

# Chapter 10

## Environmental Concern and Anti-consumerism in the Self-Concept: Do They Share the Same Basis?

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### 1. Introduction

This chapter examines the relationship between people's conception of themselves and their concern for the environment and for overconsumption. Rather than focusing on barriers to behaviour change with respect to consumption, and thereby approaching environmental impacts, I ask whether some individuals may be motivated to change their consumption and lifestyle patterns due to an existential crisis in their lives. Specifically, as consumption comes to dominate an individual's options for communicating information about the self, feelings of inauthenticity may emerge and compel alternatives to consumption as a means of self-identification. This is a social-psychological approach to understanding the possible forces motivating a societal shift to sustainable forms of consumption. It questions whether concern for the environmental impacts of our consumption habits needs to be instrumental.

In this chapter I use qualitative and quantitative data drawn from participants in voluntary simplicity (VS) classes offered by the Northwest Earth Institute (NWEI) in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. I attended classes in which participants learned strategies for reducing their reliance on material consumption as a source of meaning in their lives. I also observed and interviewed participants, many of whom enrolled in the classes with the hope of alleviating the stress and frustration they were feeling in their consumer lifestyles, although they had little prior knowledge of the VS movement.

These data, as well as data from a national survey of Americans, are used to determine whether interest in VS (i.e., reducing one's level of consumption) is an egoistically motivated interest or one driven by an underlying concern for the environmental impacts of consumption. If it is lack of fulfilment, excessive stress, agitation, malaise and despair that compels many people to explore VS lifestyles, and this is linked to the culture of consumption, then the search for a simpler and less consumptive lifestyle may be primarily a selfishly motivated concern. But if people identify as the source of these feelings concern about their impact on the environment, then the search for a simpler and less consumptive lifestyle may be more appropriately attributed to environmental considerations.

Given the current scientific consensus about the growing scale of environmental problems social science has an essential contribution to make (National Academy of Sciences 1991; National Research Council 1986, 1987; Stern *et al.*, 1992; Union of Concerned Scientists 1992). The social-psychological approach I develop here, however, is by no means unique. Already social scientists have conducted research demonstrating that value orientations are significantly correlated with beliefs about the environmental consequences of human activity (Stern *et al.*, 1993), with intentions to perform pro-environmental acts (Stern *et al.*, 1995) and with self-reported pro-environmental behaviour (Karp 1996).

This chapter extends the usefulness of this line of inquiry by introducing the self-concept. Drawing on Gecas and Burke's (1995) definition, I conceptualise the self-concept as the product of a process of reflecting on ourselves, an activity that includes the adoption of other's perspectives to determine how we must appear to other social actors. Based on this definition the self-concept can be said to be composed of the various attitudes, ideas and beliefs we form about ourselves — or, in short, our identities.

Previous research on values, attitudes and beliefs has typically required combining knowledge of an individual's value orientation with knowledge of her/his beliefs about a specific attitude object, and/or to whom the individual ascribes responsibility. This chapter treats the self-concept as the root of individuals' values, attitudes and attributions of moral responsibility, and therefore it is a key concept in understanding consumption and environmental behaviours. Identities, after all, which comprise the self-concept, carry with them implications for action. Stern *et al.*, (1999) in their "Value-Belief-Norm Theory" for predicting environmental-movement activism, acknowledge that identity, and its role in the frame-alignment process leading to movement participation (Snow and Benford 1992), is a missing variable.

An understanding of an individual's self-concept, when combined with knowledge of her/his value orientation, should further enhance our ability to predict environmental concern and pro-environmental behaviours. In addition, if the self-concept is the structure that organises our values, examining the self-concept should prove useful in determining whether environmental concern and anti-consumerist attitudes emerge out of the same value orientation or from deeper within the self.

Furthermore, the self-concept's importance can be seen when considering possible motivators of human behaviour. Most species act largely on the basis of environmental stimuli. *Homo Sapiens*, however, are unique in their ability to generate internal stimuli; a capacity made possible by the self-concept. In fact, Goffman (1974) maintains that the attempt to preserve the self — to protect our conception of ourselves — is the chief motivator of human activity. Powers (1973), Burke (1991, 1997), Stets (1995), and Stets and Burke (1994) similarly maintain that behaviour can be explained as the attempt to maintain our self-conception by manipulating how others perceive us. If much of our behaviour aims at preserving our self-conceptions (such as consuming greater amounts of more and more expensive material goods) and this tends to result in environmentally-detrimental outcomes, then exploring instances in which the self-concept is preserved through alternatives to environmentally detrimental forms of consumption is essential. This may be a way of moving us toward societies based on more sustainable consumption.

