Everyday life after downshifting: Consumption, thrift and inequality

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Abstract

In the early literature on downshifting it was proposed that reduced hours at work would lead to reduced levels of consumption, increased hours of leisure and a more sustainable and fulfilling life, yet recent survey research has challenged this assumption. Our study contributes knowledge on the differentially lived experience of contemporary downshifting and its relationship to sustainable and/or thrifty consumption. We undertook qualitative interviews with Australians of working age who had voluntarily reduced their hours of work to explore the everyday experience of downshifting and links with consumption practices in the domains of food, leisure and transport. The downshifters focused on thrift rather than sustainability and consequently did not reduce their consumption in a straightforward way. We found the everyday experience of downshifting was significantly shaped by caring responsibilities and financial and housing security. Moreover, differential levels of financial security had an impact on consumption levels. While those with lower levels of wealth closely managed discretionary expenditure, financially secure downshifters did not reduce their consumption overall. We argue that in the absence of an ideological commitment to sustainability, and without mainstream support for changing consumption mindsets, reduced working hours are unlikely to lead to reduced consumption.

Keywords: downshifting, consumption, households, gender, work, qualitative research

Introduction

In this paper we report on the findings of a small, qualitative study that sought to explore downshifting – the voluntary reduction of formal, paid working hours and income – as a life course decision rather than necessarily expressive of a political sensibility. Through life narrative interviews we investigated both the impact of downshifting on consumption practices (especially relating to food, leisure and transport) and the everyday experience of downshifting relative to issues of income and housing security and of gender and informal work. In doing so, this study accords with a recent downshifting research that interrogates the extent to which it leads to lower levels of
household consumption and greater levels of life satisfaction (Kennedy et al., 2013; Chhetri et al., 2009a; Chhetri et al., 2009b; Buhl and Acosta, 2016; Hammond and Huddart Kennedy, 2019). While downshifting has been portrayed as beneficial for both the environment and personal wellbeing, more recent scholarship encourages caution in making these assumptions.

We draw on the scholarship of downshifting and contemporary investigations of thrift (Evans 2011; Hall, 2015; Holmes, 2019) in exploring the dynamics of consumption, financial security and gender within downshifting households. We argue that downshifting by voluntarily reducing working hours without an ideological commitment to sustainability does not result in substantially lowered consumption or clear sustainability benefits. Moreover, we demonstrate that the everyday ‘doing’ of downshifting and the level of satisfaction derived from it is profoundly shaped by gendered patterns of care and by inequalities of social and economic capital.

**Downshifting, Frugality & Thrift**

As both a political concept and life strategy downshifting came to prominence in western nations, including the USA, UK and Australia, from the late-1990s, drawing on older traditions of voluntary simplicity (Elgin, 1981; Doherty and Etzioni, 2003). As a social phenomenon and, for some, a nascent social movement, downshifting also became a central motif of a renewed public intellectual critique of the hyper materialism and hyper velocity of western – and increasingly global – consumer culture (Schor, 1998; Graaf et al., 2001; Hamilton and Denniss, 2005). What seemingly distinguished downshifting beyond being a life-style option, was a deliberative political choice to escape overwork and overconsumption, to reject the increasing speed of everyday life, to emotionally reconnect with others and with local community, and to 'tread lightly' in terms of one's material impact on the local and global environment (Schor, 1998; Hamilton and Mail, 2003). Downshifting entered the lexicon at a time when ethical, fair trade and sustainable consumption were emerging or further consolidating as ways of contesting consumer norms, while an ethos of downshifting aligned with other increasingly prominent alternatives, especially simple and slow living (for discussion of this see: (Parkins and Craig, 2006; Littler, 2008; Humphery, 2010). As such, downshifting both remains part of the lexicon of anti-consumerist politics and has a broader resonance with western publics as the moniker for opting out of a stressful working life.

Nevertheless, there has, as we noted in the introduction, been a more recent shift to exploring the complexity of motivations underlying downshifting and the impact downshifting lifestyles have on consumption and life satisfaction. While such exploratory research is still limited, a number of studies suggest that downshifting and
voluntary simplicity result in positive environmental outcomes in terms of reduced household resource use (Chhetri et al., 2009b; Alexander and Ussher, 2012; Kennedy et al., 2013). However, other studies have been more circumspect. In their time-use and qualitative study of downshifters in Germany, Buhl and Acosta (2016) found that a reduction in working hours had ambiguous environmental impacts as consumption activities changed and leisure activities increased – resulting only in slightly lower resource consumption within downshifter households. The way that time is allocated appears key to the resource impact of downshifting. Buhl and Acosta (2016) found that time was largely allocated to hobby pursuits, childcare and, to a lesser extent, housework, educational activities and sleep, however some leisure activities involved more intensive resource use – the net result being only slightly lower resource consumption. Overall, the existing association of lower working hours with reduced energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions is most likely due to the strong relationship between working hours, income and consumption (Nässén and Larsson, 2015).

