



Living against the grain of society

– the practice of voluntary simplicity

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Master thesis • 30 credits
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Faculty of Natural Resources and Agricultural Sciences
Department of Urban and Rural Development
European Master in Environmental Science (EnvEuro)
Uppsala 2021

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Credits: 30 credits
Level: Second cycle, A2E
Course title: Master thesis in Environmental Science, A2E
Course code: EX0897
Programme/education: European Master in Environmental Science (EnvEuro)
Course coordinating dept: Department of Aquatic Sciences and Assessment

Place of publication: Uppsala
Year of publication: 2021
Online publication: <https://stud.epsilon.slu.se>

Keywords: voluntary simplicity, simple living, anti-consumption, practice theory, societal change, responsabilization

Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences
Faculty of Natural Resources and Agricultural Sciences
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Abstract

Ecological challenges like climate change and biodiversity loss lead to a need for change, but the radical changes that are required seem not to come about. One hot issue debated is who has the power and responsibility to change. This discussion has many different dimensions (e.g., between countries, or technological fixes vs radical system change) but here I base my study on the discussion of agency or structure. To put it simply, do we need to focus on structural political changes or rather on the level of the individuals and their consumerist lifestyles. This thesis aims to contribute to this debate by providing a better understanding of the (im)possibilities of individual lifestyle changes in a society that is largely organized to accommodate consumerist lifestyles. It does so by focusing on the example of Voluntary Simplicity, a lifestyle movement that advocates for a post-consumerist lifestyle. With the help of practice theory, which is especially fit to analyze everyday practices and change, and a qualitative interview study with seven voluntary simplifiers living in Sweden, I answer the following research questions: What are the motivations and drivers for having a voluntary simplicity lifestyle?, what are the challenges and obstacles that voluntary simplifiers need to overcome?, and does life, in consequence, get more complicated by striving for a “simpler” life because it is against the grain of society? The analysis demonstrates a motivation among the simplifiers to live sustainably and to reduce material possessions, working hours and stress. Impediments include the struggle of wanting to be part of a community but at the same time being different from the mainstream society, inflexible work structures and time and labor-intensive activities such as self-sufficiency. The question if life got simpler could not satisfactorily be answered and is connected to considerations on what life is about. In the discussion, I argue to consider social norms and values because they seem to exacerbate change both for politics and individuals. Future avenues for study could be based on participatory observation, autoethnography or doing research in non-capitalist-consumerist societies. This study is relevant because it opened up and contributed to the debate about change by acknowledging the entanglement of social structures and individuals.

Keywords: voluntary simplicity, simple living, anti-consumption, practice theory, societal change, responsabilization

Preface

During my previous studies about resource management that had a strong focus on sustainability matters, I got the image of Sweden being a rather progressive and sustainable country, which has drawn my interest to do research here. Examples include one of the highest recycling rates, many electric cars, and a high percentage of renewable energy. Another reason for my interest is, of course, that I consider myself fortunate to have spent one year in Sweden during my master's program.

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1. Introduction

Humankind faces major ecological challenges these days: climate change, environmental pollution, increasing resource scarcity, biodiversity loss; and the destruction greatly impacts wildlife and human health (Ehrlich & Ehrlich 2013; Steffen et al. 2015; WWF 2020), with western societies and their consumerist-capitalist economies being large contributors to this devastation (Alexander & Ussher 2012). This induces a need for a cultural and systemic shift in our society and economic system (WWF 2020). The discussions about sustainability have been going on for some decades now. The Brundtland report from 1987 provides one of the most cited definitions of sustainable development: “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations 1987).

After several milestones on the path to sustainability like the Rio World Summit in 1992 and establishing the UN Millennium Development Goals in 2000, the UN General Assembly “Transforming our world” set up 17 interlinked global goals for a sustainable future, the so-called sustainable development goals, also known as SDGs (United Nations n.d.). One of these goals is to establish responsible consumption and production (ibid). Similarly, the EU Commission developed an action plan for sustainable production and consumption (European Commission n.d. a) and the European green deal (European Commission n.d. b).

Although there is evidence and agreement that there is a need for radical changes to provide a planet worthy of living for future generations, there are different opinions on where this change should come from and who should be the driving force (European Environment Agency 2019). Especially western societies keep putting this change off because there is no clear answer. Should it be international organizations, governments, companies, individuals? Who has the power and the responsibility to change? There are many different dimensions to this discussion: is it technological fixes, or is a radical system change needed? Or should we focus on international agreements? My study finds its basic interest in this question of where change is located, is it agency or structure? In other words, is it necessary to focus on structural political changes, or should we rather focus on the level of individuals and their consumerist lifestyle?

This thesis **aims** to contribute to this debate by providing a better understanding of the (im)possibilities of individual lifestyle changes in a society that is largely

organized to accommodate consumerist lifestyles. It does so by investigating the example of Voluntary Simplicity (VS), a lifestyle movement that advocates for a post-consumerist lifestyle and aims for a higher quality of life while decreasing consumption (Alexander & Ussher 2012). VS is a lifestyle that is characterized by ecological awareness and claims to be sustainable (Elgin 2010).

Practice theory, which is especially suitable to analyze everyday practices and change, provides the theoretical background for my study. More precisely, I will base my analysis on the conceptual framework by Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012) and their three elements of a practice: *materials*, *competences* and *meanings*. The empirical material is collected by an **interview study** with seven Swedish voluntary simplifiers, located all over the country.

Since my goal is to gain a deeper understanding of the practice of a lifestyle that tries to go against the grain, I am interested in the reasons why someone chooses to live accordingly to VS and the connected struggles of being different than the mainstream society. Moreover, I will explore the conflict between the striving for simplicity and the challenges that are connected to “being different”. Therefore, my **research questions** (RQs) are as follows:

- 1) What are the motivations and drivers for having a voluntary simplicity lifestyle?
- 2) What are the challenges and obstacles that voluntary simplifiers need to overcome?
- 3) Does life, in consequence, get more complicated by striving for a “simpler” life because it is against the grain of society?

According to Rebouças and Soares (2020), most VS research has been conducted in Anglo-Saxon countries which is why my study is also contributing to the field of VS research in a more diversified geographical context.

2. Thematic background

This chapter shortly introduces the issue of societal change and describes the neoliberal governing practice of responsabilization to pave the way for a more detailed debate about where to locate change for sustainability in chapter 6 (Discussion). Moreover, I will give a brief overview of the development of today's prevalent consumer society in capitalist countries to provide a base for understanding why the VS movement is so much against the norm. Thereafter, I provide an insight into the roots, characteristics, and core values of VS.

2.1. Societal change and responsabilization

In our current age of climate change and biodiversity loss, the question of where societal change originates has become central. Our current globalized and connected society seems too complex to locate where change comes from and to consciously change (Weinstein 2010). According to Giddens (1991), apart from the global *scope of change*, an increased *pace of change* and the *nature of modern institutions* (e.g., the commodification of products) are features that differentiate modern social institutions from traditional social orders. Knowledge and tools developed by past generations of social scientists seem not to be fully adequate to deal with the changes in society today (Weinstein 2010) which makes it more difficult to investigate the complexity of change. Yet, in popular discourse, it is still agency or structure that is set against each other as possible origins for change.

In recent years, in societies' conscious efforts to meet current socio-environmental challenges, such as climate change, focus has shifted to include not only structure (e.g., politics, institutions, technology), but also individual people as an important driver for change. It is through the governing practice of responsabilization that the required change for sustainability is increasingly sought.

Fuchs and Lorek (2005) state that efficiency of consumption via technological improvement can only lead to *weak* sustainable consumption, whereas a change in consumption patterns and a reduction in consumption levels in industrialized countries are required for *strong* sustainable consumption. The latter is not easily reached by international governmental organizations, because of their weak position in global governance and the strong opposing interests among their

constituents, i.e., consumers and business actors (ibid). Even though a multitude of policies aiming towards sustainable development have been created in recent years on international, national and local levels, Howes et al. (2017) found that at the level of implementation the policies often failed. As such, implementation failures are a significant cause for the world not to be closer to environmental sustainability. Implementation failures origin from conflicts between environmental and economic policies, a lack of incentives for the implementation, to unsuccessful communication of goals to key stakeholders (ibid).

Individuals are expected to make changes to their behaviour in their daily lives and to be sustainable and, above all, responsible consumers since the 1990s (Christensen et al. 2007; Soneryd & Uggla 2015). This consumer *responsibilization* has become a key element in current environmental governance and is widespread in most of the Western world nowadays (Soneryd & Uggla 2015). It refers to “a governance praxis that operates through ascribing freedom and autonomy to individuals and agents [...] while simultaneously appealing to individual responsibility-taking, independent self-steering and ‘self-care’” (Pyysiäinen et al. 2017:216).

Consumer-oriented environmental policy has brought some successes, especially when technological progress, economic structures (taxes and subsidies), information (labelling) and understanding (campaigns) result in a consistent combination (Christensen et al. 2007). These measures help individuals to approach their responsibilities by being informed, guided and provided with tools that facilitate individual choice (Soneryd & Uggla 2015). Although the message of what needs to be done is clear, current green governmentality is indistinct and ambiguous policy goals make it more difficult to influence consumption patterns (Christensen et al. 2007; Soneryd & Uggla 2015). A moral imperative of the *individualized responsibility* arises from various actors, e.g., governments, corporations, and the mass media approaching citizens as responsible consumers (Soneryd & Uggla 2015). VS can be understood as a way of people responding to this moral imperative and taking “their environmental responsibility seriously” (ibid:916).

Responsibilization is understood to be neoliberal governing, a form of governing that “seeks to reshape the sensemaking, even subjectivity, of individuals in such a manner as to shift their explanations for problems or concerns from external agents or forces to the self” (Pyysiäinen et al. 2017:216). Decreased state services and security systems are linked to a raising call for “personal responsibility” and “self-care” (Lemke 2001:203).

