh who had adopted—or tried to adopt—a simpler lifestyle. I intended to use the Fernandezes’ story as an anecdote for an overview about the simplicity movement. But the Fernandezes were intriguing to me because they weren’t anything like the simplifiers written about in books and newspapers. A “typical” simplifier I read about was a middle-aged woman who got tired of trying to move up the corporate ladder, and she had a nice home and expensive clothing. The Fernandezes made choices to live simply when they were only 19 and 21 years old—at least 20 years younger than the average age of a voluntary simplifier. The couple hadn’t amassed enough resources to make the same choices as an affluent 40-year-old, but that didn’t stop them from trying to build a home twice.



As I wrote the narrative about the Fernandezes and interspersed it with facts from the voluntary simplicity literature, I realized that the piece was becoming unwieldy and complicated. I did a fair bit of agonizing over not having written what I proposed. My adviser helped me decide it would be simplest to split the longer article into two. I learned that, as a journalist, the focus of my stories can change according to what I find. I cannot force the reporting into a contrived format. This lesson will inform my career. I now know now that I need to be in close contact with my editors about the progress of the stories I report and the potential changes in news peg and angle.

Another reporting challenge arose as I tried to identify voluntary simplifiers. Most simplifiers I interviewed wouldn't be so bold as to identify themselves as such. But many of them had read and thought about one of three books that, according to simplicity sociologists, were integral to the movement: the 1981 book *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich* by Duane Elgin; the 1997 book *Circles of Simplicity: Return to the Good Life* by Cecile Andrews; and the 1992 book *Your Money or Your Life: Transforming Your Relationship With Money and Achieving Financial Independence* by Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin. In the course of my reporting, I either looked at people's bookshelves or asked them whether they had read simplicity books. If they hadn't read any simplicity books, I still interviewed them if they sympathized with the ideas.

I discovered different motivations of living simply, but in most cases, the people in the Triangle I interviewed gave many examples of how they carry out their versions of simplicity. They are turning off their televisions, taking buses, reading books, bumming

rides off their neighbors, or working fewer hours. They are looking to fellow churchgoers, friends, or neighbors for support.

At the same time, simplifiers are giving in to some pressures, such as time, and are quick to point out the inconsistencies between their values and actions. For example, they are buying disposable instead of cloth diapers and occasionally go to restaurants instead of cooking meals at home. Some of them want bigger homes for their growing families, and others have bought cars after moving into the suburbs. Many of them justify these purchases by saying that the amenities save time that they can then have for their families.

Another inconsistency between values and action surfaced in the simplifiers I interviewed who worked full-time, some past retirement-age. One of the main goals of the simplicity movement is to work less to have more time for family or leisure. In the cohousing communities I visited, I found at least half the members worked full-time. That seems to be a large obstacle to fostering strong community ties, one of the values of cohousing. Looking back at some of the studies of voluntary simplifiers in the U.S., I found data that spoke to this observation. In a 2005 study published in *Psychology & Marketing*, people who strongly embraced the idea of simplicity were the least consistent in the practices of limiting wage-earning work, working at a job that is intrinsically satisfying, and being active in their community, compared with other practices such as recycling and tuning out advertisements.

In some ways, writing this thesis prompted me to take a hard look at my own lifestyle. I sympathize with the goals of the simplicity movement, but I am inconsistent in my values and practice of simplicity. My reporting influenced me to start recycling.

Seeking a fulfilling way to help my community, I started volunteering as a writing coach for fourth-graders at Frank Porter Graham Elementary. I washed my hair less often to conserve water. But I still have many things I don't need—too many purses as well as shoes and clothing I haven't worn. Even after making what I thought were significant changes to my water usage after sensing the urgency of the drought in North Carolina, I didn't see my water bill budge.

Can the loosely bounded cultural movement of simplicity produce political or social change? Many people, with the exception of one voluntary simplicity author, Cecile Andrews, that I interviewed didn't talk about such changes, a finding shared by Mary Grigsby in her 2004 book, *Buying Time and Getting By: The Voluntary Simplicity Movement*. People have different simplicity practices and values, making it difficult for them to join together and enact political change.

Many simplicity authors write that living simply is a gradual process with no clear end goal to achieve. I agree. Working journalists also need to recognize that fact and see their reporting as a continual effort, setting context for whatever new venture, fad, movement, or product is associated with simplicity. For example, environmental reporters should study the motivations and practices of simplicity and think of them in the context of the green movement, which lately has been emphasizing green consumerism.

Simplicity, with its vastly different motivations and meanings, can inspire more sustainable living for individuals and communities. Since the ideal of simplicity is flexible and subjective, I think it could be challenging for reporters to identify simplifiers and place them into categories—such as partial simplifier, holistic simplifier, or others—that experts have created. Where possible, the reporter's sources should place themselves

into those categories and explain their reasoning. Stories on simplicity should allow ample room for direct quotes from sources, to show their voices and thought processes.

Simplicity is a mindset that helps people live according to their values and continue on a path to living a fulfilled life. Understanding the challenges and barriers can help journalists write stories so that people can have enough information to make choices to live simply. To continue the reporting of stories with a simplicity connection, I suggest the following story ideas that could be valuable articles for mainstream media:

- The consumerism of simplicity and the irony of advertising campaigns made to appeal to simplifiers. A lot of the demographic data on voluntary simplifiers came from marketing and psychology research. How are advertisements targeted at simplifiers, especially those who have chosen to turn off their televisions? Are the advertisements working?
- How online communities are helping people live simply. I allude to two online communities in my thesis, Meetup.com and SimpleLiving.net, that help simplifiers network. It would be interesting to look at these communities in more depth to see in what ways these they are supportive of voluntary simplicity.
- How social and economic infrastructure limits simplicity. During my reporting and research, I came across people who said there would have to be significant lifestyle changes if people were to combat global climate change, and undoubtedly some of these changes would relate to simplicity. What would societal changes look like, given the somewhat limiting economic infrastructure, if people truly had to change to save the planet?

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