The Modus Vivendi of Material Simplicity: Counteracting Scarcity via the Deflation of Wants

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Abstract This paper studies how voluntary material simplicity may counter-vail the causal effect of relative scarcity generated by the environment of a consumer society. Analyses of both interviews and texts were performed. It is shown that voluntary material simplifiers manage, though with difficulty, to neutralize the causal effect of consumer society. This is achieved by mediating the cultural properties of the economic ethic of material simplicity, which promotes the deflation of human wants. These simplifiers consequently manage, though with difficulty due to causal interference, to deflate their material wants and maintain them below their material means. Consequently, they actualize the modus vivendi of material simplicity; namely, a practical state of relative abundance. One major implication of this study is that the scarcity postulate of mainstream economics is problematically formulated. Hence, the development of a new model of relative scarcity and abundance encourages an explanation rather than an assumption of scarcity.

Keywords: relative abundance, consumerism, economic ethic, voluntary material simplicity, relative scarcity

INTRODUCTION

A generally accepted property of the “consumer society” is that its causal environment contributes strongly to the inflation of human material wants (Bourdieu 1986; Campbell 1987; Danner 1974; Dolfsma 2004; Etzioni 1998; Fine 2002; Galbraith 1958; Kasser 2002; Kasser and Kanner 2004; McKendrick et al. 1982; Sassatelli 2007: 74; Veblen 1994; Xenos 1989). Yet the processes by which wants are created and sustained are not well understood (Campbell 1987: 202). Since Veblen (1994), it has been widely
accepted that inflation of wants has much to do with “the importance of material objects as signs of relative social status” (Xenos 1989: ix). But if one accepts that people do not passively enact the dominant value systems of their cultures, but rather have potential to shape their own strategies for navigating through economic life, then it becomes important to investigate how and why people accept or reject social pressures to consume more (Etzioni 2004; Gandolfi and Cherrier 2008). Understanding the processes that regulate the balance between people’s wants and their material resources is of fundamental importance for economic theory. Mainstream theory takes wants to be always unlimited relative to resources, so that universal scarcity is a chronic and inevitable feature of economic life. However, if wants are subject to human fashioning, it becomes possible for people to achieve relative abundance by deflating material wants.

To gain insight into the processes whereby people manage the balance between their wants and their resources, this paper examines how individuals who practice an ethic of material simplicity manage to countervail or neutralize the strong causal pressure of consumerism. The ethic examined is Voluntary Material Simplicity (VMS)—a set of strategies and practices associated in the Western world with Elgin (Elgin and Mitchell 1977; Elgin 1993), but which also share essential cultural propositions with various philosophical and spiritual systems, most notably Buddhism (cf. Schumacher 1975; Shama 1996; Rudmin and Kilbourne 1996; Grigsby 2004; Buell 2005; Saintilan 2008). While there has been a good amount of previous research on voluntary material simplicity as a social phenomenon or movement,¹ there has been little investigation of VMS as a matter of endogenous formation of tastes (cf. Dolfsma 2002), whereby people shape their own wants relative to the material resources they think they ought to be consuming in a normative sense.

A central argument of this paper is that VMS calls into question the contrast usually drawn in mainstream economics between scarcity and abundance. The postulate of universal scarcity holds that society is utterly deficient in resources: food (Samuelson and Nordhaus 2001), money, time (Becker 1965), or virtually anything (Robbins 1945), and this situation exists even in the afterlife (Gordon 1980). However, this paper argues that

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¹ Thus, previous work has examined connections between VMS and ecological lifestyles (Iwata 2006; McDonald et al. 2006), ethical consumption (Huneke 2005; Shaw and Newholm 2002), car sharing (Jonsson 2006), voluntary reduction of working time and income or “downshifting” (Schor 1999; Huneke 2005), comparisons between “simplifiers” and “non-simplifiers” (Craig-Lees and Hill 2002), eco-villages (Jonsson 2006), popular definitions (Johnston and Burton 2003), and different levels of intensity of practice (Etzioni 1998).
Marshall Sahlins’ findings for hunter-gatherers—people living principally outside the causal pressure of consumer society—can also be true for people living inside this society:

For there are two possible courses to affluence. Wants may be “easily satisfied” either by producing much or desiring little . . . the gap between means and ends can be narrowed by industrial productivity. But there is also a Zen road to affluence, departing from premises somewhat different from our own: that human material wants are finite and few, and technical means unchanging but on the whole adequate. Adopting the Zen strategy, a people can enjoy an unparalleled material plenty—with low standard of living. That, I think, describes the hunters. (Sahlins 1972: 1–2)

The paper is divided into three sections. The first discusses the economic ethic of material simplicity, understood to be a set of ideas advanced and circulated at a cultural level about how and why people should aim to deflate their material wants relative to levels seen as normal in consumer societies. Particular attention is paid to three texts viewed by proponents of VMS as offering compelling rationales for simplifying, namely Duane Elgin’s *Voluntary Simplicity* (1993) and two Tibetan Buddhist texts: *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism* (2002) by Chögyam Trungpa, and *Open Heart, Clear Mind* (1990) by Thubten Chodron. The second section discusses what we call the *modus vivendi* of voluntary material simplicity—that is, the set of practical ways of thinking and acting that enable people to organize their everyday lives around the ethic of simplicity. Evidence is presented from in-depth interviews with three practitioners of VMS that provide valuable insights into the means by which people succeed in deflating their wants and scaling back their material lifestyles in ways that have improved their individual welfare. The third section returns to the question of how to conceptualize “wants” if resources should be understood not as universally scarce but rather as potentially relatively abundant, by extending the holistic model developed by Daoud (2007).

**THE ECONOMIC ETHIC OF MATERIAL SIMPLICITY**

The practice of VMS, which is spreading among the middle classes of the Western world, represents a key example of an *economic ethic of material simplicity*—by which we mean the cultural structures that enable people to deflate their material wants (Archer 1996; Jackson 1996; Mischel 1997; Swedberg 1998). Here, “wants” are defined as empirical manifestations of deeper human properties, which are not inherent but rather reflect sets of
cultural structures that condition people’s behaviors, including ideas, attitudes, values, norms, and strategies (Hunt 2005; Lawson 1997: 279; O’Boyle 2005; Starr 2004). Taken together, the cultural structures used to deflate wants constitute an *ethic* that enables people to make their material resources abundant relative to their wants—a condition we refer to as *relative abundance*.