2.2. Consumer society

While occasional consumption of luxuries or symbolic goods characterized most earlier societies, the newness of our current consumer society lies in that the “ever-

growing consumption has become the principal aspiration, source of identity, and leisure activity” and therefore the way of life (Ackerman 1997:109). Modern consumer society is linked to the industrial revolution which allowed for mass-production of mass-consumed commodities that were unavailable or unaffordable before (Ackerman 1997). Once all the working population could acquire material necessities and luxuries on the market, consumption expanded as fast as income would allow (ibid). New commercial institutions, advertising strategies and ways of life focusing on modern consumption emerged and the rise of department stores in the second half of the 19th century led to an intersection of several social and economic trends (ibid). The “therapeutic ethos”, i.e. a means to finding identity and freedom, and the search for self-realization turned ads from being only informative to play on consumers’ emotions (Lears 1997; Crawley 2008). In the 1950s, advertisements started to offer solutions to fake problems, problems that did not exist (Rosen 2014). Advertisers had begun to define what was socially acceptable and how women and men were supposed to act (Crawley 2008).

The consumer society is connected to the economic idea that the GDP is the measure for progress and every generation will be materially richer than the one before (De Graaf et al. 2014). More recently, shifts in capitalism in the rich North led to a wasteful consumption of excess (Urry 2010). De Graaf et al. (2014) refer to overconsumption as “affluenza”, suggesting it to be a disease that found its way throughout society.

2.3. Simple living and voluntary simplicity

The idea of living a simple and frugal life is not new. The practice has roots in the teachings and social philosophies of Jesus, Buddha and Mohammed, modern leaders such as Lenin and Gandhi, and philosophers e.g., Plato, Socrates, and Marcus Aurelius (Gregg 1936; Elgin & Mitchell 1977; Elgin 2010; Laarz 2021). Writers like Benjamin Franklin, Leo Tolstoy, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau with his book *Walden* encouraged simple and frugal living (Elgin & Mitchell 1977; Laarz 2021; Money Crashers 2021). Further examples of frugality and self-reliance include monastic orders of the Middle Ages and groups like the Quakers, the Amish, and the Puritans (Gregg 1936; Elgin & Mitchell 1977; Money Crashers 2021).

The term VS was coined in 1936 by Richard Gregg to describe "a way of life marked by a new balance between inner and outer growth" (Elgin & Mitchell 1977:1). According to Gregg (1936:2), VS 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”. After being a minuscule subculture in the 1960s (Elgin 2010), VS became a significant social movement in the 1970s, when people in developed countries started returning to simple living (Elgin & Mitchell

1977). A “silent revolution” during that time resulted in a shift from focusing on material values and physical security to an increased importance of the quality of life (Inglehart 1977). These “postmaterialist values” include, e.g., the wish for community, more freedom, and a voice in government matters (Blühndorn 2013).

There are many different ways of understanding VS, and I will mention a few here, because it is this variety that also characterizes the practice of VS that I investigate in my thesis. Elgin and Mitchell (1977:2) capture the essence of VS as a way of life that is “outwardly simple and inwardly rich”. Gregg (1936:2) found VS to be restraining in some areas of life to be able to “secure greater abundance of life in other directions” with the degree of simplification depending on the individual. Important aspects encompass, among others, frugality of consumption, a strong sense of environmental urgency, and the realization of a higher human psychological and spiritual potential (ibid). It is a *voluntary* lifestyle that is “consciously chosen, deliberate, and intentional” (Elgin 2010:4), therefore based on the choice of free will instead of being forced by government, poverty or being imprisoned (Etzioni 1998). Resources like wealth, education, and unique skills that bring income are accessible for voluntary simplifiers (VSs) (Craig-Lees & Hill 2002).

Elgin and Mitchell (1977) identified five *core values* of VS: material simplicity, human scale, self-determination, ecological awareness, and personal growth. They can be held to differing degrees and in different combinations and reinforce each other in synergistic interactions (ibid). In recent research, Rebouças and Soares (2020:6) find six recurrent aspects of VS: reduced material consumption; search for intrinsic values, well-being and quality of life; environmental responsibility; social consciousness and focus on relationships; self-sufficiency; and working hours reduction. Etzioni (1998) identifies three variations of VSs: the moderate form of downshifter who reduce their consumption; strong simplifiers who give up high incomes and socio-economic status to gain more free time and lower stress; and holistic simplifiers who are the most dedicated and live according to the VS philosophy. Zavestoski (2002) describes VS to be “both a system of beliefs and a practice”.

In recent years, the idea of a simple life reached a high media presence. Detaching oneself from materialistic possessions and decluttering and has been trending on the book market, YouTube and Netflix. Well-known examples are *The Minimalists*, who have published books, documentaries, and a podcast (The Minimalists 2021). It is said that minimalism is not necessarily about having less but about having “more time, more passion, more experiences, more contribution, more contentment, more freedom” (ibid). A different approach, also connected to the values of VS, is Marie Kondo’s philosophy around the key question if a possession *sparks joy* (KonMari Media, Inc. 2021). Some other movements and practices that share similarities with VS are e.g., downshifting (reduced working

hours) (Drake 2000), the tiny house movement, and the slow food movement. All of them reject values of the prevalent consumer society.

3. Theoretical framework

This chapter elaborates on the chosen theoretical background for my thesis. Practice theory, which is especially suitable to analyze everyday practices and change, provides the theoretical base for the investigation of the voluntary simplifiers' lifestyle. First, I give a short overview of practice theory in general by providing a positioning within broader social theory and explaining the basic ideas of the most influential theorists. This is followed by an introduction to the framework of Shove et al. (2012) who base their work on the three elements of a practice: *materials*, *competences* and *meanings*.

3.1. Practice theory

Practice theory is not one unified theory, but a broad group of theories (Nicolini 2012). I will use it to analyze the everyday practice of VS but here I will first explain the history and position of this family of theories.

Many scholars concurred with their academic works to a *practice turn* in the social and organization studies (ibid). Some early contributions can be traced back to Bourdieu (1977) and Giddens (1984). Both established their structuration theories with the attempt to overcome the shortcomings of previous social theories: the strict distinction between objectivist, i.e. taking the view that it is social *structures* that oblige certain forms of action, and subjectivist, i.e. overemphasizing individual (inter-)actions and the point of view of *actors* (Inglis & Thorpe 2019). According to Giddens (1984), the recursively related human activity and social structures are a duality instead of a dualism. Schatzki (1996:13) perceived “both social order and individuality” to “result from practices”. For him, a practice is “a temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings” (Schatzki 1996:89). The *practice* became the new basic unit of analysis, whereas before it was either individuals, systems, or structures. By using this new basic unit, “both individualism and structuralism in social theory are avoided” (Arts et al. 2014:4). Social structure and society can be seen as routinized practices, as something that does not exist outside of individuals and their practices, but the individuals *are* these practices (Inglis & Thorpe 2019).

The multitude of theories building on practices were systematically elaborated for the first time by Reckwitz (2002). He classifies practice theory as a cultural theory, which fundamentally differs from the two classical terms used in social theory to explain action and social order: *homo economicus*, based on a purpose-oriented theory of action, and *homo sociologicus*, based on a norm-oriented theory of action. According to Reckwitz (2002:246), cultural theories understand social order to be “embedded in collective cognitive and symbolic structures, in a ‘shared knowledge’ which enables a socially shared way of ascribing meaning to the world”. As mentioned before, the ‘smallest unit of analysis’ in practice theory are, in contrast to other cultural theories, the ‘practices’ (Reckwitz 2002). Reckwitz (2002) tried to establish an idealized model of practice theory that is based on the ideas of the most defining authors, such as Bourdieu and Giddens. A practice is:

“a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge.” (Reckwitz 2002:249)

The individual is described to “carry” and “carry out” the practice, both mentally and bodily (ibid:256). Matching with the previously used terminology, Nicolini (2012) refers to the carrier as *homo practicus*. The individual who carries a practice carries also “many different practices which need not be coordinated with one another” (Reckwitz 2002:250).

A practice theory approach seems suitable for investigating the VS lifestyle. Instead of focusing on the agents or on the social structures, I aim to investigate simplifiers’ *doings* and *sayings* (Schatzki 1996). Reckwitz’ (2002) list of elements that constitute a practice can all be understood as part of a lifestyle, e.g. the VSs have specific knowledge and reflect about their lives, they acquired skills and need objects to perform practices like growing food, there is a certain motivation behind their actions, and so on.

Furthermore, some authors refer to implications that are fitting for my study because I locate one possibility for *change* towards sustainability on the individual level and their practice of a VS lifestyle. According to Warde (2005:140),

“The principal implication of a theory of practice is that the sources of changed behaviour lie in the development of practices themselves. The concept of practice inherently combines a capacity to account for both reproduction and innovation.” (Warde 2005:140)

It is the individuals that through their lifestyle choice of VS try to change everyday practices – practices that are typically present in the mainstream consumer society – such as living, food and transport. Arts et al. (2014:6) state that “humans often behave routinely, yet they are capable of acting otherwise, particularly when confronted with social disruption, political dilemmas or shock events”. The

increased media attention to VS and related lifestyles and the practice of these can be understood as a reaction to the ecological crisis that humanity faces at present.

