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**Downshifting in Britain**  
**A sea-change in the pursuit of happiness**

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Discussion Paper Number 58  
November 2003

ISSN 1322-5421

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## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Elizabeth Mail for excellent research assistance with this report.

## Summary

Success today is measured overwhelmingly by material affluence, and the appetite for more appears to be insatiable. A recent study showed that 60 per cent of Britons say they cannot afford to buy everything they really need. Even among the richest households nearly half say the same.

Yet the preoccupation with money and consumption comes at an increasing cost. Consumer debt and personal bankruptcies are rising rapidly. Britons 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 Britons also say that money-hunger conflicts with their deeper values and preferences. When asked whether British society today is too materialistic, with too much emphasis on money and not enough on the things that really matter, 87 per cent agree.

### *Downshifting in Britain*

More and more Britons appear to be rejecting the norms of consumerism and aiming for more control over their lives. For this study, British Market Research Bureau (BMRB International) was commissioned to conduct a national survey to determine the extent and nature of downshifting in the United Kingdom. Downshifter are defined as those who agree with this 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?

The results show that 25 per cent of British adults aged 30-59 have downshifted over the last ten years. This is remarkably high and much higher than previous estimates. The proportion rises to 30 per cent if those stopping work to look after a baby or set up their own businesses are included. Men and women, people in their 30s, 40s and 50s, and families with and without children are just as likely to make the life change.

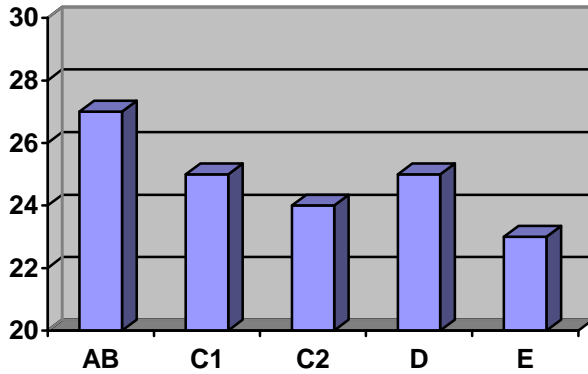
The survey results immediately dispel the widespread myth that downshifting means selling up in the city and shifting to the countryside to live a life closer to nature. While the rural idyll is the route chosen by a few downshifter, in fact the phenomenon is predominantly a suburban one; the downshifter is more likely to be found next door rather than in Cornwall.

The survey shows that women are a little more likely to downshift than men, and 30 year olds are somewhat more likely to downshift than those in their 40s and 50s. While downshifting is common to all regions, it is most prevalent in the South West, the North and the South East and least prevalent in Yorkshire/Humberside and London. It is likely that the pressures to conform are greater in the latter regions either because residents are poorer or because they are unable to resist the pressure to consume at high levels.

The survey results dispel a second myth about downshifting. It is widely believed that the phenomenon is confined to middle-aged wealthier individuals who, having accumulated substantial assets, can afford to take the risk. In fact, downshifter are

spread fairly evenly across age groups and social grades (see Figure S1) although with a slightly higher proportion amongst social grades A and B and a lower share amongst grade E.

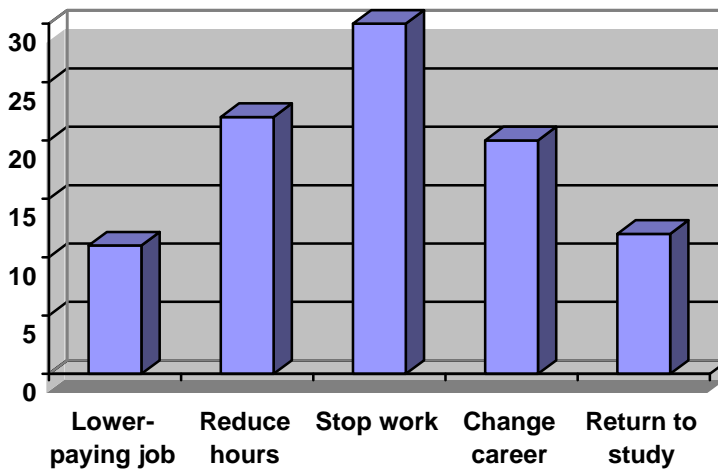
**Figure S1 Proportion of downshifters in each social grade (%)**



When asked by how much their incomes fell as a result of the life-change, the responses were spread widely, from a few per cent to 100 per cent. The average reduction was 40 per cent, a substantial decline suggesting a major life change. Asked *when* they made the change, the results indicate a strong increasing trend, with more than a quarter who have made the shift over the last decade doing so in the last year.

There are three principal methods of downshifting – reducing working hours, stopping work altogether and changing careers, with changing to a lower-paying job and going back to study less important methods (Figure S2). Although the differences are not great, women downshifters are more likely than men to stop paid work or reduce their hours, while men are more likely to change careers or change to a lower-paying job.

