Reflexive Dispossession and the Self:
Constructing a Processual Theory of Identity

HÉLÈNE CHERRIER *

JEFF B. MURRAY **

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* Hélène Cherrier (Ph.D. Arkansas) is a lecturer in Marketing, Economics and Business Building H69, University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia. Email: h.cherrier@econ.usyd.edu.au.

** Jeff B. Murray (Ph.D. Virginia Tech) is a professor in the Department of Marketing and Logistics, Walton College of Business, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas 72701. Email: jmurray@walton.uark.edu.

Abstract

Based on phenomenological interviews with consumers who voluntarily engaged in the process of dispossession, the study develops an emerging processual theory of identity, which emphasizes four main stages: sensitization, separation, socialization, and striving. Each phase corresponds to evolving consumers' perceptions of the world and positioning of the self, and characterizes distinct meanings and experiences of consumption. Furthermore, our analysis shows that, although there is no possible self-making outside of consumer culture, its normative background is not fixed, but rather fluid, and can be deconstructed when it no longer operates within the realm of consumers' world-view.

INTRODUCTION

What we did before we even bought this place, we sat down and we talked about it and we said, ‘What do we know about the lifestyle we want to lead?’ And we said, ‘We don’t know anything really.’ All we know is that we only use the kitchen, the bathroom, and the bedroom. And so all we really need is a space that would accommodate those needs. And then we decided that as we began to recognize what our needs are, then we would change the space we were living in to meet those needs. So that is what we ended up with was a place that was exactly what we needed. No extra space; nothing that doesn’t work for our lifestyle. And so when we came out and looked at this cabin, it was 400 square feet. It was one room and one bathroom. And we said, ‘Perfect.’ We’ll just start with that and we’ll see how life goes. (Mary)

In the excerpt above, one of our informants describes a self-reflective, deliberate process of acquiring exactly what her family needs. This process stands in stark contrast to the way that Mary consumed for most of her life, enacting a conspicuous and extravagant lifestyle. Although this decision to consume less was a culmination of many events over a period of years, when she finally decided to act, it was as if she shed an old skin. Mary said goodbye to part of her self and began the process of constructing a new consumption identity. Later in her narrative she states: “It almost was easier just to clean the slate and start over than it was to try to take where we were and form it into some kind of lifestyle that was going to work.” Understanding this process of *cleaning the slate and starting over* can teach us a lot about the ways that dispossession relates to

consumers' identity formation. Each of our informants gradually dismantled one consumption lifestyle then constructed a new one based on multiple cultural discourses and ways of life. Although this transition was uniquely intertwined with each informant's narrative, reading across cases reveals clear patterns in the dispossession process and identity transition. It is our objective to use these patterns to construct a processual theory of consumer identity. We refer to identity as "processual" to indicate that identity is not something that is constructed and then finished but is instead a continuous process of negotiation different dimensions of the self (i.e., distinction, social integration, continuity, and change) and constraining social structures.

In the context of discovery-oriented theory development (Wells 1993), we refer to three specific fields. The first disciplinary backdrop connects dispossession practices to life transitions and identity projects (Bonsu and Belk 2003; Kates 2001; Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005; McCracken 1986; Oswald 1999; Patterson, Hill, and Maloy 1995; Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000; Shelton and Peters 2006; Schouten 1991; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Young 1991; Young and Wallendorf 1989). Although the identity process we describe includes each dimension of the consumption cycle (i.e., acquiring, consuming, and disposing), dispossession takes on special significance. In reviewing the last twenty years of interpretive research, Arnould and Thompson (2005) note that dispossession practices have received comparatively less attention yet it is clear that they play a significant role in identity negotiation. More specifically, we build upon recent research on disposition of possessions such as the Price, Arnould, and Curasi (2000) and Lastovicka and Fernandez (2005) articles. Price, Arnould, and Curasi (2000) describe a process of disposition where older consumers, wanting to maintain control of cherished possessions, transfer these possessions to caretakers or engage in ritualistic forms of gift giving. Lastovicka and Fernandez (2005) examine the punctual disposition of meaningful

personal possessions to strangers outside their interpersonal networks. In both cases, the dispossession process is closely linked to identity negotiation. Relative to this research, our informants are younger, still participating in the work force, and are gradually disposing of everyday objects in an effort to change their consumption lifestyle. Furthermore, our study situates the concept of dispossession beyond the material. Our informants experienced a change of self, shedding away an old self for a newer self. They cleaned their soul and constructed a new idea of being and consuming. In this sense, dispossession represents a process of giving up one's current self, which may include material disposition, for another self. As an existential transition, dispossession prolongs the past into the present, and into an envisioned future through ongoing identity negotiation and reflection.

The second literature is found in popular culture. Various types of voluntary dispossession practices are making a popular resurgence. For example, a search of "voluntary simplicity" on *Google* results in 1.5 million hits in .28 seconds and over 800,000 hits for "Affluenza." Although this perspective can be traced all the way back to Confucius, Jesus, Thoreau, and Gandhi, it entered the popular vernacular in America with books such as Elgin's (1981) *Voluntary Simplicity*, Schumacher's (1974) *Small is Beautiful*, and Shi's (1985) *The Simple Life*. These books were emphasizing personal growth, balance, spirituality, and community as they relate to consumption lifestyles. More contemporary examples such as Merkel's (2003) *Radical Simplicity*, Pierce's (2000) *Choosing Simplicity*, and Schor's (1998) *Downshifters* take a pragmatic point of view emphasizing self-expression, increased free time, and liberation from credit cards enslavement. In addition to printed resources, the idea of moving from a life dictated by material accumulation to a life of integrity is distributed via virtual networks. For example, "The Voluntary Linking Network," "Center for a New American Dream," "The Pierce

Simplicity Study,” “Seeds of Simplicity,” “New Horizons for Learning,” “Cecile Andrews & Simplicity Circles Projects”, and “The New Roadmap Foundation” expose individuals to an alternative vision of a healthy, whole, and balanced life. In 1995, the Trends Research Institute of Rhinebeck, NY declared simplifying life as “one of the top trends of the nineties” (Schwarz and Schwarz 1998). Viewed as a mainstream phenomenon (Schor 1998), the idea of scaling down consumption is also identified as a money-making activity (Vanderbilt, 1996). In fall 1999, a Voluntary simplicity conference at the Open Center in SoHo drew more than 300 people for an average cost of \$150 to discuss subjects such as “Are we Possessed by Our Possessions?” and “Leading a Life of Integrity” and in April 29th 2000, a conference entitled “No Purchase Necessary: Building the Voluntary Simplicity Movement” took place at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY. While both meetings advocated changing the fundamental values that underlie consumerist culture and economics practices to values of inner development, quality of life, and sustainability; the conferences also served as promotional sites for publishing companies and authors. The cultural significance of downshifting to the relatively well-educated, Western audience is evident when we consider the impressive box office sales for movies that reject Westernized values and consumerism such as Fight Club or Al Gore’s An Inconvenient Truth (<http://www.climatecrisis.net/>). Our informants were exposed to these anti-consumerism discourses so it is important to take them into account in our analyses.

Although our informants were exposed to current cultural trends on anti-consumerism, they were also committed to discovering a new way of life. In order to appreciate the process of downshifting as an individual project, the third disciplinary background relates to Fromm’s critical perspective on consumer culture. In the 1960’s, Erich Fromm distinguished two different modes of existence, one of *having* and one of *being* (Fromm 1978). The *having mode of*

existence presupposes that individuals acquire objects, people, ideas and knowledge to reach well-being. Yet, this gratifying promise is never fulfilled and, as a result, the having mode leads to a perpetual search for more and new experiences. Fromm characterizes the type of individuals who lead a having mode of existence using the concept of *marketing character*. Described as a man for himself, the marketing character experiences himself as a commodity that is exchanged and traded on the “personality market” under the principle of “I am as you desire me” (p.146-147). Its manipulative thinking strives to have, to save, and to hoard money and material things. For the marketing character, there are no deep emotional ties that surpass the need to possess and own objects. All is to be acquired and possessed. Fromm’s notion of *the marketing character* is deeply embedded in the radical postmodern view of the self, which conveys that everything about the self is inscribed in and through commodities (Shankar and Fitchett 2002). Individuals are serialized consumers hypnotized by marketed ideas for who to be and how to live (Baudrillard 1994). Ultimately, marketers construct needs, control desire and determine consumption practices. They define consumers’ realities, and hence their identities (Kozinets et al., 2004).