## **2. Anti-consumerism and the Self-Concept**

To understand consumption's role with respect to self-concept formation in post-industrial societies we need look no further than the marketing industry. Publications such as the *Journal of Marketing Management*, *Advances in Consumer Research*, *Psychology and Marketing* and *The Journal of Consumer Psychology* provide us with research suggesting that: consuming is a process of identity formation (Gentry *et al.*, 1995; Hogg and Michell 1996; Wong 1997); persuasion is possible because the self is malleable (Aaker 1999); marketers can benefit by getting consumers to see their identities as linked to a particular brand (Muniz 1997; Simonson 1997), the symbolic power of a product to confer prestige or increase self-esteem can be harnessed (Burroughs 1996; Noble and Walker 1996) and people's sense of attachment and satisfaction can be manipulated through product acquisition (Sivadas and Venkatesh 1995).

Researchers in other disciplines — sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies, for example — take a more critical view of the manipulation of the self in relation to increased consumption. Post-modern theorists such as Baudrillard (1981, 1983), Bourdieu (1984), Featherstone (1991) and Jameson (1984), see the proliferation of goods in consumer societies as resulting in schizophrenic individuals struggling to create identities in a world of transitory and ephemeral signs and meanings. The instability of the self in a post-modern consumer society, these theorists suggest, facilitates social stratification through consumption as a statement of difference. Miller (1987) also acknowledges the role of consumption in social differentiation, but points to the potential of consumption to create social equality when goods are consumed for the purpose of creating strong social networks.

What is clear is that whether we consume to distinguish ourselves from others or to identify ourselves with a desirable group, consumption has become a fundamental mode of self-formation and self-expression. This is evident in research and theoretical developments from throughout the previous century: in Veblen's (1899) notion of conspicuous consumption; in Simmel's (1957) trickle-down theory of fashion; in Rochberg-Halton's (1986) more contemporary analysis of the meanings of material goods in our lives; or in Gillespie's (1995) study of the attachment of oneself to a community through shared consumption of television programming.

If consumption has become a necessary part of self-formation in the lives of citizens of consumer societies, what compels people with anti-consumerist sentiments to seek alternative ways of creating identities? One explanation is that some people are realising that wealth and material possessions cannot meet all of the needs of the self. When greater or different types of consumption no longer overcome feelings of chronic stress, dissatisfaction and lack of fulfilment, some individuals may begin questioning the dominant marketing messages of consumer society contending that consumption is an effective means of self-formation. A participant in a VS course who I interviewed as part of the research reported here spoke of feeling as if she had been lied to: "I grew up being told that if I had all the right things, I would be happy."<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps this sense of having been deceived, which is accompanied by a loss of trust in consumption's ability to deliver

<sup>1</sup>Interviews with participants in the courses were conducted between January and June 1997.

happiness, that allows some individuals to break from the tendency to base one's self-concept almost entirely on what one consumes.

Interviews with participants enrolled in VS courses suggest that the realisation that consuming "things" does not consistently result in self-fulfilment and happiness emerges out of an identity crisis. For some the crisis follows an acute personal or family event (such as divorce, children leaving home or a death). For others, the crisis follows years of over-consuming in an attempt to alleviate the stress, fatigue and unhappiness arising from long hours of work. In all cases, the cause of the crisis seems to be related to the relentless pursuit of wealth for the purpose of consuming material goods.

Based on the above account it would seem that awareness of the environmental impacts of consumption activities is not a motivating factor in reducing one's consumption. For some interviewees, however, awareness that simplifying is also about reducing one's burden on the environment does exist. As one participant in a VS course stated, "I'd always had these deep-seated feelings about protecting the earth, and here I was burning gasoline up and down the freeway and paying someone to clean my huge house. That was my life, and that's not who I am." Many others also exhibited an awareness of the burden of their consumption habits on the environment, but their environmental concern alone was not great enough to motivate them to change those habits. Rather, it was not until they experienced a crisis of being that these individuals began to explore alternatives to consumption.