Downshifting studies are even more inconclusive when it comes to assessing levels of life satisfaction (Chhetri et al., 2009a; Kennedy et al., 2013; Buhl and Acosta, 2016; Hammond and Huddart Kennedy, 2019). Once again the Buhl and Acosta (2016) study documents the contradictory forces underlying levels of self-fulfilment through voluntarily reduced paid work. Participants in the Buhl and Acosta (2016) study reported increased social and community engagement and enhanced life-satisfaction through downshifting, but this was tempered by many also lamenting decreased income and loss of occupational and social status. One key point to emerge was that participants reported increased caring activities and household production. Further, Buhl and Acosta (2016) found that the prioritising of different activities post-downshifting was strongly influenced by family status and gender, with women spending more time on household chores, errands and childcare, and men on leisure, repairs and hobbies – findings that corroborate those of an earlier study in the UK (Druckman et al., 2012).

This brings us to a key issue that is somewhat obscured within existing downshifting studies – the impact of wealth, income and housing tenure on both pathways into and the experience of downshifting. Financial resources not only have a direct impact on consumption practices (Mansvelt et al., 2017) but are an enabler of downshifting as a life choice. Not only do some people purposefully use financial independence as an alternative to work (Perrone et al., 2015), higher levels of household wealth have been shown to increase the likelihood of home-ownership which, in turn, allows owner-occupiers to better manage periods of income volatility (Carter, 2011). In homeowner states such as Australia and the USA, homeownership has been shown to be an infrastructure of care, as secure and affordable housing enables both greater self-care and care of others (Power, 2019; Tronto, 2013). One of the few existing studies to directly explore these issues suggests, as we do here, that 'downshifting is a highly
variable experience shaped by resources that map onto socio-economic status’ (Hammond and Huddart Kennedy, 2019: 164). Drawing on interviews with downshifters in the United States, Hammond and Huddart Kennedy (2019) demonstrate both that the decision to downshift is often less obviously voluntary for those with lower economic and social status and that downshifting can simply reproduce and highlight such inequality. Similar findings are evident in this Australian study, although we give greater emphasis, here, to housing tenure and the gendered nature of informal care, alongside that of income security, in shaping the downshifting experience.

Apposite also to this study is the turn from the concept of downshifting to the practices of frugality and thrift. Indeed, running parallel to the downshifting literature there has been renewed academic and public interest in the concepts of thrift and frugality as potential modes of sustainable consumption (Evans, 2011; Hall, 2015; Holmes, 2019; Podkalicka and Potts, 2014; Podkalicka and Tang, 2014). David Evans (2011) has proposed a conceptual distinction between these two sets of everyday practices (Evans, 2011). He argues that frugality aligns with practices of sustainable consumption through both lowered expenditure and resistance to the excess of consumer society. By contrast, thrift involves restraining expenditure but not levels of consumption and thus does not challenge high consumption norms. According to Evans, thrift is driven by economic and social circumstances (such as reduced income and the need to care for immediate friends and family) rather than by an ethos of preserving the environment for distant others, as with frugal practices (Evans, 2011).

This distinction is useful for illuminating the divergent environmental implications of different orientations toward consumption, but in the messiness of everyday life the categories may merge and contradict (Hall, 2015). As Sarah Hall has argued ‘sustainable and thrifty consumption have a level of compatibility’ (Hall, 2015). Similarly, Helen Holmes examines thrift as an everyday practice that moves across consumption and production processes and simultaneously involves both more and less sustainable practices (Holmes, 2019). Holmes usefully suggests that thrift is a constellation of practices that draws on a continuum of motivations from ‘Financial necessity’, which includes activities such as ‘shopping strategies – waiting for reduced items, shopping around, reusing and repairing’; ‘Conscience’ which is motivated by moral and ethical ideals and obligations to the environment and includes activities such as ‘reuse, recycle, re-purpose, no waste, reduce impact, ethical consumption’ and ‘Enjoyment’ which involves ‘upcycling, making, mending, transforming, gifting’ activities (Holmes, 2019).