Along with the “ego centered” and “individualist” having mode of existence, Fromm offers the possibility of living a *being mode of existence* for which individuals are no longer alienated by the social system. Under a being mode of existence, individuals refuse fraudulent traditions and prestigious affiliations with social status, possessions, body, or image. They are critical toward the system and all that surrounds them. This critical reflection gives them independence and freedom from social chains. Although individualistic, their goal in life relates more to emancipation from social constraints than to self-ownership. Fromm’s view on the mode of being is closely linked to the liberated postmodern view of the self. With the proliferation of

sites for identity negotiation and self-construction, the emancipated postmodern self is free to become anyone and anything (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). The main resemblance between Fromm's being mode of existence and the postmodern liberated self is its immunity from mass suggestion and its active participation in the world. Fromm's optimistic view on the being mode of existence, even only succinct, opens up to the possibility of moving from a having to a being mode of existence; or from an alienated postmodern self to an optimistic and liberating self.

Drawing on Fromm's having/being modes of existence, downshifting literature, and research on identity transition; we offer a processual theory of identity. Given that only detailed description on a case by case basis will provide the contextual detail needed for theory building, the next section presents information pertaining to our judgment sample, data collection, and analytic procedures.

METHOD

Consumers identities are now formed from an array of cultural discourses, social roles, resisting subject positions, leisure activities, the creative use of products and brands, and, as we will show, dispossession strategies. As a result, we propose that the best way to study identity is to examine the descriptive details of its gradual negotiation. Emphasizing descriptive detail involves collecting consumer narratives or life-stories. Consumer narratives enable researchers to understand the gradual development of the self in context. According to McAdams (1993), in order to understand identity, the researcher must have access to the individual's contemplations on their journey through life; he refers to this understanding as an individual's *personal myth*: "I must come to see in all its particulars the narrative of the self, the 'personal myth,' that I have tacitly, even unconsciously, composed over the course of my years. It is a story I continue to

revise, and tell to myself as I go on living” (p. 11). The personal myth is the *central* story behind the various episodes in one’s life.

Since our informants experienced an existential transition, deconstructing one consumer identity and constructing a new identity, their personal myths were too complex to be dominated by a single character. Their myths comprised a number of characters including past selves, future selves, perceived selves, and desired selves. These selves or characters are referred to as *imagoes*, which are internalized complexes of actual or imagined personas (McAdams 1993). These Imagoes interact and sometimes conflict in the making of identity (McAdams 1993). A vivid example of this narrative tension can be seen in Holt and Thompson’s (2004) breadwinner versus rebel model in their analysis of masculinity. These authors describe how the dialectical tension between these models resulted in a third synthetic cultural ideal called the man-of-action hero. This example is particularly relevant for this research since we also found a dialectical tension between the *having* and the *being* imagoes. The having imagoes that are oriented toward social acceptance and association were conflicting with the being imagoes that seek independence and creativity. Understanding this narrative tension fits well with our middle-out or dialectical conceptualization of identity negotiation.

Methodological Procedures

Data collection began by posting flyers at several organizations and listing advertisements in local newspapers in a medium-sized college town asking for individuals that have recently made a change in consumption. After a number of short phone conversations, twelve individuals were recruited to interview as informants. Each of these individuals had

changed their consumption lifestyle by consuming less or downshifting. All of the informants were Caucasian, there were seven females, five males, and ages ranged from 20 to 57 (Table 1). The informants represented diversity in education, occupation, and socioeconomic status. This is important in that it provided a broad range of experiences, which in turn provided useful information for contextualizing a processual theory of identity.

Given that our focus of inquiry was first person detailed descriptions of downshifting experiences and how these experiences are interpreted in the context of their narrative, open-ended in-depth interviews were conducted. We generally followed the format for existential-phenomenological interviewing as discussed by Thompson, Locander, and Pollio (1989) and then further developed by Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997). Each interview took place in a quiet location where the informants felt comfortable describing their personal experiences in detail. Informants were given a pseudonym and assured of anonymity and confidentiality. The shortest interview was just under two hours and the longest was just over three hours. Interviews were audio-taped then transcribed verbatim resulting in a 459-page double spaced text.

An existential-phenomenological perspective emphasizes that narratives reflect an individual's lived experience and that each narrative story is intertwined with a specific context. This involves three central concepts: intentionality, emergent dialogue, and hermeneutic endeavor (Thompson et al. 1989). Regarding *intentionality*, the informants were selected because they have lived the experience of downshifting consumption. Dialogue with the informant was conversational and allowed to *emerge* on the basis of the informant's story. The interviewer set the direction of the dialogue by asking grand tour questions such as: "What is your experience as a consumer?" "How would you describe your lifestyle?" "Does your current lifestyle differ from few years ago?" When conducting the interviews, every effort was made to keep the informants

on track with their downshifting experience without being too directive. The interviewer demonstrated active listening and prompted the respondent for details regarding the relevant downshifting episodes in their life. The third central concept, *hermeneutic endeavor*, brings us to the analytical procedures.

Analytical Procedures

The hermeneutic endeavor represents an analytical technique emphasizing part-to-whole relationships. These relationships exist on many different levels. Specifically, a single story is interpreted within the context of the text as a whole; the text is analyzed from the perspective of our conceptual framework of dialectical identity construction; and the conceptual framework is interpreted based on the broader perspective of sociohistoric and cultural meanings. By tacking back and forth from single meanings to broader perspectives, we were able to form interpretations *in context*. This iterative movement, or dialectical tacking (Pollio et al. 1997), continued until themes useful for constructing a processual theory of identity were discovered.

The analytical process began by reading the text one time through. This gave the authors a sense of the entire text as it relates to identity issues. After this initial reading, intratextual analyses began where an interpretation of each consumer story was completed. At this stage, the authors focused on interpreting the plot of each story. “Plot” involves narrative movement and narrative framing (Thompson 1997). Narrative movement gives the story a sense of temporal sequence, like chapters in a book, or destination (McAdams 1993). For each informant, there was a sense that their story was going somewhere, there was a sense of past, present, and future, it was building towards an end. Narrative framing is the process of selecting and highlighting

certain details out of the field of experience (Polkinghorne 1988; Thompson 1997). Thus, framing focused on the informant's change in consumption lifestyle and the ways in which searching to move from a mode of having to a mode of being contributed to a new identity. For this stage in the analyses, each informant's story was discussed, interpreted, and written.

The next stage in the analyses involved reading across stories in search of common story lines. The purpose of intertextual analyses is to move up a level of abstraction and begin to interpret themes. Four themes were discovered: sensitization, separation, socialization, and striving. Each theme corresponds to a particular stage of identity construction. The relevance of each four "S" stages of identity construction is described for all of our informants in table 1. In the following discussion, we first offer one of our informants downshifting story. We then provide a detailed description for each stage; yet, due to space restriction we only use two or three of our informants to exemplify each stage of our processual theory of identity.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATIONS

In the following discussion, we describe Mary's downshifting story as it unfolded during the intra-case analysis. We then offer the four identity negotiation stages that emerged from the inter-case analysis.

Mary's story

Eight years prior to the interview, Mary was a supportive wife and mother of two sons living in an "impersonal yet functional house" that her husband had built. She used to drive her convertible BMW everyday to bring her boys to school, soccer practices, and music classes.

Although she had everything one needs in our Western consumer culture, Mary had reached a crossroads. Her two sons now grown-up were ready to leave home, her husband was retiring and selling his business, and she was experiencing changes as she went through menopause. With the children gone and her husband's business sold, Mary's daily routines broke down. She suddenly was living in a new reality in which she no longer had to cook for her children or help her husband managing his business paperwork. The interruptions in Mary's lifestyle were catalytic events for her to emotionally "clean the slate" to "totally re-look at everything." First, re-considering her consumption lifestyle, Mary realized that her "functional house with its climbing gym, five bedrooms, and a big kitchen" were no longer responding to her needs.

"We'd acquired all this kayaking, canoeing, climbing gear and all that stuff.

We weren't doing that any more. We didn't need all that stuff any more.[...]

And I guess if your needs are ego-driven, then maybe a big house that you never go in the rooms but it looks good outside would meet your needs. But for us that did not meet our needs anymore." (Mary)

In addition, Mary re-evaluated her social network. She emotionally detached herself from the ones she loves. She stopped communicating with her husband, her extended family, and her friends. She also renounced her values, morals, and religious beliefs.