In contemporary discussions of material simplicity, there are several overlapping discourses that attach personal or social gains to simple material lifestyles (cf. Badiner 2002; Rosenberg 2004; Saintilan 2008). As shown in Figure 1, Voluntary Material Simplicity (VMS) is a subset of all material-simplicity discourses, which range from ascetic Christianity (Rudmin and Kilbourne 1996: 190), to deep ecology (Lauer 2002), to certain indigenous cultures (Sahlins 1972). Buddhism in general associates a materially simple lifestyle with the path to happiness in a way that overlaps with Elgin’s view. Western Tibetan Buddhism, which has emerged as an antithesis to the striving and longing of Western consumerism and preoccupation with status, overlaps in particular with Elgin’s VMS. In noting the commonalities between the two, Elgin writes that, “In Buddhism, there is a conscious emphasis on discovering a middle way through life that seeks balance and material sufficiency. The soulful value of the simple life has been recognized for thousands of years” (Elgin). We focus on this approach to material simplicity because it spans both secular and spiritual discourses and

![Figure 1: A Set Theoretical Approach of the Subject of Inquiry and the Reference of the Generalization](image)

*Note:* Naturally, the sets are not according to scale.
combines both Western and Eastern elements, thus hopefully providing insights that are relevant to other approaches as well.

The deflation of material wants is a central theme in the writings of Elgin and those of Tibetan Buddhist thinkers such as Chögyam Trungpa and Thubten Chodron, whose books are commonly cited as influential by proponents of Voluntary Material Simplicity. Accordingly, writers such as Chögyam Trungpa and Thubten Chodron should be seen as Tibetan Buddhists who have been influential in the development of Western Buddhist thought. Following Thoreau, Elgin (1993: 48–49) argues that “[A person] . . . is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.” In Buddhist thought, attachment to a multiplicity of desires or wants is held to be the very source of suffering, as expressed in the Four Noble Truths (Alt 1980; Herman 1979). The Four Truths hold that, first, “existence is suffering”; second, “the cause of suffering is desire (attachment)”; third, “the end of suffering comes with cessation of desire”; and, fourth, “Nirvana is attained through the Eightfold Path” (World Encyclopaedia 2005).

There are strong parallels in the writings of Elgin, Trungpa, and Chodron about their view of the problem of wantingness, the frustration it might create and how to remedy it (cf. Ishii 2001), for example:

Civilization, in the real sense of the term, consists not in the multiplication, but in the deliberate and voluntary reduction of wants. This alone promotes real happiness and contentment. (Elgin 1993: 48, citing Mahatma Ghandi)

Instead of battling the world with a dissatisfied mind that continually wants more and better, we’ll transform our attitude so that whatever environment we’re in, we’ll be happy and will be able to make our lives meaningful. (Chodron 1990: 20–21)

Each time there is a desire there is another birth. You plant wantingness, wanting to do something, wanting to grasp something . . . Birth here means the birth of further confusion, further dissatisfaction, further wanting. For example, if you have a great desire for money and you manage to get a lot of it, then you also want to buy something with that money. One thing leads to the next, a chain reaction, so that desire becomes a kind of network. You want something, want to draw something into you, continually. The experience of shunyata, [emptiness] seeing precisely and clearly what is, somehow cuts through this network, this spider’s web, because the spider’s web is woven in the space of desire, the space of wanting. (Trungpa 2002: 199–200)

For Chodron and Trungpa, the main goal for achieving happiness is found in the diminution of all types of desires or wants of both material and
immaterial character. For Elgin, too, the main focus is on the reduction of material wants. The effect of wantingness is not only suffering (Chodron 1990; Trungpa 2002), but also environmental destruction (Elgin 1993: 170–190) and social inequality (Elgin 1993: 37–45). Here, suffering does not mean great pain, but rather an unsatisfied mind, or frustrated wants:

Translating the first fact as “the truth of suffering” can be misleading, for the term “suffering” connotes great pain. Thus, when we hear that the Buddha said life was suffering, we wonder what he was talking about, for most of us don’t experience extreme misery most of the time. Actually, the Pali and Sanskrit term dukha connotes that things aren’t completely right in our lives. Something is amiss; there are unsatisfactory conditions in our existence. Most of us would agree with this . . . . We experience unsatisfactory situations: we don’t get what we want, or we get what we don’t want. While we have to work hard to obtain what we like, what we don’t like comes effortlessly, without our having to ask or work for it! Even when we get things we desire, they don’t last forever. Our possessions break or go out of style. (Chodron 1990: 130)

Elgin (1993: 145–152) acknowledges this, but is more concerned with the social and environmental consequences of attempting to satisfy all the material wants that consumer society seeds within us (Elgin 1993: 164–194). Excessive material production and consumption bring about the destruction of the environment and create inequality. It is not until the falseness or emptiness of these planted seeds is perceived that people can become emancipated. Chodron and Trungpa argue that this insight is gradually achieved by following the Dharma, the teachings of Buddha. For Elgin, however, the Dharma is one way of several for the achievement of happiness (Elgin 1993: 83).

To Chodron and Trungpa in particular, fortification of the ego is the root of the problem. To affirm a person’s own existence, various dreams and fantasies are created (wantingness). This generates attachment to objects and subjects (Chodron 1990: 107–108). However, in the process of attempting to satisfy a want, new wants are produced. Very soon, a person’s wants reach proportions that are beyond that person’s reach (relative scarcity), and a state of general dissatisfaction is created. Trungpa describes this process with a restless monkey metaphor (Trungpa 2002: 128). In this passage, the monkey anxiously tries to satisfy his hunger for various wants, but only finds a mirage of wants:

Now he [the monkey] experiences great hunger for more pleasurable, spacious conditions and fantasizes numerous ways to satisfy his hunger. He may imagine that
he sees far away from him some open space, but when he approaches it, he finds a vast terrifying desert . . . Or the monkey may fly to a seemingly lush and fertile valley, only to find it filled with poisonous insects and the repelling smells of rotting vegetation . . . Each time he seems about to achieve pleasure, he is rudely awakened from his idyllic dream; but his hunger is so demanding that he is not daunted and so continues to constantly churn out fantasies of future satisfaction. (Trungpa 2002: 139–140)

Hence, it is viewed by Elgin, Chodron, and Trungpa, that this mirage is one of the main mechanisms that causes suffering. Yet, the realization of the Dharma will weaken this fortification and consequently deflate the network of wants. Interestingly, as will be seen in the next section, all three respondents emphasized this point.2

THE MODUS VIVENDI OF MATERIAL SIMPLICITY

Whereas the concept of the economic ethic refers to ideas of material simplicity that are circulated in the cultural domain, the question remains as to how people translate cultural propositions into practical prescriptions that they consistently implement in their everyday lives. Here it is valuable to use Margaret Archer’s concept of modus vivendi. As she argues, “The establishment of . . . successful practices, which together constitute a modus vivendi, involve[s] both a realistic recognition of the multiple needs of the human condition and an intelligent, though fallible, interaction with those constraints and enablements which are activated during the pursuit of our concerns” (Archer 2003: 150). The modus vivendi of material simplicity thus refers to the practical actualization and safeguarding of a state of relative abundance by deflating wants.