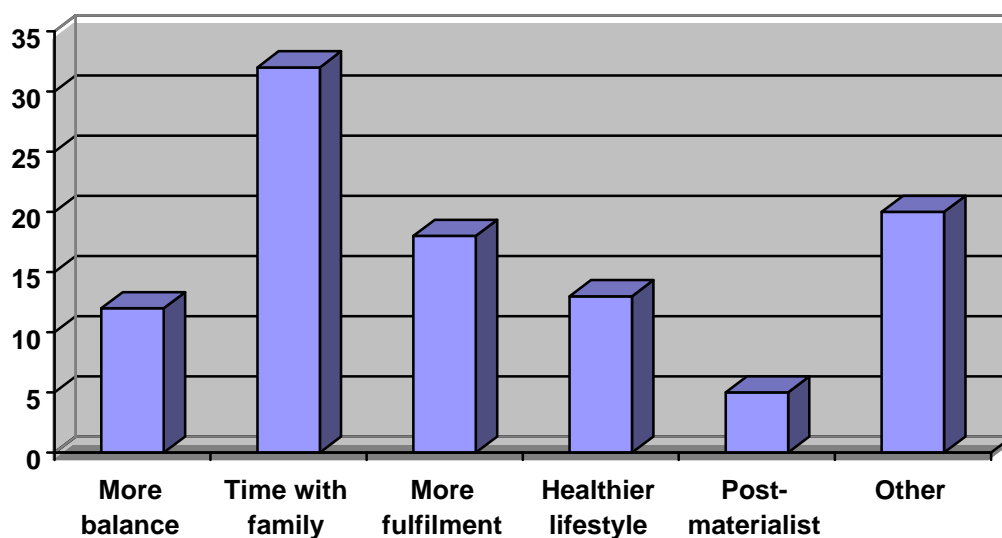
**Figure S2 How Britons downshift (%)**





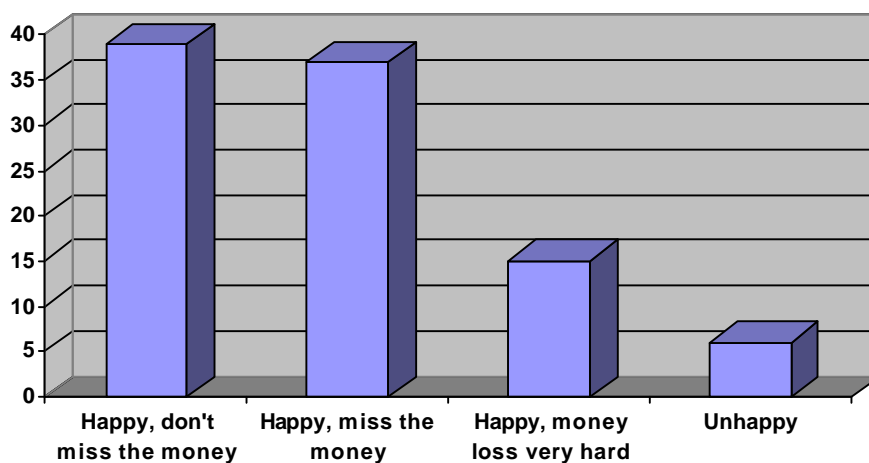
When asked their motives, one third of downshiffters nominated ‘more time with family’ as their main reason (Figure S3), a response much more likely to be given by those in their 30s and 40s than those in their 50s. Nearly one in five nominated the desire to gain more control and personal fulfilment, a motive particularly important for white-collar workers, while older downshiffters are much more likely to nominate ‘a healthier lifestyle’. Few downshiffters are motivated primarily by post-materialist values. The decision to downshift can be seen above all as an attempt to recapture control over time.

**Figure S3 Why Britons downshift (%)**



When asked to assess the life change, over 90 per cent of downshiffters say they are happy with the change, with two in five saying they do not miss the extra income at all. Another two in five said they miss the extra income and 15 per cent admitted that, while they are happy with the change, they have found losing the income very hard. Only six per cent say they are unhappy.

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



*Political implications*

The research reported in this paper uncovers a large class of citizens who consciously reject consumerism and material aspirations. 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. They therefore reject the largely unquestioned assumption of British politics that voters respond first and foremost to the ‘hip-pocket nerve’.

Downshifting takes courage as it entails a decision to resist powerful social pressures to pursue the norms of success defined by consumer society. Downshifter frequently report that they feel the weight of social pressure because of their decision. They are seen to be ‘crazy’ to reject higher incomes. Yet this study shows that downshifting is not an unusual or isolated activity but is practised by large numbers of Britons. It may transpire that those who are the prisoners of overwork and debt, and find themselves beset by stress, ill-health and family strain, may come to be seen as the ‘crazy’ ones.

The emergence of a large class of downshifter in Britain challenges the main political parties to question their most fundamental assumptions about what makes for a better society. A preoccupation with faster economic growth and higher incomes is no longer enough. The extent of the phenomenon calls for a redefinition of achievement, for this group has defined successful living in a way that thumbs its nose at the promises of consumerism. A change in political rhetoric in favour of family friendly policies and concern about overwork will not be enough as long as governments continue to sacrifice the things that downshifter value for higher economic growth.

# 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 showed that 60 per cent of Britons say they cannot afford to buy everything they really need, despite the fact that Britons are richer than ever, and around three times better off than their parents were in the 1950s (Hamilton 2003). Even the wealthiest citizens of the United Kingdom 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 the United Kingdom is now powerfully associated with affluence and putting one's achievements on display through conspicuous forms of consumption. The assumption that Britons are motivated above all by financial goals is so entrenched that it underpins much of the political debate; it is an assumption rarely challenged that the first role of government is to maximise the rate of economic growth.

Yet there is a growing awareness that the rise of overconsumption has come with increasingly serious costs. Credit card debt has trebled in the last seven years and this has been accompanied by a sharp rise in personal bankruptcies. The national savings rate has fallen by half since 1993 (Hamilton 2003). Mortgages have also grown with rising house prices and higher aspirations, so that on average each adult owes the equivalent of 70 per cent of their annual income, a figure that has risen from 54 per cent in 1993. Young people (who spend almost half of their income on luxuries, including going out and recreational drugs) accept that they will remain in debt for most of their lives. Contrary to popular belief, the accumulation of consumer debt is not the result of poorer households being forced to borrow to cover living expenses but of wealthier households splashing out on 'luxuries'.

Attitudes to debt have undergone a far-reaching transformation in Britain. Even though some aspects of life have become less secure, Britons appear evermore willing to fund their lifestyle aspirations by way of borrowing, that is, by committing their future income. Part of the explanation for this phenomenon is the declining stigma associated with bankruptcy, as is the case in the USA. As a result, the number of personal bankruptcies is rising, even though interest rates are low and for most people the risk of unemployment is small.