"At one point in there, probably around in 1992, somewhere in there, I literally gave up all my beliefs and I even broke off my associations. And I even in my

mind separated myself from my husband. Because I just felt the need to clean the slate. Just like totally re-look at everything.” (Mary)

Searching for a new orientation in life, she disengaged herself from her past social responsibilities and opened her own store. Although managing the store was exciting and challenging, Mary experienced lonely struggles and long working hours as a business woman. Mary felt powerless and feared to lose her husband. Feeling depressed and lonely, Mary exposed her fear of getting divorced to her husband. With her husband’s suggestion, she accepted to abandon all of her past personal belongings and moved into a 400 square feet cabin in the woods with no heat or running water. Reading Mary’s story several times, one can clearly conclude that Mary could not have engaged in simplifying her life without the social influence of her husband.

“I just didn’t want to face having to part with all my stuff, and also all my kids’ stuff and what to do with all that. So I just said, “I can’t do this. I am too busy.” And so he said, “No problem. I will have a garage sale.” And so I just went through the house and said, “These are the things I want. Sell the rest of it.” So he advertised to all our friends and he sold it all. He sold everything.

Our entire kitchen, all our clothes, our ski jackets, I mean everything!” (Mary).

Mary tried to follow the consumption lifestyle her husband had suggested. Yet, “living as simply as possible” was not easy. Mary had grown up in a home with running water, heat, and electricity. She had learned to appreciate and even expect this comfort in her life. After two years living in a 400 square foot cabin without utilities, Mary expressed a tension between having

comfort and living simply. With her husband's support, she decided to install water and electricity. Later, they both agreed to add a modern kitchen and built up a barn for Mary's artistic activities.

“This is the first house that matches our personality. The other houses, I think they were trying to do more like what you were talking about. Maybe they were trying to say to the world, “Ken Ewing is a builder and he can build cool houses” or something. And this is the first house that we've just had fun, we've expressed ourselves artistically, and we've only built, have what we need. Not you know, what we think other people would like.” (Mary)

Mary's story shows how she and her husband gradually dismantled one consumption lifestyle then constructed a new one based on multiple cultural discourses and ways of life. Along with the shift in her consumption lifestyle, Mary developed her artistic self. She now has a barn in which she creates jewelries, clothes, and sporadically teaches classes on how to use beads. Protective of her new life, Mary mentioned at the end of the interview struggling to keep her lifestyle simple. She has to resist her husband's constant need to expand and construct, and also find the strength to disregard her friends' unsupportive opinions.

Although this transition was uniquely intertwined with Mary's narrative, reading across our informants' cases reveals four phases in the process of identity transition: Sensitization, Separation, Socialization, and Striving.

Sensitization

The story of this first theme can be summarized by Socrates' familiar claim: "The unexamined life is not worth living." In each case, our informants began the process of downshifting by closely examining their own lives. This process of reflection was triggered by an event that occurred at a turning point in their narrative. The triggering event was identified when the informant would use it to discuss contrasting images of "before" and "after." Informants would describe their lives before the event in ways which were interpreted as pre-reflective or non-critical. Simply, they described a life of acceptance, conformity, or just going along. By way of illustration, Layla uses the metaphor *asleep*, she was "asleep and not noticing what happened," and Phillip uses the phrase *not thinking*: "whenever I did blind buying of name brands or whatever, it was just because I wasn't thinking."

Although our informants were raised in different cultural contexts with a variety of social practices, they all lived pre-established and conventional ways of life. For example, while being *asleep*, Layla's ways of life was characterized by her parents' religious education. Religious beliefs were important to her parents and they taught her to live according to the values and norms of the church. Layla went to Catholic school where she attended mass every morning and studied the bible in the afternoon. These values were part of her identity providing a sense of continuity and permanence. For Layla, this was the "before." Note that in the excerpt below, she begins with the past tense:

"I was Catholic. I was going to church every Sunday with my father who was really into it. He taught different church classes and was maybe too much into it. I went to Catholic school for three years and after that I went to Junior high." (Layla).

The acceptance and conformity of the “before” allowed our informants to live without reflecting on their reality of things and of others (Giddens 1991). Both Giddens and Goffman talk about the way individuals unreflectively use “appropriate” or “conventional” responses in given situations. The pre-established framework on how to live life provides a regime of truth and serves as a form of “protective cocoon” that provides security (Goffman 1956). Giddens refers to this as ontological security, a stable mental state derived from a sense of order (Giddens 1990; Giddens 1991). For each of our informants, the triggering event was a breakdown that interrupted this stability. Heidegger (1962) notes that circumspection occurs when there is a disturbance in the flow of one’s life. McAdams, Josselson, and Lieblich (2001) refer to triggering events as key transitions or turns in the road: “...some transitions, some periods of change, stand out as especially significant in the life course. We may see them as turns in the road, changes in the direction or the trajectory of our lives” (p. xv). For our informants, some of these turns were quite natural life passages such as going to college or empty nest; some were a matter of circumstance such as watching a particular video or finding yourself in the midst of a divorce; some were the result of choices such as a bad job or living with the wrong roommates; and some were completely uncontrollable such as the victim of a crime or a job injury. What they all had in common was that they interrupted our informants’ lives, causing them to take pause, think, and reflect on their situation. Inevitably, this led to questions, uncertainty, and anxiety. Why were they living the life they were? Is there a better way to live? What is the meaning of life? This marked the end of the “before” identity and the beginning of the “after.” Before the awakening, Layla’s narrative provides a description of a triggering event:

“I had sort of an epiphany. What happened, I was raped at the age of 14, about two months after I turned 14. And that just kind of jarred everything. That turned everything around; made everything look different; made the world look dirtier; made the religion look a lot less worthwhile. I remember going to church and not feeling anything whenever the altar boys rang the bells for blessing the host and that kind of happened right at the same time. It was just so, all of a sudden I was just empty, kind of like I felt like I’d woken up. And I had gotten the sleep seed out of my eyes, just flushed out, all of this built-up.” (Layla).

In the above excerpt, Layla describes the rape as a turning point. This experience “jarred everything” and made “everything look different.” She also describes the corresponding loss of meaning, at church, she was “not feeling anything” and that “all of a sudden I was just empty.” There is a sense, however, that from her perspective, there may be a silver lining in that Layla also describes an awakening that “flushed” everything that had “built-up.” In the next excerpt, Layla describes this awakening as “frightening,” although again there is a sense that it was challenging. After all, when Layla was “asleep,” she was watching infomercials on television; buying branded conventional clothes, and following fashion trends, the triggering event pushed her narrative forward, it served as a catalyst to begin the process of reflection and critical evaluation of pre-established social beliefs (Thompson 2005), conventions, taboos, and consumption behaviors (Pavia and Mason 2004).

“Whenever I first woke up I guess, it was just like, waking up from whenever you don’t realize you’re asleep where you’ve been sitting, for example, in a chair late at night watching TV or something like that and your eyes just have been heavy all night and all of a sudden you wake up and you don’t know you’re watching infomercials at four o’clock in the morning and you don’t know what happened. You’re, it’s kind of a frightening feeling, because you don’t know exactly where or when you are. Things seem familiar but they seem different too because you’re at a different...everything around you is different because you are different” (Layla).

With the demise of conventional system of beliefs and values as a guidance to live life, our informants no longer had the means of orientating themselves to other, nor did they have the means of organizing their behavior in response to the perception of others. Giddens explains that the foundation for existence is to cultivate a sense of shared reality of things and of others (Giddens 1991). It is our sense of shared reality that helps maintain un-reflected day-to-day routines. The event triggered an awakening and displaced the trust and reliability of persons and things. With the dispossession of a sense of shared reality of things and of others, the notion of “who I am” and the sense of having a place in the world also recede.

By way of a second illustration, Phillip’s triggering event was experiencing a PETA video on animal cruelty. “PETA” stands for *People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals*, a social movement that uses shock to jolt people awake to the ways our culture dominates animals. PETA activists create disturbances hoping to interrupt the everyday flow of life. They believe that, ultimately, people want to act ethically, they just don’t have access to the right information

and they don't think about what they are doing. Thus, the whole movement is designed to create what we are referring to as "triggering events." In the excerpt below, Phillip discusses his experience:

"It was just terrifying. Who was it that said that people would stop eating meat if all the slaughterhouses had glass walls? It's true. And PETA has this whole thing called Meet Your Meat, it's a video that they have. You see the animals living the way they are. The chickens that they have to harvest just crammed into this room that's incredibly small. The cows the way they cut off their heads and everything. It's just horrible." (Phillip).