Our methodology in studying the modus vivendi of material simplicity consisted of in-depth interviews with three practitioners of VMS. Respondents were identified by contacting one of the largest Tibetan Buddhist centers in Sweden;3 among the possible participants suggested by the center, respondents were selected on the basis of willingness to participate and of having socio-demographic characteristics that made them otherwise fairly

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2 This also demonstrates that the relation between the cultural and the individual strata (culture ↔
individual) really exists. The analytical focus of the interviews and the next section is on the social and
individual level (individual ↔ social).

3 It is however not clear how many individuals are actually active, but they usually have around 25–40
persons attending their various seminars and workshops, according to the head of this center (not one of
the respondents).
typical in the Swedish population (see below). Three out of four responded to this research call; unfortunately, later on, the fourth person, who was a monk, could not actually participate. Each respondent was interviewed for about two hours; this was done by following two questionnaires which were used in the form of an interview schedule where various themes were discussed (e.g. consumption habits, work; see discussion below). In the first part of the interview we used a semi-structured questionnaire, which encouraged respondents to reflect upon and discuss their values, consumption behavior, and vision of a good life. In the second part of the interview we used a structured but still open-ended questionnaire in so far that they were given the opportunity to share their reflections about their responses, especially their material wants ($W_k$) and their means of satisfying these wants ($M_n$). The structured questionnaire is shown in the appendix.

Because in-depth interviewing of a small number of respondents is not a typical methodology in economic research, it is important to clarify why this strategy was chosen. First, there is little careful research into the processes whereby people identify simplifying ethics and put them into practice in their everyday lives. This makes the area especially well-suited to in-depth exploratory research, which can be used to gain direct insights into the processes involved. A second and related point is that, because people may have relatively idiosyncratic ways of thinking and talking about changes in their approaches to consumption, it is important to have opportunities to ask respondents to explain or elaborate on their answers; such back-and-forth communication is easy to do in one-on-one interviewing with open-ended questions, but less so in other methodologies. Third, although it is of course necessary to be cautious about drawing broad conclusions from a small sample of respondents, given the exploratory nature of the study, it is more important to acquire high-quality insights from a small number of respondents, than it is to be sure that their experiences are broadly representative of the population from which they are drawn (Sayer 1992; Schofield 2002). Thus, we focused on providing an accurate and insightful characterization of how respondents in the sample have worked to deflate their wants, as a means of initiating fruitful research in this area, not providing the last word on it.

Table 1 outlines the backgrounds of the three respondents in terms of age, family, leisure pursuits, current work, and principal source of income. The

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4 The interviews were conducted in November and December 2007.
5 The second questionnaire has affinities with Kasser and Ryan’s aspirations index (Kasser 2002: 6), although the questionnaire used in the present study had no predefined answers. See also Sheldon and Kasser (1998).
**Table 1: Background (Causal) Categories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Leisure pursuit</th>
<th>Living conditions</th>
<th>Current work</th>
<th>Principal source of income ($M_n$)</th>
<th>Voluntary change of work</th>
<th>Systematic practice of VMS*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Singing</td>
<td>Shared apartment, city</td>
<td>University student, youth worker (part time)</td>
<td>Income and privilege from work; loan (studies); parents as last resort</td>
<td>From paid work to voluntary organization (part time)</td>
<td>0 years**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Rock music, kayaking</td>
<td>Terrace house, city</td>
<td>Assistant to functionally disordered youth (full time)</td>
<td>Income from work, partners resources; favorable housing market</td>
<td>From professional musician to youth worker (full time)</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andy</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>Sailing</td>
<td>Apartment, city</td>
<td>Conflict mediator</td>
<td>Income from work; savings</td>
<td>From CEO to conflict solver (part time)</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes:*
* = Member of a Buddhist association, engagement in consistent practice of meditation, literature study, retreats, etc.

** = Even if Lisa has not engaged in systematic practice, she has for several years tested different meditation techniques and studied and discussed Buddhist literature with her friends.
three respondents are fairly typical of people living in Western industrialized consumer society. All three respondents live in one of Sweden’s largest cities: Andy lives in a small apartment, Lisa shares an apartment with a friend, and Jon has recently moved to a terrace house. They have fairly standard leisure pursuits. However, all three respondents have chosen, or switched to, jobs that are more consistent with the ethic of simplicity, rather than ones associated with high status or high pay. Lisa has chosen to work part time rather than full time to obtain more time for leisure and voluntary work; she was offered full-time work as a youth worker, but declined. Jon received a unique offer from his former rock band (under a major international record company) to realize his childhood dream of being a rock musician. After long consideration, he chose to decline this offer in favor of his current work assisting youths with functional disorders (full time). Andy was a CEO in a smaller consulting agency (law) for several years, and was previously very engaged with the consumer way of life (concerned less with shopping for expensive possessions, but more with the pursuit of social status). After a bout of illness, he has chosen to leave law altogether and work as a self-employed part-time consultant in the field of conflict resolution. Accordingly, all three individuals have chosen professions that do not require long working hours (Golden and Wiens-Tuers 2008; Schor 1999; Starr 2008), that gives time for other activities (Etzioni 2004), at the cost of higher levels of consumption (McDonald et al. 2006)—consistent with the ethic of material simplicity described above.

The three respondents were also asked to complete a structured questionnaire about their material and immaterial wants in order of priority, as well as their opportunities for satisfying these wants (see the Appendix). One of the principal methods of satisfying material wants is a social position that enables certain economic opportunities that are used as means (Mn). In mainstream economics, means are defined by an individual’s budget constraints, commonly given by that person’s income. Here, this study tries to go beyond this definition; means may be acquired by any socially defined relation (such as through family, gifts, or status) (cf. Sahlins 1972).

Table 2 outlines the main findings. As a broad conclusion, it seems reasonably safe to claim that all three respondents have more than enough material resources to satisfy their material wants (column 4) and thus

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6 The focus will mainly be on material wants. The immaterial and material wants in Table 2 demonstrates that they are related. Nonetheless, for the sake of argumentative stringency and lack of space this question will be addressed in future research.