In taking up a number of the above insights into downshifting and thrift practices, our study contributes knowledge on the differentially lived experience of downshifting and its relationship to sustainable and/or thrifty consumption. By studying a sample of
people from two distinct Australian geographic locations who voluntarily reduced their working hours we take up Hall’s call to provide greater ‘geographical insight into the lived elements of economic and political change in everyday urban life’ (Hall, 2015), while also confirming the caution of Buhl and Acosta (2016) and of Hammond and Huddart Kennedy (2019) towards exaggerating the environmental and wellbeing impacts of downshifting. In doing so, we make particular use of Holmes's (2019) typology of thrift in our data analysis, mapping the ways in which Australian downshifting is embroiled in a matrix of practices and motivations.

The Study

For the purpose of the study, we defined downshifters as people of working age who had voluntarily reduced their income and working hours in the last five years – and, in selecting interviewees, we placed no political filter on the motivations underlying this life course decision. To recruit participants, we used a market research firm to invite participation from 10 individuals living in either Melbourne a large capital city in Victoria, Australia or in the Bendigo region in Central Victoria. The two locations offered a comparison of different downshifting contexts – Melbourne is a large sprawling city of 5 million people. Having sustained a property boom for several years housing prices and rental prices are high and housing stress is on the rise. By contrast the regional town of Bendigo has 116,000 residents and is well serviced. The town offers cheaper day to day living but has a much higher level of unemployment and fewer employment options. Five participants lived in diverse suburbs across Melbourne, one lived in a small town outside Melbourne and four lived in Bendigo. Nine women and one a man participated in the study and their demographic characteristics are summarised in Table 1- pseudonyms are used to protect the confidentiality of participants.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of study participants
As shown in Table 1 there was a range of participant ages including six in their 40s, three in their 50s and one who was 60 years old. Occupations prior to downshifting included care work (drug and alcohol counsellor, disability support, integration aid, aged care) administrative roles (manager public service, mid-level public servant, medical practice manager, payroll officer) professional roles (university teacher, accountant) and two small business owners. Eight participants lived in couple households while two were currently single and six of the participants currently had children, teenagers or young adults living at home.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Household type</th>
<th>Housing status</th>
<th>Primary reason downshift</th>
<th>Previous Job</th>
<th>Current Job</th>
<th>Year downshifted</th>
<th>Previous working hours/wk</th>
<th>Current working hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Katya</td>
<td>In 30s</td>
<td>Inner Melbourne</td>
<td>Couple with baby, pregnant with 2nd child</td>
<td>Owner apartment mortgage</td>
<td>Care of dying mother</td>
<td>Payroll Officer</td>
<td>Payroll Officer</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Was doing 50-60 hours – then zero to care for mother - now doing 20-35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Lisa (and Paul)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Outer Melbourne</td>
<td>Couple only, older children, husband retired</td>
<td>Own their house with small mortgage</td>
<td>Care and health</td>
<td>Medical Practice manager</td>
<td>Temp secretary</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>45 hours</td>
<td>Days vary 1-4 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Kimberly</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Bendigo</td>
<td>Couple with children</td>
<td>Renting</td>
<td>Work restructure</td>
<td>Drug &amp; Alcohol Counsellor</td>
<td>Casual shifts for disability support</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>0.9FTE</td>
<td>0.5FTE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Christi</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Melbourne</td>
<td>Couple with a teenager</td>
<td>Owner (large mortgage)</td>
<td>Choice - stress</td>
<td>Manager in Govt Department</td>
<td>Manager in Govt Department</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>45-50</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Melbourne</td>
<td>Single mother with older children</td>
<td>Renting</td>
<td>Choice- work</td>
<td>Public servant, Government department</td>
<td>Integration Aid</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Changed from FT to PT and now retired</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Sharon</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Bendigo</td>
<td>Shared with home stay student</td>
<td>Owner (small mortgage)</td>
<td>Package from work and care</td>
<td>University work, local council</td>
<td>Previously academic and policy work</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>35+</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Satellite town west of Melbourne</td>
<td>Couple with teenage child</td>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>Care and new relationship</td>
<td>Small business owner (café)</td>
<td>Aged Care</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Approx. 50</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Mick</td>
<td>40-45</td>
<td>Bendigo</td>
<td>Couple with adult child- has grandchildren</td>
<td>Renting</td>
<td>Work restructure</td>
<td>Disability support worker</td>
<td>Disability support worker</td>
<td>Mid 2016</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Bendigo</td>
<td>Couple with children</td>
<td>Renting</td>
<td>Redundancy, new relationship choice</td>
<td>Mining accountant</td>
<td>student</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>45+</td>
<td>Studying full time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Jenny</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Bendigo</td>
<td>Couple, one adult child at home</td>
<td>Owns house –</td>
<td>Work – closed her business</td>
<td>Self employed merchandise and retail</td>
<td>Student of community services</td>
<td>Apr 2017</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>5 (+ study hrs)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data and analysis