Watching video on animal cruelty awakened Phillip to a new reality, a reality in which animals are "tortured" for the sole benefit of the human condition. Confronted to Peta's "terrifying" and "horrible" images, Phillip called into question the pre-established regime of truth that used to govern his subjectivity. For Philip, Layla and the other informants, the "protective cocoon" (Goffman 1956) broke down and triggered reflection on their "before" values, belief, relationships, and behaviors. The regime of truth founded around eating meat (Philip), praying (Layla), , working for global corporations (Jeremy, Marc) or being a house wife (Mary), which previously were experienced without concerns are seen problematic (see table 1).

This sensitization phase shows that defining one's identity through consumption and display of commodities can be routinized and thus unreflective of the storied-world in which it takes place. Becoming conscious of consumption is therefore possible for those who have resources that allow participating in consumerist culture without reflecting on it. For consumers

to reflect on and actively engage in consumption choices and their meanings, there needs to be an awakening to the normative background of life, including parental education, religion, and consumer culture. With the awakening comes the questioning of previous ways of understanding the world and of knowing how to lead life. The destabilization of shared reality leads individuals to re-evaluate their position in the world and to reflect on the meanings of pre-established norms and values. Thus, the capacity for consumers to reflect on the normative discourses is occasioned when their vision of the world falls outside the category of familiarity. That is, when the story of the self no longer identifies and is identified within the storied-world. Such view resonates with previous conceptualization of identity transition. For example, studying deviance, Matza (1969) notes that the process of becoming a deviant begins when one is aware of his/her difference from the norm and hence starts questioning his/her behavior (devaluation). Similarly, studying esthetic plastic surgery, Schouten (1991) defines the beginning of life transition when a person disengages from a social role or status (Separation). This separation often induced by some triggering events projects individuals into a new and unknown reality in which pre-established ways of living and being in the world are no longer suitable (Schouten 1991). One main distinction between our *sensitization* stage and Schouten's *separation* phase or Matza's *devaluation* step is that it induced our informants to gradually re-shape the normative background of life. Matza's deviants were not responding to prescribed norms and values. Rather, they passively suffered imposed stigmatizations. Similarly, Schouten's informants were not politicized, they were not critiquing society, nor did they want to change our consumer culture. In contrast, the sensitization phase induced our informants to *separate* from previous normative background and legitimized identities and to find a new background based on a "being" mode of existence.

Separation

Questioning the normative background of life led to a stage of distancing emotionally and physically from social shaping. As Fromm mentioned, any society produces the characters that fulfill its needs. A “having” society produces and defines *marketing characters*. By virtue of society’s needs, each individual is socialized into conformed “having” self. This idea of social shaping is prevalent in consumer identity transition studies. For example, Studying Harley Davidson Bikers, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) speak about social shaping in term of “commitment-based status hierarchy.” A biker participates, imitates, and commits to the subculture by adopting the similar material appearance of the Harley Davidson bikers’ community. Similarly, a modification of the body using plastic surgery or tattooing is strongly driven by the desire to project a certain image to others (Bengtsson et al. 2005; Schouten 1991). It is an act of self-expression, modifying the body enables consumers to engage and be accepted in a particular social world or subculture. In contrast with these studies, our informants struggled to escape from dominant forms of socialization and find the freedom to choose new forms of socialization. They struggled to separate from the sources of social input, such as family, friends, co-workers or any other social influences that used to define what they should like, should do, and should be. In order to separate from the conformity, our informants questioned the social values incorporated in their social surrounding and intellectually and philosophically disengaged from past ties including some people, believes, and world-view.

The event has interrupted how one lives and shapes life. The interruption from previous guidelines on how to live life and conventional ways of behaving spurred to emotional

disengagement from past ties. For example Marian's Catholic upbringing provided her with religious truth and firm guidelines. With the event of moving to college, Marian discovered new ways of living life. The students in her class were not catholic and enjoyed drinking and partying with friends; activities that her religious values prohibited. The daily interactions with playful and careless non-religious students interrupted her idealized vision of religious truth. Catholic activities and rules of conduct became "suppressing" and "inadequate" to her personality. However, raised as a "strong Christian," Marian felt confused and even guilty. Her Christian upbringing and religious education reminded her that drinking and partying were not good for the soul. The antidote to guilt was for Marian an abandonment of the old religious ideologies and a reorientation of values. The emotional process of distancing herself from "the religious truth and lights" required a physical disconnection from past ties. Marian stopped communicating with her Catholic friends and community who thought she "was crazy and evil" and "had lost the relationship with God". She also created an emotional distance with her mother who is strongly dedicated to Christianity. The disconnection from past beliefs and the separation from emotional ties gave Marian the freedom and space for reflection. As stated in the excerpt below, reflecting on religious values and beliefs was a "gradual process" that required an "intellectual look" and philosophical considerations.

"Well, [Getting outside of religion] was a very gradual process. I really, intellectualized my way out of it. And I don't know how to explain that any other way. I just, I mean I thought things out. I mean, I never took anything for face value any way. So at first it made sense and I would read the Bible or whatever and compare that to Plato's I don't know, Republic or whatever. Some

kind of philosophy. And it all, it'd all wind up for a while. And I took an intellectual look at it and eventually it didn't really make sense to me any more, so I got out.” (Marian)

Marian’s philosophical process of separating from past ties mirrors Lasch’s concept of *narcissistic survivalism*; which is a survival technique of “emotional self-management” (Lasch 1984, p. 58). Christopher Lasch’ (1984) book *The Minimal Self* articulates how individuals respond to *Trouble Times*. He argues that in response to feelings of vulnerability and exposure, individuals are concerned with protection and survival of the self. This is characterized by “selective apathy, emotional disengagement from others, renunciation of the past and the future – a determination to live one day at a time” (Lasch 1984, p. 57). In a period of narcissistic survivalism, the self distances itself from sets of pre-established social norms and values as well as from “others.”

Offering a second informant’s narrative helps better articulate the intellectual and philosophical re-evaluation at past ways of living and understanding life. We consider for example Jeremy’s anthropological retreat. Jeremy’s downshifting story started when living an affluent consumption lifestyle in Los Angeles, CA. At the time, Jeremy was working for a major film production company, making a lot of money, eating in expensive restaurants, and enjoying partying with friends. Jeremy’s mode of existence was interrupted by a severe depression. The depression suddenly awakened him to his inauthentic and unhappy life. Unable to cope with the day-to-day struggles of living in Los Angeles, Jeremy completely disassociated himself with the film industry and moved back to his home town where he rented a cheap apartment. After few weeks of being back “home,” Jeremy, a “highly-trained professional lighting technician from

Los Angeles,” escaped his social position by accepting a job in a trash bag factory. As he mentioned in the excerpt below, Jeremy took on the role of an “automaton” observing his co-workers and the world from an anthropological perspective.

“I was, wow, I’m this highly-trained professional lighting technician from Los Angeles and all of a sudden I’m doing factory labor in this plant in northern Arkansas. The shifts was to approach it from more of an anthropological – It was, well, OK, I’m here and I’m this automaton and I’m doing this stuff but I don’t have to think about it so I’m going to observe the factory worker in his natural element. Something snobby like that. And see what makes him tick. And they definitely, they also were these pre-programmed consumers. They’d make \$14 an hour I think was the most you could make there, which is \$28,000 a year, and these people were constantly buying new 4-wheelers, new bass boats, new trucks. They were constantly wrecking their 4-wheelers, their bass boats, and their trucks. So they’re constantly repairing them, and basically they were on this treadmill where they would work this mindless job and then go and spend all their money, and I don’t know if they really – I guess they truly enjoyed it – I don’t know because I wasn’t around them when they were at home. But every once in a while we’d be working at, we’d be just making trash bags all the time. And every once in a while we’d switch boxes. So for a while we were making Glad brand trash bags, and then all of a sudden the boxes would change but there’s no way the bag inside changed. But we would making like Harris Teeter brand trash bags. And Harris Teeter’s a grocery store

in North Carolina. So basically you would go into Harris Teeter and you'd have a Glad trash bag sitting here and next to it on the shelf would be a Harris Teeter brand trash bag, and the Harris Teeter brand would be a \$1.26 less. But I was at the factory and I knew for a fact it was the same bag in the different box.” (Jeremy)

By experiencing day-to-day life as a blue-collar worker away from his friends from the film making industry, Jeremy gradually disengaged from his previous values that money and extravagant consumption would make him happy. First, Jeremy realized the social issue of consumption; each blue collar was enslaved by a need to maintain a certain lifestyle, which was sold to them by the production system. Second, Jeremy understood certain ethical issues of production; similar quality trash bags were sold at different prices using the power of advertisement and brand names.

