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Downshifting in Australia
A sea-change in the pursuit of happiness

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Summary

The costs of overconsumption

Australians are bombarded every day with messages saying the way to a happy and fulfilling life is to have more money and a higher standard of living. In our society, success is measured overwhelmingly by material affluence. The appetite for more appears to be insatiable. A recent study showed that nearly two-thirds of Australians say they cannot afford to buy everything they really need, despite the fact that Australians are richer than ever, and around three times better off than their parents in the 1950s.

The preoccupation with money and consumption comes at an increasing cost. Consumer debt and personal bankruptcies are rising rapidly. Australians are working longer and harder than they have for decades and are neglecting their families and their health as a result. So while they say they do not have enough money, many Australians also say that money-hunger conflicts with their deeper values and preferences. When asked whether Australian society today is too materialistic, with too much emphasis on money and not enough on the things that really matter, 83 per cent agree.

The elements of downshifting

‘The trouble with the rat race is, even if you win, you are still a rat.’ Many Australians agree with the sentiment of this epigram and dream of escaping the rat race. The ABC’s *SeaChange* program was popular because it captured this shared dream. In other countries, there is evidence that many people have left the rat race to realise this dream. A US survey indicated that 19 per cent of adult Americans had voluntarily decided to reduce their incomes and consumption levels. This phenomenon is known as ‘downshifting’; it has received almost no attention in Australia.

In this study, downshiffters are defined as those people who make a voluntary, long-term, lifestyle change that involves accepting significantly less income and consuming less. ‘Sea-changers’ may be thought of as a sub-group of downshiffters, those whose life change involves leaving a career and moving house in pursuit of a simpler life. ‘Voluntary simplifiers’ may be thought of as those sea-changers who make a more radical change for reasons of principle as well as for personal motives.

Studies in Australia and abroad have uncovered several primary motivations for downshifting. Downshiffters may be pursuing a more balance and fulfilled life; they may want to spend more time with their families; they may be motivated by a desire to live a less materialistic and more sustainable life. They may make the change following a sudden event such as a severe illness, the death of someone close or a marriage breakdown. More often, the decision follows a longer process of questioning.

Individuals who make the choice to downshift usually stress that they are not dropping out of society. They do not see themselves as part of a movement but simply as individuals who want to make a change to the balance of their lives.

Downshifting in Australia

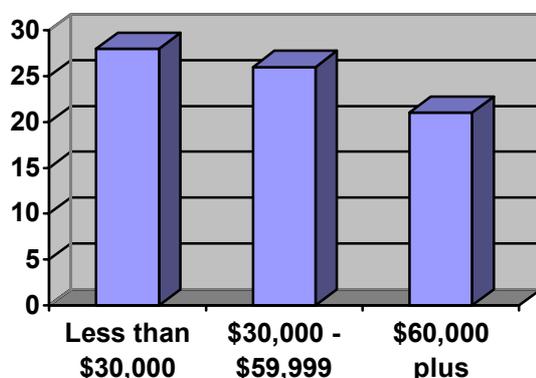
For this study, Newspoll was commissioned to conduct a national survey to determine the extent and nature of downshifting in Australia. It is the first time information has been gathered on this group of Australians. Downshifters were identified initially by an affirmative answer to the following question:

In the last ten years have you *voluntarily* made a long-term change in your lifestyle, other than planned retirement, which has resulted in you earning less money?

Using a narrow definition that excludes some who answered ‘yes’, 23 per cent of Australian adults aged 30-59 have downshifted over the last 10 years. The proportion rises to over 30 per cent if those returning to study or setting up their own businesses are included. Men and women, people in their thirties, forties and fifties, and families with and without children are just as likely to make the life change.

Contrary to a widely held view, downshifters are as likely to be blue-collar workers as white-collar workers. Proportionally, there are more downshifters on low incomes (less than \$30,000) than on high incomes (over \$60,000) (Figure S1), although in absolute terms there are more high-income downshifters than low-income ones, even after the change. (The incomes in Figure S1 are those reported after the downshift, so some of those now on low incomes would have been on high incomes.)

Figure S1 Proportion of each income group who are downshifters (%)

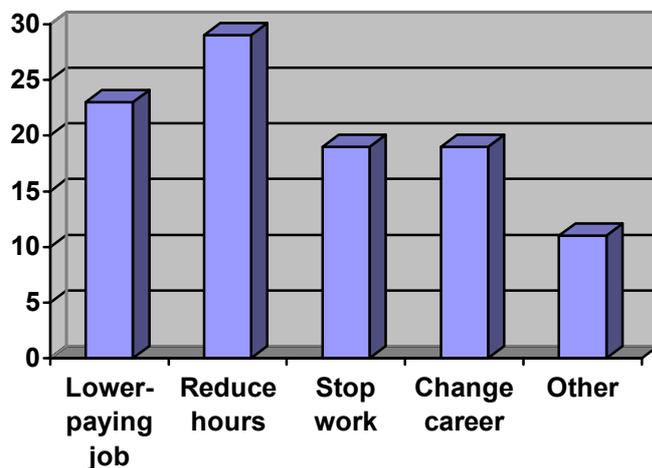


There appears to be an increasing trend to downshift in more recent years. Reducing working hours is the most popular way to downshift but changing to a lower-paying job, stopping paid work and changing careers are also common (Figure S2). Women are more likely to stop paid work and men are more likely to change careers while downshifters with children are more likely to reduce their hours of work or stop paid work altogether.

The most important reason for downshifting is to spend more time with family. A desire for a healthier lifestyle, more personal fulfilment and a more balanced lifestyle are also important (Figure S3). Post-materialist reasons – i.e. less materialistic and more

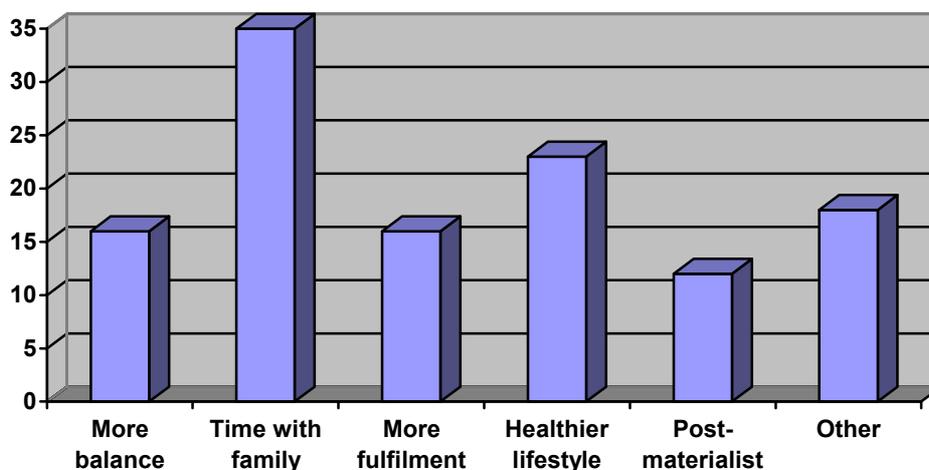
environmentally friendly lifestyles – are nominated by few downshiffters as their primary motivation, although for many it is one of several reasons for making the change. However, any decision to downshift in search of a more balanced life with less emphasis on money reflects a post-materialist value system.

Figure S2 How Australians downshift (%)



Householders with children are much more likely to downshift in pursuit of more time with their families, while those without children are much more likely to be motivated by the desire for more balanced and healthier lives. While all income groups stress more time with family, high-income downshiffters are much more likely to mention the desire for personal fulfilment, and those on low incomes are more likely to stress a healthier lifestyle.

Figure S3 Why Australians downshift (%)

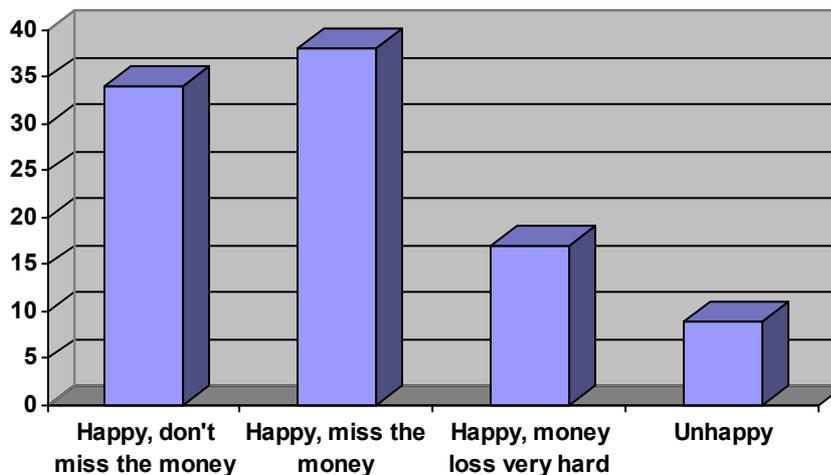


Is it worthwhile? Downshiffters are overwhelmingly happy with their decisions, although many miss the extra income and a sixth of them, while happy, find the loss of

income very hard (Figure S4). Downshiffters with children are more likely to feel the loss of income, especially if they have downshifted to a low income.

The results of the Australian survey can be compared with those from a similar survey in the USA. Downshifting appears to be more prevalent in Australia than in the USA where there are fewer high-income downshiffters. Australian downshiffters are more likely than Americans to cite ‘more time with family’ as their reason for making the change, while Americans emphasise the desire for more balance and fulfilment. While both groups are very happy with the change, Australians appear to be more contented.

Figure S4 Are downshiffters happy with the change? (%)



Political implications

‘Aspirational voters’ are those low and middle-income voters who most strongly aspire to wealthy lifestyles and the trappings of material success. The fact that nearly two-thirds of Australians believe they cannot afford to buy everything they really need has given rise to the phrase ‘middle-class whingeing’. The main political parties appeal to the feelings of deprivation of voters by reinforcing their perceived sense of financial hardship.

The research reported in this paper uncovers a large and, until now, invisible class of citizens who consciously reject consumerism and the pre-occupations of the aspirational voter. While diverse in many respects, they agree that an excessive pursuit of money and materialism comes at a substantial cost to their own lives and to those of their families. They reject the unquestioned assumption of Australian politics that voters respond first and foremost to the ‘hip-pocket nerve’; for them the hip-pocket nerve has been cauterised. These voters, who comprise at least a quarter of the adult population, might be called ‘anti-aspirational voters’. Perhaps a similar number may be considered to be closet downshiffters, those who agree with the values and life priorities of anti-aspirational voters but do not have the courage or, in some cases, the wherewithal to make the transition to downshifting.

Unlike middle-class whingers, downshiftners do not complain. The political system is geared towards trying to satisfy the noisy demands of the former. Downshiftners are often alienated from the political process because it is preoccupied with economics when they themselves have decided to put economic considerations down the list of life priorities.

Unlike middle-class whingers, downshiftners do not demand that the government solve their problems. One might say that they have been offered a 'fistful of dollars' but have said 'no thanks, the price is too high'. In recent times political leaders have begun to change their rhetoric with more talk of family friendly policies and concern about overwork. But for downshiftners this is not enough because the political system continues to promote consumerism and growth at all costs, precisely the values that downshiftners have discarded.

1. The pursuit of happiness

1.1 Overconsumption and its costs

Everyone wants a happy and fulfilling life. Our society, our political culture and our own urges tell us daily that the way to a happy and fulfilling life is, first and foremost, to have a higher income. We have become convinced that we will be happy if we can satisfy our desires for material goods. The preoccupation with material acquisition appears to have become stronger in recent years and is reflected in the phenomenon known as luxury fever. A recent study by The Australia Institute showed that nearly two-thirds of Australians say they cannot afford to buy everything they really need, despite the fact that Australians are richer than ever, and around three times better off than their parents in the 1950s (Hamilton 2002). Even the wealthiest Australians are beset by the feeling that they do not have enough, so that nearly half of those in the highest income groups say they cannot afford everything they need.