The above interviewee's statement introduces a useful framework for understanding the growing interest in reducing levels of consumption — whether environmentally motivated or not. What she describes is a feeling of inauthenticity. For existentialist philosophers such as Martin Heidegger (1967), the notion of an authentic or inauthentic being has to do with the control that one exerts over her/his existence. In simplified terms, the greater control we exercise in determining our existence, the more authentic we are. Social psychologists (Gecas 1986, 1991) similarly describe authenticity. For Gecas, authenticity describes the extent to which we are acting according to who we really believe we are. Inauthenticity is the feeling that results from acting in a manner inconsistent with who we believe ourselves to truly be. Inauthenticity is captured in the following extract from another course participant:

Myths that we tell each other — such as don't wear cruddy shoes to an interview — lead us to believe that something external to who [we are] is going to make [us]. And I had certainly unconsciously bought into that ... I had all the stuff that was supposed to make me successful — my car and my clothes, the house in the right neighbourhood and belonging to the right health club — and all the external framework was excellent and inside I kind of had this pit eating away at me.

In short, the appearance or façade that material things can create failed to provide a deeper awareness of her sense of self. This same interviewee explained three courses of action she believes individuals who come to this realisation can take:

One is they have everything and just put on a smile to say "I am happy," but inside they are being eaten away. [Another choice] is they can go "oh my god, I collected all the wrong things now I have to get rid of them and get

the right things." A new marriage, little red sports car, a younger companion — this is what we typically frame as the mid-life crisis. But they still believe that stuff will make them happy. Or, and I think this is the case with lots of people who are moving on to find themselves, they have all the stuff and still aren't happy, and they are really open to looking at the key issues that are preventing them [from being happy].

According to social psychologists, along with the desire for self-esteem and self-efficacy, a desire to feel authentic is one of the three primary motivations of the self (Gecas 1986, 1991). In the creation and maintenance of a healthy self we are motivated to: (1) be viewed in a positive light by ourselves and others, (2) feel as if we have control over our lives and our immediate environment, and (3) strive for a feeling that we are being true to ourselves. Most forms of labour in a capitalist economy strip the labourer of feelings of esteem and efficacy, and Hochschild's research (1983) suggests that jobs that force employees to manage their emotions may also strip them of their feelings of authenticity.

The argument can be made, then, that labourers in the capitalist work force have difficulty obtaining through their work the levels of self-esteem, efficacy and authenticity that they desire; consequently they seek these forms of satisfaction through the consumption of material goods. Others have also emphasised the failure of consumption to meet identity needs. Sociologist Don Slater suggests that "[c]onsumerism simultaneously exploits mass identity crisis by proffering its goods as solutions to the problems of identity, and in the process intensifies it by offering ever more plural values and ways of being" (1997:85).

Yet, many individuals continue successfully to meet the needs of the self through consumption. As the extracts above indicate, others struggle in their attempts to achieve feelings of authenticity through consumption.

### **3. Environmental Concern and the Self-Concept**

The centrality of consumption in the creation and maintenance of self-concepts lies in stark contrast to the role of the natural environment. Among environmentalists, especially deep ecologists, it is believed that we need a completely new way of conceiving of ourselves in relation to the environment (Devall 1988, 1993, 1995; Devall and Sessions 1985; Matthews 1995; Naess 1989). More recently educators (Orr 1992; Thomashow 1996), psychologists (Fox 1990; Roszak 1992) and sociologists (Weigert 1997) have made similar arguments. The self-concept serves as the ground-zero, so to speak, of certain aspects of cognitive decision-making. The self-concept organises attitudes and values so that the individual can access them easily and effectively, and is intertwined with the functioning of values inasmuch as the values we hold allow us to evaluate ourselves, thus influencing our self-esteem. Therefore, though the self-concept is seldom directly shaped by our interactions with the natural environment, it is nevertheless important in our understanding of the development of environmental attitudes and related values.

One significant function of the self in relation to attitudes and values is to provide an index of all of the possible outcomes of different attitude-behaviour combinations. While it may be values that provide standards or goals that serve to guide action (Howard 1995;

Rokeach 1973; Schwartz 1994), it is the self-concept that contains the values used to compare the desirability of the outcomes of our possible courses of action. Values specific to the quality of the natural environment, in theory, should compel an individual to consider and compare the environmental impacts of possible courses of action.

