

Re-reading 'Voluntary Simplicity and Ethics of Consumption'

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'Voluntary Simplicity and the Ethics of Consumption' (Shaw & Newholm, 2002) was published in the journal *Psychology and Marketing* in a special issue dedicated to 'Anti-consumption Attitudes' in 2002. The paper explored consumer concerns for both the extent and nature of consumption choices, drawing on findings from two qualitative studies of known ethical consumers. The paper has reached nearly 400 citations, making a reflection on this piece a timely endeavour. In revisiting the paper we believe the basic premise remains convincing. In their various ways, we argued, our respondents, who self-identified as 'ethical consumers', all spoke of restraint to their consumption. It seemed, however, there were many different ways to narrate and enact 'ethical consumption' and simplicity making us wary of simple definitions. We thought this seemed of interest, in part, because we drew on our two independently conducted studies to arrive at the same conclusion. Nevertheless, in retrospect we find some confounding as well as confirming factors. We frame these below around a consideration of history, product choices and political importance. Firstly, in terms of history, our paper begins with the contextualisation of the phenomena, 'ethical consumption' and 'voluntary simplicity', as a "growing awareness" among consumers. This is not how we would now present our argument. Since our subsequent work on the histories of consumption ethics (Newholm, Newholm & Shaw, 2015; Newholm & Newholm, 2015) it has become clear that some people have always considered the way they consume *and the amount consumed* to be matters of considerable deliberation. In 2002 (Shaw & Newholm) we argued: "It is suggested that those who begin thinking of their consumer choices in ethical terms are likely to consider these practices in terms of sustainable futures...". Being aware of a history of ethical consumption we might now say that whilst it seems likely that the unsustainability of consumer culture will trigger voluntary moves towards simplicity among some, the notion that excessive materialism is an impediment to a flourishing life has a long history (Trentmann, 2016). Thus, the conjunction within consumption ethics between compassionate purchasing and voluntary simplicity is far less novel than our 2002 paper might have suggested.

We worked with what seems in retrospect a very limited bibliography both in terms of scope and sometimes appropriateness. This, we think, is partly because academic writing on consumption ethics only blossomed this century. It is gratifying in a way to be surprised by the contrast between the narrow literature resources we had then and present cross-disciplinary abundance.

It is also good to see a fit between what we were reporting and new work in other disciplines. The philosopher Peter Wenz's (2005) virtue theory proposing a 'principle of anticipatory cooperation', for example, proposes consumers take "actions that deviate from the social norm in the direction of the ideal that virtuous people aspire to for themselves and others but which do not deviate so much that virtue impairs instead of fosters flourishing." This seems to chime with the experiences we were reporting in 2002 (Shaw & Newholm): "Indeed some holding ethical concerns actually restrained [cutbacks in consumption] in some of their personal relationships". Similarly, a clear concern of John Woolman in the 18th Century was that his Friends would not understand his distinctive purchases and his simplicity (Newholm, Newholm & Shaw, 2015). Some two-and-a-half centuries later the anthropologist, Cindy Isenhour (2012), reports her 'beyond the mainstream' respondents *needing* to seek "like minded friends" to avoid these misunderstandings. The uneasy connection between individual consumption simplicity and human social relations is undoubtedly one warranting further study.

We are also inclined to think, however, that had we been considerate of a history of ethical consumption in our 2002 literature search we might have found further work that would have strengthened our case. David Craig in his 2006 book explored John Ruskin's⁴ 19th Century work on consumption. According to Craig (2006), Ruskin's advice to consumers was to ask:

"first, what condition of existence you cause in the producers of what you buy; secondly, whether the sum you have paid is just to the producer, and in due proportion, lodged in his hands; thirdly, to how much clear use, for food, knowledge, or joy, this that you have bought can be put; and fourthly, to whom and in what way it can be most speedily and serviceably distributed."

The prior part of Ruskin's imperative addresses what we would now call 'ethical consumption'. The latter part addresses 'voluntary simplicity' in requiring a justification of the purchase through a frugal judgement. Ruskin uncritically presents these parts as constituent of the excellence of

⁴ We are aware that Ruskin's concern with the value of frugality was by no means the first voice doing so but we select it because it relates more closely to what we would now recognise as consumption and simplicity.

consumption practice. Thus, both the historical practice and development within moral economics of consumption ethics in terms of considered consumption *and* restraint were far better established than we had appreciated at the time of writing.

Secondly, in terms of product choices, although we were writing our paper only 15 years ago, some of the consumer practices under the heading ‘Maintained Levels of Consumption’ have now moved on and, as such, our examples are dated. We suspect this is because much has come onto the market to facilitate this approach for consumers as a means to address ethical concerns. We are struck, for example, by the difference between what we had found from our studies in the 1990s and Isenhour’s (2012) very sophisticated ‘prestige posh’ in Sweden, published a decade later. We reported that “Some consumers look to technological solutions for more sustainable [less unsustainable] consumption choices. This behaviour would include buying some green products such as catalytic converters on fuel-economic cars, clockwork radios, superefficient refrigerators, and laundry balls to replace detergents.” (Shaw & Newholm, 2002). Among these “technological fixes” were energy efficient appliances, where

“One respondent [from our studies] had investigated a special range of [kitchen] appliances with exceptionally high environmental credentials. These had proved to be exceptionally expensive and so he had bought an ordinary refrigerator with a good specification. Because he could well afford the exceptional product⁵, why he did not is of interest. He said he could not justify spending on objects at the cost of his charitable, people-centred giving.” (Shaw & Newholm, 2002)

At the time of our research in the late 1990s some participants were certainly making use of energy ratings displayed on new kitchen appliances and we may assume from the above quote that rather higher rated market ‘solutions’ to environmental issues were also available.