Success in Australia is now powerfully associated with affluence and putting one's achievements on display through conspicuous forms of consumption. The assumption that Australians are motivated above all by financial goals is so entrenched that it underpins political debate. In recent times some politicians have taken to describing those most determined to attain the consumer dream as 'aspirational voters'.

Yet there is a growing awareness that the rise of overconsumption has come with increasingly harsh costs. Consumer debt has risen rapidly over the last 15-20 years. Today Australians are borrowing ten times more for housing each year than they did 15 years ago. Spending on consumer goods is increasingly financed by credit cards. The last 6-7 years have seen an extraordinary rise in credit card debt with the amount doubling in the last three years and increasing four-fold in the last eight years so that it now exceeds \$21 billion (Reserve Bank 2002).

Australians are increasingly locked into a pattern of escalating desire. Satisfying this desire demands more debt and more pressure to work longer and harder. In the words of one commentator: 'In rich counties, consumption consists of people spending money they don't own to buy goods they don't want to impress people they don't like.'¹ One of the consequences of the growth of consumer debt has been a sharp rise in personal bankruptcies. In 2000-2001, nearly 24,000 Australians filed for personal bankruptcy, 80 per cent being consumer rather than business related.² Contrary to popular belief, the accumulation of consumer debt is not a result of poorer households being forced to borrow to cover living expenses but of wealthier households splashing out on luxuries. The obverse of growing debt has been a sharp decline in the savings ratio in Australia. Despite the fact that real incomes continue to grow over the decades, Australians today are less willing to defer purchases of goods than they were in the 1950s and 1960s. There is an ever-increasing desire for instant gratification.

¹ Joachim Spangenberg, formerly of the Wuppertal Institute.

² Insolvency and Trustee Service of Australia, 'Administration under the Bankruptcy Act 1966 statistics (provisional): Financial year ended June 30 2001', law.gov.au/aghome/ (22.10.02, 1.56 pm)

The pursuit of ever-higher incomes is having a serious effect on the personal lives of many workers, including the stresses associated with debt and overwork. Over the last two decades, average weekly hours worked by full-time employees have risen 10 per cent, from 38.2 in 1982 to 41.9 in 2000 (Campbell 2002, Table 3), but the averages conceal some much sharper trends in parts of the workforce. About a third of the workforce now works extended hours (more than 40 hours a week), and 26 per cent work more than 45 hours, up from 18 per cent in 1985. Increasing numbers are working what are defined as ‘extremely extended hours’, 50 or more hours a week, with 17 per cent now in that category. Among full-time employees 30 per cent are working more than 48 hours per week.³

The costs of long hours can be severe. Many workers are sacrificing their weekends to finish off work that cannot be done in the normal working week. A survey of 6,000 employees suggests that 29 per cent acknowledged that they fulfil work duties at home on weekends, with 11 per cent admitting that they spend more than 8 hours of their weekends doing so. Senior managers give up their weekends more than any other group with 44 per cent saying that their weekends are filled with work-related obligations.⁴

The impact of long hours on family relationships can be severe, with many workers feeling that they are neglecting their partners and children. According to a Newspan survey, 80 per cent agree that people are spending too much time working and not enough with their families and friends.⁵ Nine out of ten believe that family is more important than work yet many overworked parents are spending less time with their children. There is a widespread recognition that when parents work long hours children suffer, with 81 per cent of men and 70 per cent of women saying children are better off at home with a parent. A study by a researcher at the Queensland University of Technology found that the wives of workers frequently away from home for extended periods experience higher levels of anxiety, stress and depression than the general population.⁶ Called ‘intermittent husband syndrome’, it puts marriages under stress because the cycle of parting and reunion often causes a recurring crisis. Teenage children are also more likely to be affected by frequent absences of parents due to excessive work commitments.

1.2 Conflict of values

Awareness of the costs of consumer lifestyles has given rise to a growing uneasiness; there is an inner conflict between what we do on a daily basis and what we believe is right for ourselves and our society. In the USA, a 1995 report prepared for the Merck Family Fund delivered a devastating attack on American consumerism. *Yearning for Balance* reports the results of a detailed investigation, through a national survey and focus groups, of American citizens’ perspectives on consumption and the American lifestyle (Harwood Group 1995). The report reached four key conclusions. Firstly, Americans believe that the value system that dominates their society is wrong. ‘They believe materialism, greed, and selfishness increasingly dominate American life,

³ Campbell (2002) and M. Bachelard, ‘Caring, sharing and hardly ever home’, *The Australian* 01/09/2001. Some of the additional work takes the form of unpaid overtime.

⁴ ‘Extra work at home’, *Adelaide Advertiser* 22/09/2001

⁵ Mike Stekete, ‘Hearts say stay, but heads say work’, *The Australian* 01/11/2001

⁶ J. Dagge, ‘My Career-Stressed Wives’ Club’, *The Sun Herald* 15/09/2002

crowding out a more meaningful set of values centered on family, responsibility, and community.’ The vast majority want their lives to be based on values of family closeness, friendship and individual and social responsibility, yet they believe that their society is far from that. They desperately want to achieve a balance between the material and non-material sides of their lives.

Secondly, Americans believe that materialism has overtaken society with dire consequences, that ‘lust’ for material things lies at the root of crime, family breakdown and drug addiction. Four-fifths believe that they consume far more than they need to and are concerned about the inability of people today to save up for the things they want. Children are believed to be especially possessed by a corrupting materialism.

Thirdly, Americans are deeply ambivalent about the contradiction they are caught in. They can see that materialism is corroding society and themselves, yet they are too fearful to change their behaviour in any significant way. They are wedded to ‘financial security’ even though they understand that non-material aspirations are the ones that will give them contented lives. They therefore avoid too close an examination of their own behaviour, but the contradiction gives rise to a deep conflict of conscience.

Finally, Americans understand, albeit somewhat vaguely, that rampant consumerism is destroying the natural environment. There is an overwhelming concern that the world left for their children will be less safe, less secure and marked by the wrong value system. In stark contrast to the optimism of the post-war boom, there is a pervasive sense that things can only get worse, that the future is bleak.

Australians too hold contradictory attitudes to the factors that affect their quality of life. While the immediate perception of 62 per cent is that they are having difficulty making ends meet (Hamilton 2002), when asked to stand back and reflect on their lives and their society they take quite a different view. A survey commissioned by the Australia Institute in 1999 asked Australians what it would take to improve their personal quality of life. Large majorities nominated as ‘very important’ both more time with family and friends (75 per cent) and less stress and pressure in their lives (66 per cent), while a minority (38 per cent) nominated more money to buy things (Eckersley 1999).

More recently, an Australia Institute Newspoll survey asked respondents whether they agree or disagree with the following statement: Australian society today is too materialistic, with too much emphasis on money and not enough on the things that really matter. The results indicate that 83 per cent of Australians believe that our society is too materialistic, with too much emphasis on money and not enough on the things that really matter (Hamilton 2002). The proportions agreeing with the statement are remarkably stable across the income distribution. Women are more likely to agree that we are too materialistic, although the difference is not great (87 per cent compared to 79 per cent of men) and no differences are apparent between families with and without children.

The survey question itself gives us pause to ask what are ‘the things that really matter’. Eckersley’s work provides a persuasive answer: for most people the things that really matter are relationships with family and friends and time to do the things that are personally fulfilling. These results confirm other studies suggesting an uneasy

disjunction between people's immediate assessment of their own financial position, which tends to be self-focused and income-driven, and their recognition that society in general is too materialistic and focused on money instead of 'the things that really matter'.

1.3 Swimming against the tide

Almost everyone recognises the truth of biblical warnings about the love of money. Popular wisdom about the dangers of money-hunger is summed up in the epigram: 'The trouble with the rat race is, even if you win, you are still a rat.'⁷ When ABC Television launched its *SeaChange* program in 2000 it had no idea how popular it would prove. The program appears to have captured and reflected a shared dream of city-dwellers to get out of the rat-race and live a slower, simpler life in which relationships and personal fulfilment take priority over material and career success. Rather than portraying the new life of its main character, Laura Gibson, as a sea-side idyll, the appeal of the program lay as much in its portrayal of the tribulations of small-town life. It became more real and therefore more attainable.

But is making the sea-change no more than a dream played out in a thousand lounge rooms? Certainly in other countries, there is evidence of substantial numbers making real changes to their lives. A survey reported by Juliet Schor concluded that between 1990 and 1996, 19 per cent of all adult Americans made a voluntary decision to change their lifestyle, other than a planned retirement, that entailed earning less money (Schor 1998, p. 113). This large group, whose members came from all income groups, was made up of equal numbers of men and women.

Schor called the phenomenon 'downshifting', a term now widely used in the USA, and one that will be explored in more depth in the next section. Downshifting is related to another US term, 'cultural creatives', which emerged from a series of studies by Paul Ray in the USA (Ray and Anderson 2000). Cultural creatives – estimated at a quarter of the adult American population – are defined by a set of values and attitudes that diverge from those of mainstream consumer culture. In the words of one commentator:

The Cultural Creatives tend to value community, the environment, human values, are global in outlook, read extensively, watch less TV, are anti-authoritarian and reflect a 'new consciousness' that is evolving. Sixty percent are women.⁸

According to Ray and Anderson (2000) these people are not confined to middle-class new agers.⁹ Cultural creatives (said to comprise 24 per cent of the population) are contrasted with 'heartlanders' (29 per cent) who are conservative and provincial and tend to be dogmatic in their beliefs, and 'moderns' (47 per cent), the dominant group,

⁷ Quoted by Tan (2000, Appendix A, p.2).

⁸ www.ross-jackson.com

⁹ See www.culturalcreatives.com. The sociological appeal of the concept of cultural creatives is seriously undermined by the marketing hype and new-age flakiness of those who say they have discovered it.

who are ‘materialistic, egoistic, oriented towards consumption and success and the newest technologies’.¹⁰

Section 3 of the present study defines downshiffters by their behaviour rather than their attitudes. They are people who have made a conscious long-term decision to accept a lower income and a lower level of consumption in order to pursue other life goals. They are motivated by a strong desire for more balance, more personal fulfilment and more time with their families. Some qualify as ‘real estate refugees’, those driven out of the cities by rising house prices and the pressure to work longer and harder to repay onerous mortgages. Most, however, do not shift out of the cities in order to change their lives.

Before downshifting, there was a long history of ‘voluntary simplicity’ (discussed in the next section), which can be thought of as a radical type of downshifting with a political intention. Downshiffters in their various guises are frequently caricatured as new-age dreamers – hippies, greenies and vegans who have opted out of society. But, if this were ever a true picture of downshiffters, it is certainly false now. As we will see, at a time when market ideology and consumerism appear to have a more powerful grip than ever before, the decision to swim against the tide seems to have become a mainstream activity with widespread appeal.

¹⁰ www.ross-jackson.com

2. What is downshifting?

2.1 Defining downshifting

There has been an explosion of interest in downshifting in the USA in the past three or four years with a proliferation of books, websites and magazines devoted to the concept. In Europe the phenomenon is well-entrenched and, as distinct from the USA, seems to be more practised than talked about. However, neither the literature nor the ideas have filtered through to Australia. Very few of the two dozen or so books specifically on the topic of downshifting or voluntary simplicity, not to mention others on related topics such as balancing work, parenting and personal finances and ‘how to’ manuals, have been released in Australia.

Most of the literature examines what might be seen as the more radical end of the downshifting movement, that is, those people who decided to change their lives in dramatic ways and do so for philosophical and political reasons. As with the data described by Schor (1998) for the USA, the survey results reported in Section 3 below show that downshifting in Australia is a much more mainstream activity than indicated by the literature and websites. The bulk of downshifter make the life change for personal rather than philosophical reasons, although they often have a social critique that sets them apart from ‘unconscious consumers’. This should be borne in mind when reading the literature review in this section.