At the outset our key research questions were, 1) what are the pathways into downshifting, 2) what are the everyday experiences of downshifters, and 3) what impact does downshifting have on consumption. We used a qualitative methodology and collected data through in-depth narrative interviews and self-completed consumption diaries. Participants were interviewed in person in their houses and photographs were taken as a reference for the research team. The life narrative interviews (Wiles et al., 2005) included detailed questions about their transition to less work and how this has affected their everyday lives and consumption practices. The interviews took on average between 1-1.5 hours. Participants were also asked to complete self-recorded diaries documenting their practices and expenditure in three key consumption domains - food, transport and leisure over one week. The consumption diaries took the form of a table for each day of the week with fields for recording descriptive notes and expenses relating to the three consumption domains, and a further field for reflections on how current consumption practices and expenditure might differ from that prior to downshifting. These templates were completed by the participants over one week and emailed back to the research team.

The interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed. The data analysis involved carefully reading the transcriptions and consumption diaries in full and producing a summary of key narrative elements, events and themes for each participant (Wiles et al., 2005). Thematic analysis was also undertaken individually by the team of three researchers and cross-checked and matrices were used to summarise the consumption data, themes and patterns in the data (Miles et al., 1994).

Downshifting as a response to work/care demands

Pathways into downshifting were varied and the key drivers for reducing working hours were connected with labour market change – including workplace restructures and redundancies – or family change, particularly relating to intensified caring responsibilities or relationship dissolution and/or formation. Where downshifting was unprompted by such events, work stress and personal health played a key role in the transition. While almost all participants portrayed their decision to downshift as a 'life choice', their action was almost always initiated by external events beyond their control. This formed a backdrop to the interviews that, while framed around a focus on consumption practices, unfolded as a broader conversation about care, income and household.

Care emerged as a major motivator for choosing to reduce working hours for participants in our study. Caring responsibilities were a key feature of downshifting for
most of the study participants (8 out of 10), with many undertaking the less socially visible and recognised forms of care for elderly parents, partners and older teenagers (Loretto and Vickerstaff, 2015). For example, Katya (aged in her early 40s) had given up paid work for several years to look after her now deceased mother. This care work (undertaken with her brother) was extremely demanding and it was not possible for them to work as well as care. As Katya commented:

> Well, obviously we had to work around the clock to suit both of us, like she had a lot of respiratory problems, so it involved us being around her 24/7, someone had to be there. Doctor's appointments, non-stop you know, obviously taking her to hospital, you'd take her in and then there'd be stints of two - three weeks. So, if it wasn't going home, we'd be going to hospital. But yeah, I just think at the time it was the right move.

After her mother’s death Katya decided to go back to work part time, but at the time of interview was pregnant with twins and planning to take a further break from the workforce to care for them.

In two cases work and care intertwined to reduce hours. Sharon (aged in her mid-50s) took a redundancy package and payment from her university job. She then moved into paid work with a local council but eventually reduced her hours significantly to manage family caring responsibilities for her ill partner, her son and, her now deceased elderly father. These caring responsibilities took a heavy toll that resulted in divorce and has affected her health and ability to re-enter the paid labour market. Similarly, Lisa (aged in her early 40s) reduced her working hours in response to her partner Paul’s deteriorating health and a family crisis involving the death of her stepson. She was able to support Paul through his heart operation and recovery and they are taking the opportunity to travel ‘while he can’, but she continues to provide care to grandchildren one day a week and regularly visits her 93 year old father.

In contrast, two participants moved towards downshifting in response to new relationships and relocation. Sandra (aged in her late 50s), for example, reduced paid working hours initially to look after her teenage son who was struggling with mental health issues, but she then went through a divorce and re-marriage. This meant moving in with an older partner and finding affordable housing in a satellite town to Melbourne.