What we were reporting, however, seems markedly different from Isenhour. Those practising ‘conspicuous green consumption’ “replacing light bulbs or by purchasing eco-labelled products” (Isenhour, 2012) and, more specifically the ‘prestige posh’ purchasing a new “top-of-the-line standing mixer, [...] state-of-the-art video projection system [and] advanced mobile phones[;] items that will last a long time.” (Isenhour, 2012). As in our 2002 paper, this supposed product longevity is where the interesting restraint to their consumption exists.

Although no direct comparison should be made between findings from qualitative work conducted with relatively affluent consumers in the UK and Sweden, it suggests an interesting longitudinal study would be to follow ‘techno-fix consumers’ through time. Isenhour reports,

⁵ The respondent’s wife had a professional position and he worked as a Chief Schools Inspector.

however, one of her ‘prestige posh’ respondents questioning his own strategy. “Yes, that is part of my rationale but I don’t know if it is true because people that have expensive, good quality electronic things, they are also the ones who buy a lot and change them a lot.” (Isenhour, 2012). Empirically, we should ask, whether or not it is the case that ultimately the well-meaning ‘prestige posh techno-fix’ consumer project is counterproductive in environmental terms. Are some variants of the project more promising than others? Many ‘alternative’ products, clockwork products and laundry balls, remain marginal markets so is there a difference in trajectory between ‘alternative’ and ‘mainstream’ capitalised products? What might have been ‘super-efficient’ in the late 1990s would be considered inefficient now and be superseded by new market offerings. How do consumers who espouse the ‘techno-fix’ strategy address this conundrum?

Finally, our paper gained attention less through its central argument, that we were reporting an empirically derived coincidence between our data sets showing simplifying narratives to be common among self-selected ‘ethical consumers’, but more so because of its political importance. At a time when Fair Trade was being mainstreamed (Low & Davenport, 2005; Fridell, 2009), ethical consumption as a project was being associated with neo-liberalism as a ‘responsibilization’ (Littler, 2008; Lekakis, 2013; Johnston, 2008) of the consumer through choice in the marketplace. The pejorative association of ‘ethical consumption’ with the neo-liberal concept of ‘the market’ will, in part, result from a narrowed view of the former around choice between products: the ethical/unethical, environmental/damaging, harmful/harmless, etc. The (ethical) consumer is responsible *only* for making the right purchase choice. Because of this narrowing of the term to market transactions we began to use it less in our writing and only specifically where we referred to purchasing products. We then spoke of consumption ethics as a wider term that could include abstention and frugality as well as consumption of ‘ethical’, alternative, second-hand products etc.

The ‘responsibilization’ thesis itself raises many awkward questions. Was it not the nascent neo-liberal project that during the 18th and 19th centuries ‘de-responsibilised’ the consumer as its economics swept away alternative concepts? (Slater, 1997) Didn’t the wizards of neo-liberalism tell consumers to ‘just do it’? Is neo-liberalism to be taken as a monolithic project now set on passing culpability for unsustainability to the individual when much of its marketing tells us not to worry, the corporation has a plan A because there can be no plan B? We should treat this thesis with some caution.

In a series of considerations of the relationship between what he elegantly refers to as the *good* and the *simple*, Kim Humphrey (2010) says, “The immediate answer is, as Shaw and Newholm

reasonably contend, ethics and frugality rolled into one.” Ethical consumption can hardly be a servant of global finance if it advocated simplicity.

“Together, [Humphrey, says] the simple and the good can thus constitute a formidable response to a world geared to consumption, but what is also reinforced is the fundamental weakness of both these dominant forms of ‘anti-consumerism’; their propensity to sideline the question of structural socio-economic reform brought about by collective effort that is not mediated through individualised acts, but effected through purposeful interconnection and collaboration.”

We agree this is a weakness. It is, however, clear that the politically active are not immune from ethical consumption (its arch critic George Monbiot (2013) is striving to be vegan) and, as Clive Barnett et al. (2010) argue, those seeking to consume ethically often engage in ‘purposeful interconnection’.

Evaluations by academics with interests in political movements of the practices of consumption ethics effectively co-opt ‘consumers’ into their schema and pronounce them to be competent or, more usually, deficient practices. This is, we think, a quite legitimate critique within the parameters of political discourse. Since the practices of ‘excellence in consumption’ can boast hundreds, perhaps thousands of years of development (Newholm, Newholm & Shaw, 2015), however, we suggest more respect be accorded to the principled lives that have constituted, and presently extend, this good and simple⁶ history.

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⁶ Whilst this might seem like a value judgement, we would argue that the ‘good and simple’ is in accord with the scientific consensus on sustainability and the way we should live.

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