3.2. A conceptual framework

Shove et al.'s (2012:11) work *The Dynamics of Social Practice: Everyday Life and how it Changes* starts with the words “How do societies change? Why do they stay so much the same?” and introduces concepts to “capture the dynamic aspects of *social practice*”. This shows how much Shove et al.'s (2012) work emphasizes transformations of the social which is a good starting point for my thesis because I situated it in the sustainability discussion on where change can take place and who can be the driver that advances it. As previously mentioned, Warde (2005) finds the source of changed behavior to be in the practices themselves, which is the basis for Shove et al.'s (2012:11) assumption that “understanding their emergence, persistence and disappearance is of the essence”. This can be of value when trying to influence public policy or responding to complex challenges like climate change (ibid). Moreover, Shove et al. (2012) mention patterns of consumption to be impacted by their theories, which is a relevant component of practicing a VS lifestyle.

Shove et al. (2012) base their practice theory approach on three interdependent elements: *materials*, *competences* and *meanings*. Reckwitz (2002) saw the elements of a practice interconnected as well, but according to him, a practice consisted of several more elements like mentioned beforehand. When these three elements are combined by a practitioner, they make up a practice. These combinations, or links, shape how a practice develops, sustains, or disappears. Practices develop, endure, change, and dissipate when these links – the *connections* – between the elements are made, kept up or broken. It is an unusual approach to de-center the human actor but at the same time it is the *practitioner* who reproduces both the practice itself as well as the elements that make up the practice (Shove et al. 2012). By focusing on the elements and the links between them, Shove et al. (2012:23) say we can “describe and analyse change and stability without prioritizing either agency or structure”. And by including the element of materials, Shove et al. (2012) overcome a gap that is present in conventional social theories. They agree with Latour (2000) that artefacts are not reflecting society but they in fact are to a large extent what makes up what Latour calls socialness.

I consider Shove et al.'s practice theory framework suitable for my research because I see the three elements reflected in some of the core aspects of VS. *Materials* are an important part of VS, more precisely material simplicity, as this is considered to be a core value of VS (Elgin & Mitchell 1977). But I expected to find other material aspects to it that are characteristic for this lifestyle as well. Being different than most of the society requires the VSs to acquire specific knowledge,

skills and skillfulness because common “services” of society (e.g. food in regular supermarkets) might not be made use of by them. This is what I try to capture with the element of *competences*. Shove et al.’s (2012) third element of a practice – *meanings* – is represented by further core values of VS: ecological awareness, personal growth, self-determination. These three elements of *materials*, *competences* and *meanings* were the basis for coding and to structure the analysis of the empirical interview materials in my study.

Materials

Shove et al. (2012:24) agree with Røpke (2009) that “things” (Reckwitz 2002) or “objects” (Schatzki 1996) are part of a social practice, but they extend this category of *materials* to comprise “objects, infrastructures, tools, hardware and the body itself”.

In my study, materials play an important role because of the material reduction in possessions that a lot of voluntary simplifiers undergo (Elgin & Mitchell 1977). Furthermore, this element, of course, encompasses objects that they possess and that are used which are e.g., their living space, transport infrastructure such as cars, bicycles, trains and airplanes. Moreover, it includes food, clothes, other objects that can be home-made as well as their bodies to contribute to the satisfaction of their needs.

Competences

The element of *competences* comprises of various forms of (shared) understanding, know-how, skills, background knowledge and practice knowledgeability. Practitioners need to know how to perform appropriately.

In my study, I analyzed the know-how and skills that my interviewees need to practice VS. How did they learn about this concept, how and from whom do they learn specific skills they need, what are these skills, how do they decide if something is simple? When are you accepted as a legitimate member of the practice? How can you show skillfulness and what character traits might be helpful? This element contributes to answering RQ2, i.e. the challenges and obstacles of VS practitioners, which might comprise e.g., lacking knowledge in order to switch from buying to homemade. But learning new skills and gaining knowledge can also be a motivation (RQ1) for adopting this lifestyle.

Meanings

The element *meanings* deals with the “social and symbolic significance of participation” (Shove et al. 2012:24) and conflates what Reckwitz (2002) outlines as mental activities, emotion and motivational knowledge. This corresponds with RQ1 where I asked about the motivations and drivers of VSs behind their choice for this lifestyle. The analysis of this element moreover includes findings of

meanings shared between different practitioners of VS, what inspires them, being part of a community, their relationships to family and friends and the conflict between simplicity and complexity (RQ3).

Interrelatedness

Shove et al.'s (2012) conceive these three elements are all interrelated. A practice exists when the elements are actively integrated. An example from my study is the aspect of self-sufficiency. I associated it to the element of *materials* because it includes the food that is grown, soil, different tools etc. But in order to be able to grow food, one must have specific knowledge about cultivation, processing and so on (*competences*). Moreover, there is a motivation behind it, e.g., not being dependent on others to survive, but there is also an emotional connection e.g., the appreciation of self-made food or childhood memories.

4. Methodology

This chapter describes my methodological considerations. Creswell and Creswell (2018) describe methodology to be a combination of three components: the philosophical worldview that the researchers bring with them, the research design, and the used methods. Furthermore, I describe the processing and analyzing of the material and end this chapter with some critical reflections.

4.1. World view

The worldview, or general philosophical orientation, that constitutes my research approach is constructivist. Social constructivism is based on the assumption that individuals try to understand the world around them by ascribing subjective meanings to their experiences (Creswell & Creswell 2018). The researcher should rely as much on the participants' views as possible and depict the complexity of their views (ibid). Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest to use open-ended questions in order to be open for the respondents' answers (see chapter 4.3. Methods and materials). In my research, I aimed to get rich results from the participants to make sense of the meanings that they ascribe to their VS lifestyle. These subjective meanings are socially and historically negotiated and established through interaction with others, hence the term social constructivism. I, as a researcher, acknowledge that my interpretations are shaped by my personal, cultural, and historical experiences (ibid).

4.2. Research design

My study is based on a qualitative research design, which means I aim to explore and understand meanings that humans, either as individuals or groups, attribute to a social problem (Creswell & Creswell 2018). The focus of this study lies on individuals and their lifestyle choices. By using qualitative interviews, I aim to proceed explorative and be open to the topics brought up by the interviewees (ibid). Even though I strive to depict the interviewees' sense-making, I nevertheless make my own interpretations of the meaning of the collected materials (ibid). In

qualitative research, the researcher is considered to be the key instrument since she is the one who collects the materials and does the interpretation (ibid).

Furthermore, my research is based on an abductive approach, which means to move back and forth between materials and theory, therefore combining deduction and abduction (Suddaby 2006). I collect materials in order to “explore a phenomenon, identify themes and patterns, locate these in a conceptual framework” and test this through additional collection (Saunders et al. 2015:145). Qualitative research is typically emergent, meaning that the initial plan for a study can be adjusted after entering the field and starting to collect materials (Creswell & Creswell 2018). This was the case when I adapted my interview guide.

4.3. Methods and materials

This chapter describes how I collected my material by doing a qualitative interview study. It also elaborates on recruitment and respondents and gives a short overview of my interview guide.

4.3.1. Qualitative interviews

Researcher-provoked materials e.g., derived from interviews with open-ended questions, are typical for qualitative research because it lets participants share their views (Silverman 2015; Creswell & Creswell 2018). Thus, I used the method of in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviewing (Bryman 2012). Qualitative interviews are suitable for my research because the purpose is to get a deep understanding of the interviewees’ sense-making and to obtain detailed and rich answers (Bryman 2012; Silverman 2015). I expected to find diverse answers and sense-making of my respondents, but I also looked for recurring themes and reasonings behind their practice. I created an interview guide, which I often departed from and encouraged my interviewees when they moved into different directions to get insights into what they consider important (Bryman 2012). I aimed to be flexible and an active listener and asked how, why and follow-up questions (Bryman 2012; Adams 2015). According to Silverman (2015), this is legitimate as there is no fixed, structured sequence of interview questions that would fit all interviewees. To confirm my understanding, I used interpreting questions like "Do you mean that..." (Bryman 2012). I strived to give my interviewees freedom to ascribe their meanings (Silverman 2015) - a balance between being active and not too intrusive that Bryman (2012) describes as difficult. Although the interviews were produced collaboratively, I had a certain level of control because I decided which follow-up questions I asked, what topics I wanted to close and when I would end the interview (Silverman 2015). An advantage of interviews, compared to observations, is that interviewees can provide historical information (Creswell &

Creswell 2018), e.g., what the interviewees' lives looked like before VS. The interviewer must be aware of how she presents herself, because it leaves an impression on the interviewees and influences the study (Fontana & Frey 2000). Therefore, I introduced myself only as "master's student", but intentionally avoided mentioning that I study environmental sciences to prevent any active connection to the theme of sustainability.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted the interviews online, which turned out easy because people got used to online meetings. This allowed me to reach VSs all over Sweden and to record both the verbal part and the video. Some of the respondents could show me their furnishing which is a significant part of my research. I took notes during the interviews to keep track of what was said and to not forget follow-up questions that arose. After each interview, I took notes on how the interview went, how I felt about it and any other thoughts that emerged (Bryman 2012), and advanced the interview guide for the next interview, based on lessons I learned from the former interview (Adams 2015). The interviews lasted between 59 min and 1h and 50 min (when I interviewed two VSs). This is unusual, but because of the increased dynamic I decided to proceed with the interview. All interviews were held in English.

4.3.2. Recruitment and respondents

The two main requirements for my interviewees were that they live in Sweden and identify themselves as VSs or live a simple(r) life or are currently trying to achieve such a lifestyle. Public environmental discussions, policies and citizen engagement are part of Sweden's reputation (Olausson 2018). I planned to find the respondents for my study on social media like Facebook (FB) or Instagram because of the increased media presence in recent years. Because people with similar interests often gather in FB groups to facilitate exchange with like-minded people, I started by looking for "voluntary simplicity" on FB. I found a group with this name with around 2800 members (02.04.2021), but the language used in this group is English, so I reckoned the chance to find Swedes would be relatively low. Thus, one of the main challenges was to find people who live in Sweden and who identify themselves with the English term VS. After I searched for "voluntary simplicity Sverige", I found the Swedish term "frivillig enkelhet". Hence, I found the FB group *Frivillig enkelhet – mer med mindre* ("VS – more with less") with around 8200 members (02.04.2021), where I posted and asked for participation in my study. This was done quite early in the process to ensure I would find enough respondents. I aimed to find people with versatile ways of living to show VSs' diversity and map the different motivations and challenges. Five interviews were arranged, whereby interviewee P5 suggested to be joined by a friend (P6) who lives similarly. I used the snowball effect and asked each respondent if they know

someone I should interview as well. I got one more interviewee, so in total I conducted six interviews with seven interviewees.