> We couldn’t buy a house between us, without a mortgage without moving out of Melbourne. My son was horrified but we promised him we’d help with a car, which we have, and we take him back and forth as often as he wants. We’ve been here 18 months now and that’s the way we could afford to buy something, because it’s cheaper here...Then I went part-time. I got a job about three months after we moved here. I volunteered at aged care, they took me on.
Despite the difficulties of providing informal care and forging a new household Sandra, like many participants, insisted that downshifting had also afforded new opportunities for forms of self-care. Looking back on her previous life Sandra observed;

> It was very regimented. I wanted to change the busy-ness of it. I didn’t really have a home life really. It was really integrated, you know, there was no real home life. I had to be always organised, you know, the school drop-off, school pick-up, lunches made the night before. I was sort of like a robot. I don’t know what the word is, but I just didn’t have the freedom of self really.

For Sandra, downshifting is perhaps a way of positively re-framing the losses she had experienced during this tumultuous time in her life and affirming her new sense of self.

Similarly, for Christi (aged in her late 40s) downshifting was essentially driven by the need to care for herself;

> I think it’s basically probably health wise, so yeah I wanted to take a break because I was getting too stressed at work and the amount of hours that I was working was just far too excessive.

Surprisingly, none of the participants framed their decision to downshift in ideological terms, as an alternative lifestyle or a choice to live more sustainably or ethically. Instead, a commitment to relationships and care emerged as a stronger motivation theme. Throughout this study, a strong sense of difficulty and stress was conveyed in many interviews when participants reflected on the task of juggling paid work and caring responsibilities and on dealing with family crises. Indeed, prioritising carer roles, through reducing work and income, became a rational method for reconciling these intense but common everyday pressures for the middle-aged women in our study. Many women thus ‘downshifted’, at least in part, in order to do other forms of work; the so-called informal work of caring for others and themselves. Characteristic of many Australian women, they had changed their mode of work rather reduced work overall in order to sustain and support their families (Bauer and Sousa-Poza, 2015). Yet economic resources and financial security were also important mediators of everyday life after downshifting as we discuss below.

**Income and housing shape everyday life after downshifting**

Importantly our study found that financial security, particularly in the form of home ownership, investment income or an employed partner provided a platform for successful and satisfying downshifting (Power, 2019). The majority of our participants (6 out of 10) reported enjoying life after downshifting. We found dual understandings of freedom in the downshifter’s narratives. ‘Freedom from’ work and the ‘freedom to’ spend more time as they chose or with family and friends were key themes in the
interviews. For some participants, however, downshifting was a struggle very much related to a sense of enforced frugality and low social status.

Lisa, despite her considerable care duties noted above, found that she had become ‘much less stressed’ and was ‘much happier’ with reduced and flexible paid work. Financial security in the form of a modest house with a small mortgage, access to her husband Paul’s semi-retired income, and mutual savings had enabled them as a couple to spend time socialising and travelling. They felt privileged that they were ‘quite comfortable’ and able to move in and out of work. As Lisa commented:

And a lot of people aren’t in that situation, so we’re very lucky and we know that. Not everybody would be able to just quit work and say [they are] going to have a few months off and then work for myself and then go away for nine weeks and then do this. Yeah we’re very, very fortunate.

For Sandra also, having now bought an affordable house outright with her new partner, life was both manageable and enjoyable on reduced income. As she said of her life after reducing work hours: 'I think I could breathe. I could smell the roses'. These same sentiments in relation to housing security were echoed by Jenny (aged in her early 50s). For Jenny and her partner, having now finally paid off their mortgage had provided the flexibility for her to close her stressful retail business and downshift. She was clearly revelling in the transition to new daily rhythms:

I’m not as stressed, nowhere near as stressed. I am more relaxed than ever, and I’ve done things that I wanted to do. So I’ve sanded and painted furniture, I’ve just set myself little tasks each week I suppose. So I just get up and I think oh yeah, I’ll go and do that today.