During the phase of separation, our informants struggled from independence from past social shaping, including points of reference such as religion, parental values, class, and subculture. They strived for a possibility of existing outside of a conformed existence where life would no longer be directed by acceptance, validation, and ritualistic conformity.

While not identical in their reflexive separation from pre-established ways of living and understanding the world, Jeremy's, Marian's, and all of our respondents' narrative shows evidence of lonely struggles in doubting and separating from taken-for-granted rules and conventions. Following on Marian's narrative, although she felt “liberated” from a “suppressing” Christianity, the disengagement from the “catholic truth” created an unbounded, ill-defined, and overwhelming search for new guidelines on how to live life. In acknowledging alternative

worldviews that lie beneath the way non-religious people live and perceive life, Marian was “just all over the place.” She struggled with not being able to live past religious identities and the fear of not knowing how to live life. This struggle shows the difficulties inherent with self-change. Self-change was for our informants an unplanned experience, oscillating between impossible yet secure past selves and possible yet unknown new selves. In an effort to escape or overcome a feeling of suspended identity comes the necessity to choose a new way of life. The connection between identity and choice is deeply embedded within the condition of postmodernity (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Schrag 1997). Constructing an identity results from the hard struggle of having to choose a consumption lifestyle in a consumer culture that offers everything from bodily transformation (Bengtsson, Ostberg, and Kjeldgaard 2005; Schouten 1991) to extreme experiences (Celsi and Rose 1993; Kozinets 2002) or sexual conversions (Shields 1992). In such context, choosing is complex and uncertain, and hence can be painful. Our study shows that choosing among multiple cultural discourses and ways of life was guided by inspirational locals. The significance of “others” in constructing a new lifestyle leads us to discuss the third stage of our processual theory of identity: the socialization stage.

Socialization

The socialization phase represents *reaching out for others' life examples*. The sociologist George Herbert Mead notes that we infer our world-views and our understanding of who we are from our experiences with others (Mead 1968). Identities are intrinsically relational. They are tied up to the ways in which the world has related to us in the past and is currently relating to us. The separation phase felt lonely and cold because it reflected a phase of disengagement for past

emotional ties. The phase socialization fills up the loneliness and recognizes that a “man exists as a unit of society. Of himself, he is isolated, meaningless; only as he collaborates with others does he become worth while” (Whyte 1956, p.7).

Recall that after the triggering event, points of reference such as religion, parental values, class, and subculture affiliations were destabilized. Past cultural and social indoctrinations were broken down during the separation phase and the whole experience of being in the world was interrupted. As our informants separated from the norms and conventions that used to orchestrate and set images, concepts and spaces for the making of their identities, they now need to re-shape a new normative background and re-delineate their ways of living in the world. Indeed, it is only against a background or a storied-world that individuals can express different dimensions of the self (i.e., distinction, social integration, continuity, and change). This third theme shows that a decisive factor to shaping and defining new normative backgrounds was to reach out, listen, and follow certain others, being a friend, a new lover, a leader in a group, or simply knowing a person who lived differently. By reaching out, our informants gained access to a social sphere that was open to coaxing and coaching a new identity. The social sphere consisted of inspirational locals who provided approval and support for (re)-defining an identity and a consumption lifestyle.

A wide spectrum of social influences was revealed in our analysis. Some influences came from past relations including parents (Jeremy, Diana), husband (Mary), childhood friends (Marc), and local grocers (Robert). Others were new encounters such as a new boyfriend/girlfriend (Alexia, Laila, Frank, Philippe), or new sub-cultural influences ranging from vegan subculture (Philippe) to Buddhist community (Marc), sustainable lifestylers (Marc), environmental activists (Vivian, Marian), ecologists/recycling community (Robert), and

voluntary simplifiers (Amelia) (see table 1). In all stories, the influence was driven by inspirational locals who, with diverse personality traits, values, and motives, provided informants with an image of being, living, and consuming differently. To take it a step further, this theme shows that social influences led informants to live differently and drastically influenced them in changing their consumption lifestyles; i.e. disposing of material objects and lowering their consumption practice.

A clear example of inspirational locals is present in Marc's narrative. Five years previous to the interview, Marc witnessed unethical maneuvers being performed in the global environmental corporation he was working for. Disillusioned, Marc left his job as an environmental consultant, gave away his possessions and sold his apartment. He moved from the city to the country side where he constructed a house in the woods with solar systems, photovoltaic electricity, and composting toilets. In his small country home, Marc grows his own vegetables, hand-makes most of his furniture and pottery, and resists consumption as much as he can. Marc's decision to downshift coincides with meeting with a Buddhist community and wildlife biologists, who were "artists," "fun," and "living a sustainable lifestyle." He felt "enlightened" by their lifestyle examples and had a "revelation." It is those physical relationships and their precise resonance to environmental conservation, sustainable lifestyle, and fun social ambiance that led Marc to build a house in the woods. Living in a house in the woods is for Marc a way to belong to a community of liked-minded people who are concerned with the deterioration of natural resources. It is clear from the excerpt below that Marc changed in his consumption lifestyle and "ended up buying [a] piece of land that [at first] thought was so horrible" due to inspirational "others".

“So it was, I probably, more than anything, just did it because that's what my friends were doing. Although I did have an understanding about I didn't want to eat pesticides. But it wasn't motivated by early thoughts about sustainable living. I really didn't really think much about where my food was grown or what techniques were used to grow it or anything like that. I drove my car, I commuted to work, I used gas. I didn't really think too much about limiting my petroleum consumption.” [] “It can lead to community if you do things with other people like that. It's much more, much better than just buying stuff.”

(Marc)

The dispossession process of material objects was for Marc a way to be connected with individuals he enjoyed meeting and interacting with. As he mentioned in the excerpt above, his change in consumption was an emotional change rather than an intellectual change. Yet, physically modifying his behaviors prompted meanings and enjoyment.

The social influences that opened up our informants to a new way of life were not necessarily linked to sustainable, ethical, ecological, or simple living consumption lifestyle examples. The socialization process also started when informants turned their attention to loved ones such as their husband (Mary), fiancée (Robert), or boyfriend (Alexia) (see table 1). For example, Alexia discovered that living in a city while trying to preserve the natural environment requires learning how to consume. It is through John efficient lifestyle example that Alexia started the process of getting rid of her ‘nonfunctional’ material possessions and modified her consumption lifestyle. Before meeting John, Alexia had married a person from the city that she identifies as careless toward the environment. Living together in a three bedroom house, Alexia

was acquiring and accumulating objects “almost as an emotional medication” that would help her forget her loneliness. With the divorce, Alexia awakened to new possibilities of living. As described by McAlexander, Schouten and Roberts (1992), a divorce can indeed provide “a sense of freedom to experiment with personae and activities” (McAlexander, Schouten and Roberts 1992, p. 555). Separated from her husband and disengaged from “old friends”, Alexia no longer had to confine to others’ way of leading life. With John, Alexia discovered the pleasure of creating an experience as opposed to consuming “pre-packaged experiences.”