Britons 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.'<sup>1</sup> Despite the fact that real incomes continue to grow over the decades, Britons today are less willing

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<sup>1</sup> Joachim Spangenberg, formerly of the Wuppertal Institute.

to defer purchases of goods than they were in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. There is an ever-increasing desire for instant gratification.

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. In recent years more and more Britons have sacrificed time spent with their families and at leisure to work longer hours in order to fund increasingly ambitious lifestyle goals. Full-time employees in the United Kingdom work longer hours than their European counterparts, an average of 43.5 hours per week compared to the European average of 40.1. A quarter of male employees work more than 48 hours a week, substantially more than a decade ago (Hamilton 2003).

The culture of long hours is taking a toll on relationships. Perversely, men who are the fathers of young children are more likely to work long hours than those who aren't, so that not only do they spend less time at home but they are more tired and stressed when they are at home. One third of fathers spend more than 50 hours a week at work, frequently eating into their weekends, compared with a quarter of men without children. There is evidence that long hours of work on the part of parents can damage both their relationships with their children and their children's development. According to a recent government report:

Difficulties in managing this [work-life] balance can have a detrimental impact on the quality of the relationships between parents and children and the parent's responsiveness to the child, with implications for child outcomes. This is particularly important for very young children, with evidence suggesting that it is best for children if they can receive intensive parental contact for the first months (HM Treasury & DTI 2003, p. 13).

Parents understand this and many express a desire to work less and spend more time raising their children (HM Treasury & DTI 2003, pp. 13-14).

Wives of workers who are frequently away from home for extended periods experience higher levels of anxiety, stress and depression than the general population. This is 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.

While most people recognise that children suffer from parents' excessive work, many parents seem unable to scale down their level of desire in order to spend more time at home. Yet the time they spend earning money to provide luxurious surroundings for their children often comes at the cost of the emotional well-being of those children.

## **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, one that

resonates just as strongly in Britain. *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, 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.

Britons too hold contradictory attitudes to the factors that affect their quality of life. While the immediate perception of 60 per cent is that they are having difficulty making ends meet (Hamilton 2003), when asked to stand back and reflect on their lives and their society they take quite a different view. The same survey asked whether respondents agree or disagree with the following statement:

British society today is too materialistic, with too much emphasis on money and not enough on the things that really matter.

The results indicate that 87 per cent of respondents believe that British society is too materialistic, with too much emphasis on money and not enough on the things that really matter (Hamilton 2003). The proportions agreeing with the statement are remarkably stable across social grades and income levels.

The survey question itself gives us pause to ask what are 'the things that really matter'. Eckersley's work (1999) 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.’<sup>2</sup> Recent television programs that show ordinary Britons escaping to live in the Spanish sun or the French countryside seem to reflect a central element of the *zeitgeist*. They 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.

But is making such a change no more than a dream played out in a million 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. A similar study in Australia found that 23 per cent of adults aged 30-59 had done likewise (Hamilton and Mail 2003).

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.<sup>3</sup>

According to Ray and Anderson (2000) these people are not confined to middle-class new agers.<sup>4</sup> 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, who are ‘materialistic, egoistic, oriented towards consumption and success and the newest technologies’.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Tan (2000, Appendix A, p.2).

<sup>3</sup> [www.ross-jackson.com](http://www.ross-jackson.com)

<sup>4</sup> See [www.culturalcreatives.com](http://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.

<sup>5</sup> [www.ross-jackson.com](http://www.ross-jackson.com)

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 but stay put.

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.

## 2. What is downshifting?

### 2.1 Defining downshifting

In recent years there has been an explosion of interest in downshifting in the USA 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. There are now 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.

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 Australian survey results reported by Hamilton and Mail (2003) show that downshifting is a much more mainstream activity than is indicated by the literature and websites. A survey in Britain found that about one in eight people questioned reported that they had either downshifted over the previous two years, or planned to do so in the next year (Jones 2003). The bulk of downshifters 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 Australia, 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 19<sup>th</sup> century commentary on his idyllic life on Walden Pond reflects many of the elements of voluntary simplicity (Thoreau 1992). 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. While some describe 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), 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 US\$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',<sup>6</sup> 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 goal 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 less.

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<sup>6</sup> Popcorn (1996) cited in Tan (2000 p. 10)

They are defined by their behaviour rather than their motives; the latter may be varied and include those relating to personal life and those based on principle.

## **2.2 Why do people downshift?**

Studies in the USA, Australia and elsewhere have uncovered several primary motivations for downshifting. Although people who downshift are rarely motivated 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 downshifters with children (Tan 2000). In detailed research into downshifters in Australia, Tan identified technological change and a growing emphasis on work, in addition to changes in the economy and the 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 to 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 in Australia 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 question 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 natural 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 make the final change (Tan 2000, p. 159).

### 2.3 Types of changes

Although the downshifting experience is a uniquely individual one, researchers have 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 downshifters 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 downshifters choose to withdraw from paid work and some couples choose to live on one income.

Some downshifters move to rural areas while others simply choose a smaller home. A dramatic change in location can allow people to cut down on their spending considerably. A smaller house often means lower mortgage repayments 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.

Many people who try to downshift seek support from others and join groups committed to voluntary simplicity. These groups provide support and a sense of community for individuals which helps them to ‘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.

The transition to downshifting of course involves drawbacks. In particular there are the challenges presented by a reduction in income which, in some cases, is substantial. Downshifter 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 downshifter 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). Despite this, downshifter overwhelmingly report that despite a drop in income and status, their personal lives, work lives and overall satisfaction with life had improved.