For others, the transition to living on less income entailed in downshifting was proving more of a challenge, but still ultimately satisfying. Maria (aged in her mid-40s) was made redundant during the global financial crisis and had moved location with her new partner who was working full time. Maria herself had not been able to secure a permanent, full time professional position. She began studying part time and working intermittently and eventually to see ‘the positives’ of her enforced downshifting:

I then started thinking about retirement and I’m still probably too young for that but I was at home and I really loved it because I could go to the shops when I wanted, I could do my dishes, I could travel and never have to ask for leave. There were all these bonuses of not working. But having time just felt so good that when I did go back to work, working full time was quite hard. Whereas before I’d never known any different. I just went straight from school to Uni, to working, back to study, back to work. And then one day I had time between when I didn’t have a job at all and I was
stressed at first and then I thought ‘this is actually really good. I can have a life’.

With financial support from her partner, Maria’s downshifting provided a range of consumption choices in terms of travel and leisure activities.

In contrast, financial insecurity had a profound impact on everyday life for those participants for whom downshifting was far more life circumstance than life choice. Given years of intense caring obligations and health difficulties, Sharon – although having originally voluntarily downshifted – now felt locked out of the job market and excluded from social and cultural activities through lack of income. As she commented:

I used to have an art gallery membership and go down to Melbourne for that, an art gallery here and other cultural things. I really love music and theatre. I don’t do any of that anymore, just because financially I can’t. It is a disappointment, yeah.

In Sharon’s case the dual freedoms are there but without financial security her leisure consumption choices are much more limited than Maria’s. Mick also reported that his leisure options had been constrained through living on a low income and reported not being able to accompany his partner on a cruise through lack of funds. Indeed downshifting for financially insecure participants such as Mick and Sharon could be read as merely a euphemism for diminished economic and social capital.

Throughout the interviews undertaken for this study financial security through a regular income stream and reduced housing costs through home ownership were clearly identified as crucial platforms for viable downshifting. In other words, having a life that was happier, less stressful and more meaningful after downshifting was not guaranteed; and many participants were keenly aware of this fact. For the least satisfied of our downshifters, reduced income had led to money worries, pressure on relationships, a sense of social isolation, and exclusion from consumer markets. For our participants, then, downshifting could certainly fulfil its promise of greater life satisfaction but only under the conditions of solid financial security – through home ownership and savings or through a secure relationship with a financially supportive partner.

**Thrift and Consumption**

All of the participants in this study lived on reduced income in comparison to their lives prior to downshifting. While this had an impact on personal and household consumption, there was wide variation in the consumption patterns of interviewees. This variation was linked to financial resources rather than particular ethical sensibilities about sustainability or simplicity. Indeed, while a small number of people
mentioned activities such as investing in solar energy, consumption was not consistently reduced or geared toward more sustainable patterns by any of our participants. Nevertheless, downshifting, for many participants, had resulted in a partial shift towards a greater resourcefulness, a selective frugality or financial cautiousness, and a heightened appreciation of home production and leisure activities that did not involve high levels of consumption. This was evidenced both in the interviews and in consumption diaries. Table 2 provides a summary of the expenditure and consumption diaries in the three domains of food, transport and leisure.

Table 2: Summary of weekly expenditure and consumption of food, transport and leisure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Name</th>
<th>Weekly Food Expenditure</th>
<th>Comments on food</th>
<th>Weekly Transport Expenditure</th>
<th>Comments on transport</th>
<th>Weekly Leisure Expenditure</th>
<th>Comments on leisure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Katya</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>Walked to local grocery store.</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>transport expenses are mainly petrol for car</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>Included dining out with friends and family and shopping as a leisure activities, and watching TV.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>Shops for groceries at Aldi.</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Short car trips often involving relatives.</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Watches TV and Netflix and crochets, jewellery shopping, Walk around the block.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christi</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>2 supermarket grocery shops and eating out with friends &amp; family. Spends more time preparing meals at home now.</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Takes train to city on work days and uses car on other days (for shopping and social engagements)</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>Walking the dog, cooking, reading and watching TV. Is more social since downshifting and has time at home for activities other than chores.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>Shops at supermarket for convenience and makes frequent small purchases.</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>Multiple short car trips for shopping.</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Gardening, playing computer games and watching TV at home. Drove to the beach one day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharon</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>Frugal with grocery shopping and largest expenses are linked to social events.</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Short car trips and longer drive to visit boyfriend in a different town.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Doesn’t go out much for both health and financial reasons. Social events, visit to local gallery and op shop are main leisure activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>Shops at supermarket for value for money, take-away pizza one night. Dined one night with parents (mother cooked)</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>Drives to shops, drives both her son and herself to work (son has L plates). Drives son to gym. Long car trip to visit parents on other side of Melbourne.</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Home – TV, Out – Bingo, movies, walked dog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mick</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>Few details but mainly eats at home</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Short car trips, mainly for trips to the gym and work place.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Gym workouts, walking, house and garden jobs, watching TV.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Shops at supermarket for convenience and</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Multiple short car trips to shops and athletics track.</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Home - reading, online entertainment, letter-writing, stamp collecting, TV. Away from home – athletics training, visiting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Drawing on the typology of thrift practices developed by Holmes (2019) we found numerous examples of thrift driven by financial necessity. For participants on limited incomes careful budgeting and a little frugality as a downshifter was crucial across both household and leisure consumption terrains. As Sandra explained:

We just have to be careful where we spend our money and where we do it. My wages are spent before I get it because even though we haven’t got a mortgage, we still have a small loan for his [her partner’s] truck and I’ve never had a loan for a car before, do you know what I mean? So those sorts of things change, and going out; we do go out, we go to bingo once a week because he likes bingo and we go dancing once a week because I like dancing lessons - rock and roll - and that’s really our social life. So we still do things, but we just have to watch it.

This sense of ‘watching it’ was particularly marked in relation to food consumption. We found that for most participants downshifting had a substantial impact on their weekly food consumption and had, in many instances, resulted in new food purchasing patterns and changes to the types of food prepared and consumed. For many there was an increased focus on healthier, home cooked meals and a reduction in take away and eating out. As Lisa commented

I shop at Aldi, there’s nothing wrong with that. Aldi’s great. I love to cook and I’m doing more of that because I’m able to, I’ve got the time to do it.... So I start from scratch, we don’t have takeaway, we don’t have a lot of processed at all... That’s significantly changed, and we never have takeaway, we just don’t.

Several participants spoke about choosing to shop at Aldi the global discount supermarket chain.

In the domain of travel, thrift practices were geared around financial constraint rather than sustainability. There were changes in travel and holiday patterns, but not an overall reduction for most of the participants. Attention had instead shifted to identifying holiday bargains and, given greater available time to travel, at least half of our participants spoke of this as one of the ‘benefits' of downshifting. Once again, Lisa summed this up well in observing how she and her partner had reduced expenditure in various domains but prioritised travel:
Since we’ve wound back with work our travelling has increased, but we’re doing it hopefully more on a budget way of doing it. So we wait for deals to come up and we use the low cost airlines and that sort of thing. We go more often if we do that…

Surprisingly, none of the participants in this study specifically mentioned thrift practices driven by conscience such as a commitment to the environment through ethical or sustainable consumption (Holmes, 2019). This is not to say that sustainable practices or reduced consumption were not observable in the diaries or interviews but rather consumption was not framed as part of a ‘mindset shift’ or alternative lifestyle ethos (Hall, 2015).

We did however, find several examples of thrift motivated by enjoyment and pleasure that are compatible with sustainability, though not framed by the participants in these terms (Hall, 2015; Holmes, 2019). This was particularly the case for participants who enjoyed growing food in their gardens and cooking. Jenny spoke of having much less money to spend on food but one of the pleasures of her new life is the growing and eating of vegetables.

We’re actually growing a lot of vegetables. I don’t know if you can see out here, but I’m growing spinach and I’ve got strawberries, and there’s tomatoes coming. And my husband has a huge big block at his mum and dad’s house...and he’s growing a mass amount of things. So he’ll go ‘Oh, we’ve got zucchini’ and so then I’ll just Google what are we going to have with zucchini? So I can make up different recipes. During winter we had asparagus so I made – you know, you can make asparagus soup, you can do lots of things. So I’m Googling more to use what we’re growing. So we’re growing more and more.

There was increased time for pursuing other enjoyable thrifty practices such as renovating furniture, up-cycling and making (Holmes, 2019). A further example from Jenny

I am more relaxed than ever, and I’ve done things that I wanted to do. So I’ve painted, I’ve sanded and painted furniture, I’ve just set myself little tasks each week I suppose. So I just get up and I think oh yeah, I’ll go and do that today.