“John has especially inspired me to try and get rid of a lot of my nonfunctional clothes that I had. I’ve started to see how all the systems contribute to each other in that of scary way. So John’s been a real inspiration to me to get rid of that stuff and give it to friends who actually will wear it and go sit quietly in front of a movie screen for two hours in it.” [] “Right now, I’m spending a lot of time with a group of people that, you know, my old friends when they want to do something fun, their idea of something to do is to go out and it’s something you can buy. Like a movie. And you go out and you buy a pre-packaged experience... hanging out with some of the independent video producers on community Access Television, and their idea of what to do that evening is ‘let’s go film some random footage that we may use in a video montage later.’ And so they create their own experience.” [] “Influenced by John’s and his friends, Alexia stopped consuming the pre-packaged experiences provided by restaurants, movie theaters, or television. Instead, she started creating her own experiences such as making her own patio, which she found “a lot more fun to do because the materials were a lot

more varied and just hunting for the materials was more fun than just going and buying it all at once.” (Alexia)

The concept of inspirational locals involves two main aspects: inspiration and physical proximity. First, inspirational individuals provided an image of being, living, and consuming that differs from what has been seen before the event. They demonstrated the possibility of living differently from anything that has previously been lived. With their visionary, energetic, unconventional, or exemplary qualities (Lindholm 1990), the inspirational individuals promoted change and enabled our informants to think of themselves differently. Second, inspirational individuals were in close physical proximity to our informants. The physicality and locality of their social networks engendered trust and support. With their examples, life no longer seemed lonely and detached from others. The importance of physical proximity challenged the idea that the geographic presence of individuals has little or no impact on consumer behavior (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001).

The socialization phase shows the crucial importance of others in shaping and defining new normative backgrounds. It is through others' life examples that the new way of living and being was envisioned. The importance of others in shaping a new identity is present in several identity transition studies. For example, Schouten (1991) shows that the way individuals envision and formulate possible selves before engaging in the process of body modification “are affected by many individual and sociocultural factors” (p. 421). Similarly, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) note that individuals construct a new identity by way of imitating a new subculture and committing to their vision of a new self.

In addition to previous researchers that note the crucial impact of others on consumer behaviors (Kates 2002; Kozinets 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995), our study emphasizes the impermanence of such influence. Indeed, following on Alexia's narrative, she could not completely dispose of past selves and previous routinized consumption behaviors. As she mentioned "I have all the voices of my culture in the back of my head that I grew up with, screaming at me that I find this stuff comforting, and I find security in it." (Alexia). This struggle between past and envisioned identities is explicit in the fourth stage of our processual theory of identity, named striving.

Striving

The striving stage is a highly reflexive stage which incorporates both considering others and answering fundamental existential questions about the self. It fundamentally moves the self from being passive with others to being active with others; bringing a unity between being alone and being with others. In this process, human agency is not only required but essential in the construction of a new consumption lifestyle. For if the inspirational locals helped discovering a way of being, then, in order to be actualized and lived, this way of being had to be juxtaposed to other identities and subjectively re-appropriated. Again, the event that interrupted our informants' way of living showed a new reality. During the striving stage, consumers learn to live in this new reality with themselves and with others. This stage emphasizes that the process of dispossession is an ongoing journey of identity negotiation and that the amount of objects to buy, own, and dispose of is always undetermined, ceaselessly negotiated. The striving stage shows a struggle to reconcile the past with the present and the envisioned future. It knits together

fragments of history and of social and personal experiences into a mixing of identities. This process requires the identification of missing identities, unwanted identities, or aged identities that needed to be replaced or adapted to the new vision of the world. Our study clearly shows this process as challenging for which adopting a lower consumption lifestyle produced tensions between maintaining, resisting, and defending competing identities. The tension between social identities, past identities, and envisioned identities is explicit in the story of Amelia. Amelia engaged in an “effort toward downshifting and simplifying” after she inherited from her parents and her husband’s parents’ furniture. She perceived their heritage as an invasion of her space. However, as stated below, her efforts toward simplicity created conflicts with her husband who is a museum collector.

“So with my efforts towards downsizing and simplifying, my husband's coming around, but he loves stuff. And he - there's this empty space - we could put something there. He's in the right field, he's a museum collector and the collect, collect. He gets paid to do that so he's not going to come home and change his personality. So we have a conflict there.” [...] “I've had 2 yard sales in my life. My husband can't stand it. He buys my stuff back. I'm like - the money's not the point. I just want it out of here. So now I sneak stuff off and give it to the Attic (second-hand store).” (Amelia)

For Amelia, the conflict is a daily struggle not solely with her husband but also with her friends who buy her “things,” with the stores that keep putting items on sales, and with her

persisting enjoyment to go shopping. Amelia's struggles to downsize and simplify her lifestyle reflect an "identity bricolage" (Firat and Venkatesh 1995), whereby specific meanings from particular discourses are deconstructed and re-appropriated. In the process of identity bricolage and with the merging of cultural discourses coming from organizations and friends who recycle and try to simplify their life; downshifting took on personalized meanings of being in control. For example, Amelia tries to control accumulating paper by re-using the paper as writing paper. Similarly, Amelia still goes shopping, "not at all with the idea of buying things but with the idea of just seeing what state our society's in" (Amelia). Yet, this "bricolage" is never completely satisfying. At the time of the interview, Amelia was still struggling to maintain control over her possession. As she emphasizes, she is not immune to sales.

"Well, I was buying fabric all the time. Oh, this is on sale, I will buy on. And there is that 'on sale' factor. [...] And finally I realized there's always fabric on sale. It will always be on sale. I don't need to do this. But it is a real hook. So there is, I mean it does have some pull to it. And I'm not immune to it. []

"There's no hope. I can't deal with it. I just have to live with it. So I try to simplify with my personal possessions. Fewer t-shirts, fewer dresses. Wear them out. Give them to the Attic. Just get some of this stuff out." (Amelia)

Such struggle results from the juxtaposition of divergent identities. On the one hand, choosing a simpler lifestyle responds to Amelia's desire for "emptiness," to resist "being tied down," and to live an "simply." On the other hand, downshifting does not help in living in harmony with a museum collector, having a daughter, and "keep the economy going." The

dialectical interaction between divergent identities creates confrontations over the combination and the mixing of identities and the ordering of the mixing (Hetherington 1998).

The story of Diana further emphasizes the stage of striving in constructing a consumer identity. When retracing her personal experience of downshifting, Diana recalled her struggle to lower consumption, to work two jobs, to take care of her house, and to attend university. Those conflicting identities led her to personalize and adjust downshifting into a search for harmony and “balance.” At the time of the interview, Diana firmly believes that protecting the environment and promoting social justice requires resisting the system of consumption and fighting against marketing. In her own term, marketing is “evil”, “manipulative”, and “wrong.” She is “aware of the world and how things are connected and interrelated,” and tries to “reduce consumption in the face of this.” However, with a house, her part time job as a librarian, and her university classes, Diana’s downshifting story reflects a battle for “balance” and harmony, and a clear struggle to unlearn past-consumption behavior.

“I try not to go to fast food restaurants, but I started working full time recently, and I have to admit that I have been going more than I'd like to. So no there isn't a restaurant that I absolutely never go to.” [] “You have to find a balance between doing what you need to do and eating dirt or living off the land and growing potatoes and living in the middle of nowhere. There's a full spectrum of lifestyles, and there are people that do that - people in the United States who live in mud, straw huts and grow potatoes and they're probably malnourished, I don't know. But that's not for me. But I would, you just have to - I'm still trying to find what my place is and what I can do.” [] “I'd love to build a cabin with

solar panels and collect my rainwater. I'd love that. I'd love to live out in the woods and stuff. But no, you've got to have a job. And what does that mean? It means you're going to drive to commute and so - it just goes back to you've got to find your own balance.” (Diana)

In the excerpts above, Diana’s downshifting story reflects a struggle between diverse and plural identities. The meaning of downshifting is gradually appropriated, re-constructed, deconstructed and re-appropriated in search for finding “a balance between doing what you need to do and eating dirt or living off the land and growing potatoes and living in the middle of nowhere” (Diana).

The new way of being formed through social interactions could not be lived unless it was personalized and adjusted to other aspects of life and to pre-established behaviors or habits. This necessary yet difficult adjustment shows that *The downshifter consumer type* described by Schor (1998, p.110) is never achieved. Downshifting does not exist outside time and context. There was no prescription or guidelines helping our informants to evolve from a “having” mode of existence to a “being” mode of existence. Our informants had to struggle, define and somewhat enact a mode of “being” on their own; molding it to their specific time and context. The molding was difficult and in some cases impossible, forcing them to re-adopt aspects of their old self and lifestyle. During the interview, Diana admits that, although she was able to stop going to Wal-Mart for 3 years, her new full-time employment and living nearby the shopping center influenced her to re-adopt her previous shopping behavior.