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### 3. Patterns of downshifting in Britain

#### 3.1 How many Britons have downshifted?

Various estimates have been made of the extent of downshifting in Britain. The most recent is by Datamonitor, which estimated that the number of downshifters in Britain has increased from 1.7 million in 1997 to 2.6 million in 2002.<sup>7</sup> As we will see, this is a serious underestimate of the extent of the phenomenon. Part of the difficulty is that some of the research, including that by Datamonitor, has been carried out by marketing firms with a view to identifying new types of consumers and advising corporations as to how better to package their products to appeal to them, which of course contradicts the purpose of downshifting. The marketers have developed their own definitions rather than ones of use to social analysis, and their results should be viewed with skepticism.<sup>8</sup>

As this suggests, variations in the definition of the phenomenon make comparisons difficult. The most useful definition of a downshifter is a person who has made a voluntary, long-term decision to change their life in a way that involves earning less money and, as a consequence, consuming less. While some people may accept a reduced income forced upon them by a change in circumstances such as redundancy, we are particularly interested in those who have decided to ignore convention and pursue other goals in place of higher incomes. These people are of interest not just as a social phenomenon – for what they tell us about the state of modern consumer capitalism – but as a political trend, for downshifters appear to flout the conventional wisdom that voters are first and foremost interested in their own material standards of living.

International evidence suggests that downshifting is not a phenomenon confined to Britain but is very widespread. 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). A recent similar study in Australia revealed that 23 per cent of Australian adults aged 30-59 fit the definition of downshifter used in this study, although that study asked respondents if they had chosen to reduce their income over the previous ten years (Hamilton and Mail 2003).

For the present study, BMRB International was commissioned to conduct a national opinion survey to explore the extent and nature of downshifting in Britain. The survey was conducted by telephone over 17th-19th October 2003 and included 1136 respondents selected by means of random digit dialling. Respondents were 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 downshifters. Adults younger than 30 were excluded because the first question asked respondents whether they had made a decision to downshift over the last

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, *Daily Telegraph*, 3 October 2003 and *Evening Standard* 16 April 2003. The Datamonitor report, called 'Simplicity', appears to have been released in April 2003 and re-released in October 2003.

<sup>8</sup> It is hard to take seriously the results of research which can only be viewed by the public if they are willing to pay out US\$4,995 for the privilege, as is the case with the Datamonitor report.

ten years and it was felt that this question would not have meaning to most people in their early and mid twenties.

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? 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 why they decided to downshift and what action they took. The responses to these subsequent questions allowed filters to be applied to the sample in order to remove from the definition of downshifting those whose motives might be seen as ambiguous. The following groups were filtered out to arrive at a narrow definition of downshifting.

- Respondents who started their own business were excluded 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 downshifters have been excluded.
- 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.

Some demographic characteristics of downshifters in Britain are reported in Table 1. It is apparent that 25 per cent of adults in the 30-59 age range have downshifted over the last ten years.<sup>9</sup> If those who downshifted by starting their own business, refused a promotion or took time off after having a baby are included then 30 per cent of 30-59 year olds qualify.<sup>10</sup>

The size of the downshifting population in Britain immediately dispels the most widespread myth about the phenomenon, *viz.* that it means selling up in the city and shifting to the countryside or a small town to live a life closer to nature. ‘The middle classes are heading back to nature’, writes one commentator, who then goes on to argue that ‘the brutal truth is that people who wrench themselves away from the stimulations of the modern world risk becoming first bored, then boring’.<sup>11</sup> While the rural idyll is

<sup>9</sup> Giving us a sample size of 270 downshifters of the 1071 respondents using the narrow definition of downshifting.

<sup>10</sup> Of these, five per cent of downshifters using the broad definition gave their reason as starting their own business, 14 per cent gave time off to look after a baby and one per cent had refused a promotion.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Why are so many of us swapping a full life for one that’s half empty?’ by Simon Hinde, *The Express*, 17<sup>th</sup> April 2003. The usual caricature is captured in the following comment by Ros Byam Shaw in the

the route chosen by a few downshiffters, in fact the phenomenon is an urban one with most downshiffters staying put but making changes to the way they live their lives. Rather than running an organic farm in Cornwall, most downshiffters live next door in the city.

Given the relentless 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 pressures of British society and opted to emphasise other, non-material aspects of life. This has a number of political implications that will be explored in the next section. 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 many non-downshiffters regard them at best as odd and at worst as failures.

**Table 1 Demographic characteristics of downshiffters in Britain (%)**

Characteristic	%	Region	%
Total	25	London	20
Sex		South East	28
Male	23	South West	39
Female	27	Wales	22
Age		East Anglia	31
30-39	27	East Midlands	22
40-49	25	West Midlands	23
50-59	24	Yorkshire/Humberside	17
		North West	25
		North	30
		Scotland	24

Source: BMRB

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 downshiffted are added to those who have wanted to downshift but have not had the

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*Independent On Sunday*, 6<sup>th</sup> July 2003: 'Downshifting is one of the more dreary cliches of the new millennium. In truth, it only applies to Londoners because what it really means is selling your three bedrooms and patio in Fulham for a lot of money, and buying a house with six bedrooms, a utility room and outbuildings somewhere beyond the home counties for a lot less. With any luck, the difference leaves you with enough cash to eke out a life of vegetable soup and bracing walks while you decide what to do next. Perhaps open a second-hand bookshop, or fill your spare bedrooms with bed and breakfast guests, or rear organic alpacas. You will certainly send your children to the local state school.'

courage, and in some cases the wherewithal, then a majority of the British population comprises actual or potential downshiffters.