Various terms have been used to refer to the subject of this study – downshifting, voluntary simplicity, cultural creatives and, in this country, sea-change – each with its own nuances. As we will see, in both academic and popular writing, there are various ways the phenomenon may be characterised, but they all centre on the idea of a voluntary choice by individuals to change aspects of their lives in order to create a simpler lifestyle.

While the notion of living a simple life can be traced back as far as the founders of the world’s major religions, in modern times Henry David Thoreau’s 19th-century commentary on his idyllic life on Walden Pond reflects many of the elements of voluntary simplicity (Thoreau 1854). The term ‘voluntary simplicity’ was later refined and given widespread popularity with the release of Duane Elgin’s 1981 book of that name which described a way of life that is ‘outwardly simple and inwardly rich’. This last phrase has become popular on the many websites and in discussion groups and publications devoted to discussion and exploration of this way of life, especially in the USA. First use of the term ‘downshifting’ has been attributed to Gerald Celente of the Trends Research Institute in New York in 1994 (e.g. Harris 1995).

Academic discussions of voluntary simplicity and downshifting have given rise to several definitions and theories. Leonard-Barton describes downshifting in terms of the ability of individuals to pursue a lifestyle that maximizes their personal control over their daily lives and minimizes consumption and dependency (1981, p. 244), while Iwata defines voluntary simplicity in terms of its orientation towards low consumption (1999, p. 379). Juniu (2000, p. 72) argues that voluntary simplicity requires working less, spending less and doing things in a more leisurely manner. Some definitions

emphasise the personal development aspects of the life change, such as exercising self-reliance and developing one's intellect (Zavestoski 2002. p. 149).

In his influential discussion of the phenomenon, Etzioni (1998) suggests that it is useful to think of three types of voluntary simplicity practitioners – downshiffters, strong simplifiers and those who belong to the simple living movement. Downshifting is the most moderate form and is practised by ‘economically well off and secure people who voluntarily give up some consumer goods, often considered luxuries, they could easily afford, but basically maintain their rather rich and consumption orientated lifestyle’ (Etzioni 1998, p. 622). These people adopt a style of downshifting in which they ‘dress down’ in order to appear to be living a simpler lifestyle when, in fact, it is just as costly as before. Others have argued that adoption of this style of voluntary simplicity is a result of the consumption excesses of the eighties (Urbach 1997; Viladas 1997). Brooks (1997) suggests that the wealthy shun symbols of affluence in ways that nevertheless make it clear that they still have money. This style is illustrated by magazines such as ‘O’ (Oprah Winfrey’s magazine) and *Real Simple: The magazine about simplifying your life* which professes to ‘make life more simple’ whilst at the same time advertising a pair of gloves for \$250.

The second type of voluntary simplicity practitioners identified by Etzioni are called strong simplifiers. This group of individuals are ‘people who have given up high-paying, high stress jobs as lawyers, business people, investment bankers and so on, to live on less, often much less income’. In doing so they forgo high levels of income and social status (Etzioni 1998, pp. 623-624). Strong simplifiers have for a variety of reasons chosen to downshift their careers and subsequently curb spending. They may change to a lower-paying job, retire early or cut their work hours. People who change careers in pursuit of more personal fulfilment and less affluent lifestyles also belong to this category. Others refer to this type as ‘career downshiffters’ who have ‘cashed out’,¹¹ suggesting that they are confined to those who have substantial assets.

The third type of voluntary simplifiers identified by Etzioni are those who belong to the simple living movement. They are the most dedicated holistic simplifiers, adjusting their whole life patterns according to the ethos of voluntary simplicity. They often move from affluent suburbs or gentrified parts of major cities to smaller towns in the countryside, farms or less affluent or urbanized parts of the country with the explicit goals of leading a simpler lifestyle (Etzioni 1998, pp. 625-626). This group differs from others not only by the extent of the changes that they make, but also because they appear to be motivated by ‘a coherently articulated philosophy’.

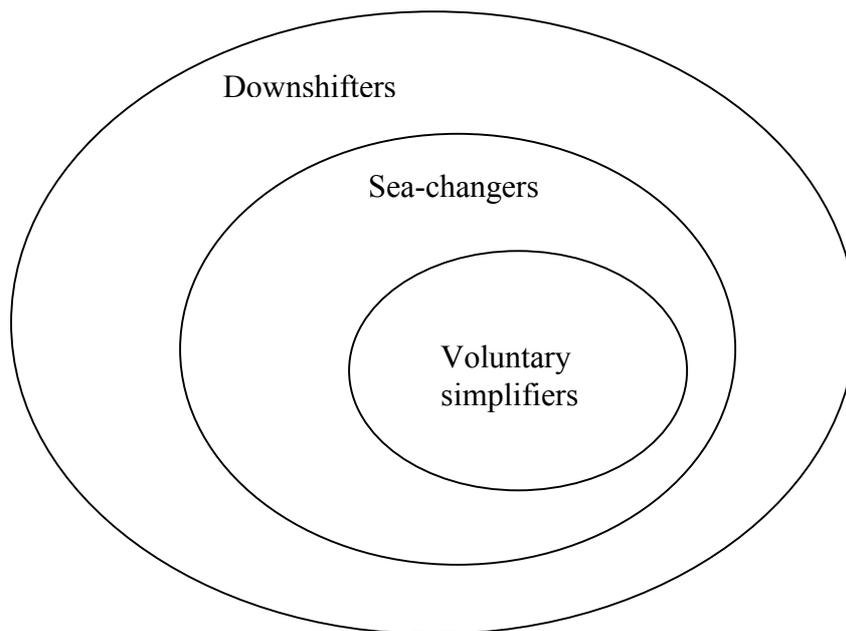
There are difficulties with Etzioni’s classification. It implies that before the change all three types of simplifiers are wealthy and are therefore in a strong position to reduce their levels of consumption. As we will see, this assumption is contradicted by the evidence which indicates that downshifting, however defined, occurs across the income spectrum and includes low-income and blue-collar households.

In this study, downshiffters are defined as those people who make a voluntary, long-term change in their lifestyle that involves accepting significantly less income and consuming

¹¹ Popcorn (1996) cited in Tan (2000 p. 10)

less. Motives may be varied and include those relating to personal life and those based on principle. ‘Sea-changers’ may be thought of as a sub-group of downshiffters, those whose life change involves leaving a career and moving house in pursuit of a simpler life (see Figure 1). ‘Voluntary simplifiers’ may be thought of as those sea-changers who make a more radical change for reasons of principle as well as for personal reasons. This classification does not match Etzioni’s; our definition of downshiffters is narrower than his as it describes people who must accept a significant reduction in their income and consumption.

Figure 1 A downshifting classification scheme



2.2 Why do people downshift?

Studies in Australia and abroad have uncovered several primary motivations for downshifting. Although people who downshift are rarely actuated by a single factor, their motives can be divided into personal reasons and those based on principle. A dominant reason for downshifting is the desire to gain more fulfilment from life (Craig-Lees and Hill 2002). While various factors can underpin a lack of fulfilment, it is commonly centered on the increasing dominance of work and career over all other life goals, especially relationships with family and friends. The desire to spend more time with family is commonly cited as a strong motive for many downshiffters with children (Tan 2000). Tan has identified technological change and growing emphasis on work, in addition to changes in the economy and structure of organizations, as contributors to career downshifting (2000 pp. 17-19). Changes in the workplace in the 1990s, including overwork and increased pressure, appear to have intensified the attraction of downshifting for reasons of family and personal fulfilment.

Ill health can also be a motivational factor affecting either the downshifter or someone close them. It is a common theme in popular culture to associate severe and near-fatal illness with ‘life changes’. Daniela Guidera, the head of Monash University’s Stress

Management and Counselling Clinic argues that an individual's life satisfaction is greatly affected by workplace stress and that among executives a breakdown in health is often the only factor that will cause them to reassess their working lives (Shiel 1999).

For some downshifters the decision follows a particular event that causes them to reappraise their priorities in life. Apart from illness, the event may be an accident such as a house fire, bankruptcy, the death of a family member, friend or close colleague, the breakdown of a marriage or a spiritual experience. Exposure to radically different cultures and lifestyles through overseas travel can also trigger a fundamental questioning of one's life course and priorities.

For others, the decision to downshift results from a long process of questioning the state of the world and their own place in it. Gross inequality and dire poverty – especially at a global level – cause some people to query their affluent and self-centred lifestyles. Concern for the global environment is also a motivational factor especially in the USA and Europe. Some individuals have a growing belief that the environment is precarious and feel that they can at least reduce their responsibility by treading more lightly on the Earth through simple living and minimising waste.

While the decision to downshift sometimes follows a dramatic event or sudden realisation, it is probably true to say that most downshifters reach their decision slowly. The actual process of life change may not be an overnight switch from one lifestyle to another but a more gradual winding back of working time, income and consumption. Tan's respondents generally took 1-5 years to finally make the change (Tan 2000, p. 159).

2.3 Types of changes

Although the downshifting experience is a uniquely individual one, research in Australia and overseas has identified certain patterns. Individuals who make the choice to downshift usually stress that they are not dropping out of society altogether. They are changing their lifestyle to varying degrees because they are not happy with some aspects of their lives (Tan 2000). They do not see themselves as part of a movement but simply as individuals who want to make a change to the balance of their lives. Most people want more satisfaction and fulfilment from life and few see themselves as being on a spiritual journey. Tan identified three broad motives among her participants – 'getting balanced', 'getting free' and 'being authentic' (Tan 2000, p. 158).

As we have seen, there are varying degrees of change to consumption patterns and careers. In many of the books on downshifting a change in the individual's patterns of consumption has been identified as a primary step in the downshifting process. After assessing how much they consume and how much they actually need, people can make a change in work and consumption patterns more easily. There are manuals for making just such an assessment. In their popular book *Your Money or Your Life: Transforming your relationship with money and achieving financial independence*, Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin (1999) give instructions on how to calculate what they call 'real paid working hours'. These hours include actual paid work, overtime, unpaid overtime, time outside work taken up with work related matters and travelling time both in regard to work and picking up and dropping off children to child care. Individuals are able to see

how much balance they really have in their lives and how much it is costing them to work to live. The object is to allow the reader to make more educated decisions about what and how much to consume.

Other downshiffters decide to cut down on earnings and then reassess other areas of their lives such as career and consumption. The 30 career professionals interviewed by Tan (2000) had shifted down from high-paying, high-stress jobs following dissatisfaction with their working and personal lives. The changes to patterns of work can take the form of reducing working hours, changing jobs entirely or doing unpaid volunteer or community work. Some single downshiffters choose to withdraw from paid work and some couples choose to live on one income.

Downshiffters often move house. Some simply choose a smaller home or apartment, while others move to rural areas. A dramatic change in location can allow people to cut down on their spending considerably. A smaller house often means lower mortgage or rent. Moving out of the cities can reduce living costs and take one away from shopping malls. A more radical style of downshifting is to move to communal housing, a trend that is popular in Denmark. Schwarz and Schwarz (1998) suggest that co-housing is increasingly popular in the USA, Australia and Canada.

Some downshiffters form communities. Residents of the 'sustainable community' of Maleny in Queensland have mostly adopted voluntary simplicity as a lifestyle. The town includes a co-operative to produce and sell organic food and to promote recycling and conservation initiatives. Holistic simplifiers, as Etzioni (1998) calls them, choose to change their patterns of consumption to reflect their personal philosophies. They limit spending to ethically sound products and invest in ethical companies. In place of money, they may use barter systems (such as Barter Cards, Ithaca hours or LETS).

While downshifting information resources are not as plentiful in Australia as in the USA it is possible to take courses in sustainable consumption. Workshops and study circles emphasise reduced levels of material consumption as the cornerstone of voluntary simplicity. Jim McKnight, a professor of psychology at the University of Western Sydney, has written book called *A Procrastinator's Guide to Simple Living* (2001), which appears to be the first Australian publication on downshifting.