“I feel guilty. Twice I stopped shopping there. Once for 2 years and once for about a year. And really when I bought my house it just got really hard. I live right next to Wal-Mart, really close at least. I'm up late at night and sometimes you've got to beat the crowds, and it's easy to go at 1 in the morning and do your shopping there. But yeah, I do feel guilty about it.” [...] “Some people don't ever think about consumption and some people would never go near McDonald's or Wal-Mart. And I'm somewhere in between.” (Diana)

CONCLUSION

Drawing upon phenomenological interviews with twelve downshifters, our study unfolded the complex process of identity negotiation into four main phases: sensitization, separation, socialization, and striving. Each phase symbolizes evolving positions of the self in the world. At times, the self embraces a prescribed existence of “having” filled with routinized patterns of life and pre-determined ways of leading life. At other times, the self is reflexive on normative constraints, questions its existence and meanings of consumption, and seeks for a new consumption lifestyle of “being.” It is through the tension between agency and structure, resistance and domination, freedom and constraints, and more significantly between the having and being mode of existence that consumer identities are created, transformed, and appropriated. These interactions are lived, challenging and difficult; operating through all social practices. It is through these interactions that the self struggles to discover, define, and enact a “being” mode of existence, negotiating with powerful structures, rationalizing, and changing small things. This constant dialogue with the consumer culture to discover an existence of “being” (rather than “having”) shows that downshifting is far more complex and involves deeper struggles than

depicted in “choosing simplicity” (Pierce 2000) or in the easy steps to downshift (Schor 1998). Downshifting is very difficult. There is a kind of tenacity that has to do with how one struggles to discover a “being” mode of existence. The actual process should be considered within a context of struggle and tension over the ability to shift away from past selves and mode of “having” and the possibility to adopt new selves and mode of “being.” This suggests that downshifting can be done in various ways and privileging the co-constitutive, co-productive processes of identity construction helps understand these complications.

Conceptually, the language of co-production or dialectic shifts from a consideration of consumer identity in terms of either / or to a dialectical perspective which includes a continuous tug of war between creative individual actions and constraining social structures (Holt 2002; Holt and Thompson 2004; Murray 2002; Thompson and Arsel 2004). Understanding the construction of identities as a dialectical process involves studying the constant negotiations among different dimensions of the self (i.e., distinction, social integration, continuity, and change) and among constraining social structures. This perspective understands identity as a construction that is neither bottom up nor top down but rather a *middle-out* process. The phrase “middle-out” suggests that at certain stages in the identity construction process the consumer may have the freedom and opportunity to push against the structure and act as a creative agent; and at other stages the consumer may be shaped by its historical and cultural circumstances. The emphasis on the aspect of negotiation enables us to consider both the consumer and the consumer culture in the construction of identities. As such, this study contributes to one of the key theoretical issues in consumer culture theory concerning the co-constitutive, co-productive processes in which consumers forge a coherent, if diversified and often fragmented sense of self (Arnould and Thompson 2005).

In addition, our study extends the disposition literature beyond the *undesired object* (Jacoby, Berning and Dietvorst 1977) and the *undesired self* (Schouten 1991; Young 1991; Shelton and Peters 2006). In 1977, Jacoby et al. undertook the huge project to develop a disposition decision taxonomy that would help better understand keeping versus getting rid of objects. Later, researchers situate disposition in the unceasing process of identity negotiation. In this respect, disposition is used as a means of separation from an undesired self or a detachment from an undesirable past (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005; Price et al. 2000; Young 1991; Young and Wallendorf 1989). In the context of downshifting, the process of dispossession is used as a means of separating from undesired social norms and social shaping. As a means of separating from normative background, dispossession is a difficult process and does not allow to completely repudiate and escape from past selves and to incorporate new identities and new consumption lifestyle. Dispossession practices were used in competition with the social structure. The mode of “having” continued to constrain our informant before, during, and after disposing of material objects; making them less successful than they would like in establishing a new consumption lifestyle.

While our dialectical process of identity negotiation helps to frame how individuals evolves through possible selves (Markus and Nurius 1986) gradually moving toward a being mode of existence, we note that this emergent theory is founded on a small number of informants based in a Western, developed economy. As processes of downshifting and dispossession are culturally and economically bounded, further contextualization would enrich and expand each stage.

Moreover, questions should arise on the adequacy of our emergent four “S” processual theory of identity in other contexts of involuntary dispossession. Examples of involuntary

dispossession narratives include loss originating from natural disasters or from personal belongings lost in transit. Other areas of investigations could involve the loss of employment due to redundancy or retirement, the loss of freedom before, during and after physical imprisonment, or the loss of virginity in willing or unwilling circumstances. Each of these losses can be experienced as either a tragedy or as an epiphany, depending on whether or not they are viewed, experienced, and storied within the framework of self-change.

Although this study focuses on dispossession, we also suggest looking at the dialectical interplay between the mode of “having” and the mode of “being,” or between an alienated postmodern self and an optimistic and liberating self, in context other than downshifting. For example, studying new commitments to spiritual groups such as Buddhism, drastic changes in professional orientation, or cultural transitions from the Western world to poorer countries can help better understand consumers’ motivation, identity change, and consequences of transitioning toward a new mode of existence. These contexts could also be used to look at whether a process of self-change toward a “being” mode of existence can improve, permanently or not, consumers’ sense of self-authenticity, true-self, or self-actualization.

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Table 1 – Informants and Themes

Informants	Sensitization	Separation	Socialization	Striving
<u>Name:</u> Layla <u>Sex:</u> Female <u>Age:</u> 23 <u>Occupation:</u> Administrative assistant <u>Marital status:</u> Living with boyfriend <u>Personal Myth:</u> Security, safety	<u>Triggering Event:</u> Rape. <u>Awakening:</u> Family, religion, school cannot provide security.	Disposed of her religious beliefs. Disbelief in people and society. Disposed of conventional clothing Stopped communicating with family and religious friends. Engaged in smoking, drinking, & sex. Feeling of loneliness & being lost .	Met vegetarian boyfriend. Moved in with boyfriend . Love for her parents.	Stopped smoking, drinking, eating meat. Cooked vegetarian meals. Still enjoys clothes and decided to Hand-make her clothe and furniture Still searching for a sense of security; maybe boyfriend can provide it.
<u>Name:</u> Philip <u>Sex:</u> Male <u>Age:</u> 20 <u>Occupation:</u> Journalist for local newspaper <u>Marital status:</u> Leaving with girlfriend <u>Personal Myth:</u> Personal growth & authenticity	<u>Triggering Events:</u> 1) Watched videos on butchered animals. <u>Awakening:</u> Not living an authentic lifestyle	Left the punk subculture community. Stopped eating meat, milk, eggs. Felt inauthentic to himself and ashamed of his brand oriented consumption habits.	Moved in with new girlfriend who focuses of personal creativity and does not eat meat Joined the Vegan community	Disposed of clothes/objects with brands. Stopped consuming fashionable clothes and new items. Stopped smoking and drinking artificial colored drinks. Struggles to live as a vegan. Slowly eating more like a vegetarian than a vegan.
<u>Name:</u> Marian <u>Sex:</u> Female <u>Age:</u> 24 <u>Occupation:</u> Employee in Greenpeace branch <u>Marital status:</u> Single <u>Personal Myth:</u> Knowing the “truth” and influence others toward this truth	<u>Triggering Event:</u> Going to college. <u>Awakening:</u> Christianity is not the truth in life.	Disposed of her religious beliefs Explored college lifestyle by drinking and caring about fashion. Search for a new truth in life. Loneliness and feeling of being useless . Feeling lost without guidelines and set of principles. Struggle fighting against Christian guilt of partying.	Memories of her childhood in small village without much to consume. Friendship with members of the Sierra Club Coalition Met environmentalist/activist/vegan boyfriend who showed her how to bring meaning in her life through controlled consumption Joined Greenpeace as an administrative assistant	Disposed of her unnecessary clothe & car. Moved to a farm. Bikes everywhere even on the snow. Stopped consuming meat. Struggles to keep a low and sustainable consumption lifestyle while having a job. She needs to fly to attend Greenpeace meetings and buy pre-packaged food during her travel.
<u>Name:</u> Mary <u>Sex:</u> Female <u>Age:</u> 55 <u>Occupation:</u> Retired <u>Marital status:</u> Married, 2 children <u>Personal Myth:</u> Caring and loving others	<u>Triggering Events:</u> 1) Children left home. 2) Husband retired. <u>Awakening:</u> The ones I care and love (husband and two sons) do not need me.	Detached herself from friend and husband for self –realization . Questioned her religion belief to control her values. Felt useless and lonely.	Memories of her simple life before having children and her travel experiences without much possessions. Caring for her husband and her marriage falling apart. Discussion with her husband that her marriage is falling apart. Met a property manager who told her about a small cabin in the wood on sale.	Sold the 7-stories house and moved to 1- bedroom cabin in the woods with her husband. Disposed of all of her personal belongings Sold her convertible BMW. Discussions with husband to build up a kitchen, and expand a little the cabin for her need to create jewelries.
<u>Name:</u> Marc <u>Sex:</u> Male <u>Age:</u> 40 <u>Occupation:</u> PhD student in biology and teacher <u>Marital status:</u> Single <u>Personal Myth:</u> Make a difference, having an impact in the world	<u>Triggering Event:</u> Encountered unethical practices while working as an environmental laboratory analyst <u>Awakening:</u> Cannot make a difference on the environmental global scale	Left his job, disposed of previous high income and social class status to become a student. Aggressive and ambitious in trying to find alternatives to environmental degradation. Felt powerless and disillusioned	Memories of his childhood friends from the Chicago Tribune, his professor of environmental science, and his college readings on sustainable lifestyles. Friendship with artistic sustainable lifestyleers	Constructed his sustainable house (powered by photovoltaic and use propane) in the wood. Disposed of most of her personal belongings. Left his city apartment and moved into his home. Hand-made his own furniture and potteries Feels lonely in the woods and is thinking about getting a flat in the city.
<u>Name:</u> Robert <u>Sex:</u> Male <u>Age:</u> 31 <u>Occupation:</u> student <u>Marital status:</u> Living with girlfriend <u>Personal Myth:</u> Being respected and independent from others	<u>Triggering Event:</u> Had a job injury while working for a big corporation and did not get compensation. <u>Awakening:</u> Corporations are enslaving individuals. One cannot escape the power of corporations.	Left his job. Felt powerless in front of big institutions and American bureaucracy.	Memories of his simple childhood living in small city with local stores that were independent from big corporations. Visited childhood local grocers. Joined the recycling community and became aggressive in expending their recycling program.	Rituals with his girlfriend regarding recycling products and consumption and with the city regarding weekly meetings. Controlled and lowered his household consumption level, yet his wife still consumes a lot.