7 Cf. with Kasser and Ryan’s (1996) distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic goals.
### Table 2: Evaluation of the Success of VMS Practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material want-list $(W_k)$</th>
<th>Immaterial want-list</th>
<th>Material consumption bundle</th>
<th>Modus vivendi of material simplicity?</th>
<th>Interference?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$W_1$=Basic needs</td>
<td>(1) Family</td>
<td>Deflated</td>
<td>Stagnant.</td>
<td>Yes, but fragile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$W_2$=Computer</td>
<td>(2) Singing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$W_3$=Cellphone</td>
<td>(3) Movies, reading</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$W_4$=MP3 player</td>
<td>books, Internet</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$W_1$=Basic needs</td>
<td>(1) Religious practice</td>
<td>Inflated/Deflated</td>
<td>Stagnant.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$W_2$=Money as such</td>
<td>(2) Family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$W_3$=Kayak</td>
<td>(3) Colleagues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4) Outdoor life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5) Rock music</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$W_1$=Basic needs</td>
<td>(1) Religious practice</td>
<td>Deflated</td>
<td>Deflated</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$W_2$=Computer</td>
<td>(2) Family, social relations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$W_3$=Cellphone</td>
<td>(3) Involvement in the</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$W_4$=Sailing boat</td>
<td>Buddhist association</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$W_5$=Car</td>
<td>(4) Conflict resolution</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5) Sailing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
actualize a *modus vivendi* of material simplicity, (measured as the relation between $W_k$ and $M_n$): see columns 3 and 4. To reiterate, the category material wants ($W_k$) is a crude estimation of what an individual believes to lack or lacked in a near-past as well as the near-future timeframe. All three respondents claim, not surprisingly, that basic material wants, or more precisely basic needs, of different kinds (food, housing, basic clothing) are of highest priority: see column 1.

Lisa’s material wants seem now to be stagnant, after a time of deflation. Her material wants have neither decreased nor increased over the last year. She claims, “I live in a nice apartment and have no reason to want a bigger place. I have no need for a car; I use public transport. I have enough clothing, and if I need something I look in the secondhand stores. I have, nevertheless, thought about a new piano for my musical interest, but I am not sure that I will use it.” According to her comments, she has all the necessary means ($M_n$) to satisfy her current material wants ($W_k$). She collects her means mainly from her current part-time job (income) and studies (loan), but enjoys some privileges from her position and support from her parents—if it is needed. Besides her old computer, Lisa’s workplace provides her with a laptop computer and a cellphone, which she uses in her leisure time as well. Even so, there is some doubt whether Lisa will manage to safeguard her near-future *modus vivendi* of material simplicity: her means may soon be reduced, whereas no further deflation of wants can be observed. At the moment, however, she is succeeding.

At first sight, Jon’s material wants have actually increased, or inflated—this seems to be a major anomaly, in relation to the hypothesis that practicing VMS leads to deflation of wants. Nevertheless, there seems to be a sufficient explanation for this, found in Jon’s own story. Jon appears to have assimilated the material needs of his newborn daughter (food, clothing, security, etc.). Jon’s personal material wants appear to be very basic. He does not even buy new clothing. However, for his daughter’s sake, he was “forced” to buy a bigger home, a terrace house, in a secure neighborhood. He narrates, “The terrace house we bought ... is located in a very secure area. It is within a car free area. It is really Swedish in a sense, but it’s so damn good for my daughter. A lot of families with children, good day care, it is really perfect. Almost too perfect ... and my partner didn’t want to live in a district with a lot of social problems.” Accordingly, it could be that the house was bought to please his partner, rather than for the needs of his daughter. Yet it seems that it was not Jon’s personal material wants that forced him to accept the new house; the source of the pressure was his family. This would indicate that Jon’s *personal* material wants have actually deflated,
but when the material needs of his daughter (or his partner) are added to his want-list (W_k) it appears that “his” wants have inflated. Nonetheless, Jon’s modest income combined with his partner’s, as well as the sale of their apartment in a favorable housing market, lead Jon to conclude that he has enough means to satisfy all his material wants.

Andy has made radical changes in his life. Both his means as well as his material wants have deflated because of this. His monthly income is considerably lower, because he gave up high status employment as a CEO. Simultaneously, his material wants have radically changed from a status-pursuing level of consumption to a more modest one. Although he currently has a somewhat expensive leisure pursuit—sailing, (he will dispose of his car, see Table 2 Andy’s W_5) he maintains that he has enough means. Andy’s main resource is his savings; the income from his part-time job assignments is not enough to cover all his monthly expenses.

It is, in particular, one element of the economic ethic of material simplicity that is salient in these testimonies: namely, the realization of the “mirage of wants.” Andy and Jon, who have systematically practiced the kind of ethic for the longest time—see Table 1, column 8—return to this point consistently (as in the monkey metaphor above): it is one of the clearest strategies used to deflate wants. It should be noted that Jon’s leisure pursuit requires a kayak, and if he is asked how he controls his various new wants, he responds as follows:

I can be very eager … recently, I thought of buying a new kayak, a kayak that I really, really would like to have … It is so funny because I recognized the idea: “if only I could buy this kayak, it would be so much fun … ” But at the same time I am thinking: “I will allow myself to think these thoughts and these dreams, and I will see if they are equally strong in a week or so.” And after a week: “these fantasies have come up again … me, in this really cool black kayak.” … The thoughts were strong at the beginning, the same next day, but they became weaker and weaker . . . . And just as with this idea about this kayak, just as I have thought about everything else.

In a similar manner, Andy claims that the fantasies associated with wants create the impetus for a never-ending chase: craving, chasing, working, more craving. To realize that these fantasies are nothing more than a mirage produces contentment. Accordingly, even if all three respondents can rather easily satisfy their material wants, they feel the presence of an internal

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8 Compare this with the concept of mindfulness; see, for example, Rosenberg (2004).
9 It should be added that both Andy and Jon have obtained an audience with the Dalai Lama.
conflict, a sort of ambivalence. Andy sells courses and works as a consultant for different organizations. He is very familiar with different selling techniques, but now he has a more distant relation with them. He says, “... selling is also a thing that I have become worse at, because the focus is not on me anymore and I do not feel the scarcity of money any longer, so I am not so keen to sell you a course.” Jon and Lisa report a similar conflict.