Unfortunately, the picture is not quite so simple. First of all, very few individuals have highly developed values specifically related to the quality of the environment (although many do have attitudes about environmental quality and value "a clean environment" or "a beautiful countryside" (Stern and Dietz 1994; Inglehart 1990)). Stern and Dietz (1994), for example, failed to find a separate biospheric-value orientation distinct from the social-altruistic orientation identified by Schwartz (1994). Even if such values existed, very few individuals have developed an awareness of the possible environmental outcomes of their behavioural decisions. In fact, as Weigert (1997) notes, social, cultural and social-structural obstacles often mediate our experience of the natural environment so that the environmental outcomes of actions we take are felt at temporal and geographical distances.

Nevertheless, a number of researchers have examined the possibility of an ecological self — a sense of self that incorporates the natural environment so that self-preserving behaviour is also "environment-preserving" behaviour. Bragg (1996) finds evidence for the presence of ecological identities in the self-concepts of Australian participants in "Council of All Beings" exercises — meetings in which human participants adopt the identities of nonhuman elements of the natural world (animals or objects) and speak on their behalf before a "council" of all the other species and objects represented in the meeting. Among Earth First! activists, Ingalsbee (1996) also finds evidence for the existence of ecological identities. Statham (1995) explores the importance of the self-concept in the formation of a connected and integrated self as postulated by eco-feminism. Drawing on interviews with several different groups in southeast Florida, she examines how her subjects' self-concepts reveal varying degrees of connectedness to others and to the natural environment. Statham concludes "our sense of self becomes heavily entwined with where we are — in physical terms — something many self-theorists have failed to recognise" (1995:216).

Thomashow also uses experiences with environmental activists to explore how an ecological identity can emerge in everyday life. "Memories of childhood places, the perception of disturbed places, the contemplation of wild places," he writes, "are examples of transformational moments in people's lives, when they realise that their personal identity is intrinsically connected to their direct experience of nature" (1995:xvi). Drawing on the philosophy of the deep ecology movement — especially, but not limited to, those aspects that are relevant to the "ecological self,"<sup>2</sup> — Thomashow proposes that the key to ensuring an environmentally-sustainable future rests on introducing to wider audiences the process by which environmentalists, like those interviewed in Statham's study, expand their sense of self and develop an ecological identity.

<sup>2</sup>Most deep ecologists acknowledge the concept of an ecological self. For specific attempts to conceptualize the ecological self, see Devall and Sessions (1985), Fox (1990), and Macy (1991). Or, for a more general approach to the philosophy of deep ecology, see the edited volumes by Sessions (1995) and Drengson and Inoue (1995).

Weigert (1991, 1997) proposes a process of role-taking that would incorporate anticipated responses from "environmental others." Because role-taking requires an individual to come to see and feel about her/himself the way others do, Weigert (1997) acknowledges that role-taking the earth seems impractical; after all, the earth does not have "feelings" toward us — at least not as far as we know.<sup>3</sup> "By role-taking the earth or one of its life-supporting dynamics," Weigert suggests, "we see self anew — as an interactor within the biosphere ... Role-taking the earth brings us closer to [a] more adequate self" (1997:133).

But at the same time Weigert (1997) acknowledges that except in the case of very local environmental conditions, individuals are not likely to get direct, immediate and interpretable feedback from the environment. Consequently, the ecological self acquires a social characteristic inasmuch as our ability to anticipate the environment's responses to actions with impacts that are distant and beyond our senses depends on the various cultural forms that transmit the understandings of these impacts. If "ecological selves" or "ecological identities" of the types described by the above researchers currently exist only in specialised populations of highly committed environmental activists, it may be more useful to view the relationship between the self-concept and environmental concern in terms of the individual's conception of her/himself as a caring, compassionate or altruistic person. The more compassionate individuals perceive themselves to be, the greater the chance that their compassion extends to the environment.