Table 1. Interviewees

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Occupation	Location	Housing	Living situation
P1	Female	25	Student	Big city	Flat	Single
P2	Male	48	Not working	Small village	House	Single with child
P3	Female	33	Pre-School Teacher and graphic designer	Country-side	House	With partner
P4	Female	45	Communications and project management at climate charity	Big city	Flat	Single with child
P5	Female	76	Retired	Small city	Small flat	Single
P6	Female	43	Psychomotrician and facilitator for family and organisation constellations	Nature reserve	Small house	Single + part time with children
P7	Female	39	Handicraft teacher	Very small village	House	With husband and children

4.3.3. Interview Guide

It was essential to consider what I need to know to answer my research questions when I developed the guide (Silverman 2015). The questions of my interview guide could only be properly answered by VSs, so I could not test a pilot interview guide (Bryman 2012) before the start of the actual collection of my materials. Nevertheless, I tried out this method beforehand by conducting two interviews with

friends. After an introduction, the first questions related to the start of their interest in VS. The overall themes, that would become important for my analysis, were already created when I collected my materials (Crang & Cook 2007:146), because I based my study on Shove et al.'s (2012) three elements of a practice (*materials*, *competences* and *meanings*) and it was overall grounded on my research questions. I grouped the questions into three blocks according to these three elements. In the first interview I mentioned that the interview consists of these three blocks, but since the order of the questions was changed a lot during the interview, depending on what topic emerged naturally by the answers of the interviewees, I did not mention these blocks to the interviewees anymore. Also, even when the interviewees introduced themselves, they already answered some of the questions that would have followed. I asked the interviewees to bring an item with symbolic value and started the materials block with a question about that to get a trigger for the *material* element. Moreover, this block included topics like housing, food, transport, consumption, and self-sufficiency. The second block, *competences*, dealt with skills, information exchange etc. and the third block, *meanings*, included questions about opinions of friends and family, about feelings and reasons to choose the VS lifestyle. Lastly, I asked for demographic data like age, gender and occupation to be able to contextualize the answers (Bryman 2012).

4.4. Processing and analyzing the interviews

The interview recordings allowed for transcription and a more thorough and repeated examination (Bryman 2012). I started transcribing after the first interview to use the time efficiently because transcribing is a laborious task (Bryman 2012) and it is easier when the interview is a fresh memory, and to start reflecting so I could already enhance the interview guide for the next interview. Crang and Cook (2007) identify the inseparability of writing and analysis which I found confirmed in my research. During transcribing, I already took notes for the analysis, e.g. reoccurring themes and reflections for the discussion and started to create an analytical narrative (Crang & Cook 2007; Bryman 2012). The interviews were fully transcribed, leaving out only unnecessary parts, e.g., about the internet connection. I included when somebody laughed and filler words like “uhm”, but for the citations in chapter 5 (Findings and Analysis), disfluency words are left out for the sake of readability. I used the video recordings only a few times for the interview with two respondents to check who laughed. I listened to all the interviews again to proof-read the transcripts and took more notes on potential themes for the analysis. Thereafter, I read the transcripts again to get a better overview and not miss anything important and then manually started the first round of *open coding* where I tried to find recurrent themes. During this first step the goal was to find emerging codes to understand the VSs' sense-making. These codes were influenced by the

questions from my interview guide, but I was open to find codes for themes that were brought up by the interviewees. After that, I did a second round, *priori coding*, where I assigned the themes to Shove et al.'s (2012) three elements of *materials*, *competences* and *meanings*.

4.5. Critical reflections

It is important to acknowledge that my study is shaped by my education, by the literature I read, the theory I use, the research questions and the interview guide (Harvard n.d.). Furthermore, it is my interests and positionality that makes it unlikely that someone else would come to the same conclusions as me, unlikely that this research is replicable (Crang & Cook 2007). When analyzing and interpreting field experiences, categories are constructed instead of revealing the truth (ibid). It is about “trying to find a means to understand the inter-relations of multiple versions of reality” instead of trying to be omniscient as a researcher (Crang & Cook 2007:162). As a fairly inexperienced interviewer, I might have steered people by showing (dis-)agreement, which should be avoided (Bryman 2012).

I tried to increase the reliability by working through the transcripts several times (Creswell & Creswell 2018). Nevertheless, multiple sources of materials are typical for qualitative research (ibid) and could have increased the reliability. I forwent to do observation because of the pandemic. But the drawbacks of online interviews are that the body language cannot be analyzed, and the time lag can be disruptive. Moreover, interviews tend to encourage the sense-making of our actions afterwards, which Joosse and Marshall (2020:610) call *ex situ* rationalization, “based on norms and meanings present in the practice in which we are currently situated and performing”. An interview length of around one hour might not have been enough to get deep insights into the simplifiers’ sense-making of their lifestyle. Since English is not the first language of both the interviewees and me, there is a chance of slight misunderstandings.

Gender representation is not very diverse in my study, since only one of my seven interviewees is male. It has not been the focus of my study to research VS from a gender perspective and I cannot make inferences about this here. Maybe gender plays no role for the obstacles or motivations people have for a VS lifestyle, but that would be an interesting topic for future research.

5. Findings and Analysis

In this chapter, the findings of my research are presented. The analysis is based on Shove et al.'s (2012) conceptual framework of practice theory, using the three interconnected and mutually shaping elements of *material*, *competences* and *meanings* to structure the findings. One example for this interrelatedness is the previously mentioned self-sufficiency that I assigned to the element of *materials*, but it is also linked to knowledge, motivations, and emotions. Another example is the choice of the location of a living space, which I consider a *material*, that is tied to the proximity to family and friends for some VSs. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that there is not one way of living a voluntary simple life, it can affect all different areas of one's life and the meaning of "simple" is something very personal. As previously explained, I investigate the sense-making of VS practitioners and aim to find out what it means for them to have a VS lifestyle. The results include quotes from the seven VSs that I interviewed. The citations that are used do not include crutch words to increase the readability.

5.1. Materials

The element of *materials* includes things and objects that are needed by VSs and other material aspects that are part of the practice of VS. The themes that I found encompass *minimalism and material simplicity*, the *living space*, *self-sufficiency and food*, *secondhand*, *quality*, and *transport and travel*. Since I used an interview guide, some of the themes were evoked partly by the questions I asked. Nevertheless, I aimed to find and include the themes here that were mentioned and explained by the majority or even all my interviewees in order to illustrate their practice of VS.

5.1.1. Minimalism and material simplicity

Material simplicity, a quantitatively reduced consumption and possession of material belongings, is a reoccurring theme for all the interviewed VSs, regardless of their living space (see 5.1.2.), but it is practiced to different degrees. It includes buying less things in the first place but also decluttering, especially when they decided to change their lives towards a simpler one.

“I can't say that I'm living a minimalistic life but I'm working on it (...) just buying things that I really need. (...) I know there [are] so many things that you don't need, so I rather spend my money on like time and memories.” (P1)

One interviewee has had a minimalistic lifestyle his whole life and currently practices a rather extreme version of material simplicity, where he understands minimalism not as a lack, but as the asset of having space.

“I'm aiming towards minimalistic lifestyle. I've been doing this for as long as I have been aware of myself, my whole grown-up life. I started to minimalize, simplify my existence as a child, I think. I can trace it back.” (P2)

“I have one pair of shoes. I have one fork, I have one knife. I... And it's annoying for some people. (...) If it's one year since I had six guests, I throw away one glass. I don't have more stuff than I need.” (P2)

Decluttering can come in waves or it can be a constant process, sometimes it is both. This means that material simplicity and minimalism is not something that my interviewees have reached but it is rather something that needs to be worked on more or less constantly.

“If you improvise, you need material and lots of stuff and I always am... I'm collecting things and I get rid of things. It's a constant war.” (P2)

“I think my decluttering process is going in waves sort of. First, I moved from 78 square meters to 24. And so there I had to get rid of a lot of things. But even here, and I have been here for some years now, it is waves and then it sort of stops. And then comes a new wave and then it stops. So, it's not easy to get rid of the things. I mean particularly papers and things that are books and things that are more emotionally attached. So, it's sort of the mind has to... that's why I think it stops for a while. You have to get there with your mind.” (P5)

“So, it doesn't stop. It's in everything. It really, really accelerates. So even if I take a break and I listen to music or something and I'm on my phone, I just clean out the message or the mail or... So, I just apply it on everything. Unconscious. (...) It's a habit.” (P6)

The reasons behind it are various, from moving, wanting to live in a tiny house or in a van, but for some interviewees it has a lot to do with creating calmness around them and making life in general simpler and “*reduce the complications in life*” by practicing minimalism.

“I'm also quite interested in like minimalism and I've decluttered a lot and I find it much more... it's easier to focus when you don't have too much stuff. It's sort of this thing where your, you know, your external life and your internal life sort of mirror each other a bit I guess.” (P4)

Minimalism creates a harmony between the physical surroundings and the emotional life. The wish to own less objects seems important especially when living in a small space like a tiny house, where I found a tendency of owning multi-functional objects among the interviewees. Owning less means also that as a result less time is needed for cleaning and more time is freed up for other activities.