Observe that Jon wants money as such (Table 2, column 1). This seems to be peculiar: “Money is important to me. To know that I have money ... therefore I rank money in second place [in the questionnaire] ... I get scared when I say all of this [nervous laughter]!” How does wanting money fit with the economic ethic of material simplicity? At first sight, it does not. However, consider the following. This claim could also be interpreted as Jon’s interest in safeguarding the *modus vivendi* of material simplicity, relative abundance, by keeping already deflated wants below his material means. Alternatively, relative scarcity emerges—an undesirable state. Naturally, the average person also desires a state of relative abundance, but the strategy of such a person is not to reduce material wants, but to increase material means, by working more or borrowing money (Golden and Wiens-Tuers 2008; Schor 1999; cf. Starr 2008). Therefore, all things being equal, when Jon claims that he wants more money than he needs, it basically indicates that he will become annoyed if his material wants will for some reason unexpectedly inflated and thus exceeded his means. Thus, even if Jon does not realize it, this kind of irritation is actually consistent with the outlined ethic (cf. George 2004).

Nevertheless, the dependence on money creates ambivalence and uneasy feelings. For Lisa, this internal conflict is channeled towards work as a “necessary evil” to acquire means (Mₙ). She claims, “The job is stressful. It permeates everything. It is such a need that is stressful. It is, unfortunately, the basis of all life in this society,” she continues. “I hope, of course, that I do not get into a situation where I need a lot of money, with big loans and such things. I hope I can manage on a little.” Thus she works part-time rather than consume more. All three, accordingly, testify about a dissonance, a kind of causal interference.

To sum up: in its orthodox form, VMS aims to extinguish the worldliness of social life and so corresponds to a vision of monastic life (Weber 2000). In Max Weber’s account, Buddhism is a world-rejecting system of thought, in contrast with the world-affirming tradition of Ascetic Protestantism, which seeks mastery and thus control over material conditions. VMS seeks
emancipation by reducing the importance of the material wants (Schluchter 1989: 117 ff.). Thus, on the cultural level, it is this rejection of the material world that accounts for the pursuit of deflation of wants. On a practical level, however, judging from the three respondents, the activation of this economic ethic results rather in the establishment of a *modus vivendi* of material simplicity (“carrying some material wants”) and not of complete rejection of the world (“carrying no material wants at all”).

Now, with reference to these observations let us try to assemble an analytical model in order to account for some of the underlying mechanisms of relative scarcity, abundance, and sufficiency. As this study uses very few cases, no empirical generalization is granted; but the construction of an analytical model will provide some potential for an analytical generalization (Sayer 1992; Schofield 2002).

**Towards a Holistic Model of Relative Scarcity, Abundance, and Sufficiency**

As the comparison of the fourth and fifth columns of Table 2 shows, even if all three respondents have accomplished relative material abundance, there is a sort of *causal interference* between the totality of VMS (principles and practices) and fundamental properties of consumer society (Grigsby 2004; cf. Pellow 2005). As Grigsby argues, “The problem [for simple livers] is how to get by economically and socially and at the same time participate as little as possible in reproducing the dominant economic relations and culture” (Grigsby 2004: 166). The explanation for this interference, it seems reasonable to propose, is that different systems and economic ethics operate at the same time (Archer 1996; Hodgson 1998; Swedberg 1998). In this context, the *modus vivendi* of material simplicity does not manifest as a categorical event, but rather as a tendency. The event functions as a continuous potentiality in the practice of VMS, but is not necessarily actualized: a person can practice VMS, but may not succeed in the establishment of relative abundance. It is precisely a *modus vivendi*, a fragile state, because it is under constant threat from countering causal pressures. Both material wants and means depend on dynamic forces. A person may lose his/her job, or his/her wants *seem* to inflate because his/her family wants more. The possibilities are many. However, for our respondents, it seems, there is no relative scarcity and no need to allocate material means. Accordingly, the scarcity postulate of mainstream economics does not seem to apply in these three critical cases.
In relation to the observations described above, the main thrust of the thesis\textsuperscript{10} does not hinge on relative abundance being entirely actualized. On the contrary, relative scarcity plays an equally essential role in this model, which illuminates the complexity of human (socioeconomic) provisioning. In view of this, I maintain that by making some modifications to the holistic model of absolute scarcity and abundance developed by Daoud (2007), a model of relative scarcity and abundance can be advanced that has the analytical power to explain the empirical observations presented in this paper.\textsuperscript{11} This model is informed by the critical realist ontology.\textsuperscript{12} This ontology informs the structure of this model (that is, the analytical division between events, necessary generative mechanisms, and underlying structures).

Nevertheless, other basic concepts of this model are provided by Menger’s (2004)\textsuperscript{13} theory on scarcity, which was developed further by Robbins (1945). According to these two theorists, relative scarcity arises when the “many wants” (competing ends) exceed the given resources (means). In mainstream economics, a resource is commonly expressed in monetary terms as a “budget constraint,” but this is not a necessary restriction. A resource could also be “time,” “energy,” “cognitive abilities,” or other means with alternative uses.\textsuperscript{14} Even if the focus of this study is upon material resources (defined by the respondents), this argument highlights the analytical generality of the developed account.

In the same manner, in this model an event of relative scarcity (or abundance) is defined as the necessary relation between one kind of $M_n$ (in this case material means) and several kinds of $W_k$ (in this case material wants) harbored by an individual and potentially satisfied by these means. If $M_n$ is insufficient to satisfy all $W_k$, then relative scarcity emerges; if $M_n$ is more than sufficient, relative abundance emerges. This is captured in

\textsuperscript{10} This model is obviously not a mathematical model but a causal or theoretical one. A theoretical model aims to show the underlying causal mechanism of an event rather than to establish a statistical inference; it is a graphical representation of how theoretical categories are related. For a detailed exposition of “models” see Danermark et al. (2002: 150 ff.).

\textsuperscript{11} Compare this model of relative scarcity and abundance to the model of absolute scarcity and abundance developed in Daoud (2007 see also Daoud (forthcoming)). The two models are almost analogous, but differ in that this model focuses on the alternative use of the set of $M_n$, whereas the model of absolute scarcity focuses on the actual use of available quantities (A) and entitlements (E). Thus the two models highlight two different dimensions or potentialities in resources.

\textsuperscript{12} See, for example, Bigo 2006, Lawson 1997, Martins 2007, and Mearman 2006 for some of the possibilities and problems with critical realism.

\textsuperscript{13} Originally published 1871.

\textsuperscript{14} See, for example, Menger’s analogy of Crusoe, who tried to allocate his limited water supply (2004: 133–136) or Robbins’ example of being either a philosopher or a mathematician (1945: 14). Also, compare this argument with the economic approach of Gary Becker.
Figure 2. Herein lies the kinship with the mainstream conception, but the differences consists of, at least, three kinds.