The previous two sections contrast the function of the self-concept with respect to consumption and the environment. In the case of the former, meeting the needs of the self-concept through consumption, especially the need for authenticity, becomes difficult for some individuals. In other words, consumption creates challenges for the self that for some people results in anti-consumerist sentiments. In the case of the latter, though an ecological self may be unrealistic, it is hypothesised that environmental concern increases relative to an individual's incorporation of compassion and altruism into her/his self-concept. With a conception of oneself as altruistic and compassionate, the self-concept may come to include aspects of the natural world so that pro-environmental behaviour, and in some cases environmental activism, become necessary activities for the maintenance of the self-concept.

#### **4. Linkages Between the Self-Concept and Values**

If a person behaves inconsistently with respect to her/his values, and in doing so does not experience diminished esteem or a sense of inauthenticity, then those values must not be central to the individual's self-concept. For instance, a researcher may observe an individual's values and expect those values to be accompanied by a strong tendency for a particular type of behaviour; but if the values expressed are not central to the self-concept, then the self-discrepancy that would follow from acting otherwise will not result. Values

<sup>3</sup>Deep Ecologists (Devall and Sessions 1985; Devall 1988; Macy 1991; Naess 1989, 1995; Seed *et al.*, 1988) and other spiritual environmentalists (LaChapelle 1988) would argue that the Earth does, in fact, have feelings toward us. Coming out of a more scientifically grounded tradition, Abrams (1996) argues phenomenologically that there is a process of communication between humans and the "more-than-human" world.

have to be linked to the self in a substantive way or else they have no bearing on behavioural motivations. As Hoffman (1984:300) states:

One's moral principles are an integral part of one's conception of what one is or ought to be as a person. People may be powerfully motivated to act in accord with their self-conception, and if moral principles are a significant part of it, actions that depart from the principles may produce tension, a feeling of shame, or guilt.

If concern for the environment or over-consumption are related to values then an understanding of their basis in the self-concept seems essential. Do individuals develop concern for the problem of over-consumption only after their environmental concern has led to an understanding of the relationship between over-consumption and declining environmental quality? Or, does concern for the problem of over-consumption develop independently of environmental concern, having a completely separate basis?

Not only are the answers to these questions vital if we are to find solutions to many environmental problems, but the answers may also be essential if we hope to provide social environments that can nurture and sustain individuals with healthy and functional self-conceptions. In addition, we need to know if the self-concept types associated with particular manifestations of environmental concern or concern for over-consumption appear in unique segments of the population with specific social structural positions. The self-concept, therefore, also provides us with the ability to acknowledge structural-level influences on concern for the environment and for over-consumption. To the extent that individuals' social-structural position influences their ability to meet basic needs and the configuration of their self-concept, some types of environmental concern or anti-consumerism may be more likely than others.

Currently, little research exists examining the correlation between environmental concern and self-concept types. No research has explored the correlation between anti-consumerist sentiments and self-concept types. If environmental concern is a form of social altruism, which is also the assumption behind Stern *et al.*'s (1995) application of Schwartz's (1977) norm-activation theory of altruism to environmental issues, then we would expect altruistic self-concept types to be correlated with environmental concern. Anti-consumerist sentiments, as I earlier asserted, seem to emerge out of a self-interested motivation to assert an authentic self. Therefore, it is proposed that anti-consumerism is more strongly associated with a more narrowly defined self-concept. If environmental concern and concern for over-consumption are conceptually distinct, the following hypotheses should hold: the self-concept types correlated with environmental concern, and their level of correlation, will differ from the self-concept types correlated with anti-consumerist sentiments.

## 5. Methodology and Measurement Methods

To test these hypotheses I analyse data from three different samples. The first is a random sample of 800 Americans who were surveyed in 1995. These respondents were questioned



about their attitudes toward consumption as part of the Merck Family Fund's "Yearning for Balance" study. I refer to this dataset as the Yearning sample. The second sample, termed the Student sample, is a convenience sample of 111 students at two non-traditional college campuses in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. The third sample (Simplicity sample) consists of 179 participants in voluntary simplicity classes offered in the workplace by a non-profit group in a large city in the Pacific Northwest.

All three of the surveys used a single-item measure of environmental concern and asked participants to respond on a scale of one to five to the question: "How concerned are you about the quality of our environment?" The Yearning sample also contained a seven-item scale asking respondents, on a scale of one to ten: "How serious is the problem of [air pollution, water pollution, loss of rain forests, toxic waste, population growth, global warming, garbage]?" The Yearning sample further employed a measure of efficacy with respect to the environment. In this case the survey asked respondents to assess on a scale of one to five the following question: "What difference would it make if we recycled more [or if we passed and enforced tougher anti-pollution laws, if we contributed more money to organisations that advocate for the environment, if companies reduced the amount of packaging on their products]?"