Informants	Sensitization	Separation	Socialization	Striving
<p><u>Name:</u> Jeremy <u>Sex:</u> Male <u>Age:</u> 28 <u>Occupation:</u> Carpenter <u>Marital status:</u> Single <u>Personal Myth:</u> Living in ethical and fair society with creative and liked-minded people</p>	<p><u>Triggering Events:</u> 1) Working as a film technician in Los Angeles.</p> <p><u>Awakening:</u> Society is unfair and full of false promises.</p>	<p>Loneliness in the crowd and disgust by the capitalist productive system. Depression. Abandoned his dream of becoming a creative film producer. Disposed of material possession acquired in Los Angeles. Left Los Angeles and Moved back to his childhood home.</p>	<p>Readings on anti-consumption: magazines such as Adbusters or books such as No Logo and Culture Jam.</p> <p>Rituals with nature and tradition: spend time with his parents and parents' friends who live in the woods.</p>	<p>Acquired anti-consumption/anti-marketing discourse. Feels Lonely and is thinking about moving back to the city to live with some friends.</p>
<p><u>Name:</u> Diana <u>Sex:</u> Female <u>Age:</u> 25 <u>Occupation:</u> student and part-time work at the library <u>Marital status:</u> living with boyfriend <u>Personal Myth:</u> Harmony and simplicity</p>	<p><u>Triggering Events:</u> 1) Buying a home. 2) Going to college and learning about environmental degradation.</p> <p><u>Awakening:</u> Life is complex.</p>	<p>Advocated strength by working several jobs to pay for the house mortgage and college tuitions. She bought furniture and food and even pesticides to clean the house at Wal-Mart. Guilt of consuming pre-packaged food and guilt of buying at Wal-Mart the same pesticides that injured her mother when she was little. Struggle between a need for simplicity and having to work part time, going to college, acquiring material objects.</p>	<p>Memories of her mother living happily without consuming nor wasting much objects. Spent time with her mother.</p> <p>Friendship with a member of the Progressive Student Association.</p> <p>Became of member of the Progressive Student Association.</p>	<p>Stopped consuming products at Wal-Mart for three years but now, with her jobs and having Wal-Mart next door, it is too difficult to resist. Disposed of her car Guilt of not having time to attend the Progressive Student Association meetings. Guilt of eating at fast-food due to her new full time job.</p>
<p><u>Name:</u> Frank <u>Sex:</u> Male <u>Age:</u> 27 <u>Occupation:</u> Architect <u>Marital status:</u> living with girlfriend and her son <u>Personal Myth:</u> Living in clean empty space</p>	<p><u>Triggering Event:</u> Moving in with flat mates.</p> <p><u>Awakening:</u> Flat mates make his environment dirty and cluttered.</p>	<p>Disposed of most of his personal belongings. Created his personal empty space by keeping his bedroom empty of unnecessary objects. Brook up with his materialistic girlfriend. Fear of losing control of material accumulation Feeling of being different, too neat. Fear of not finding a girlfriend who would understand him.</p>	<p>Memories of his aunt and uncle who lived in a clean empty house Met his girlfriend at architecture school, 16 years his older. She never owned a car, hate consumer culture, and lives with her son in a simple, uncluttered house. He moved in with her.</p>	<p>Struggles to live with a 16 years old boy who possesses stuff. Rituals in household: once an object is bought, an old one has to be given away.</p>
<p><u>Name:</u> Amelia <u>Sex:</u> Female <u>Age:</u> 57 <u>Occupation:</u> Piano Teacher <u>Marital status:</u> Married (2nd husband), 1 child <u>Personal Myth:</u> Control over her life, her space, and her time.</p>	<p><u>Triggering Event:</u> Received heritage (furniture) from both her parents and her husband's parents.</p> <p><u>Awakening:</u> the inherited furniture clusters her space</p>	<p>Fight against the material invasion: she gave away as much as she could It was too much to deal with, she felt cluttered by too much stuff, which created high anxiety</p>	<p>Memories of her simple life before the heritage</p> <p>Friendships with voluntary simplifiers who showed her ways of lowering consumption practices and live simply.</p>	<p>With the example and support of her new friends, she developed ways to resist material accumulation. For example, she does not go shopping for sales or reuse wrapping paper to write to her friends. Yet, she recently bought a new and expensive carpet: "too beautiful to resist."</p>
<p><u>Name:</u> Alexia <u>Sex:</u> Female <u>Age:</u> 26 <u>Occupation:</u> Administrative assistant <u>Marital status:</u> Divorced <u>Personal Myth:</u> Security and preservation of the natural environment</p>	<p><u>Triggering Events:</u> Married a materialistic man and moved to a wasteful city.</p> <p><u>Awakening:</u> Individuals do not care about the natural environment.</p>	<p>Gave up her childhood simple living example. Divorced Nightmares on the end of natural resources. Loneliness, anxiety, powerless, fear for the future</p>	<p>Memories of her parents' environmental concern and her childhood simple lifestyle. Caring for the natural environment. Met new boyfriend who consume ethically to preserve the natural environment.</p>	<p>Disposed of her materialist husband. Disposed of most of her clothes and her furniture (gave away). Stopped buying clothes so that, one day, she can fit everything in a small luggage to travel with her new boyfriend. Yet, this "dream" seems impossible as she is emotionally attached to her possessions.</p>
<p><u>Name:</u> Vivian <u>Sex:</u> Female <u>Age:</u> 21 <u>Occupation:</u> Student <u>Marital status:</u> Single <u>Personal Myth:</u> Friendship, having great friends</p>	<p><u>Triggering Event:</u> Parents' divorce.</p> <p><u>Awakening:</u> Being different and not included in the community of friends.</p>	<p>Stopped communicating with past friends who have "normal" families. Explored different community of friends. Loneliness, feeling different and not included.</p>	<p>Friendship with the Progressive Student Coalition. Became of member of the Progressive Student Association.</p>	<p>Disposed of all of her brand clothe. Stopped consumer new items. Stopped eating meat. Sold her car. Stopped shaving. She is now questioning her lifestyle when she will need to have a job.</p>