The developed approach is consequently interested in the following issues. First, it questions the constitution of this means–ends relation, which means that the nature of wantingness is investigated (Kasser and Ryan 1996). Different institutional settings (e.g., different social fields) will form and produce different wants. For Robbins, “The external world does not offer full opportunities for their complete achievement [the various wants]. Life is short. Nature is niggardly” (Robbins 1945: 12–13). Yet a resource is not merely naturally given as a “budget constraint,” but assembled socially in micropolitical affairs (negotiations about the distribution of family resources,
changing working hours, etc.) (Archer 2003; Hodgson 1998)\(^{15}\)—this is reflected in the three VMS cases. Second, in a situation of relative scarcity, instrumental rationality is only one possible mechanism to determine alternative use (allocation). Social relations (power, institutions, norms, etc.), fallible reflexivity, habits, or lack of information leading to uncertainty are some mechanisms that may inform behavior (Archer 2003; Hodgson 1997). In the case of VMS, the foci have been on how norms or ethics (sociocultural mechanisms) condition wantingness. Third, if mainstream economics is intimately dependent on a situation of relative scarcity,\(^ {16}\) a more general socioeconomic approach focuses not only on scarcity but also abundance and sufficiency (Dugger and Peach 2009). A state of abundance or sufficiency may be the goal of any given political economy (e.g., the welfare state or utopia) (Bronfenbrenner 1962; cf. Hodgson 1995), or socioeconomic action (the three VMS cases presented here). The development of certain institutions in a society may be guided by these events (cf. Danner 1974). This development is often characterized by conflicts, that is, new emergent habits (e.g., VMS) that challenge a dominant culture (e.g., consumerism) (Grigsby 2004).

In more general terms, the constitution of \(M_n\) and \(W_k\) and their underlying causal properties depends on the underlying causal structures that produce them (cf. Dolfsma 2002). Naturally, different cases will pinpoint different underlying structures. For example, the alternative use of money in capitalism is slightly different from the alternative use of time in family relations, and for any given study, the analyst may focus on specific structures or the relation between them (sociological, psychological, biological, etc.). For VMS, as discussed in this essay, the main focus has been on its sociocultural dimensions. Psychological,\(^ {17}\) biological, and other kinds of structures are acknowledged to exist, but have not been subjected to deep scientific inquiry. This focus, consequently, invites to further research on the other underlying causes of relative scarcity and abundance, not only about VMS, but also the various other cases that may be investigated by such an approach (use of time, generation of immaterial wants, and fiscal systems, to mention a few).

Thus, the underlying sociocultural structures and the conflict they generate may be pinpointed in the following summarized way. The assembled observations mainly show that: (1) the sociocultural practices of VMS have

\(^{15}\) Compare these different accounts, Archer’s sociological agency structure and Hodgson’s institutional agency institution approach. See Fleetwood (2008) for an illuminating comparison.

\(^{16}\) Without it, the analysis collapse. See for example Robbins (1945).

\(^{17}\) See Kasser and Kanner (2004) for psychological studies on consumerism.
logical and causal properties, labeled the \textit{material want deflating mechanisms}, or MWDM; (2) the sociocultural properties of consumer society elicit a set of countervailing logical and causal mechanisms, referred to as the \textit{causal environment of material complexity}, or CEMC; (3) when VMS is mediated by human agency, it also triggers the economic ethic of material simplicity, or EEMS; and (4) the three agents practice this ethic and achieve the \textit{modus vivendi} of material simplicity (the event), but with difficulty, because of the \textit{causal interference} between CEMC and MWDM. Figure 2 illustrates this point.

It is not unreasonable to assume that the magnitude of this causal interference is one of the determining factors of the general success of a VMS lifestyle; that is, on both individual and social levels (a hypothesis which could be tested by future research). Higher interference tends to lower the manifestation of a \textit{modus vivendi} of material simplicity. As Grigsby argues (2004: 166), the problem for VMS practitioners is how to get by socially and economically without reproducing the dominant institutions. A direct answer to this question is of course difficult to provide, but may be found in a combination of psychological (see, for example, Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi 2006) as well as socio-logical theories (see, for example, Etzioni 2004; Schumacher 1975). Even if VMS is positively correlated with social and individual wellbeing (Brown and Kasser 2005; Ekman \textit{et al.} 2005; Rosenberg 2004; Sheldon \textit{et al.} 2004), the future of VMS depends on its effectiveness in contesting dominant institutions, but mostly on its ability to mediate and disseminate the economic ethic of material simplicity.

Accordingly, it should be emphasized that these individuals are merely examples of a relatively fractioned social movement that has not produced a significant or systemic change of society. These individuals could be seen to manifest expressive rationality or meta-reflexivity; that is, individuals who frequently reflect over themselves and the consequences of their own action (Archer 2003: 255 ff.). They reflect over issues ranging from their own identity to the ultimate ends of life; it is maybe not surprising that they tend to go a step further when it comes to changing their lifestyle when they believe it to be necessary. So, even if the economic ethic of VMS has gradually become more accepted by the public, it has still not become normalized practice (Etzioni 2004). It seems that the average individual still harbors the mainstream consumerist values, at least if we judge from the increased consumption level of society (Bauman 2007). The growth of VMS would require that this economic ethic is adequately disseminated, from this kind of social movements (Buddhism, ecological movement, or other similar
movements) into the normal or common value system of society, seriously
challenging it, and, subsequently, reproduced and gradually expanded
further.

We could therefore ask, what are the outlooks for VMS to become a
central element of society’s mainstream value system as well as individuals’
practice? To reiterate, it is merely possible to give some indications of how to
research this difficult question. First, it should be said, that the prognosis
depends on the chosen definition. Should the social scientist choose
voluntary material simplicity (VMS), voluntary simplicity, simple living, or
downshifting (Johnston and Burton 2003)? Thus there are, on the one hand,
several ways to theoretically define the “act of deliberately choosing to
reduce ones wantingness”; on the other hand, there are in practice several
social behaviors and thus social movements that fit the “act of wanting less”:
Western Buddhism is only one example. Groups within the green movement
are another example (Lauer 2002), some Christian movements are yet
another example (Rudmin and Kilbourne 1996). Hence, a more fully
elaborated account of this question depends on both theoretical and practical
methodological issues. There are, nonetheless, two relatively crude indicators
that may play in favour for the general successfulness of VMS.