The three studies also shared a three-item measure of concern for over-consumption. Respondents were asked to provide personal assessments ranging from one to five to the questions: "How concerned are you about [the amount of greed and selfishness in our society, our society's focus on material wealth, the effect of advertising and television in our lives]?" The Yearning sample had one additional measure of concern for over-consumption. This particular survey asked respondents for their level of agreement (from one to five) with the following statements: "Most of us buy and consume far more than we need — it's wasteful"; "The amount we buy and consume is a major cause of many environmental problems"; "Many of us buy and consume things as a substitute for what's missing in our lives"; "The 'buy now, pay later' attitude causes many of us to consume more than we need" and "Today's youth are too focused on buying and consuming things."

The Yearning sample contained a set of ten value items that asked respondents to indicate the extent to which each value is a guiding principle in their lives. The ten items, which are rated on a Likert-type scale from one to ten, include: responsibility, prosperity and wealth, friendship, financial security, religious faith, pleasure/having fun, freedom, family life, career success, and generosity.

In a principal components factor analysis using a varimax rotation two factors emerged from the ten values. The factor loadings roughly corresponded to the self-enhancement and self-transcendence value orientations previously identified by Schwartz (1992) and Stern *et al.* (1995). Responsibility, friendship, religious faith, family life and generosity strongly load on the first factor (self-transcendence); while prosperity and wealth, financial security, pleasure/having fun, and career success load more strongly on the second factor (self-enhancement). Freedom and friendship are the only two values that do not load strongly on either factor. To create the self-transcendence and self-enhancement scales, the slightly more conservative approach of requiring a loading greater than 0.5 for an item to be included in a factor was used. In doing this, friendship is placed in the self-transcendence scale, while freedom, which does not have a loading greater than 0.5, is dropped from either

scale. Based on the two factors, self-transcendence and self-enhancement value orientation scales were created by summing each respondent's score for the respective factor's items.

In the Student and Simplicity samples, a value orientation scale with greater conceptual complexity was employed. This 15-item scale contained three items each intended to tap biospheric, self-transcendence, self-enhancement, openness and tradition value orientations. To ensure a sample large enough to perform a factor analysis, the Student and Simplicity samples were pooled ( $N = 290$ ). In this pooled sample, a principal components factor analysis using a varimax rotation revealed four factors: biospheric, self-transcendence, openness and a combination of self-enhancement and tradition. Despite the mixed set of values in the fourth factor, five scales were created representing the five types of value orientations that were built into the measure.

Finally, the surveys used with the Student and Simplicity samples, but not the Yearning sample, contained a self-concept measurement scale. The Twenty Statements Test (TST), modified to ten statements for this study, asked respondents to respond ten times to the question, as if they are asking themselves, "Who am I?" Initially developed by Kuhn and McPartland (1954), this approach allows respondents to express spontaneously how they perceive themselves. Though quantitative analysis can be cumbersome, this approach allows for the expression of the contents of the self-concept, rather than a measure of respondents' attitudes toward various components of their self-concepts. This latter approach requires the researcher to predetermine the most important aspects of respondents' self-concepts. Additionally, such a measure is designed to assess self-esteem — the positive or negative evaluations of parts of the self-concept — rather than the overall content of the self-concept.

Given that an altruistically oriented self-concept is expected to be correlated with environmental concern, the research methodology coded responses to the TST in two different ways. The first coding scheme used Triandis' (1988, 1989) collectivism/individualism distinction to identify respondents whose self-concepts are more "other" oriented. Although not necessarily a reflection of altruism, the more "other" oriented a person is, the more her/his actions are aimed at meeting the needs of others (Triandis 1994). This distinction is similar to the interdependent/independent self-concept types identified by Markus and Kitayama (1991, 1994). The second coding scheme relied on the adaptation of self-concept categories created by Gordon (1968) for the purposes of coding the TST. The category of concern for our purposes is what I refer to as the "compassionate/caring self." Responses ranging from "I am a kind person" to "I am sensitive to other's feelings" are coded in this category. The assumption is that the more often a person conceives of her/his self in these terms, the more likely she/he is to extend that compassion and care to the environment. In both coding schemes, percentages were calculated reflecting the proportion of total responses that were coded as "collectivist" or "compassionate/caring self."