Many people who try to downshift seek support from others and join groups committed to voluntary simplicity. These groups provide support for individuals and a sense of community to help them 'wean' themselves from consumerism (Etzioni 1998 p.631). Support networks, which have proliferated in the USA, can serve to occupy time previously spent on consumption-related activities. In this way people may learn to replace shopping with volunteer work or interaction with like-minded people.

2.4 Some common themes

The most thorough Australian study of the process of downshifting is a doctoral thesis by psychologist Philomena Tan, awarded in 2000. Tan conducted very detailed interviews with a small sample of predominantly tertiary educated individuals whose incomes ranged from \$38,000 to \$250,000. As the study was a phenomenological investigation of 'career downshifting', the interviewees were not selected to be

representative of all downshiffters. The sample of 30 was therefore biased towards white collar workers with pre-downshift incomes above average.

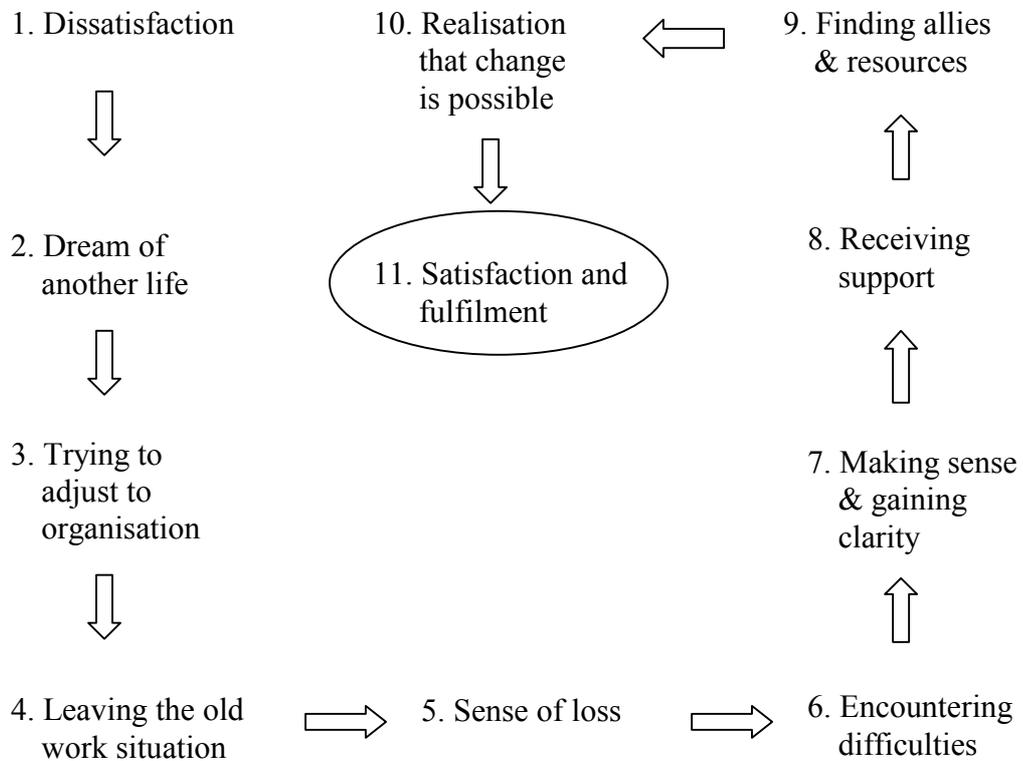
Tan identified several core themes and issues in the experience of downshifting (Tan 2000, pp. 176-177). These stages serve to reflect the fact that downshifting is a transitional process. Tan's model focuses on the psychological transitions. Figure 2 is an adaptation of her diagram with emphasis on the external changes that most downshiffters appear to go through.

The transition to downshifting of course has drawbacks. In particular there are the challenges presented by a large reduction in income. Downshiffters also experience difficulties adjusting to changed careers, including the adjustments faced by partners and family members. The perceived decline in status is often a major problem. On average, career downshiffters in Tan's study reported a 54 per cent decline in income and a perceived 29 per cent drop in socio-economic status (Tan 2000, p. 166).

One of the most important findings of this study is that despite a drop in income and status most downshiffters interviewed felt that their personal lives, work lives and overall satisfaction with life had improved. Tan found that participants' satisfaction with life was significantly better after the career downshift and that their satisfaction with their lives was slightly higher than the Australian norm (Tan 2000, p.167). The career change was rated as being highly desirable by almost all participants.

Tan's study provides a fascinating account of the experience of career downshifting. It is however markedly different from the current study in that it contains a small sample size of well-educated individuals earning twice the average Australian income and concentrates solely on a change in career. As a result it is not representative of the overall prevalence and experience of downshifting in Australia.

Figure 2 The downshifting process



Source: Adapted from Tan (2000)

3. Patterns of downshifting in Australia

3.1 How many Australians have downshifted?

While there are a few qualitative accounts of downshifting in Australia, notably the doctoral thesis by Philomena Tan (2000) and the downshifter's manual by Jim McKnight, no quantitative analyses of the extent of the phenomenon exist. Nor are there representative data on the reasons for downshifting and the general satisfaction of downshifter with their life change. In the USA, Juliet Schor has reported the results of a nationwide survey of the phenomenon which revealed the surprising result that 19 per cent of American adults said that over the previous five years they had voluntarily changed their lives in a way that involved reducing their income (Schor 1998, p. 113).

For this study, The Australia Institute commissioned Newspoll to conduct a national opinion survey to explore the extent and nature of downshifting in Australia. Respondents were selected by means of a stratified random sample process with quotas set for each capital city and non-capital city areas to ensure they were representative of the whole Australian population. The survey was conducted over the period 29 November – 1 December 2002 among 981 respondents limited to adults aged 30-59. Those 60 and over were excluded because most are retirees and, although most of those have lower incomes after retirement, they do not fit the definition of downshifter. Adults younger than 30 were excluded because the first question asked respondents whether they had made a decision to downshift over the last ten years and it was felt that this question would not have meaning to most people in their early and mid twenties.

Downshifter were identified initially by an affirmative answer to the following question:

In the last ten years have you **voluntarily** made a long-term change in your lifestyle, other than planned retirement, which has resulted in you earning less money? For example, have you voluntarily changed to a lower paying job, reduced your work hours, or quit work to study or stay at home?

Respondents who answered 'yes' were then asked what they did and why they decided to downshift. The responses to these subsequent questions allowed two filters to be applied to the sample in order to turn a broad definition of downshifting into a narrow one free of any ambiguities. The following groups were filtered out of the broad definition to arrive at the narrow definition of downshifter.

- Respondents who started their own business were excluded from the narrow definition because starting one's own business frequently means working harder and, if successful, increasing one's income. On the other hand, starting a new business is a well-recognised method of downshifting for some, so undoubtedly some genuine downshifter have been excluded.
- Respondents who reported going back to study were also excluded. While returning to study certainly can be a path to downshifting, it can also mean a

temporary break from a job in order to improve one's career prospects and income.

- Those who said their lifestyle change involved refusing a promotion were excluded since this represents a sideways shift rather than a downshift. This was a very small group and their exclusion has little effect on the results.
- Those who gave 'time off to look after a baby' as their reason were excluded because such a change may not represent a deliberate decision to change one's lifestyle even though it may mean a cut in income.
- Those who gave 'more financial independence' as their reason were excluded because of uncertainty about motives.

Under the narrow definition, 23 per cent of adults in the 30-59 age range have downshifted over the last 10 years – see Table 1. In other words, using the narrow definition of downshifting, nearly a quarter of 30-59 year-old Australians qualify as downshifters. If genuine downshifters who downshifted by going back to study or start of new business are included, the percentage is pushed up to a third of the population.¹² Under the broadest definition – that is, all those who answered 'yes' to the question of whether they had made a voluntary long-term change resulting in earning less money – 39 per cent of 30-59 year-olds have downshifted.

Given the extraordinary pressure to define success in terms of increasing incomes and displays of consumer goods, it is remarkable to find that a quarter of the population has rejected the dominant materialist ideology of Australian society and opted to emphasise other, non-material aspects of life. This has a number of political implications that will be explored in Section 5. But here it is worth noting that people who have chosen to discard conventional goals and accept lower incomes and reduced consumption often feel isolated, and that everyone around them regards them at best as odd and at worst as failures.

The results of this survey show that the extent of downshifting is much greater than might have been anticipated. However, the set of values expressed by them is by no means confined to a peculiar minority. Indeed, it could be argued that if those who have downshifted are added to those who have wanted to downshift but have not had the courage, then a majority of the Australian population comprises actual or potential downshifters.

The rest of this section presents results for downshifters under the narrow definition, with occasional comments based on the broader sample. It is worth bearing in mind that the survey asked if respondents had accepted a lower income *in the last ten years*, so that those who downshifted more than ten years ago have not been included. The question also asked about 'a *long term change* in your lifestyle', which may include some who downshifted for a short period but resumed their previous lifestyle.

¹² Giving us a sample size of 228 downshifters of the 981 respondents using the narrow definition and 382 using the broad definition.

3.2 Who are the downshiffters?

The demographic characteristics of downshiffters in Australia are shown in Table 1. The following conclusions may be drawn,¹³ bearing in mind that the characteristics of downshiffters reported below apply after the change in lifestyle.

- Men are a little more likely to downshift than women, with 25 per cent of men and 21 per cent of women fitting the narrow definition.
- Downshiffters are about equally likely to be in their thirties, forties or fifties (see Figure 3).
- Households with children are just as likely to downshift as those without. However, using the broader definition of downshifting which includes women who take time off to look after a baby, Australians with children are more likely to downshift (44 per cent) than those without (33 per cent).
- Proportionally, there are more downshiffters in the cities than outside of them, although the difference is not large. This is interesting as we have seen that the pressures of city-living are more likely to result in a decision to downshift. Some downshiffters, the sea-changers, do move out of the cities as a result but not in numbers sufficient to exceed those who remain.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of downshiffters in Australia (%)

Characteristic	%	Characteristic	%
Total	23	Total	23
Sex		Children	
Male	25	Yes	22
Female	21	No	23
Age		Area	
30-39	21	Capitals	25
40-49	26	Ex-city	21
50-59	23		

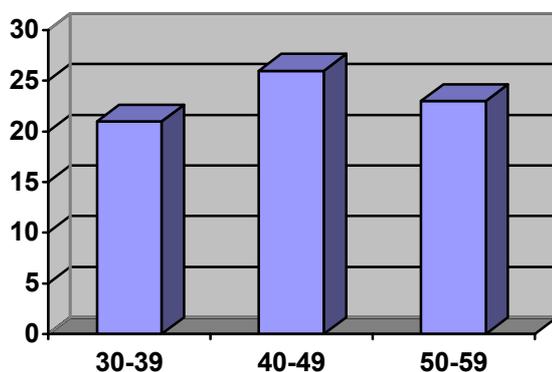
Source: Newspoll

Some further characteristics of downshiffters relating to employment and income are shown in Table 2. These results are particularly interesting. It is widely believed that downshifting is a phenomenon largely confined to wealthy middle-class households, either because they have a large enough asset base to be able to take the risk or because

¹³ Throughout, differences in percentages that are statistically significant at the 90 per cent level are marked in the tables with an asterisk.

they are more likely to hold ‘post-materialist’ values. Our survey shows that there is no appreciable difference in the prevalence of downshifting among white and blue-collar workers and that downshifting are not confined to wealthy and middle-income households (see Figure 4). Among households with incomes below \$30,000, 28 per cent are downshifting, while in households with incomes higher than \$60,000 only 21 per cent report that they have downshifted. Although proportionally, there are more downshifting on low incomes than on high incomes, in absolute terms there are more high-income downshifting than low-income ones, 32 per cent on high incomes *versus* 27 per cent on low incomes.