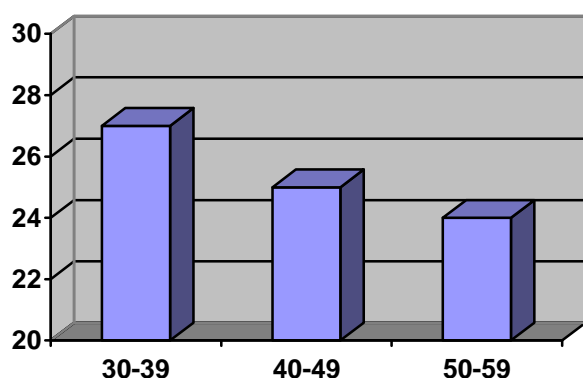
### 3.2 Who are the downshiffters?

Table 1 reports data on the sex, age and location of downshiffters in Britain. The following conclusions may be drawn, bearing in mind that the characteristics of downshiffters reported below apply *after* the change in lifestyle.

- Women are a little more likely to downshift than men, with 27 per cent of women and 23 per cent of men fitting the definition.<sup>12</sup>
- Thirty-year olds are somewhat more likely to downshift than those in their 40s and 50s (see Figure 1), although as we will see their reasons are somewhat different.
- There are some interesting regional variations.<sup>13</sup> Downshifting is most prevalent in the South West (39 per cent), the North (30 per cent) and the South East (28 per cent) and least prevalent in Yorkshire/Humberside (17 per cent) and London (20 per cent).

The regional differences are partly accounted for by the likelihood that some downshiffters move from London, for example, to the South West. It is also likely that the pressures to conform are greater in London and Yorkshire/Humberside either because residents are poorer or because they are unable to resist the pressure to consume at high levels. But a more interesting fact is that downshifting is common to all regions.

**Figure 1 Proportion in each age group who are downshiffters (%)**



Source: Table 1

Information on the social grades of downshiffters is of special interest. It is widely believed that the phenomenon is confined to middle-aged wealthier individuals who, having accumulated substantial assets, can afford to take the risk. The results in Table 2

<sup>12</sup> The gap is wider if women who stop work to look after their babies are included.

<sup>13</sup> In some cases, the sample sizes are not large enough to draw robust conclusions, and the regional differences should therefore be treated with caution.



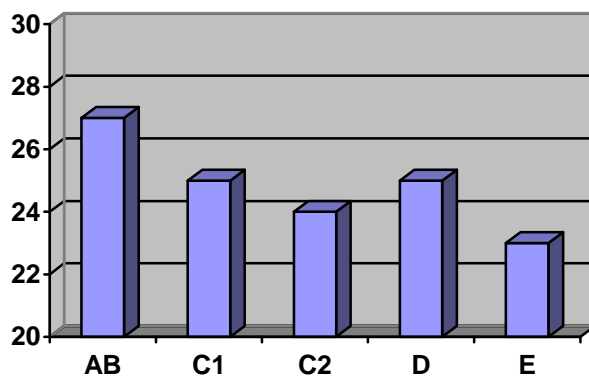
show this to be untrue. It is apparent that downshiffters are spread fairly evenly across the social grades (see Figure 2) although with a slightly higher proportion amongst social grades A and B and a lower share amongst grade E. It should be noted that these are reported social grades after the change in life so some downshiffters may have moved ‘down’ a grade or two.

**Table 2 Social grades of downshiffters in Britain (%)**

Characteristic	%
Total	25
AB	27
C1	25
C2	24
D	25
E	23

Note: In summary, social grades are defined as follows, with their shares of the population:  
 A – professionals, senior managers, business executives, bank managers and university lecturers (3%)  
 B – middle managers in large firms and senior officers in government organisations (14%)  
 C1 – junior managers, white collar workers and small business owners (26%)  
 C2 – skilled manual works and unskilled employees with responsibility for others (25%)  
 D – semi-skilled manual workers and apprentices (19%)  
 E – those on long-term benefits, including long-term unemployed (13%)  
 Source: BMRB

**Figure 2 Proportion of each social grade who are downshiffters (%)**



Source: Table 2

More light can be shed on this by examining the responses to the following question in the survey:

“When you made this change, by how much did your income fall?”

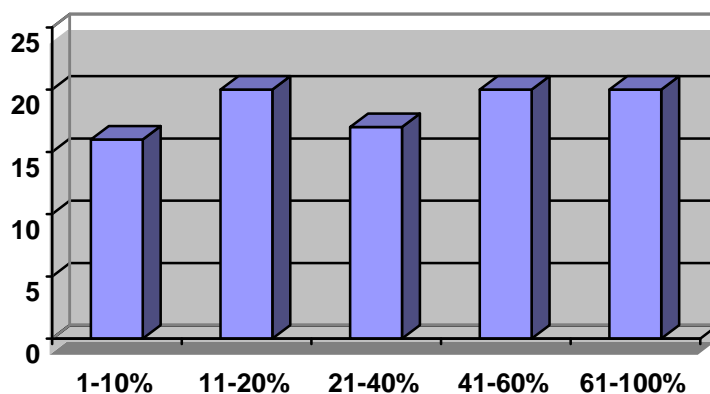
Respondents were asked to nominate one of the categories 1-10%, 11-20%, 21-40%, 41-60% or 61-100%. Table 3 and Figure 3 report the results.<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that the figures showing percentage income fall by social grade reflect low sample sizes and are therefore unreliable and should be treated with caution. However, the totals both for each income fall category and for each social grade are more robust.

**Table 3 By how much did incomes fall, by social grade? (%)**

Percentage decline in income	Total	AB	C1	C2	D
1-10%	16	18	17	12	22
11-20%	20	18	20	17	31
21-40%	17	11	18	26	20
41-60%	20	21	22	24	9
61-100%	20	29	19	14	11
Total <sup>a</sup>	40	45	39	38	27

Note a: Totals were calculated by taking mid-points in the categories, except for the 61-100% group where the average was assumed to be a 90% decline reflecting the expectation that 30% of the respondents said that they had stopped paid work altogether. Seven per cent said 'Don't know'.  
Source: BMRB

**Figure 3 Percentage by which incomes fell (%)**



Source: Table 3

The results suggest that the amounts by which downshifter reduced their incomes were spread widely, but with an average reduction of 40 per cent. As would be expected, downshifter in social grades A and B reduced their incomes by somewhat more than

<sup>14</sup> Note that data for social grade E have been excluded because there are anomalies in the responses. In particular, 36 per cent of respondents from social grade E said 'don't know' to this question, compared to 5% per cent for the rest of the sample. Of those who did respond more than half indicated that their incomes had fallen by 61-100%.

the average, 44 per cent, while those in social grade D reduced them by rather less than average, 26 per cent.