## 6. Findings and Discussion

Table 10.1 reports the standardised regression coefficients for the regression of the five measures of environmental concern and concern for over-consumption on the self-transcendence and self-enhancement value orientations identified in the Yearning sample. A

Table 10.1: Standardised regression coefficients for the regression of environmental concern and concern for over-consumption on value orientations (Yearning Sample).

	Self-transcendence Values	Self-enhancement Values
Environmental Concern		
ENV CONCERN	0.19***	0.09*
SERIOUSNESS	0.27***	0.25***
EFFICACY	0.18***	0.14***
Concern for Over-consumption		
OCONCERN	0.22***	-0.10**
GENBELIEFS	0.12***	-0.05

ENV CONCERN = one-item environmental concern measure; SERIOUSNESS = seven-item scale of perceived seriousness of environmental problems; EFFICACY = four-item scale of perceived effectiveness of solutions to environmental problems; OCONCERN = three-item concern for over-consumption scale; GENBELIEFS = five-item scale of general beliefs about consumption

(\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ )

significant relationship exists between the self-transcendence value orientation and all five measures of environmental concern and concern for over-consumption. In other words, the higher a respondent scored on the self-transcendence value orientation scale, the more likely she/he was to express concern for the environment and for over-consumption. At the same time, however, self-enhancement values are *also* positively correlated with all three environmental concern measures. The higher a respondent scored on the self-enhancement scale, the more likely the individual was to express environmental concern.

Self-enhancement values were not, on the other hand, positively correlated with either measure of concern for over-consumption. Though self-transcendence values seem to provide a strong basis for both environmental concern and concern for over-consumption, self-enhancement values do not seem to provide a basis for concern for over-consumption. In this sense, concern for over-consumption could potentially be a more refined form of environmental concern. For example, it may be that among those who have concern for the environment, only those who have self-transcendence values also have concern for over-consumption. This explanation appears unlikely when examining the distribution of self-transcendence and self-enhancement values in the Yearning sample. Many respondents seem to hold both self-transcendence and self-enhancement values, as seen by the positive correlation between the two value orientations ( $r = 0.28$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Alternatively, it may be that holding both value orientations simultaneously obstructs one from making the connection between consumption habits and environmental or human-rights implications. The drive to consume as a means of self-creation and maintenance, in other words, is not seen as inconsistent with valuing others' well-being.

Table 10.2: Regression of environmental concern and concern for over-consumption on different self-concept types.

	Environmental Concern		Concern for Over-consumption	
	Student Sample	Simplicity Sample	Student Sample	Simplicity Sample
COLLECTIV	-0.09	0.01	-0.15	-0.06
COMPASSION	0.24*	0.00	0.18	-0.18*

COLLECTIV = percent of TST responses coded "collectivistic/interdependent;"  
COMPASSION = frequency of "compassionate/caring self" responses in TST

(\* p<.05)

Given the mixed findings with respect to value orientations and the two types of concern, a look at the relationship between self-concept types and the two varieties of concern is necessary. All three samples (Yearning, Simplicity, Student) exhibited virtually identical levels of concern for the environment. The Simplicity and Yearning samples, in contrast, were significantly higher than the Student sample in their concern for over-consumption.

Table 10.2 shows the standardised regression coefficients for the simple regressions of the two concern variables on the two different self-concept types that were measured. The number of collectivistic responses in one's self-concept is not correlated with either type of concern in either sample. The second self-concept measure, which used the frequency of "compassionate/caring self" responses, resulted in a significant positive correlation with environmental concern ( $r = 0.24$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) in the Student sample, and a significant negative correlation with concern for over-consumption in the simplicity sample ( $r = -0.18$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). In addition, there is no significant difference between the two samples in the mean number of collectivistic responses per respondent ( $F = 0.48$ , d.f. = 1, 285; n.s.). There is also no significant difference in the mean frequency of "compassionate/caring self" responses between the two samples ( $F = 0.24$ , d.f. = 1, 285; n.s.).