The first indicator is found in previous research on values. Ronald
Inglehart and his associates have convincingly demonstrated that many
societies around the world have entered what they call a post-materialistic
era, a value system that praises non-materialistic activities (Inglehart and
Abramson 1994). Basically, these findings show that societies which have had
a strong economic development (mostly Western societies) and previously
strong materialistic values (emphasis on survival values, e.g., economic
growth), now have researched a point of material saturation and thus tend
today towards more post-materialistic values (emphasis on self-expression,
e.g., individual self-expression) (Inglehart 2004). Accordingly, VMS could be
seen as an example of post-materialist values, but an example that goes
further than the ordinary post-materialistic individual. However, this does
not mean that all post-materialistic values encourage the economic ethic of
VMS and thus promoting the modus vivendi of material simplicity. In a post-
materialistic value system consumption of immaterial services becomes more
and more common, which may still lead to consumption of status giving
services in general. Inglehart and Welzel (2005) argue that:

Rising emphasis on self-expression values does not put an end to material desires.
But prevailing economic orientations are gradually being reshaped. People who
work in the knowledge sector continue to seek high salaries, but they place equal or
greater emphasis on doing stimulating work and being able to follow their own time schedules . . . Consumption is becoming progressively less determined by the need for sustenance and the practical use of the goods consumed. People still eat, but a growing component of food’s value is determined by its nonmaterial aspects. People pay a premium to eat exotic cuisines that provide an interesting experience or that symbolize a distinctive life-style. The publics of postindustrial societies place growing emphasis on “political consumerism,” such as boycotting goods whose production violates ecological or ethical standards. Consumption is less and less a matter of sustenance and more and more a question of life-style—and choice. (p. 33)

Thus conspicuous consumption is still a possibility within a post-material era. In other words, post-materialism does not necessarily equal the ethics of VMS; what it does mean, however, is that there is a greater logical compatibility between VMS and post-materialist value system than VMS and materialism (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). So how could we substantiate whether these post-materialistic tendencies are working in favour of VMS? The following indicator gives us a hint.

The second indicator is based on increased media coverage of simplicity and ecologically sustainable lifestyle (internet, newspapers, television, books), not only in the US but also in the UK (Princen et al. 2002: 212) or even smaller Western countries such as Sweden. Princen et al. argue:

Perhaps because of their growing numbers, simplifiers have become the subject of increasing media attention. In 1993, for example, readers of major US newspapers would have learned little if anything about the VSM, since relevant stories rarely made it into print. This had changed by 1996; that year, an average of just over two articles or features per paper appeared. By 1998 the number of stories or features had jumped threefold to fivefold, depending on the newspaper, and as of this writing (mid-2001) there is no indication that this pace of coverage is slowing. Strikingly, relevant articles are finding their way into marquee venues. (2002: 201).

The number of published stories seems to increase exponentially both in Sweden but especially in English speaking countries. A crude search in Google News shows that between year 1980 and 1999 about 1,900 newspaper stories could be found about simplicity in English newspapers; between 2000 and 2009 (October) the number rose to about 5,300 stories, almost a threefold of the amount of stories. The absolutenumber is not comparable with the US, but a small emerging trend is observable in Sweden as well. Between 1980 and 2003 no publications about simplicity could be found in Swedish newspapers, but between 2004 and 2009 (October) the stories rose to around 40. This is a very small relative number but an indication of increasing media coverage. For recently published stories in the major Swedish newspapers, see, for example, Aftonbladet (Gustavsson 2008) “År Vardagen Full Av Stress?”, Svenska Dagbladet, “Hårt Jobb Att Arbeta Mindre” (Lagerblad 2007), E24 “Vägen till ett annat tempo” (Andersson 2009), and Dagens Nyheter, “Var Fjärde Skulle Byta Sänkt Lön Mot Mer Fritid” (Granestrånd 2008) and “Jag Vill Sälla Taget Om Det Materiella” (Lerner 2009a). The latter was also broadcast on the very popular morning show “Gommoron Sverige” (Sveriges Television 2009). Published books about material simplicity show a similar tendency. The following English search string was used: “simple living.” OR “voluntary.simplicity.” OR “slow.life.” OR “material.simplicity.” The following Swedish search string
Zafirovski found, via a content analysis, that more books on simplicity were published in a recent four-year period (32 books in 1995 to 1998) than compared to the previous 22 years (26 books in 1973 to 1994) (Zafirovski 2000). This shows that the public interest in material simplicity has increased considerably.\(^{19}\)

Nevertheless, none of these arguments say much about the actual behavior of people. Values may be held, but not practiced; people may harbor post-materialistic values but do not find material simplicity compelling; the media may write about simplicity and people read it with interest, but they do not find the motivation or interest to actually change their lifestyle. What these trends at least say is that material VMS in general has found a common acceptance in the general discourse and thus people’s minds, which could motivate a growing number of people to actually change their lifestyle.

Even if there is strong evidence for the case that a materialist lifestyle gives less long-term happiness than non-materialist (Kasser 2002), a major obstacle to the adoption of VMS and other kin lifestyles is the perceived sacrifice people need to do within a capitalist system (cf. Jonsson 2006), which links directly to the problem of causal interference. As Etzioni writes:

> The question of whether voluntary simplicity can greatly expand its reach depends to a significant extent on the question of whether voluntary simplicity constitutes a sacrifice that people must be constantly motivated to make or is in itself a major source of satisfaction, and hence self-motivating. (1999: 113)

Given the inherent instability of modern capitalism (Ingham 2008), which generates periods of financial crisis and now directly accountable for a rapidly impending ecological crisis, it seems to me, that VMS will gain increasing momentum. The economic ethic of VMS resonates well with the ecological economical call for, among other things, voluntarily reduced material consumption (Cato 2009; Daly and Farley 2004; Lawson 2006). Hence, reduced material consumption, with assistance of fundamental technological innovations, is one of the main solutions to the impending ecological crises of our time. Simplicity “might provide the foundation for a society that accommodates basic socioeconomic equality much more readily than societies in which conspicuous consumption is rampant” (Etzioni 1999: 125). But it needs to be perceived by the public as a forward looking

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\(^{19}\) For Swedish book examples which have been noticed in major newspapers see, for example, Lerner (2009b).
movement, or else it has little chance of flourishing within modern capitalist societies.  