The characteristics of British downshifters are similar to those of their Australian counterparts in that they are fairly evenly spread by sex, age and income (Hamilton and Mail 2003). However, unlike Britain, there are more men than women included in the 23% of the relevant population who are downshifters and they are more likely to be in their 40s rather than in their 30s. As in Britain, Australian downshifters are drawn from across the income distribution and are as likely to be blue-collar workers as white-collar ones.<sup>15</sup>

### 3.3 When did they make the 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 4. They suggest that there is a strongly increasing trend, with more than a quarter who have made the shift over the last decade doing so in the last year, compared to only five per cent of the sample indicating that they made the shift in a twelve-month period 5-10 years ago and 11 per cent each year on average for those who made the shift 2-5 years ago. Although not shown, the trend over the last year is driven strongly by residents of the South East with few from London who mostly made the shift 2-10 years ago (although the data do not allow firm conclusions).

**Table 4 How long ago did the change in lifestyle occur? (%)**

When the change occurred	%
Within the last 12 months	27
1-2 years ago	15
2-5 years ago	33
5-10 years ago	25
Total	100

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding.

Source: BMRB

### 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 5 and Figure 4. There are three principal methods of downshifting – reducing working hours (22 per cent), stopping work altogether (30 per cent) and changing careers (20 per cent), with changing to a lower-paying job and going back to study less important methods. Some patterns are apparent.

<sup>15</sup> In the USA there tend to be fewer downshifters in the high-income groups (Schor 1998, pp. 114-119).

- 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 or switch to a lower-paying job.
- Those in their 50s are much more likely than others to stop work, while those in their 40s are more likely than others to reduce their working hours. A sixth of those in their 30s or 40s return to study.
- Although not shown in the table, there appear to be some significant differences in methods of downshifting among social grades. Those in social grades A and B are more likely than others to reduce their working hours (31 per cent nominated this route compared to the average of 22 per cent) while white-collar workers (C1) and unskilled workers (D) are more likely to change careers (27 and 33 per cent respectively, compared to the average of 20 per cent).

These patterns can be compared to those in Australia where downshifter are much more likely to change to a lower-paying job (23 per cent compared to 11 per cent in Britain) or reduce their working hours (29 per cent versus 22 per cent), while Britons are more likely to stop work or go back to study (Hamilton and Mail 2003). American downshifter are much less likely to reduce their working hours (12 per cent) and much more likely to take a lower-paying job (Schor 1998, p. 115).<sup>16</sup>

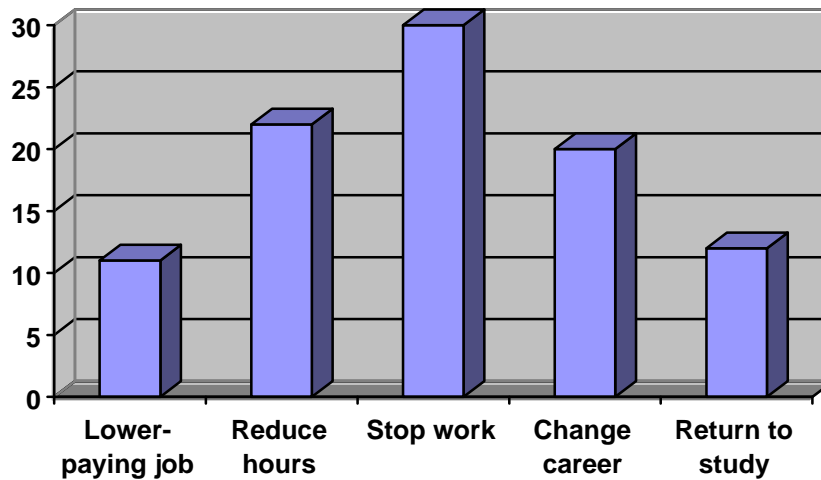
**Table 5 How Britons downshift, by sex and age (%)**

<i>Lifestyle change made</i>	Total	Sex		Age		
		Male	Female	30-39	40-49	50-59
Change to a lower-paying job	11	15	8	13	8	12
Reduce work hours	22	19	24	18	27	20
Stop paid work	30	27	32	27	22	42
Change careers	20	23	17	18	24	17
Return to study	12	10	14	17	16	3
Other	6	6	6	7	4	6
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Note: Totals may not add to 100 due to rounding

Source: BMRB

<sup>16</sup> Among downshifter in Australia and the USA, around twice as many than in Britain start their own businesses (ten per cent in the USA and nine per cent in Australia).

**Figure 4 How Britons downshift (%)**

Source: Table 5

### 3.5 Why do they do it?

Survey respondents were also asked to nominate their main reason for making the lifestyle change. The results are shown in Table 6 and Figure 5. Several conclusions can be drawn both from the tables and from further results not reported in the tables.

- One 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 Britons consider more time with family and less stress, rather than more income, would make them happier. For both men and women this was the most common reason given. Perhaps unsurprisingly the desire to spend more time with family was much more likely to be given by those in the 30s and 40s than those in their 50s.
- The next most important motive is to gain more control and personal fulfilment (nearly one in five gave this as their main reason) and this response was spread evenly across sexes and ages.
- Older downshifter are much more likely to nominate ‘a healthier lifestyle’ (25 per cent) than those in their 30s (only eight per cent). 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 lifestyle.