5.1.2. Living space

I found several aspects that make up a living space: the place itself and its size (e.g. house, flat, tiny house), surroundings and infrastructure (countryside vs. city) and proximity to some sort of community.

Concerning the place and the size, my interviewees practice VS in a quite diverse manner. P5 and P6 plan to build a tiny house and are in the process of finding the pieces to build it and reduce their belongings so they would fit in this small space. Also, P2 wants to reduce his living space and try to live in a van. But living a VS life does not necessarily mean to reduce the space, e.g. P3 lives in a much bigger place now and owns some land while paying less than before.

“We cut our budget in half. Like we spend half as much money now in this big old house, needing to have a car and everything, than we did in the city in this small apartment where we couldn't do anything. So, that's the irony of it. Our living standards are just like so much higher, but we pay half as much for it.” (P3)

There is a tendency to live in or move to the countryside among my interviewees, of which most live in (normal sized to bigger) houses. Only two of them currently live in a city, both in Stockholm, whereby P1 lives closer to the center, P4 in a suburb. Nevertheless, P1 spends a lot of her time at her parents' house in the countryside close to nature and plans to build a house at her parents' place. That house is supposed to be environmentally friendly, using old materials and aesthetically fit into nature. P4 lives in a small flat in a co-housing house with several spaces to be shared.

Living in the countryside is connected to having a less dense infrastructure (like grocery shops and public transport), often being further away from the workplace (which gets less important since the Covid19-pandemic) and culture like museums and concerts. The proximity to nature is understood as a benefit by my interviewees.

“And I retrained because most programming jobs, like pre-Corona at least, were in the bigger cities and their abundant regions, so we're kind of stuck there with our educations. I mean now you can work from anywhere, so now it doesn't really matter. But who... who would have known a few years ago that that would be the case.” (P3)

“I have the fields and the meadows on the one side and on the other side is a little road and it's a path down to a beach.” (P2)

Being close to friends and family plays a big role when choosing where to live. P7 did not want to move too far away, whereas P3 lives very far away which she considers to be the biggest trade-off.

5.1.3. Self-sufficiency and food

All my interviewees practice some sort of growing food, but no one is completely self-sufficient, so everybody still goes to grocery stores. Often, they started with growing on their balcony, on their windowsills, in pots etc. and when living in the city, an allotment was used as well. P3 has fruit trees and is making a kitchen garden now. P7 is making her own soil by using the bokashi process¹ and is planning for the growing season because she wants to grow her own food and not buy anything from grocery stores. But she and her family would need a huge garden for that, which is holding her back at the moment. She remembers how much she enjoyed picking and eating food that her grandmother grew when she was a kid, similar to P1, whose parents grow food, and who thinks it is *“luxury to just go and pick your own carrots and cucumbers to the dinner”*.

There is a tendency to buy organic food and to buy food that would be thrown away otherwise. Concerning the diets, almost everybody stated that they reduced their consumption of animal products or are vegetarian. But P3 talks also about the temptations she faces.

“You shouldn't eat this frozen like vegetarian products if you wanna be like a good eco-friendly person but it's like... it's convenient. And we're just people and it's very convenient to have something in the freezer. You just pour in the food. But not as much anymore.” (P3)

VS also has an influence on the simplicity of the diet. P5 eats mainly a raw diet consisting of raw and fermented vegetables, green powders, amino acids and fruit.

“I think it got simpler in the way that I don't cook the things. But other people who cook things and you know, put things in the micro-oven, they would consider it more complicated to cut up all these things and... take off the shells and things like that. But for me it is simplifying.” (P5)

P4 shared her view on the simplicity of her diet as well.

“I live more cheaply. And eat quite simply. (...) Not like simple as in simple to cook but [laughs]...opposite. Often simple living can be quite complicated” (P4).

And P3 explains that she does not *“buy so many different things anymore. We just buy like staples, like basic necessities, like milk or flour or butter or very basic ingredients that can combine into like any variety of things. Because we already have like the vegetables that are providing so much like diversity throughout the year”*. Moreover, she mentions the benefits of now being able to stockpile and that they have a root cellar.

¹ A fermentation process that converts food waste and produces a fertilizing soil complement (Bokashicycle 2021)

Both P3 and P7 expressed their wish to get hens so they can “*close as many like loops as possible*” but this is “*a bigger responsibility*” (P3). Closing these loops makes the VSs more and more independent from common services and infrastructures of society like the availability of grocery stores.

5.1.4. Secondhand

Using secondhand objects is a big part of practicing a VS lifestyle, e.g. P3 who “*whenever possible like buy[s] secondhand as a first choice*”. For her, buying secondhand was the first step towards VS. It includes clothing, kitchen appliances, furniture etc. being offered at a big variety of shops, like the church’s thrift store, vintage boutiques, and the Red Cross good will store. P3 called going to IKEA as a “*kind of the last resort when you can't find something in the second-hand market*”. She values furniture that she got from her great-grandmother and thinks it is fun to find little notes or photos in things that she buys secondhand because she says it is “*worth more*”. So even though secondhand objects are cheaper in terms of money, they are valued more by VSs.

P5 is looking on Facebook marketplace for a trailer or a tractor to build her tiny house on and looks there to find building materials as well because it is cheaper or even free. P3 buys food “*secondhand*” on MatSMART and even found her house on the secondhand selling website Blocket (instead of Hemnet, the usual real estate website).

Nevertheless, secondhand shopping is not equally enjoyed. It ranges from being a “*hobby*” and a “*treasure hunt*” (P3) to being “*more like a chore and I can't be bothered to look through 10 second-hand shops*” (P4).

Oftentimes, the VSs get things for free, like P3 who got furniture from older relatives or P4 who makes use of a room in her co-housing where things can be exchanged, or she finds stuff. Swapping e.g., clothes with friends is also practiced. Moreover, saving objects from the (bulk) trash is part of the secondhand practice, with P3 saying that she could “*furnish a house with the stuff [she] found in there*” and that she found a lot of useful toys and other things for her work as preschool teacher. P7 saved a broken chair to make a swing from the wood because “*there are a lot of materials that we are not supposed to throw away, I think. And that are really beautiful*”.

P1 is trying to borrow things from her parents or grandparents instead of buying them.

When giving stuff away, P2 tries to donate them and P7 even created a Facebook group to give away things for free in her old neighborhood to “*prolong the life of these things*”.

5.1.5. Quality

The quality of material objects is very relevant for my interviewees. One reason is that owning less makes money available to buy high-quality products.

“If you have a very limited amount of things, you become easy[ly] a nerd. You buy the best. You can afford to buy the best of everything 'cause it's so little. The demand's getting higher on the things.” (P2)

But it seems to get harder to find good quality products. P3 expressed her disappointment in “*new*” things and gave several examples of objects that decreased in quality, like kitchen towels, and things that cannot be repaired anymore, like a sewing machine and a dough mixer. The price seems not to be an indicator for good quality anymore, also for clothing, as P4 mentions.

“So that's just super annoying that, you know, no matter how much you spend when you buy a new thing, it's going to be worse than something from like the 60s or 70s. Because it was made to last for like generations where... whereas now it's made to last until the warranty ends, like two or three years later so you will buy a new one.” (P3)

“And it should be comfortable and practical, reasonably practical and ideally durable, but I find that that can be hard to... to know even like if it if you buy something more expensive. It's not always better quality. (...) I obviously avoid things that are obvious that they're not good quality. But sometimes it's not so easy to say and sometimes I just wonder if something is actually that much better than... Just because some things are ridiculously expensive (...) Is it really going to last me 10 times as long just because it costs 10 times as much?” (P4)

The importance of quality also applies to food, which is one of the reasons for self-sufficiency.

“I mean it just tastes so much better and you get kind of spoiled because when I know what my own tomatoes or lettuce tastes like, it feels kind of hard to motivate going to the store and buying this like whatever watery, expensive poisoned tomatoes from like Spain that... they don't contribute anything.” (P3)

5.1.6. Transport and travel

The means of transport used by my interviewees are diverse and include walking, cycling, public transport like metro and train, car, and plane. P1, who lives in the city, usually walks and uses public transport for longer ways. Cars are used either because there is no public transport infrastructure, carpooling is not an option or to travel safer in terms of health because of the pandemic. Electric cars are less of an option because of the high price, which is why P3 said that “*we can buy a car that is as small and efficient as possible, and we can drive it as little as possible*”. Especially the VSs who live on the countryside try to combine different errands to

reduce the amount of transport, like grocery shopping, buying things for the garden, visiting family etc. For P5 it is important that the place where she is going to build her tiny house is accessible by public transport since she does not own a car.

The plane is often used for travelling longer distances, mainly because it is cheaper, easier, and faster, even though my interviewees expressed environmental concerns. But taking the train for travelling is also considered to add benefits to a trip.

“It was like very different from taking the plane and you can see so much more of the countries that you couldn't see from like a plane window. So, I hope and I will work actively to take the train more.” (P1)

And P2 can even travel from Sweden to Southern Europe by bicycle. P7 expressed a decreased urge to “*travel (...) and see the world*” because she has her “*own world*” where she lives.

5.2. Competences

In the following it is analyzed which *competences* are part of the VS practice. It shows which socially shared ideas of competences, like skills or character traits, make one a legitimate member of this practice. The themes I found are *skills* (physical skills and knowledge), *homemaking*, but also habits, such as *thinking, questioning and reflecting*, and *character traits*.