In the Yearning sample, self-transcendence and self-enhancement values were both found to be positively correlated with environmental concern. In the case of concern for the problem of over-consumption, this research found a positive correlation with self-transcendence values and a negative correlation with self-enhancement values. Most interestingly, it was found that "compassionate/caring self" responses are negatively correlated with concern for over-consumption — while the exact opposite holds in the case of the Student sample.

Based on these findings, it appears that in some instances concern for over-consumption may be another manifestation of environmental concern. For individuals who hold self-transcendence, but not self-enhancement values, concern for over-consumption is high; most likely, this is explained by the importance of these values in the self-concept and the ability to make connections between these values and the impact of one's consumption habits on the environment and others. Among those who hold self-enhancement *and* self-transcendence

values, concern for the environment may derive from an egoistic basis. As Stern *et al.* (1995) have noted, it is completely possible to find egoistically based reasons to care for the environment. Additionally, holding both sets of values simultaneously, though cognitively feasible, may result in an inability to link one's consumption habits to the subsequent impacts on humans and the environment.

This examination of self-concept types, however, suggests that people motivated enough to attend voluntarily a course on reducing consumption are not motivated by self-transcendence values that are anchored in a compassionate and caring self-concept. Though they may hold such values, their sense of themselves as compassionate and caring people is not related to their concern with over-consumption. Rather, such concern has more to do with a crisis of self, perhaps originating from difficulties in using consumption to meet the basic needs for self-esteem, efficacy and authenticity. In terms of the participants in NWEI's VS classes, it may be that these individuals have begun a process of self-examination and have opened themselves up to the idea that there may be non-material ways to meet their self-esteem, self-efficacy and authenticity needs. In short, a compassionate/caring self-concept may be more important in the development of environmental concern than concern for over-consumption.

These findings are limited by a number of factors. Analyses of existing data, such as those performed on the Yearning sample, tend to suffer from inadequate operationalisation. In this case, the absence of a self-concept measure was severely limiting. The other two samples were insufficiently large, and insufficiently representative, to allow for adequate generalisations. One consequence of this may have been too little variation in the environmental concern and concern for over-consumption measures. The Pacific Northwest is known for its progressive environmental thinking, and this may have skewed the levels of environmental concern, especially in the Simplicity sample.

In the future, research using larger samples drawn from international populations should help identify more precisely the relationship between environmental concern and concern for over-consumption. Furthermore, Maslow's (1970) theory of the hierarchy of needs and Inglehart's (1990) post-materialism thesis both suggest that as more and more material needs are met, people's priorities move toward nonmaterial issues like justice and equality. Such a shift, these propositions posit, explains the emergence of new social movements including those focusing on human rights and environmental issues. Yet, Maslow's theory holds that after basic-material needs are met, individuals shift their focus to non-material needs such as love and belongingness, and ultimately self-realisation. Multi-national cross comparative research in the spirit of Inglehart's that approaches concern for over-consumption as an outgrowth of blocked attempts to meet higher order needs such as self-actualisation is needed.

Clearly, the research presented here falls far short of such a goal. My intention instead has been to stimulate new social science perspectives on motivations for changes in consumption habits and not to present empirical evidence in support of a particular view. Hopefully, such new perspectives can build on the notion that among some people concern for over-consumption may be linked to strategies for meeting self needs as opposed to concern for the environmental impacts of consumption. This may make an important contribution to discussions about approaches to policy and social change that will move us toward more sustainable forms of consumption.

## 7. Conclusion

Interest in voluntary simplicity, for many, has a clear environment-related basis. Ultimately, however, these individuals may constitute a very small portion of the growing number of people interested in voluntary simplicity. If this is the case, we need to know more about the rest of the people who buy "how-to-simplify-your-life" books and visit voluntary simplicity sites on the Internet by the thousands. The potential for massive voluntary changes in consumption practices, not for altruistic or environmentally motivated reasons, but for more inwardly oriented reasons must be explored. Such investigations must consider how culture, gender, social class, wealth and other key variables influence changing consumption habits. However, voluntary changes in consumption levels in response to a crisis of self may not be a feasible way of moving us towards sustainable consumption if such a crisis depends on first achieving unsustainable levels of material wealth. Until we determine whether this is the case we will benefit from linking our understanding of the functioning of human values with what we know about the motivational significance of the self-concept.

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