DISCUSSION

This paper has presented the following argument. The general causal environment of consumer society tends to inflate human material wants and thus generate relative scarcity. It has been shown how individuals who are enclosed by this environment may implicitly or explicitly attempt to neutralize this effect by activating the economic ethic of material simplicity. This ethic is produced by the cultural structures of VMS, which is a shared sociocultural element of Western Tibetan Buddhism and voluntary simplicity. The interest of these individuals is thus to actualize and safeguard the *modus vivendi* of material simplicity, a practical state of relative abundance by deflation of human material wants. At the moment, and despite the strong countervailing forces that create causal interference, these individuals seem to do so. Hence, the main purpose has not been to contribute to the already rich literature on voluntary simplicity, but to use existing knowledge, complemented by new conceptual and empirical findings, to illuminate the theme of scarcity, abundance, and sufficiency.

One of the main theoretical contributions has thus been to empirically explore, with reference to these three critical cases (Danermark *et al.* 2002; Ragin 1987) how scarcity may be countervailed. This then indicates that the scarcity postulate of mainstream economics is problematically formulated. However, it is important to distinguish between an analytical and empirical generalization (Sayer 1992; Schofield 2002). In terms of an empirical generalization, this study is more explorative than conclusive. Still, in terms of an analytical generalization it may provide the necessary theoretical tools for a fuller understanding of an event of scarcity, abundance, and sufficiency. Accordingly further studies need to be made in order to understand the empirical extent of the issue.

The alternative causal model, the holistic model of relative scarcity and abundance (cf. Daoud 2007; Daoud forthcoming), seeks to account for the limitations of the scarcity postulate by being stratified and dynamic. A supporter of this postulate may provide at least one counterargument, namely that economics is only interested in cases of (relative) scarcity, and therefore the example of VMS is indeed sociologically interesting, but economically irrelevant. I argue that while this may be so, it is only true for

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20 I thank both anonymous referees for making me aware of this issue.
neoclassical economics and not for general socioeconomic theory. The paradox of affluence is outside the scope of neoclassical economics. As Peter Danner describes this paradox, “increasing affluence generates more scarcity and, consequently, increasing ‘unsatisfaction’ of wants. The goad of scarcity, put precisely, is that affluence, in fulfilling more wants, frustrates even more” (Danner 1974: 22). This study has sought to investigate how the economic ethic of material simplicity effects individuals material want formation (cf. Danner’s “spirit of poverty”; Danner 1974) and ultimately their well-being (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi 2006).

The holistic model encourages explanation of relative scarcity, abundance, sufficiency (the problem of emergence), rather than assuming scarcity (the problem of allocation). One of the important questions is, accordingly, why does relative scarcity and abundance arise in the first place? How do various social actors countervail these events (if they are not desired), or how are these promoted (if desired)? This shift in focus does not mean that questions of allocation should be ignored, but rather a collaborating and complementary approach is preferred. Yet, irrespective of focus (allocation or explanation), this model illustrates the importance of sociocultural and institutional conditioning upon economic events (Jackson 1996; Lawson 1997; Mischel 1997; Hodgson 1998; Dolfsma 2002).

Nonetheless, further research is required to test the applicability of this causal model, and to account for issues in proximity. For example the following should be researched: first, examination of the internal relation between the concepts of wants, wishes, desires, needs, preferences, aspirations, ends, interests, and related concepts (Hunt 2005; O’Boyle 2005); second, how these relate to various institutional settings (Hodgson 1997); third, to develop more fully how wants may change, that is, the “metamorphosis of wants”; and, fourth, to address the relation between materiality and immateriality of wants and means (Kasser and Ryan 1996). Furthermore, to reiterate, only crude qualitative measures were used in this study which does not validate any empirical generalization. Complementing this limitation with quantitative studies is thus also necessary (cf. Greene and Yoon 2004). All in all, by examining issues of this nature, the holistic model

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22 Strictly speaking then, the meaning of affluence is not the same as relative abundance, as developed here. The antinomy of affluence is poverty. Relative scarcity may then exist in affluence, and relative abundance in poverty. Increased affluence simply means increased control over material means.
24 In such an approach, the quantification of scarcity, abundance and sufficiency is required. The terminology
invites for further and deeper socioeconomic interventions into the theme of scarcity, abundance, and sufficiency (cf. Gordon 2005).

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$W_k$ and $M_n$ is used in order to facilitate such quantification. I merely offer a sketch here. To reiterate, scarcity, abundance and sufficiency (SAS) is defined as the relation between wants ($W_k$) and means ($M_n$). This is defined as a scale, namely, “$SAS = M_n - W_k$.” Here, $W_k$ is a set with $k$ different kinds of wants (house, car, etc.) and $M_n$ is $n$ different kind of means of satisfaction (social positions, own income, partner’s income, etc.). This SAS relation is basically the dependent variable. If the SAS variable is positive, then abundance is actualized; if negative, scarcity exists. However, in order to investigate a special kind of relative abundance, namely, the modus vivendi of material simplicity, which occurs via deflation of material wants, further specifications must be made. The character of $M_n$ and $W_k$ could in turn be investigated by a series of independent variables; most importantly, active value system (the economic ethic), kind of work, whether downshifted, kinds of good consumed, if less consumption is voluntarily chosen, affiliation with some kind of VMS movement (e.g., Buddhist, ecological), denote these variables as $b_1$ to $b_z$. Accordingly, in a simple multivariate regression one could set “$SAS = b_0 + b_1 + \ldots + b_z + e$.” This sketch offers a basis for statistical analysis.


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THE MODUS VIVENDI OF MATERIAL SIMPLICITY


APPENDIX—THE STRUCTURED QUESTIONNAIRE: CAPTURING AN INDIVIDUAL’S WANT-LIST

(1) Which material goals do you prioritize? (for example, a house, a car)

i. Could you please rank these?
   1. ___________________________________
   2. ___________________________________
   3. ___________________________________
   4. ___________________________________
   5. ___________________________________

   ii. Which would you abstain from if you had to choose?

(2) Which immaterial goals do you prioritize? (for example, spiritual, social or political)

iii. Could you please rank these?
   1. ___________________________________
   2. ___________________________________

25 The following is my translation from Swedish to English.
iv. Which would you abstain from if you had to choose?

(3) Could you please rank both your material and immaterial goals in the same list?

1. ___________________________________
2. ___________________________________
3. ___________________________________
4. ___________________________________
5. ___________________________________
6. ___________________________________
7. ___________________________________
8. ___________________________________
9. ___________________________________
10. ___________________________________

(4) Do you have enough time and money to fulfill each goal?

v. If no, what obstacles are there?
vi. If yes, what enables you to accomplish your goals?

BIOGRAPHY

Adel Daoud is a doctoral candidate in Sociology at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. His research comprises the study of the concepts of scarcity, abundance, and sufficiency in economics and sociology. One of his main interests is to bring these disciplines closer together through the development of these concepts. Another research interest, is meta-theory, particularly realism.