5.2.1. Skills

P3 sees a value in learning how to do stuff because she says that “*we're moving towards a world where no one knows how to deal with anything anymore*”. She describes a learning curve she had, e.g., when fixing her place by putting up wallpapers or when she started growing food. She and her partner built a wooden deck, and her partner is learning about electricity. P5 and P6 went to workshops to learn how to build a tiny house but are still “*inexperienced builders*” (P5) which is why it will take some time to build the houses. P5 also has plans to craft her own clothing which she got inspired for by travelling. It is supposed to be made from durable material and consists of squares that you put together and that are easily foldable. P7 did some DIYs, like making a swing, sewing covers for her sofa, crocheting hand towels and says that “*this sort of lifestyle makes you more skilled at life kind of. (...) You learn things all the time*”. Her background in textile handicraft and her job as wood handicraft teacher contribute to her skillfulness. For P4, there is not really a need to make things herself, except for food (see 5.2.2.) and plants. P2 says that he can solve situations at home, a “*little bit like MacGyver*”,

and fix something. P3 on the other hand thinks that people throw so many things away because they do not know how to repair them.

When it comes to learning, P3 has some key people that she follows on social media and she thinks that this is *“amazing about being alive at this time at least. I mean you can learn anything from anywhere, that is so cool”*. But she noticed that nowadays she is more answering questions than posting them and tells that she learns from her mistakes. P6 also mentions the process of developing thoughts to find new solutions. YouTube, books and reading and (online) groups to share practical things are mentioned as ways to learn. P7 wants to learn more from her father who is a carpenter. She also thinks that people on the countryside know a lot more than her about the cycles of growing food but that they just do not feel the need to *“intellectualize”* about it. She assumes that they do not have the urge to talk about it, but just do it because their parents and grandparents did it and that they *“inherited this trait”*. P3 expressed her admiration for people from the countryside who *“are so competent, they have so many skills and I'm so impressed”* which made her want to learn how to drive a tractor someday. P6 says that *“the thing about building [a] tiny house together [is that] it's so amazing because you learn so much from each other”* and is looking forward to *“sharing energy and ideas”*.

5.2.2. Homemaking

Cooking and making food from scratch is an aspect of the VS lifestyle that is tightly connected to self-sufficiency. Around the half of my interviewees explained what kind of food they make themselves. P3 is making her own jam as gifts for people in exchange for favors. Other things she makes herself include sourdough bread, pickling food, making kefir yoghurt, she bakes and cooks a lot from scratch. Similarly, P4 also makes most her food from scratch and makes tea. P5 is fermenting food. P7 explains that she wants to make more things herself because she feels disgusted that she throws away so much plastic packaging.

5.2.3. Thinking, questioning and reflecting

Thinking and questioning the norm is important to some of the VSs I interviewed. P3 mentions that she spends *“a lot of time thinking about things”* and that she needs time and energy for thinking and reflecting, also on things that she learned.

“I value like thinking and yeah, reflecting on things and trying to figure stuff out. And there's just no way of doing that when you're too tired to even like think” (P3)

P4 wants to *“have time to think and feel”* and is good at this *“mental skill”* of thinking and reflecting.

“Because my diary is both a very practical thing for me but it's also symbolic because it's like... I've always kept a diary and I've always used it to reflect on myself and life a lot. And I think that has helped me to be very conscious with my choices.” (P4)

This helps her to know what she wants and does not want in life and she says that she is “*quite good at... I guess, I don't know how to say, sort of trying to be true to myself*”. Reflecting helped P7 as well to make her shift her interest in tropic plants to plants she could eat. Reflecting on their lives and taking an active stance on what is happening around them is an important habit of the VSs.

5.2.4. Character traits

For my interviewees, there is no character trait that one specifically needs to practice a VS lifestyle. But they found some traits that they find valuable for their lives as VSs. For P1 it is important to stay open and “*broaden your opinions*”, which can be connected to the habit of reflecting, and she says that she is driven and creative. Similarly, P7 mentions to be curious and wanting to learn more, implying that skills and knowledge are essential for the practice of VS. For P3, it is important to be confident and believe that you can learn how to do things that are needed for this lifestyle. P2 mentions that he is practical and agrees that one must be open and says you need to stay brave. For P6, it is important to be flexible and to be able to communicate to get on well with one another when you live in a smaller space. For P5 practicing mindfulness is an advantage.

5.3. Meanings

In Shove et al.'s (2012) third element of a practice – *meanings* – I found several themes connected e.g., to the VSs' motivation to choose this lifestyle and their perceptions of VS. It includes *sustainability, time, community and like-minded people, societal structures and the perception of work, family and friends, inspiration and influencing, being different* and the contrast of *simple vs. complex*.

5.3.1. Sustainability and environmental awareness

All interviewees expressed sustainability aspirations. For some practicing a sustainable lifestyle is even the major motivation to live according to VS. Environmental consciousness and avoiding overconsumption are on the basis of VS for P4. P3 describes how her interest in VS started by being interested in sustainability and by “*trying to reduce [her] footprint on Earth*”.

“I had always... or for a long time been interesting in living a sustainable life and environmental issues. And I think it kind of comes from that direction that I try to live a sustainable life and

then, as a part of that, to reduce your consumption of things and I started reading books and joining like Facebook groups on the topic.” (P3)

For that reasons she buys secondhand which is now *“more of like a statement”*, positioning her against the consumer society and the cycle of consuming more and more because secondhand products last much longer than newly produced products. Similarly, P2 sees *“our consumption as stupid”* because it is *“just a waste of resources that we don’t have”*. P3 even calls *“buy[ing] sustainable”* to be *“the biggest lie of current times”* because *“the more conscious choice might be to not do the thing, to do less”*. Similarly, P4 thinks *“buy less is most important. (...) when it comes to consumer habits and the environment, it's mainly the big things that matter. Like don't fly, don't have a car, don't eat meat. And I don't want to waste too much energy on like... I don't want to run around the whole town to find organic underwear”*. Therefore, she says that she is not *“slavish about these things”* (buying e.g., organic clothes) because avoiding consumption is more sustainable.

For P7, the entry point to VS was her interest in zero waste which made her want to lower her waste, so she started with bokashi. She was also *“disgusted”* by her interest in Tropic plants because she *“felt like I was exploiting Earth more than I was actually contributing with anything”*.

5.3.2. Time

Time has a very important meaning among my interviewees. It is considered as something valuable that they want to spend on their interests, friends and family. There was a big awareness that one does not know how much time one has because life can always be unexpectedly over.

“In the end I think time is so much more important than having money and I don't think that you regret like ‘Oh I had so much time’ (...) I think it's usually people who regret working too much, but I don't think that you regret having much time with your family and friends.” (P1)

P7 even describes the core of VS is to be *“increasing the time with yourself and your family and the things you like”*. But having children and needing to take care of her garden and her house also make her have a lot less time for other things.

Time is tightly interconnected with work and money. Some of the VSs previously had very time-consuming jobs and earned more money but then chose to work less, accepted to earn less money but to have more time for other things in life instead. P3 even considers time to *be* money and asks herself how much she needs to work to buy something. Pursuing interests seems more important than having much money.

“I prioritize time much higher and I sort of... my interests aren't particularly expensive ones, so I'd rather have the time to pursue my interests, then I don't need so much money.” (P4)

That is why P4 chose to work less at the moment and live partly on her savings, so she can spend more time writing. Moreover, she wants to spend time with her daughter because they are *“having a lot of fun together. And I'm thinking in a few years' time she won't wanna hang with me anymore [laughs]. So, I wanna have both the time and energy to like... be there and be present and be fun”*. For P6 it is also important to spend more time with her children. Time (and energy) is also needed in order to learn something new and trying out things. If less time is spent working in a traditional job, there is more time to do things yourself instead of buying services or take-away food.

5.3.3. Community and like-minded people

P2 says that people are made to be in a group and wants to have some sort of community to exchange with others about their lifestyle.

“We are not made to sit alone and think about ourselves.” (P2)

He describes it to be *“warming to see others think different in a time we need to share the space on Earth (...) when the whole world is telling you something else”* but on the other hand he feels isolated and is *“afraid of getting more isolated”* because of his *“ascetic life”*. This isolation comes from *“not [being] in the society, working and consuming”* like *“everybody else does”*. Before he had a family, he was able to travel more and meet like-minded people. Nowadays, he does not feel like he has a network with like-minded people, just a tiny bit in the Facebook group.

Social media can help a lot to create this feeling of community and to realize that there are like-minded people. P3 says that social media is important to her to be part of the VS community *“because if you just look at like normal society you feel like a UFO, like an alien from another planet sometimes. But then you can kind of make your own little community where you don't seem so strange and where you can find people who agree and can share experiences”*. She says that *“representation matters”* for downshifters just like for other movements and to *“not feeling like the only person in the world”*.

Although I found all my interviewees in a Facebook group except for one, some said that they do not use this group to actively exchange with others. But P4 mentioned that in one of her FB groups they wanted to meet up in real life but then the pandemic came along. She made some very good experiences in her *“social media bubble”* with people offering help and advice and being open and sharing. She finds herself lucky to live in an area with *“a lot of sort of alternative or very sociable people who are like always happy to help”*. Social media can be an opening for people outside of the *“bubble”*.

P3 perceives some sense of community and feels welcome in the countryside, but she still misses community a bit. Similarly, P7 misses being part of a VS community like you could be in the city and exchange when you meet people every

day. She says that her community in the city had a much bigger awareness about sustainability. P7 started a FB group because she felt like there was a lack of a human, friendly, loving and giving community, *“like a heart”*. When being part of a community, it also gives the opportunity to learn from each other. P5 is in several FB groups to learn practical things about tiny houses. But she shares her ideas only with P6 because she wonders *“Who could I share with?”*. For P6 the exchange about their tiny house projects with P5 is something she appreciates. When she exchanges with others, it is *“more showing than saying”*, e.g., when visiting one another.

The importance of social networks and communities is also emphasized by Shove et al. (2012) to foster new practices by using the social ties between people. By using online social networks, geographical distances can be overcome.