Figure 3 Proportion in each age group who are downshifting (%)

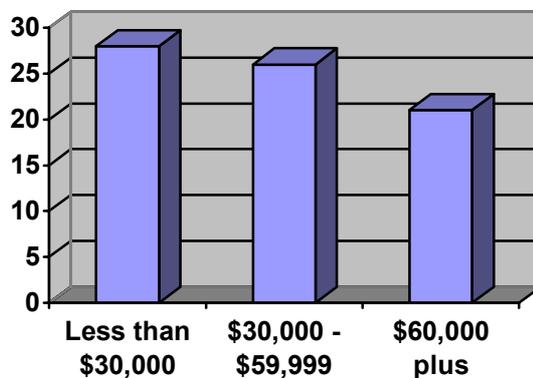


However, these are reported household incomes after the change in life and it is reasonable to assume that incomes of respondents have fallen significantly as a result. As we will see, substantial numbers of downshifting report that their life change involved reducing their hours of work or stopping work altogether so it is not surprising that among those working full-time only 21 per cent have downshifted while 28 per cent of part-time workers have downshifted. Although not apparent from Table 2, 50 per cent of downshifting work full time (compared to 58 per cent of the whole Newspoll sample), a quarter work part time and another quarter do not work. Thus, as one would expect, compared to the Australian population as a whole, downshifting are less likely to work full time, and more likely to work part time or not at all.

Table 2 Socio-economic characteristics of downshiffters in Australia (%)

Characteristic	%	Characteristic	%
Total	23	Total	23
Socio-economic status		Household income	
White collar	24	Less than \$30,000	28
Blue collar	23	\$30,000 to \$59,999	26
Work status		\$60,000 plus	21
Full-time	21		
Part-time	28		
Not at all	24		

Source: Newspoll

Figure 4 Proportion of each income group who are downshiffters (%)

Source: Table 2

Some interesting comparisons can be made with results from a very similar survey in the USA, as reported by Schor (1998, pp. 114-119). For a more accurate comparison the results of our broader sample of downshiffters are used. In both Australia and the USA downshiffters are as likely to be women as men and are fairly evenly divided between those with and without children. While Australian downshiffters are spread fairly evenly across the income groups, in the USA there tend to be fewer in the high-income groups.

3.3 When did they change?

If respondents identified themselves as having made a long-term change in their lifestyles which resulted in earning less money, they were then asked: "When did you make this change?" The results are reported in Table 3.

Although the sample size is not big enough to reach a definitive conclusion, it does appear that a disproportionately large number downshifted in the year 2001, 23 per cent of the total, up from an average of around 8 per cent of the total in previous years.

With respect to the timing of the life change, there are few differences in demographic, income or other characteristics of downshifter. However, older people are more likely to have made the life change a few years ago.

Table 3 How long ago did the change in lifestyle occur? (%)

When the change occurred	%
Within the last 12 months	16
1-2 years ago	23
2-5 years ago	37
5-10 years ago	23
Total	100

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding.

Source: Newspoll

3.4 How do they change?

Respondents were asked which one of a number of lifestyle changes best described their downshifting experience. The results are shown in Table 4. Downshifter are fairly evenly divided between the four main motives, with 29 per cent choosing to reduce their working hours, 23 per cent changing to a lower-paying job and 19 per cent each stopping work and changing careers (Figure 5). Drawing on Tables 5 and 6, various additional observations can be made from the survey data.

- Although the differences are not great, women downshifter are more likely than men to stop paid work or reduce their hours while men are more likely to change careers.
- Downshifter with children are more likely to reduce their hours or stop paid work while those without children prefer to change careers.
- Although not shown in the tables, there is little difference in the patterns of downshifting across age groups.
- Blue-collar downshifter are much more likely to stop paid work (28 per cent compared to 12 per cent of white collar workers) while white-collar downshifter are more likely to have changed careers (25 as opposed to 10 per cent). Twenty-nine per cent of both white collar workers and blue-collar downshifter reduced their hours of work.

Table 4 How Australians downshift, by demographic characteristics (%)

<i>Lifestyle change made</i>	Total	Sex		Children	
		Male	Female	Yes	No
Change to a lower-paying job	23	24	22	21	24
Reduce work hours	29	26	32	34*	24*
Stop paid work	19	16	21	23	15
Change careers	19	21	17	11*	26*
Other	11	14	9	12	11
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Note: Percentage differences that are statistically significant at the 90 per cent level are indicated with an asterisk. N= 228 for the narrow definition of downshifting.

Source: Newspoll

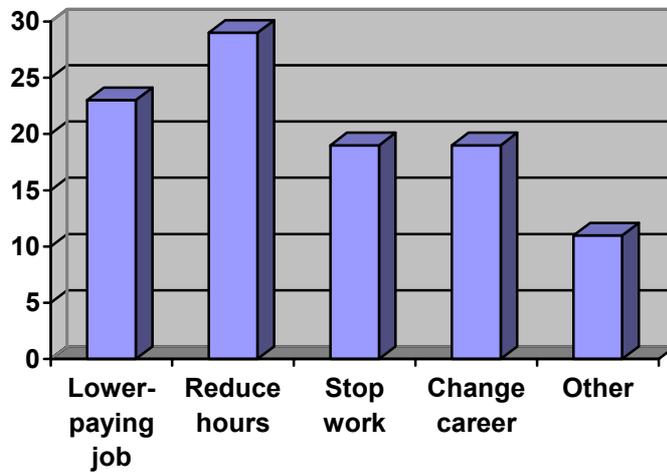
- It is clear from Table 5 that there are significant differences in downshifting patterns among income groups. High-income downshifters (with incomes over \$60,000) are more likely to have reduced their working hours or changed to a lower-paying job, while those downshifters who settle on low incomes (less than \$30,000) are much more likely to have stopped paid work altogether.
- Those who made the change 5-10 years ago are more likely to have changed careers rather than reduced their working hours or stopped working, while recent downshifters prefer to change to lower-paying jobs or cut their hours of work. The increasing flexibility of the labour market has provided more options for downshifting.

These patterns can be compared to those for US downshifters (Schor 1998, p. 115). American downshifters are much less likely to reduce their working hours (12 per cent compared to 22 per cent in Australia using the broad definition) and much more likely to take a lower-paying job (29 per cent versus 15 per cent in Australia). About the same proportion start their own businesses (10 per cent in the USA and 9 per cent in Australia).

Table 5 How Australians downshift, by income group (%)

<i>Lifestyle change made</i>	Total	Household income		
		Less than \$30000	\$30000 to \$59999	\$60000 plus
Change to a lower-paying job	23	20	25	29
Reduce work hours	29	16*	31	32*
Stop paid work	19	39*	8	13*
Change careers	19	11	26	15
Other	11	14	11	11
Total	100	100	100	100

* Statistically significant at the 90% level.
Source: Newspoll

Figure 5 How Australians downshift (%)

Source: Table 5

3.5 Why do they do it?

Respondents were also asked to nominate their main reason for making the lifestyle change. Although the question was worded to discourage multiple responses, they were nevertheless permitted, so the totals add to more than 100 per cent. The results are shown in Tables 6 and 7. Several conclusions can be drawn both from the tables and from further results not reported in the tables.

- More than a third nominated ‘more time with family’ as their main reason for downshifting. This is consistent with survey evidence (reviewed in Section 1) showing that a large majority of Australians consider more time with family and less stress, rather than more income, would make them happier. The next most important motive is ‘a healthier lifestyle’ (23 per cent), followed by more personal fulfilment (16 per cent) and a more balanced lifestyle (16 per cent) – see Figure 6.
- The importance of healthier lifestyles is consistent with anecdotal evidence suggesting that serious health scares – such as a heart attack or cancer diagnosis – sometimes lead to radical changes in life.

Table 6 Reasons for downshifting, by sex and whether have children (%)

<i>Main reason for lifestyle change</i>	Total	Sex		Children	
		Male	Female	Yes	No
More balanced lifestyle	16	12*	20*	10*	22*
More time with family	35	28*	42*	54*	16*
More control and personal fulfilment	16	16	17	14	18
Healthier lifestyle	23	25	20	17*	27*
Less materialistic lifestyle	5	4	5	2*	7*
More environmentally friendly lifestyle	7	8	7	4*	11*
None of these/don't know	18	20	16	14	22
Total	119	112	127	115	123

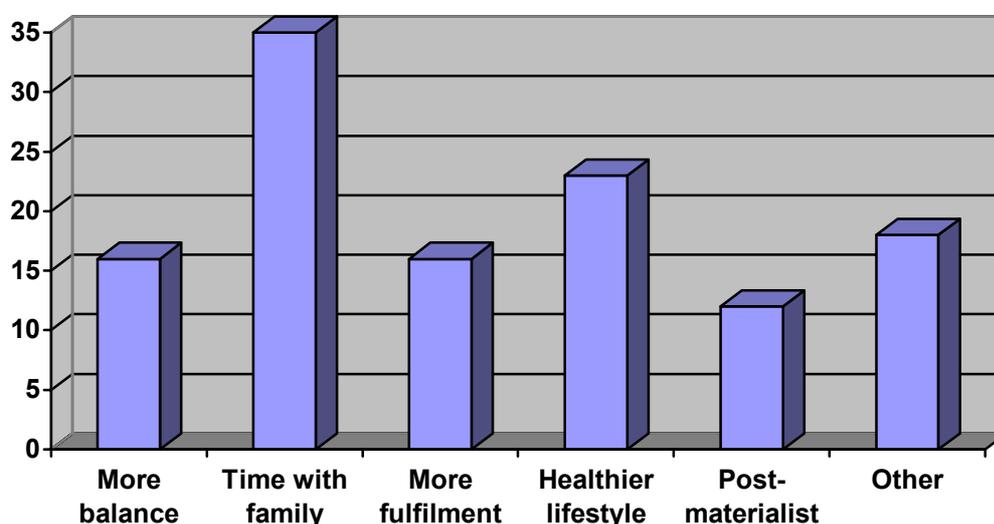
Note: Multiple answers were permitted.

* Statistically significant at the 90% level.

Source: Newspoll

- Downshiffters with children are much more likely to downshift in pursuit of more time with their families (54 per cent versus 16 per cent for those without children), while those without children are much more likely to be motivated by more balanced and healthier lives. They are also more likely to downshift primarily for post-materialist reasons (18 per cent) than those with children (6 per cent).¹⁴
- Older downshiffters (50-59 years) are more likely to be motivated by a healthier lifestyle (28 per cent) than younger downshiffters in their thirties (20 per cent), while the younger group stresses time with family (41 per cent versus 26 per cent). Otherwise the differences in motivation are small.

Figure 6 Why Australians downshift (%)



Source: Table 6

- Contrary to much of the downshifting literature, few downshiffters appear to be motivated primarily by post-materialist values with only 12 per cent nominating 'a less materialistic' or 'a more environmentally friendly' lifestyle as their principal motive. However, the decision to downshift usually involves a complex of reasons, including personal motives and matters of principle, and it is possible that if the survey had encouraged multiple answers more would have nominated post-materialist reasons as their second or third reason.
- The motivations of men and women downshiffters show some differences. Women are more likely to nominate more time with family and a more balanced lifestyle, while men are more likely to mention a healthier lifestyle as their main reason.

¹⁴ In adding categories in the 'main reason' question there may be some double counting.

Table 7 Reasons for downshifting, by income group (%)

	Total	Household income		
		Less than \$30,000	\$30,000 to \$59,999	\$60,000 plus
<i>Main reason for lifestyle change</i>				
More balanced lifestyle	16	10	17	15
More time with family	35	40	36	35
More control and personal fulfilment	16	7*	15	24*
Healthier lifestyle	23	28	17	19
Less materialistic lifestyle	5	2	2	6
More environmentally friendly lifestyle	7	4	9	8
None of these/don't know	18	17	17	18
Total	119	109	114	125

* Statistically significant at the 90 per cent level.