In summary, across participants in this study, consumption patterns had changed but not uniformly decreased after downshifting as people adapted to living with lower incomes while still retaining previous consumption preferences and habits. Using Evans (2011) binary distinction our participants focussed on thrift – saving money and
caring for immediate family and friends, rather than frugality – reducing consumption for the benefit of the environment or distant others. Thrifty consumption was a common response to life on a reduced income following downshifting but consumption patterns like all aspects of everyday life after downshifting appeared to be strongly related to financial resources and security for participants in our study. No one expressed a desire to reduce their consumption or to consume differently for environmental or ethical reasons and thrift was instead focussed on finding a bargain or continuing to consume at high levels on less money (Evans, 2011; Holmes, 2019). Most notably, when it comes to domestic and overseas holidays, many in our sample increased rather than decreased their travel, especially taking advantage of off-peak specials.

Yet some thrifty activities had potentially positive side benefits for the environment. Many participants enjoyed increased home-based productive activities including furniture restoration and gardening. Food consumption was the domain that changed most markedly after downshifting; with a range of people partaking in cooking from scratch and vegetable growing. What was thus evident throughout the interviews was the somewhat indefinite and contradictory impact of reduced working hours on consumption. While downshifting was linked to changes in consumption practices, this just as readily involved an increase – rather than decrease – of consumption in specific domains, particularly for those with financial security.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Our findings both connect with and extend recent work on the downshifting experience and provide several implications for geographical debates on consumption. Firstly, the macroeconomic assumption in the literature that lower working hours and lower incomes result in lower consumption are not neatly observable at the micro level (Hanbury et al., 2019). Just like patterns of consumption in austerity Britain after the GFC (Hall, 2015) and the study of Swiss workers who have reduced their working hours (Hanbury et al., 2019) high consumption norms are not fundamentally challenged by a reduction in working hours or income by participants in our study. This supports Frank Trentmann’s thesis (2006) that consumption and its links with the good life are much more entrenched and long-term historical patterns than sustainability advocates may hope (Trentmann, 2006).

Secondly, the marked silence about sustainability in our interviews suggests that downshifting with or without the ‘downshifting ideology’ makes a big difference to everyday life and consumption patterns post downshifting. Without self-identification or commitment to be an ethical or sustainable consumer our findings suggest simply reducing working hours is unlikely to challenge high consumption norms. Thrift remains geared to saving money for the family rather than saving the world for future
generations (Evans, 2011). This may explain the ambiguous findings in recent European survey research on the relationship between reducing working hours and consumption patterns (Buhl and Acosta, 2016; Nässén and Larsson, 2015). If downshifting is defined as voluntary reduction of working hours rather than sustainability mindset then consumption outcomes are likely to be mixed. Our research suggests that sustainable consumption ideals are not yet mainstream and indeed, in our study, there was little evidence of a ‘mindset shift’ or commitment to conscience driven, ethical or sustainable consumption.

Thirdly, the desire to create a more meaningful life through downshifting is salient for participants in our study though this may be explained more by the unequal gendered distribution of care rather than alternative ways of living. The neglect of gendered patterns of work and care is a major oversight in the downshifting literature which has tended to focus primarily on the supposed benefits of downshifting rather than acknowledging wider structural patterns that may undercut the quality of the downshifting experience. In general, women are more likely to have weaker ties to the paid labour market, to work part time in casual or precarious jobs, and to shape their labour market engagement according to care needs of dependents and the major role they play in domestic labour within households (Craig and Mullan, 2010). Many of the women in this study followed these labour market patterns. As demonstrated above, we found that caring responsibilities were a major driver of downshifting for our participants. As a result, the women spoke about a relief from the pressure of dual roles once they had downshifted. Indeed, our participants downshifted to achieve social sustainability for themselves and their families.

Considerations of gender cut-across a further key domain of the downshifting experience; financial security in the form of an income stream and/or home ownership was central to the viability of downshifting as a successful life choice. As previously noted, recent studies (Chhetri et al., 2009a; Kennedy et al., 2013; Buhl and Acosta, 2016; Hammond and Huddart Kennedy, 2019) have documented the way in which downshifters often report feelings of increased life satisfaction while also sometimes lamenting a loss of economic and social capital. Similarly, many of our participants spoke of life as less stressful and more meaningful having now stepped out of the 'work and spend' cycle. However, almost all participants acknowledged the role of financial and housing security (and insecurity) (Power, 2019) in underpinning this reality or, at the very least, reported the experience of downshifting in ways that accentuated the role of relative wealth as a key dynamic. Indeed, for participants in this study downshifting was primarily a life-course, economic calculation; one taken in response to life events, caring responsibilities and workplace change rather than an alternative consumer lifestyle.
References


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