5.3.4. Societal structures and the perception of work

Wanting to practice a different kind of work-life-balance makes living a VS more complicated. Both P3 and her partner worked in fields with strong norms to work full-time (marketing and graphic design, and computer programming) and she said, *“it's not really like accepted to not be ambitious and want to work as much as possible”*. She retrained to become a preschool teacher, partly because it is more accepted to work part-time. She mentions that there is a lot of talk about the right to work full-time in *“women-based work”* but is questioning why e.g. programmers do not have the right to work part-time. Moreover, she talked about the conversations she had when people asked her about her pension. She critiques the current pension system and the *“boomer idea of working yourself to death”*, and is convinced that *“that society is gone, it's not coming back”*. P1 mentioned the issue of people telling her that she might not find a job with her studies, even though she really likes her studies. P4 finds that when you do not focus on your career that people do not think *“like there's something wrong with you, but it's sort of that is the definition of success and what you sort of meant to strive for”* and that your *“job is very much tied to your identity in Sweden”*. P1 confirms this view.

“The society today is so based of career, stress, like you are not the person, you are just like what you are doing, you are, like, your education, you are your job, you are what you are doing but there is nothing beneath that.” (P1)

Practicing a VS lifestyle can make you *“anti-social”*, as P2 thinks, because *“you are not dealing with the same issues as everyone else”* because most people *“are in the world of producing and consuming”*. Nevertheless, P7 finds that working full-time is not *“a sustainable solution for any person, any individual”*.

Another issue with society's structure was mentioned by P7 who commented on the lack of recycling infrastructure in the suburb she previously lived.

5.3.5. Family and friends

P2 cannot always appreciate gifts from his family members because *“the piles grow with things”*. But when he tells them he does not appreciate it, *“they get tired of hearing stuff like that”*. So, the positive intention behind giving gifts cannot be valued by P2 and this leads to a tedious feeling among the givers.

P3 experienced different sorts of understanding among her parents and her partner’s parents. Her mum had a burnout and got a depression; therefore, she can understand why P3 and her partner want to work less and is very supportive. P3’s partner’s parents on the other hand are more conservative and question their lifestyle. But she thinks that *“it has always been hard for the older generations to understand what the younger generations are doing”*. P7 says that her family thinks she is *“like some sort of hippie”* and does not think they would like to switch lives with her. But she sees the reason for that in the fact that they have been working their whole lives and want to rest. Her husband’s parents on the other hand are very supportive because they share their interests. Both their parents loaned them money to be able to buy a house because they saw that they were not feeling good in the city. P5 says that her friends and family do not say much about her current lifestyle (where she has already downsized) but *“they all get excited”* about *“the idea that I’m going to build a tiny house”*. The family of P6 on the other hand think it is *“crazy”* that she wants to build a tiny house and she has a dispute with her children’s father because Swedish law requires children to have more space to live in than that.

P4, who worked a lot in the NGO sector and environmental movements, says that most people she knows have similar values but *“most of them still live more mainstream than I do”* and some get stressed and burnt out. Some friends live *“a little bit”* simply but they are not interested in it as her. P1 tells about a friend that she has known since childhood and that she connected with again now as a young adult because she *“realized that we are like quite similar in thoughts an opinion”*. Having similar values and opinions can deepen friendships.

When deciding where to live, staying close to family and friends is often an important factor. P3 lives now far from them and misses them and considers this as the being *“perhaps the biggest tradeoff”*. But they have enough space to invite their friends to stay at their place for some time. For P7 it was important to find a house somewhat close to friends and family (and work), but she still misses her friends. She says that her friends seem to be curious about her lifestyle and some are envious *“because maybe they can’t afford to buy a house”*.

5.3.6. Inspiration and influencing

For P1, her mum is influencing her because they are both *“scared”* to have a fulltime job and she is hoping to inspire people in her surroundings to not take

things so seriously. P3 got influenced by her boyfriend about living simpler and now feels an “*urge to communicate and try to influence others to be better*” which is why she started an Instagram account. But social media is an inspiration for her as well. So, social media is helping to get inspired for practicing a VS lifestyle and can often be the entry point (P4). She says that “*we all influence each other*” and she is “*offering (...) an alternative*”. Also, her daughter gets a lot of her views and values from her. Moreover, she brought up the idea of having inspiration days with a movie, a panel discussion or workshops because more people should hear about VS. Both getting inspired and feeling support from others, and inspiring and influencing others is a social component of the practice of VS. P7 is inspired by people living on the countryside growing their own vegetables but being in a city, you meet a lot of people who you can have conversations with and be inspired by that.

5.3.7. Being different

Being different than the mainstream society causes some reactions and feelings among other people but also within the group of my interviewees. This theme of being different and to some extent not being understood is mentioned in previous findings which shows the interconnectedness of the elements.

P1 thinks that people are provoked by her lifestyle. “*If you do things too much and too intense*”, P2 also thinks that it can be annoying for some people that he is living such a minimalistic life. He thinks that he sometimes sounds like an environmentalist giving people a bad conscience, e.g., when family members bring him presents.

“I have a feeling they look at my eyes when they’re doing something or when they talk about what they brought” (P1)

They get a bad feeling and tired when he is telling them that he cannot appreciate when they are consuming and giving him things, but he tries “*not to be a pain in the ass all the time*”. P3 says her partner’s parents are provoked of their lifestyle, while her own parents are more envious. People are provoked e.g., because she and her boyfriend are “*kind of seeing through the lie*” of products that claim to be sustainable. P1 also thinks that people are jealous about her lifestyle, but she cannot understand how somebody can react negatively when one talks about their non-mainstream lifestyle. On the other hand, she is not jealous about others and their lifestyle. P4 tells that because of her work environment, most people she knows have similar values, but they live more mainstream, and some can get a bit jealous. She can also have “*flashes of jealousy*”, but in general she is not jealous because her lifestyle is so voluntary.

Even though P3 has always tried to find her own way and to not listen to other people's advice so much, she says a "*normal*" lifestyle seems peaceful.

"You can't just like 'Oh I would like to live a completely different life from the norm'. There's not like a fixed package for that. You have to like figure everything else for yourself and kind of fight for it." (P3)

Apart from that, there is a need to be "*perfect*" when one wants to live more sustainable, and she thinks that "*too much pressure and focus is put on like individual consumers*". She says that "*we have to be a bit like forgiving on ourselves for like trying our best*" because we are not the "*biggest impacters*".

It can be a challenge to be different and to be confronted with the "normal" lifestyle.

"If I drive my daughter to school, the other dads in my age... I reflect myself in them. And I look on what they have, on their clothes, and their cars, and I have a shield but still. It's there, it's my surrounding. I have to work with it." (P2)

P6 might even risk to have a lower frequency of contact with her kids because of her plan to live in a tiny house with them. P5's son-in-law does not believe it is possible for her to build a tiny house. P7 realizes that she is different from a lot of people because, in contrast to her, they throw away things without thinking. From the interviews I did not get the impression that the VSs were explicitly missionary but that some of them tried to inspire people who are interested in this lifestyle. But the more "extreme" or different from the norm someone lives, e.g., P2, the more provocative his statements might sound to his social surroundings.

5.3.8. Simple vs. complex

The interviewees did not have clear answers if their lives in general got simpler. Some areas usually get more complex. The reduction of stress is something to be achieved when choosing VS, e.g. by owning less things or by working less than what is usual in society. P1 noticed that her "*brain is more calm*" when she thinks about choosing this lifestyle for her future. P3 finds working less a lot less stressful than before. P7 is not able to work full time because that makes her stressed and tired.

For P2, this lifestyle is "*not simple from the beginning*", it is complicated, and he says that "*simple is not easy*", although the idea of living simple is for P5 about "*reduc[ing] the complications in life*". P7 sees the term VS problematic because "*it adds also some problems that you have to solve*". Especially with kids when you are short on time and money, it gets more complicated. P3 finds her life more energy consuming than the mainstream life because she and her boyfriend question a lot. She thinks it is so much easier to go with the norm and e.g. buying new is an

“easy solution” compared to the efforts one has to put into buying secondhand sometimes. Similarly, for P4 it is a lot of effort to buy secondhand or find *“sustainable”* products, so for her it is more important to reduce her consumption in general. Regarding transport, using alternative means can get complicated and expensive, e.g., taking the train and ferry from Sweden to the UK.

6. Discussion

In this chapter, the findings from my study are discussed in order to answer my research questions. Based on my practice-based approach and the framework of Shove et al. (2012), I put my results in relation with recent literature. My first research question asked about the **motivations and drivers for having a VS lifestyle**, so I aimed to gain insight into the reasons behind the choice for a VS life. As broad and diverse as the practices of living a voluntary simple life are, as broad are also the motivations. Especially the entry points showed a wide variety among the VSs. Some of these, like reducing waste and buying second hand, are connected to ecological awareness, which is one of the core values of VS (Elgin & Mitchell 1977). Material simplicity, another core value (ibid), is also reflected in the entry point of wanting to reduce belongings, e.g., because of moving or because of the wish to reduce the size of the living space. Positive effects of minimalism on humans' wellbeing were found by Lloyd and Pennington (2020), e.g. autonomy and mental space. Similarly, Hüttel et al. (2020) found that anti-consumption of VSs did not decrease and in some cases increase their well-being. Alexander and Ussher's (2012) study even suggests that the happiness increases when living simple. In contrast, the study of Chhetri et al. (2009) showed a significantly lower life satisfaction among downshiffters compared to non-downshiffters. The reduction of stress and the complications in life are further examples for the wish to practice VS. This goes hand in hand with the intention to reduce working hours because for my interviewees a job is not all that life is about and a job does not make up a person's whole identity. Time is highly valued and having more time for oneself and friends and family is another motivation for VS. Being less dependent on society by growing food was mentioned by another simplifier. They are enabled to care about themselves and enjoy the luxury of self-grown food. The gained skillfulness can be connected to the core value of personal growth (Elgin & Mitchell 1977).