Source: Newspann

With respect to differences in income levels, it must be remembered that reported household incomes are those prevailing after the change in lifestyle and are therefore lower than before the change and in some cases much lower. There are some sharp differences in reasons given for downshifting according to income levels (Table 7). While all income groups emphasise more time with family (35-40 per cent), high-income downshifter are much more likely to mention more personal fulfilment (24 per cent versus 7 per cent of low-income earners) with those on low incomes more likely to stress a healthier lifestyle (28 per cent versus 19 per cent of high income downshifter). High-income downshifter are more likely to mention post-materialist values (14 per cent) than low-income earners (6 per cent).

If we compare the reasons for lifestyle change with the type of change people make, some interesting features emerge. Downshifter motivated mainly by a desire to spend more time with family are much more likely to reduce their working hours than to change jobs, although many stop work altogether. Those motivated by more control and personal fulfilment are more likely to change careers, with very few stopping work, although the less stringent definition of downshifting sees many of these go back to study. Those wanting more balance in their lives are more inclined to reduce their working hours and change careers than stop work or change to a lower paying job. More recent downshifter appear to be placing greater emphasis on a more balanced lifestyle (29 per cent) and less on more time with family (20 per cent).

Australian downshiffters, when compared with their US counterparts (Schor 1998, p. 117), stress family time more strongly than Americans, with the latter emphasizing personal goals of balance and fulfilment. As in Australia, few Americans report post-materialist values as their primary motivation.

3.6 Is it worth it?

Finally the downshiffters surveyed were asked how they ‘personally feel about the lifestyle change’ they made. The possible answers centered on the trade-off between satisfaction with the change and how much they miss the loss of income. The results are shown in Table 8 and Figure 7.

Overall, nearly 90 per cent of downshiffters are happy with the change in their lifestyles, with 34 per cent not missing the extra income at all. Thirty eight per cent said they miss the extra income and 17 per cent admitted that, while they are happy with the change, they have found losing the income very hard. Nine per cent are unhappy with the change.

There is not a great deal of difference in the pattern of feelings about the change between men and women (Table 8). However, a higher proportion of women are unhappy with change (11 per cent *versus* 6 per cent men). On the other hand, having children makes quite a difference. Downshiffters with children are more likely to miss the extra income, although two thirds say they don’t miss it or don’t miss it too much.

Table 8 Assessment of lifestyle change, by sex and whether have children (%)

	Total	Sex		Children	
		Male	Female	Yes	No
<i>Feelings about lifestyle change</i>					
Happy with the change and do not miss the extra income at all	34	34	34	25*	42*
Happy with the change but miss the extra income	38	36	39	42	34
Happy with the change but found losing the income very hard	17	19	15	20	15
Unhappy with the change	9	6	11	10	7
None/Don’t know	3	5	1	4	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100

* Statistically significant at the 90% level.

Source: Newspoll

Figure 7 Are downshiffters happy with the change? (%)



Source: Table 8

Though not shown in the tables, those who keep full-time jobs are less likely to miss the extra income – 38 per cent don't miss it at all, compared to 33 per cent of part-time workers and 26 per cent of those who do not work at all. While 83 per cent of downshiffters who have given up paid work are happy with the change, the proportion who are unhappy (14 per cent) is higher than among those who work full time (5 per cent) or part-time (11 per cent).

Table 9 shows how income differences affect levels of satisfaction with the change. Not surprisingly, high-income downshiffters are more likely not to miss the extra income (46 per cent) than low-income earners (20 per cent). While over 80 per cent of low-income earners are happy with the change, 16 per cent reported that they are unhappy, a substantially higher share than for high-income households (7 per cent). Around a sixth of downshiffters are happy with the change but find the loss of income very hard (18 per cent of low-income downshiffters and 14 per cent of high-income downshiffters).

Some additional results from various cross-tabulations are worth noting.

- An examination of the nature of the change reveals that those who switched careers appear to be happiest with their decision while those who stopped paid work found it most difficult. Nevertheless, over 80 per cent of those who stopped work are happy with the change with more than a quarter not missing the loss of income at all and a third missing the income but not finding it too hard.

Table 9 Assessment of lifestyle change, by income (%)

	Total	Household income		
		Less than \$30,000	\$30,000 to \$59,999	\$60,000 plus
<i>Feelings about lifestyle change</i>				
Happy with the change and do not miss the extra income at all	34	20*	37	46*
Happy with the change but miss the extra income	38	43	41	32
Happy with the change but found losing the income very hard	17	18	21	14
Unhappy with the change	9	16	1	7
None/Don't know	3	3	1	2
Total	100	100	100	100

* Statistically significant at the 90% level.

Source: Newspoll

Some interesting comparisons can be made with US downshiffters (Schor 1998, p. 118). Australians are generally happier with the change than Americans. The difference is mostly at the low end with Americans more likely to report being unhappy with the change (15 per cent compared to 7 per cent of the broader sample of Australian downshiffters).

3.7 In summary

Using a narrow definition, 23 per cent of Australian adults aged 30-59 have downshiffted over the last 10 years. The proportion rises to over 30 per cent if those returning to study or setting up their own businesses are included. The attraction of downshiffting is not confined to any demographic group. Men and women, people in their thirties, forties and fifties, and families with and without children are as likely to make long-term life changes that result in reduced income. There are proportionally more downshiffters in the capital cities than in the regions but the difference is not large.

Contrary to a widely held view, downshiffters are as likely to be blue-collar workers as white-collar workers. Proportionally, there are more downshiffters on low incomes (less than \$30,000) than high incomes (over \$60,000), although in absolute terms there are more high-income downshiffters than low-income ones (32 per cent on high incomes versus 27 per cent on low incomes).

There appears to be an increasing trend to downshift in more recent years. Reducing working hours is the most popular way to downshift but changing to a lower-paying job,

stopping paid work and changing careers are also common. Women are more likely to stop paid work while men are more likely to change careers. Downshifter with children are more likely to reduce their hours of work or stop paid work altogether.

Blue-collar workers are more likely to stop work while white-collar workers tend to change careers.

The most important reason for downshifting is to spend more time with family. The desire for a healthier lifestyle, more personal fulfilment and a more balanced lifestyle are also important. While downshifting itself represents a rejection of the common preoccupation with money and material acquisition, few downshifter nominated the two explicitly post-materialist reasons as their primary motivation, i.e. a less materialistic lifestyle and a more environmentally friendly lifestyle. However, it is fair to assume that, among the complex of reasons for making the change, severing the bonds of materialism is important.

Households with children are much more likely to downshift in pursuit of more time with their families while those without children are much more likely to be motivated by the desire for more balanced and healthier lives. While all income groups stress more time with family, high-income downshifter are much more likely to mention the desire for personal fulfilment and those on low incomes are more likely to stress a healthier lifestyle.

Downshifter are overwhelmingly happy with their decisions although many miss the extra income and a sixth, while happy, find the loss of income very hard. Downshifter with children are more likely to miss the loss of income, especially if they have downshifted to a low income.

4. Six case studies

Every decision to downshift has a unique story behind it. The six case studies presented below have been collected to illustrate some of the situations, thoughts and feelings that downshifter experience before and after the decision to change. The stories are based on a structured questionnaire administered to the respondents. Those selected for interview were asked first to describe their lives before the change (their jobs, incomes, lifestyles and attitudes), the doubts and stresses they experienced leading to the change, the types of changes they made (their work, incomes, locations), the effects on their lives (their relationships and attitudes after the change) and their feelings about their new situation, both positive and negative.

As we have seen from the survey results, downshifting is very much a mainstream activity in Australia. The six people or couples whose stories appear here are not meant to be representative of downshifter; they are probably better educated and had higher incomes before the change than the average downshifter. But their stories are typical, and there are strong resonances with the themes identified by Tan in her study (Tan 2000). Some of the paths leading to the decision to change included dramatic events or realisations while other paths were marked by gradual changes over some years. The latter appears to be more common.

In writing up the case studies, names and certain inessential details have been changed to preserve the anonymity of the respondents. Three of the stories are written in the first person and three in the third person.

Nick

The downshift period began 7 years ago when Nick was 27.

Before the downshift I was an economist working in the financial markets. I was earning between \$95,000 and \$100,000 a year, including bonuses. I worked fifty or sixty hours a week, from about 8 in the morning till 6 or 7 pm five days a week. Friday nights included going out and drinking, which is part of the work culture in the finance sector.

I always thought that the work was important because it was about money. I remember clearly that my perspective at that time was that the most important thing that people were aiming for was to make money. I was very focused and thought that this was helping wealth creation and as a result I thought that my work was very important.

You could say that my consumption at the time was quite high. I led a very materialistic lifestyle. I was very focused on material things generally – to buy, buy, buy. I always wanted the latest gadget or gizmo. I'd be spending \$1,000 on a suit and \$200 on a tie. Finding ways to spend money was the most exciting thing for me. It was always about flash restaurants and flash clothing. I had a share portfolio, but I made no conscious decision about what shares I would buy. It was just about making money on those shares. I owned a property, which I sold and then moved to buy another property.

The prime driver for a lot of the decisions that I made was my consumption lifestyle. I was always asking: Will this be positive for my long-term career path? Will this help me make money? Should I stay back extra hours to make sure that I get that promotion?

My job was very important to defining myself. My sense of self was always an external feature, like where I fitted into the pecking order of seniority within the corporation. I would calculate how much money I expected to make in a year and compare that to other people. I was very competitive. It was important to me that I was the youngest person by ten years reporting to the senior management; it was important that I was the youngest manager and the first one to attend a certain meeting, at a certain age, at a certain level. My definition of my self worth all came down to how I was achieving at work. If I was doing well at work my self-image was really positive. If things went poorly at work – like my forecasts didn't turn out – then I was very susceptible to feeling down about myself.

At the time I sensed that there was something not quite right. I had an unsatisfied feeling that what I was doing was not giving me any sense of fulfilment. The fulfilment that I experienced only lasted for seconds. It was classic materialistic behaviour – I gained something and felt good for a while and then it was gone. It was the same in my career. When I got a bonus or a promotion I was really happy for about a week, and then I thought 'what's next?'

I remember being really excited when I got my first office with a window. That excitement lasted for a couple of weeks. Then it would come back when I could see a really nice sunset from the window, but I realised it was more about the sunset than the view. I remember thinking how often you could take for granted things like that.

My lifestyle change wasn't motivated by not being able to achieve my goals; rather, I saw through what I was trying to do. A number of things occurred. One of the first things that happened was that I went through a few bad relationship break-ups. The first occurred because, for career reasons, I decided not to go overseas which ended the relationship. I began another relationship, which also suffered as a result of my career focus. I sacrificed time in relationships for career functions and work. It was all about being seen at the right things. It was endemic of my wider outlook. It was always more important to put career things first; family and friends came second.

When the two relationships failed in the space of 18 months I began to feel burnt out. I think that it was due to working 12 hour days without many holidays that I felt like I needed a break. I decided to take a year off to spend time travelling. I think that the sense that there was something wrong kept growing and growing. I didn't know exactly what was wrong, but I think that the second relationship break-up had a domino effect on my relationships with other friends. I was so obsessed with material things that people didn't want to be around me. I had become chauvinistic and hedonistic. I realised that all the people that I worked with weren't friends but competitors. They were all wanting me to fail. I realised that my friends had all disappeared out of my life. The only friends that I had were work-related, who were great for drinking with and talking about work, but not for talking about my dissatisfaction with life. Basically, I had become an arse-hole.

Another thing was that a week before I resigned I received a letter from my superannuation fund and found myself calculating how much money I would have to retire on when I was 55 and it made me ask whether that's all there is to life.

Once I resigned I began selling my assets. I bought a round-the-world ticket with South America as my main destination. In South America, for the first time in my life I felt out of my depth. I looked around and started seeing this amazing level of poverty and squalor. I met a family and stayed with them for a couple of days in one of the ghettos in Brazil. What I found was that in the midst of poverty there is not despair, there is actually hope and community. When I went to stay with a family in a very wealthy part of Rio I couldn't get my mind off what I had seen in the ghettos. It made me think about how much we need and how much we want. It made me realise that the people that didn't have a lot of wealth were just as happy as those that did.