**Table 6 Reasons for downshifting, by sex and age (%)**

<i>Main reason for lifestyle change</i>	Total	Sex		Age		
		Male	Female	30-39	40-49	50-59
More balanced lifestyle	12	9	15	13	14	7
More time with family	32	28	35	38	37	19
More control and personal fulfilment	18	16	19	20	18	14
Healthier lifestyle	13	16	11	8	10	25
Less materialistic lifestyle <sup>a</sup>	5	7	4	3	5	10
More financial independence	4	6	3	7	4	2
None of these/don't know	16	18	13	12	13	24
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Note: Totals may not add to 100 due to rounding

a. Includes those who wanted a 'more environmentally friendly lifestyle'.

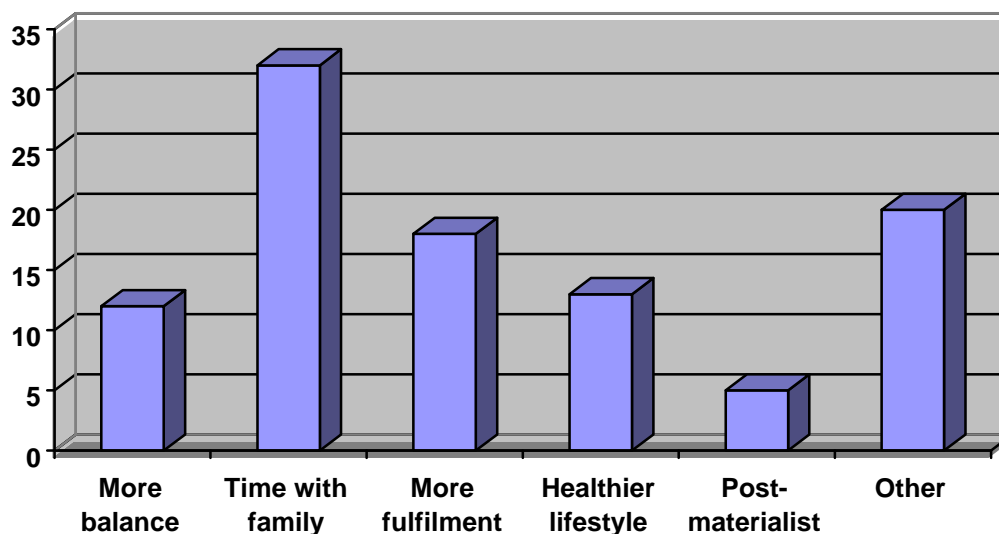
Source: BMRB

- Contrary to much of the downshifting literature, few downshifters appear to be motivated primarily by post-materialist values with only five 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 downshifters 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.
- Although not shown in the table, there are some interesting differences in motivation among social grades. The desire to spend more time with family is the most common motive across the grades, with the striking exception of white-collar workers (C1) of whom 33 per cent nominated a desire for more control and personal fulfilment with only 20 per cent giving family reasons.

- Downshifters in social grades A and B were more likely than others to nominate family time (37 per cent versus an average of 32 per cent) and more balance (17 per cent versus 12 per cent).

Compared with their Australian counterparts, British downshifters are remarkably similar in motivation (Hamilton and Mail 2003).

**Figure 5 Why Britons downshift (%)**



Note 'Other' includes 'more financial independence' (4%)

Source: Table 6.

### 3.6 Is it worth it?

Finally the downshifters 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 7 and Figure 6.

Overall, over 90 per cent of downshifters are happy with the change in their lifestyles, with 39 per cent saying they do not miss the extra income at all. Thirty seven per cent said they miss the extra income and 15 per cent admitted that, while they are happy with the change, they have found losing the income very hard. Only six per cent are unhappy with the change. There is little difference in the pattern of feelings about the change between men and women, although women seem to be a little more happy. Older downshifters appear to have fewer concerns about the decline in their income.

While all downshifters across social grades are happy with the change, as expected more from grades A and B (51 per cent) and C1 (45 per cent) give unqualified endorsement of the shift while among C2 downshifters a quarter say that, while happy with the change, they found losing the income very hard. Overall, British downshifters

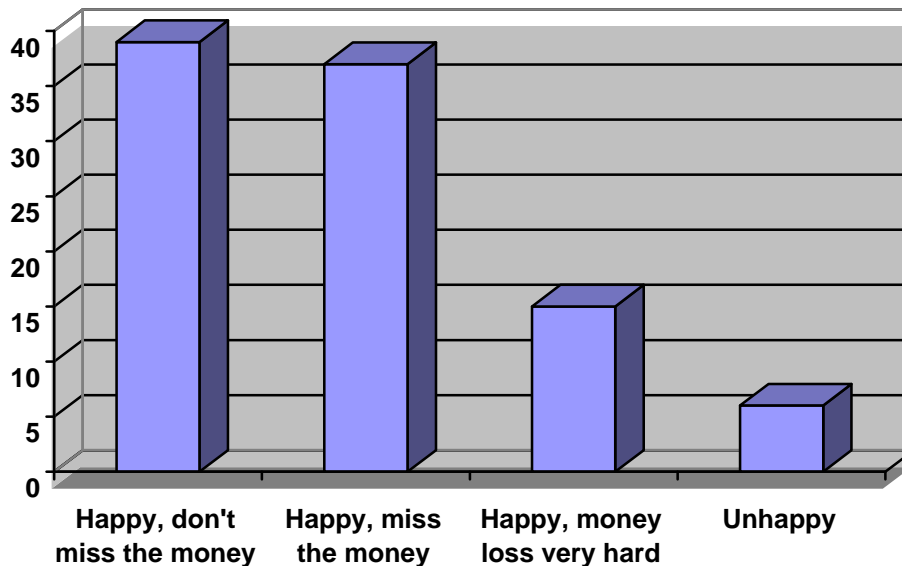
appear somewhat happier with the change than their Australian counterparts, although the difference is not great.