The second research question was about the **challenges and obstacles that VSs need to overcome**, so it deals with the impediments that VSs face when practicing this lifestyle. From the empirical materials I gained, it seemed like that many aspects of the VS life are connected to tradeoffs. VSs face the conflict between the need to be part of a community and wanting to do things differently than the mainstream society. Thinking about their own lives and questioning a lot bears the

risk of becoming “anti-social”. Finding a community in the countryside was feasible but finding particularly like-minded people that aim to have a similarly simple lifestyle seemed easier in the city.

Being different causes quite some provocation and jealousy within their social surroundings. The societal structures are not supportive in terms of work and infrastructure like transport and recycling. This is reflected in Alexander and Ussher’s (2012) study, where suitable employment and suitable transport were the two greatest obstacles among VSs. Such external institutional factors were also found by Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002). The barriers for my interviewees included the impossibility to reduce working hours in the IT and marketing industry and the need to stay close to bigger cities because of the job opportunities there. This resulted also in a need to ponder where to live. The geographical distance to the workplace as well as family and friends is conflicting with the wish of having a calmer life on the countryside where self-sufficiency is possible. There might also be a conflict between the wish to reduce working hours which results in a lower income and the increasing housing prices, and the sacrifice to living far from services which results in the necessity to drive by car (McArthur & Stratford 2020). Moreover, it is a lot more time-consuming to make food from scratch and living completely self-sufficient would require a huge garden and is also labor-intensive.

With my third research question, I asked **if life, in consequence, gets more complicated by striving for a “simpler” life because it is against the grain of society**. From the empirical data I gained and the analysis I have done, I come to no clear answer to this question. As implied by the theme *simple vs. complex*, some aspects of the VSs life became simpler, but others caused more complications. Examples for that are that owning fewer material objects and living in a smaller place reduces the time for cleaning, whereas e.g., self-sufficiency is more time-consuming because VSs are not using “society’s services” like supermarkets. The reflections on this research question are connected to deeply philosophical considerations on what life is about on a personal level for the VSs. If the quality of life is purely based on how happy a person is (Brülde 2007), then living happily and sustainably means to find value in sustainability (Kronenberg & Iida 2011). In that sense, money and possessions do not bring happiness directly, but are rather tools to enable humans to attain happiness in the form of status, relationships and a healthy environment (Meadows 1998; Kronenberg & Iida 2011).

The habit of questioning the social, economic and political system we are living in is also exhausting and does not simplify my interviewees lives. Even though they strive for calmness and less stress, living the “normal” life seems more peaceful because that would probably mean to question less the existing mainstream norms and values. Another issue that arose among the interviewed VSs is the compromise of how to use time. Working less hours in a traditional job frees up time, which is often consequently used to work at home e.g., to grow food or repair things. From

these insights into the practice of VS, I would argue that living against the norm will continue to be a compromise in some areas if the system with its societal structures and norms does not change.

Therefore, I will in the following discuss the question **how a society can change**. I already took a stance on where to put “the social” by choosing practice theory for my study. I understand the social not to be located in individuals or in social structures, but in the entanglement of these two: the performed practices. Therefore, I argue that it is neither only individuals and their lifestyle decisions (e.g., VS, that is believed to be more sustainable than the average consumer in western societies) that are put in charge to act sustainably by neo-liberal governing with their responsabilization strategies (Soneryd & Uggla 2015; Pyysiäinen et al. 2017), nor can it only be the social structures. It must be acknowledged that locating the social and also change in practices is a difficult position and this entanglement of structure and agency does not make it easier to analyze where change could come from.

The most influential policy instruments to promote sustainable consumption are external factors to make sustainable practices easily available for consumers, institutional factors to regulate the available products (e.g. product standards), social norms, ethical codes and cultural expectations, and business, community and the public sector that set good examples (Jackson 2005). The social and cultural context, i.e. social norms, ethical codes and cultural expectations, seems to be the hardest area for policy makers, which is why Kronenberg and Iida (2011) suggest a value-based approach. I support the idea of incorporating values by referring back to the element of *meanings* of Shove et al.’s (2012:24) conceptual framework of practice theory, which is based on “social and symbolic significance of the participation” and is tightly connected to values. There are significant consequences for the current system of economy and environment when changing people’s values and convictions (Meadows 1999). The VS movement’s basic principles and values (such as environmental concern) represent resistance to what is prevalent in the mainstream consumer society and leads to a conflict between the collective identity and the struggle to act according to these norms (Sandlin & Walther 2009; Lorenzen 2012; Soneryd & Uggla 2015).

The construct of what is normal and reasonable is influenced by current governing using a post-ecologist framework that is based on some “nonnegotiable values and needs” (Soneryd & Uggla 2015:923). This is hindering politics to start acting towards a change (Blühdorn 2013). On the other hand, political agency expressed in the form environmental NGOs are able to put pressure on governmental authorities as well as on companies (Micheletti & Stolle 2012).

7. Conclusion

Based on the urgent need for sustainability, my study contributed to the debate about where to locate change and found its basic interest in the dichotomy of agency and structure. By zooming in on the level of individuals and looking into the (im)possibilities of individual lifestyle changes of VSs living in Sweden, I tried to open this matter up for discussion. A qualitative interview study gave insight into the sense-making of these simplifiers which I then analyzed by using a practice theory approach and the three elements of *materials*, *competences* and *meanings*. My study also contributed to the body of knowledge about VS which seems to be mainly conducted in Anglo-Saxon countries.

I found that VSs are able to change, they practice a different lifestyle in their daily lives than what would be considered mainstream. Even though there are obstacles they need to overcome, mainly due to societal structures, they found room for maneuver. But even in these modern individualized times, there is still need for community and support, which the VSs want and need to feel. On the other hand, they can inspire and support others who decide to change and simplify their lives.

I suggest that individuals changing their lifestyles can only be *part* of the change for sustainability. The entanglement of agency and structure that I see through my theoretical lense of practice theory leads me to the conclusion that change will need both, it cannot be either structure OR agency, it has to be structure AND agency. Do we need simplifiers to change the world? Perhaps. Will this be the solution for sustainability problems? Probably not.

Future research could include observation of VS practices, participatory observation or autoethnography to get first-hand experience and reflect on these. Getting closer to the practice can contribute to understand what it entails to go against the grain. The high media presence of simple living provides the opportunity to get a deeper understanding of the aspect of influencing others, e.g. via a netnography. Another aspect to investigate is gender representation in VS practices. Eventually, there are plenty of possibilities to do research on VS in non-capitalist-consumerist societies.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude my supervisors Sofie Joosse and Marianne Penker and my examiner Lotten Westberg for helping me to improve my work.

I would also like to thank my dearest Flogsta friends, especially my study buddy Daphne Manolakos, for countless walks and fikas and my family for supporting me throughout my studies.

Appendix

This is the last version of my interview guide. The guide was enhanced after each interview, adapting to what I learned from the previous interview and to what I already knew about my interviewees' lives (their living situation, job and so on). Not all questions were used, formulations might have been changed and follow-up questions were asked.

Introduction

When was the first time you heard about VS? From whom? How was it presented?
Why did you become interested in it?

What was the first thing/area in your life that you wanted to simplify?
[competences]

What is the essence of VS? How would you describe it to someone who has never heard about it before? [meanings]

Block 1 – Materials

Did you bring an item? What is it? Where and when did you get it from? Why does it have symbolic value for you?

Housing

Where do you live? (House, flat etc.)

How is your home furnished (and decorated)?

What do you think about the concept of minimalism? Do you know it? Is it important to you?

Food

How does your diet look like? What did you eat yesterday?

When was the last time you went to the shop? And what did you get there?

Do you make some of your food yourself? Grow your own veggies etc.

Where (and how often) do you get your food from?

Is the VS lifestyle also affecting your diet?

Transport

What do you use as a means of transport and why?

For longer distances? Why?

For travel? Why?

Consumption/Self-sufficiency

When was the last time you bought/got clothes? Where do you buy/get them?

What is important to you when you get new clothes? (make yourself, swap, share?)

What kind of care and cleaning products do you use? Do you make any of these yourself?

Use of time: What does time mean to you? How do you think about your time?

Would you say that you buy less but better quality?

Does sustainability play a role in your consumption?

Block 2 – Competences

Skills

Do you have any special skills that you consider important for having a VS lifestyle?

What are these and how/when/where/from whom did you learn them?

Do you want to learn something else to make your life simpler? [challenge]

Information

How do you organize/exchange yourself with other VSs?

Is it even important to you to exchange with like-minded people? [meanings]

Are you also part of the FB group?

Do you use Instagram as well?

Do you think that there are VSs who do not use social media?

How do you decide whether something is “simple enough” for you?

Are there situations where you find it hard to live simple? [challenge]

Work

What were your jobs in Stockholm?

Why did you downshift?

How is it to live with less money?

Was there a change in your wellbeing?

Block 3 - Meanings

What does it mean to you to live voluntary simplistic? (how does it look like, what are the main/most important components)

Why did you choose this lifestyle? [motivation, drivers]

Do you think there is a connection between *lagom* and VS?

Did your life become easier with living “simple”? [RQ3]

If you decluttered your belongings - how was that? Was it challenging? How does it feel to possess less?

What does your family, friends, acquaintances think about your lifestyle? How does their lifestyle look and what do you think about their lifestyles? [ask for example/situation]

Is there someone of your friends/family who are worried about you

Are there people who are provoked by your lifestyle?

Is there something you are jealous about the lifestyle of others?

Do you find that you are influencing other people?

Demographic data

Age, Gender, Highest Education, Occupation, Location, Single/couple/family;

Ask for further respondents