I spent a couple more months travelling around Brazil and then the big moment came in Bolivia. I was staying in a little mining town in the Andes when a riot broke out. The indigenous Indians were protesting about government land reforms that were going to make it harder for the displaced to claim back their land. I was talking to a man at the hostel that I was staying at and telling him how this would never happen in Australia and what a just, fair society it is. I proceeded to tell him that someone should do something about how these people are being treated. He then said that he thought that indigenous people in Australia are not treated as well as I thought and that rather than worry about the people in Bolivia, maybe I should worry about people in Australia.

I then visited a mine in which children worked carrying heavy loads up and down the mine in cramped, dirty conditions. There was a boy working there who lit dynamite in a crater and scrambled out of it before he was blown up – all to earn money from tourists. I later found out that the materials that the children were carrying were exported to Germany to use in the manufacture of cars. Not long before that I had owned a Mercedes. At that point I realised that I was part of the problem, not part of the solution. I cried for three days.

I made my way back to Australia. I was unemployed, depressed and directionless. I got a part-time job as an economic commentator and was later offered work back in the financial markets. I took it because I really needed money, but vowed not to forget the lessons that I had learnt. When I came back to Australia I made contact with all of my old friends and girl-friends who I had treated badly and apologized to them. I then began to volunteer with the reconciliation movement and then with Greenpeace and Amnesty International. I went back to university and did an environmental policy degree. At university I met some people involved in an NGO in the anti-globalisation movement, and began volunteer work with it, which turned into a part-time paid position.

I now have a sense of fulfilment and passion for what I do that I could have never had before. At my workplace there is a sense of sustainability in every sense – physical, emotional, family. There is a sense of community rather than competition.

I occasionally miss the security and I occasionally miss not having to worry about paying bills, but the things that are really important to me I still do. I still keep in

contact with a few people within the finance industry and some donated money to the NGO I worked for in order to help me survive. I get the sense that I am doing something that a lot of them wish they could do.

My parents have not been very supportive of my decision to change. My father is more supportive of my decisions than my mother who thinks I should just get a well-paying job and settle down. My brother and extended family think that what I have done is great. My aunty visited Australia before I made the change and came back earlier this year. She was a radical when she was young and she told me she could hardly believe the transformation that I had undergone. She said that what happened to me gave her hope for the future once again.

Gail and Hugh

Gail and Hugh are in their early fifties and made the change 12-18 months ago.

Gail worked in the helping professions until she and Hugh, a sales manager, resigned from their jobs and bought an organic farm.

Before their life change over a year ago, Gail worked full-time for a large charitable organisation. She liked her job, although at times it was quite stressful and in the last few years she began to feel overworked. She felt that she had little energy left to maintain friendships, something she regretted as she believes they are important to a balanced life.

Gail and Hugh had worked hard all their lives and accumulated significant assets. They had a nice home but did not live an extravagant life. After their children left home, they wanted to travel abroad but had too many commitments.

Gail describes Hugh as something of a workaholic who, though enjoying his work, was becoming bored with it. For some years they had considered the possibility of shifting to the north coast to live a more environmentally sustainable life, but they never committed to the idea seriously.

A major health problem influenced their decision to downshift. Gail was diagnosed with breast cancer three years ago. It did not intrude too much on her work life as she had a lot of sick leave she could draw on. After recovering from the operation and chemotherapy she continued to work for another two years. But things were changing in the workplace. The organisation was forced to become more competitive and more money-orientated, and the new management style conflicted with her values.

In making the change, Gail and Hugh were seeking a life in which they could pursue self-sufficiency. They have a strong environmental ethic and like working with their hands. Gail's cancer episode also made her more interested in the potential dangers to our health of modern urban life.

Prior to the change Gail and Hugh's combined income was well in excess of \$100,000. The move to the country saw their income drop by around 80 per cent, as they relied solely on income from their rental properties. This continuing source of income gave them a sense of financial security; if things didn't work out they could sell some assets and return to the workforce.

Daily life on the organic farm involves sustained hard physical work, but they sometimes become so absorbed in it they have to make a point of taking time off. They are very committed to improving the land. Gail feels that they are creating a place where their children and grandchildren can come and eat healthily and feel at peace.

Gail doesn't feel any loss of social status although Hugh sometimes misses the respect that he received in his previous position. However, they sometimes feel like novice farmers and it has been a challenge to go from being experts in their areas of work to being amateurs in their new activity.

Their material lifestyle has not changed much because they had always lived quite frugally. They have never been big spenders and therefore have not had to give up any 'luxuries'. The change has been good for their health and fitness; they feel well and strong.

Gail is immersed in her new life on the land and finds it difficult to sustain friendships back in town. Sometimes they don't leave the farm for 10 days at a time but they are quite happy with that. Gail sometimes misses the lack of easy access to cafes and the ease of social contact with people provided by city life and paid work.

Sometimes on the farm she wonders about what she is doing and why she is there, but she has no regrets about the move. Although her parents think the move is a little strange, Gail's family has been accepting of the life change and they and her friends love to visit the farm.

Gail feels that her new life is very much in tune with what she has always wanted to do; she feels she has stepped out of the rat race and has much more autonomy. She is happy with the change and feels more at peace with herself.

Luca

Luca is 48. He and his family began the downshift around 15 years ago.

After leaving school Luca trained as an electrician. He had a series of jobs working for both private firms and the government. He made good money and bought a house. He married Marie at 23 and they had five kids. They moved to a bigger house in a new suburb. They could afford to live pretty well. Luca had two cars – a new ute for work and a family car.

Everything seemed to be going well, but then his father died. A day before he died Luca went to see him in hospital. He wanted to say goodbye but his father could not open up

to his son even when he was dying. Luca felt angry and resentful. His father had migrated from Italy. He was a builder with a strong work ethic. Home life was patriarchal with everything revolving around his father. He was always tired because he worked hard and was strict with discipline.

Luca said he felt guilty because he did not grieve much for his father but he resolved that his own children would not grow up with a distant father.

Luca and Marie sometimes took the children on picnics in the mountains. They loved being out there and one day they saw a property for sale. They thought about buying it but decided to look around. It was too big a step. Three months later, however, the place was still for sale and they decided to buy it. A year after that they moved out there.

At first it was hard, especially as it took Luca more than an hour to get to town for work. But they built the place up with chickens and vegetable gardens and made friends with others in the district. They realised that they did not need as much money and Luca began spending more and more time at home. Now he only works as an electrician when good jobs come up. Sometimes he will spend two weeks without going to town at all. The kids are leaving home now but they have loved the lifestyle although the travel was a problem when they were teenagers. Luca and Marie feel that they are a close family. Luca says one of the benefits of having a more relaxed life style is that you make love more often.

A lot of the blokes he has worked with envy his decision to live simply and work less.

Richard

Richard is 45 and downshifted 5 years ago.

I am married with two kids in their early twenties and grew up in Melbourne. In my early twenties I wanted to be an academic so I worked hard to get a PhD. I was an academic for a while but felt like a failure. I then joined the public service. I was a bit of a high flier and was on a high salary by my mid-thirties, quite young to make it into the senior ranks. I really wanted to be seen to be successful, to be sharper than everyone else, to be some sort of *wunderkind*. It was a highly competitive environment. Those on the fast track were very clever and worked long hours. I admired what they did but I felt hemmed in as a public servant. I could not express myself openly because of the constraints of the job.

I was really struggling with where my life was supposed to be going. I had been restless since my teenage years and it was getting worse. I was stressed and irritable and it pained me that I was not being as good a father to my children as I should have been. I was there for them but I was often too cranky to enjoy being around. I decided to do a personal development course. So I began working on myself, asking what motivates me and why, looking at how I had become who I was, trying to examine myself honestly.

One day, after a few months of this self-examination, something amazing happened. Without going into details, I had what I later understood to be a religious experience. I had always been an atheist, and a dogmatic one at that, so it was ironic that I should have been picked out for something like that. I now really divide my life into two stages, before and after that experience, because it shattered everything. Everything I believed in, except the love of my family, dissolved. I spent the next six years reconstructing myself. It was enormously painful, frightening and exhilarating to go deeply into parts of myself that I did not know existed. At the same time, I was plagued by severe back pain. In this period of intense inner turmoil I discovered whole new worlds within and without.

At a personal level, those six years were a process of breaking attachments – to money, to success, to my mental map of the world and to my own ego. It was a process of disintegration and then slow reintegration or rebirth. Breaking all of those attachments helped to dissolve all of the fears about striking out and doing something quite different and risky.

It took me a long time to really get to the point of making a change. The osteopath who was trying to fix my back said: “Richard, what you need is a new job”. In the meantime, I received an offer to join a consulting firm which I took because, although it was not the sort of ‘new job’ I needed, it was a way out. I guess I knew that it was only a holding operation until I was ready to know what the real path should be. The work had its advantages and disadvantages. The salary was big but I was still heavily constrained in what I could work on. My struggle to find out who I was and what I was supposed to be continued. It was as if I lived in the outer world for convenience and as a cover, but the real stuff was happening in my inner world.

As I worked on my inner life, I gradually formed the view that what I really wanted to do was set up a new organisation to help businesses become more environmentally sustainable. To cut a long story short, one day I decided to do it and, after talking it over with my partner, within two weeks I gave my notice. A month later I had started a new life.

It was a real struggle at first. No, that’s not right. It was not a struggle because I felt I was doing what I was supposed to be doing. There was not much money; my income fell by three quarters, but having paid off the house our needs weren’t great. My partner was fantastically supportive. She could see that I was doing what I had to do even though she was more worried than I was about the loss of income. But neither of us had ever been very materialistic; we felt sorry for those who had to have the big house and luxury car.

It was difficult to deal with status issues, but only in certain situations. Soon after I downshifted I met a fellow academic I had not seen for a long time. I always disliked him because he was smarmy and self-satisfied, a real shit. He made a point of telling me he had just been made a professor, and asked me what I was doing. I said “Oh, I’m unemployed”. I said it to shock him and it did. He nearly fell over. But I also felt embarrassed that this person would think that I was somehow failing.

My friends and relatives were a bit skeptical. No-one really thought what I was attempting would work, but some of them admired me for trying. Anyway it did work and over time the project became very successful. There is just this sense that at last I am doing what I am supposed to be doing. Some people call it 'flow', as if you are no longer thrashing about in the river of life. It doesn't mean that daily life is blissful. The usual stresses and strains still happen; but they are just ordinary life, not some manifestation of inner turmoil.

Alex and Jane

Alex and Jane are in their mid-forties and downshifted over a year ago.

Alex was a consultant for one of the world's leading firms in his field. He found the work very satisfying and rewarding but also stressful. Jane fitted part-time work around the family and saw herself as keeping them all together in the face of Alex's frequent absences.

With their three children, they lived comfortably with a good lifestyle. While their house was big and they took overseas holidays (mostly associated with work trips) they did not live luxuriously. Alex says that he is not interested in material acquisitions. 'I like simple things, like a good fishing rod and some old family furniture.' They owned a simple beach house, shared with a friend, on the South Coast.

Alex worked 50-60 hours a week, and the nature of his work meant a great deal of international travel which saw him spending 150-200 days away from home each year. 'I was "on top" of what I did, but knew I was getting stale and less interested than required.' He felt he was neglecting his family and friends and his health. He had always had an interest in sailing and wanted to write a book on his family's involvement in international yacht racing but had put his interest 'on hold for 25 years'.

The turning point came one day when he was required to fly to Singapore for dinner and then turn around and be back home in the morning. This just didn't seem right and so he resigned. It came as a total surprise to his employer but they parted on good terms. Alex and Jane sold their house and moved to the Gold Coast. At the time, two of their children had just started university and the third was entering high school so the timing was right.