**Table 7 Assessment of lifestyle change, by sex and age (%)**

<i>Feelings about lifestyle change</i>	Total	Sex		Age		
		Male	Female	30-39	40-49	50-59
Happy with the change and do not miss the extra income at all	39	37	41	36	37	46
Happy with the change but miss the extra income	37	41	33	42	38	28
Happy with the change but found losing the income very hard	15	14	17	13	16	17
Unhappy with the change	6	5	6	5	7	6
Total <sup>a</sup>	100	100	100	100	100	100

Note: a. 1% indicated 'Don't know'.  
Source: BMRB

**Figure 6 Are downshiffters happy with the change? (%)**



Source: Table 7



### 3.7 In summary

Using a narrow definition, 25 per cent of British adults aged 30-59 have downshifted over the last ten years. The proportion rises to 30 per cent if those stopping work to look after a baby or setting up their own businesses are included. The attraction of downshifting is not confined to any demographic group. Men and women, people in their 30s, 40s and 50s, and people from all regions are likely to make long-term life changes that result in reduced income. The decision to downshift is so extensive in Britain that it has become a suburban phenomenon, and the image of the downshifter as someone who moves to the countryside to grow vegetables or run a bed & breakfast is far from the reality. While a few choose this route, the downshifter is much more likely to live next door in a city than in Cornwall. There is a marked increase in the rate of downshifting in recent years, with more than a quarter of those who have made the shift over the last decade doing so in the last year.


It is widely believed that the phenomenon is confined to middle-aged wealthier individuals who, having accumulated substantial assets, can afford to take the risk. This turns out to be a myth; downshifters are spread fairly evenly across the social grades although with a slightly higher proportion amongst grades A and B and a lower share amongst social grade E. Downshifters are spread across the country but are more prevalent in the South West, South East and the North. There are proportionally fewer in London and Yorkshire/Humberside – probably for differing reasons – yet the trend remains strong in those regions too.

The defining characteristic of downshifters is the decision to reduce their income. The amounts by which incomes are reduced range from 1 to 100 per cent with an average of around 40 per cent. Two-thirds reduce their income by more than 20 per cent suggesting substantial changes in attitudes and consumption behaviour.

Reducing working hours and stopping paid work altogether are the most common methods of making the change, with changing to a lower-paying job and going back to study less important methods. Women are more likely to stop paid work or reduce their hours, while men are more likely to change careers or change to a lower-paying job. Those in social grades A and B are more likely than others to reduce their working hours while white-collar workers and unskilled workers are more likely to change careers.

The most important reason for downshifting is to spend more time with family. One-third nominated this as their main reason, with higher proportions in their 30s and 40s. The desire for more personal fulfilment, a healthier lifestyle (especially amongst those in their 50s), and a more balanced lifestyle are also important. Among social grades, white collar workers present a striking exception to the preference for family, with a third nominating a desire for more control and personal fulfilment. While downshifting itself represents a rejection of the common preoccupation with money and material acquisition, few downshifters nominated the two explicitly post-materialist reasons as their primary motivation, that is, 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.

Downshiffters are overwhelmingly happy with their decisions although many miss the extra income and 15 per cent, while happy, find the loss of income very hard. Although the differences are not great, older downshiffters, women and those from social grades A, B and C1 are a little happier with the life change.



#### 4. Political implications

As we saw in Section 1, a recent study has shown that there is a substantial majority of Britons 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 the United Kingdom 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 ‘a culture of middle-class complaint’ (Hamilton 2003). At least since the time of the ‘middle-class tax revolt’ in the 1980s, the sense of deprivation among middle-class voters has sustained the unspoken obsession of politics with maximising incomes, often at the expense of other aspects of life.

The research reported in this paper uncovers a large class of citizens who consciously reject consumerism, at least in its more obsessive form. 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. Downshifter therefore reject the largely unquestioned assumption of British 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’ and perhaps a similar number may dream of making the same shift 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 citizens are mixed. Undoubtedly, many downshifter were once well-off people 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. Downshifter share a rejection of the social norm of acquisitiveness and consumerism in favour of a more balanced life for themselves and their families. Their decision can be seen above all as an attempt to recapture control over their time, and to devote the time freed up to activities that are more fulfilling than earning more money.

For the most part, while they have a social critique that sees obsessive materialism as the source of much personal discontent and understand that British society is preoccupied with 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 downshifter 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 Britons 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 downshifters 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.

Downshifters 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* and the entire economic 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 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.

Downshifters 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. In the words of one:

When we actually handed in our notice [at London newspapers] it was like we were heroes – everybody said, ‘Wow, you’re really doing it, we’ve always wanted to do this, fantastic!’ It was like we’d found the escape tunnel. And then people went away and started thinking, ‘Maybe I could do that’, thought of all the reasons why they couldn’t or weren’t going to do it, and in the last few weeks people said, ‘You’re crazy’. Attitudes changed: I think people felt a bit threatened once we were really doing it.<sup>17</sup>

This study shows that downshifting is not an unusual or isolated activity but is practised by large numbers of Britons. The isolation felt by many downshifters is isolation within a crowd. Yet as their numbers grow they may come to see themselves as normal and levelheaded members of society because they have chosen balanced lives over ones obsessed with material acquisition. It may transpire that those who are the prisoners of overwork and debt, and find themselves beset by stress, ill-health and family strain, may come to be seen as the ‘crazy’ ones.

The emergence of a large class of downshifters in Britain 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; downshifters 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 in large measure a façade. For while there has been

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<sup>17</sup> ‘The good life. 21st century style’, by Margarette Driscoll, *The Sunday Times*, 20 April 2003

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.

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