The reasons for making the change were mixed. Jane wanted to be nearer her mother who was dying. They had agreed that they wanted to retire in the sun and this was a good way of settling down somewhere for good. Alex wanted more control over his life, and more time with the family and for leisure.

After resigning, their income fell to zero although the first few months were supported by long-service leave. Alex wrote the book he had been planning for years. After some months he began to do some consulting and they decided to set up their own consulting business. Their income is now at around 60 per cent of its level before the change.

The downshift involved a move from a big house on a big block of land to a much smaller house on a much smaller block. But it's very near the beach. They live a simpler lifestyle now but do not feel that they have become less materialistic as they were not very materialistic before the change. Operating on a tighter budget they are far more selective in what they buy. They sold their share in the beach house to ensure there was cash to educate the children. They lost a few nights sleep with the move but always felt pretty confident that things would work out.

For Alex the change has had a big impact on his daily life with much more time for family and recreation. He swims, surfs and goes fishing regularly. Jane has developed a new circle of friends through rowing and exercise and has cultivated some old friendships from when she grew up in the region. They enjoy having much more time for a social life. The main drawback of the change has been leaving their friends and family from their previous place of living where the children grew up.

Alex thinks some of his former colleagues are envious but feel they are locked into their jobs and lifestyles. Although the loss of security was initially stressful, they have no regrets about the life change and are very happy with their new lives. Neither has any desire to go back to the old pattern.

Gary

Gary is 33 and made the life change two years ago.

I worked as a tax accountant on the North Shore. I put in really long hours. I felt I was living the high life – eating out at good restaurants, moving in circles where people had a lot of money. They had really nice houses, expensive cars, extras like boats which they would take away for weekends. That's what I wanted so I was driven to work even harder so I could have what those people had.

After some years of working I purchased a house. It was out of my price range but that's what I aspired to. The mortgage payments and the rest of the expenses of my lifestyle put me under pressure. I had to work even longer hours to pay for it all.

During this time I had a relationship breakdown. It was more to do with just not spending a lot of time together due to my long working hours rather than being incompatible. She wanted more from a long-term relationship. I was really stressed, tired most of the time and couldn't keep up the pace. I just felt generally unhappy and I started questioning whether this was really what I wanted.

I realised that I really hated the job; I just didn't find it rewarding any more. I was bored at work and resented all the stress. So I decided I had to change my life. I had to change my job and fix my finances to take the pressure off. There was nothing in particular that triggered the change I made; just a recognition that I was unhappy.

I applied for a job as a security officer. I got the job, and retrained. It was a huge drop in income. Being a security officer must be the lowest paid job out there. There was no

way I could hang on to the house, so I sold up and looked for a small house in a cheaper part of town. I ended up buying an old weatherboard house. It was pretty run-down but I had visions of renovating it and turning it into something that was modern and reflected my previous lifestyle. But nearly two years on, I haven't renovated and put in a whiz-bang kitchen and bathroom. I realised that I love the fact that it's old style. I don't want to lose the character so I'm going to restore the place and retain it how it was. I don't need all of the gadgets. I like it as it is. I don't need all the stainless steel appliances.

My new job is much more laid back, nothing like the pressure I had in the accounting industry. I'm a lot happier with my life. I feel like I have got off the treadmill and I can now control the pace at which I move. I control what I do and how I do it.

My family were really surprised when I changed jobs because they were very proud of me being in the high-stakes world earning a lot of money with all of the material possessions. So I think they were pretty shocked when I changed because they thought I was enjoying that lifestyle. Some of my friends think I am crazy. That's OK. I don't move in those social circles any more because those people have a different outlook on life. I still consider them to be good people but I just don't have much in common with them any more.

Initially it was harder than I thought it would be to have a much lower income, but as I let go of the things that I thought I needed to make me happy it became easier. I have more time to put into my relationships with family and friends because I am not so work-focused. There's more balance in my life. It's been good.

5. Political implications

5.1 The anti-aspirational voter

As we saw in Section 1, a recent study has shown that there is a substantial majority of Australians who believe they cannot afford to buy everything they really need. Of these, many say they spend nearly all of their money on the basic necessities of life. Close to half of those in the richest income groups in Australia believe they cannot afford everything they really need. These people are caught up in an endless endeavour to make their incomes match their desires for material success, and because their desires always outstrip their incomes they feel constantly deprived. This phenomenon has been dubbed ‘middle-class whingeing’ (Hamilton 2002). Middle-class whingeing has sustained the unspoken deprivation model of politics in which voters are believed to suffer real material deprivation despite the fact that life in Australia today is characterised, above all, by abundance.

This phenomenon of the middle-class battler has transformed Australia’s political culture. The main political parties appeal to the feelings of deprivation of voters by reinforcing their perceived sense of financial difficulty. Politicians frequently use phrases such as ‘families are doing it tough out there’. The Coalition’s 2001 electoral victory is said to have been delivered by ‘Howard’s battlers’, a large group of middle-income voters in outer suburbs who were persuaded that the Prime Minister understood their financial worries and would help them. The Sydney house price boom, now being replicated in Melbourne, has added to the sense of deprivation amongst large numbers of well-off households. The middle-class battler syndrome is closely aligned to the idea of the ‘aspirational voter’, understood to be those low and middle-income voters concentrated in the newer suburbs of the capital cities who aspire to wealthy lifestyles characterised by access to private education for their children, private health-care, new cars, home theatres and so on.

The research reported in this paper uncovers a large class of citizens who consciously reject consumerism and the pre-occupations of the aspirational voter. While diverse in their reasons for downshifting, they agree that excessive pursuit of money and materialism comes at a substantial cost to their own lives and those of their families. Some of them also believe that consumerism and money-hunger have social and environmental costs. Downshiftners therefore reject the hitherto unquestioned assumption of Australian politics that voters respond first and foremost to the ‘hip-pocket nerve’. These voters, who comprise at least a quarter of the adult population might be called ‘anti-aspirational voters’. Perhaps a similar number may be considered to be closet anti-aspirational voters, those who agree with the basic values and life priorities of anti-aspirational voters but do not have the courage or, in some cases, the wherewithal, to make the transition to downshifting.

We have seen that the motives of this large group of Australians are mixed. Undoubtedly, many downshiftners were once ‘middle-class whingers’ who came to the realisation that they would never have enough money to satisfy their ‘needs’ as long as their needs always stayed ahead of their incomes, and that this was a recipe for a life of discontent. They have therefore decided to scale down their incomes, but to scale down

their needs even more. Downshiffters share a rejection of the social norm of acquisitiveness and consumerism in favour of a more balanced life for themselves and their families. For the most part, while they have a social critique that sees obsessive materialism as the source of much personal discontent and understand that Australian society is focussed on material consumption to an unhealthy degree, their own actions are not primarily motivated by a conscious politics of post-materialism but by a personal desire to step off the treadmill. They have redefined ‘the good life’ in a way that assigns less importance to money and material acquisition, and in this sense they represent an unorganized post-materialist social movement. Downshifting is by no means confined to middle-class professionals and successful business people who can afford to cut their incomes because they have accumulated assets. While downshiffters certainly include people in this category, many are also low to middle-income people who have simply decided to accept lower incomes, live more simply and spend more time on the activities they value more highly than paid work.

The numbers of Australians taking the downshifting path appear to be growing. Many are baby boomers who have done well financially but just as many are in their late 20s and 30s. Younger downshiffters are somewhat more likely to articulate post-materialist values, those that explicitly reject consumerism in favour of more sustainable lifestyles. Many have taken advantage of the flexibility permitted by the deregulated labour market. They can more easily change jobs, work independently, reduce their hours and negotiate more time off.

Downshiffters display an unusual degree of resolve as they have made a conscious decision to resist powerful social pressures to pursue the norms of success defined by consumer society. The decision to downshift is all the more difficult because of the absence of everyday role models. The norms of consumerism are constantly reinforced by public images and private practice; acquisitiveness is the *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times, and the entire capitalist system depends on the constant creation of desire for more. It is unusual for prominent people in the mainstream to reject these values, and when they do – as in the cases of former National Party leader Tim Fischer and Chairman of the ACCC Alan Fels – their decisions to step down attract widespread and sympathetic attention. But because they have been earning high salaries for a long time they do not provide suitable role models for ordinary people.

Downshiffters frequently report that they feel the weight of social pressure because of their decision. They are seen to be ‘crazy’ to reject higher incomes. Or they are accused of trying to cover up failure. This study shows that downshifting is not an unusual or isolated activity but is practised by large numbers of Australians. The isolation felt by many downshiffters is isolation within a crowd, a feeling that the evidence collected for this study may dispel. Recognition of this fact may change perceptions of downshifting, including perceptions of downshiffters themselves. Downshiffters may come to see themselves as normal and levelheaded members of society because they have chosen balanced lives over ones obsessed with material acquisition. Those who are the prisoners of overwork and find themselves beset by stress, ill-health and family strain, all in pursuit of an ever-higher standard of living, may come to be seen as the crazy ones.

5.2 Political responses

Unlike middle-class whingers, downshiffters do not complain. The main political parties compete with each other to demonstrate concern for 'struggling families', promising tax cuts and middle-class welfare. The political system is geared towards trying to satisfy these noisy demands, demands that can never be satisfied because whingeing is endemic as long as wealthy people feel somehow deprived. Downshiffters, on the other hand, quietly go about their lives. Perhaps a majority are simply alienated from the political process because it is preoccupied with economics when they themselves have decided to put economic considerations down the list of life priorities. For downshiffters, the hip-pocket nerve has been cauterized. Others with an expressly political outlook have a more developed critique of the political and social structures that assign influence to those with financial power. In recent times, many of these appear to have been attracted to the Greens. But for all downshiffters there is a clash between their values and those embodied in Australia's political culture. As a consequence they are politically disenfranchised. Much of the political debate passes them by because it is preoccupied with things they are either not interested in or actively reject.

Unlike middle-class whingers, downshiffters do not demand that governments solve their problems for them. They have been offered a 'fistful of dollars' but have said 'no thanks'. And those who have consciously made a downward bracket leap are not concerned about bracket creep. They are more likely to ask the Government to ratify the Kyoto Protocol than give them a \$30 a week tax break. They remain concerned about affordability; after all, they have reduced their incomes. But they have also proven to themselves that they can do without many of the things they previously took for granted, a profound psychological leap that causes nightmares for middle-class whingers.

The emergence of a large class of downshiffters in Australia challenges the main political parties to question their most fundamental assumptions about what makes for a better society. A preoccupation with more growth and higher incomes is no longer enough. The emergence of the downshifter calls for a redefinition of success; downshiffters have defined successful living for themselves and their families in a way that thumbs its nose at the promises of consumerism. It will not be enough for political leaders to change their rhetoric from economics to family friendly policies and concern about overwork. That is already happening, but it is a façade. For while there has been some change in the rhetoric, the promotion of consumerist values and growth at all costs continues unabated and these are precisely the things that downshiffters are rebelling against. Yet governments continue to sacrifice the things that downshiffters value for higher economic growth.

In recent years in Australia, the Federal Government has pursued a range of policies with the explicit purpose of bolstering Australia's rate of economic growth at the expense of the things that downshiffters value. It has refused to adopt stronger environmental policies, such as measures to reduce greenhouse gases, because of their putative effects on economic growth. It has continued to pursue privatisation and competition policy even though most Australians believe that they erode the sense of community. It has deregulated the labour market in ways that reduce protections, increase insecurity and erode social norms (although downshiffters have taken advantage

of the greater flexibility). It has embraced globalisation when it has been in Australia's economic interests (e.g. free trade) but rejected international efforts to protect human rights and the environment. The emphasis on economic factors to the exclusion of others is at variance with the priorities of downshiffters, a divergence that no amount of family-friendly rhetoric can conceal. The main political parties remain a long way from redefining the Australian dream in a way that accords with the actions of the new class of downshiffters.

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