A THEORETICAL MODEL FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION – DOWNSHIFTING. CAREER METAMORPHOSIS, WELL-BEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

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Abstract. The main goal of the article is to analyze, systematize, summarize and develop a theoretical model of the downshifting phenomenon as an alternative form of personal fulfillment in contemporary society. Various definitions of the concept are presented, as well as its forms of manifestation; the main reasons for undertaking such a change in lifestyle are described, along with the most common methods for its implementation. The effect which voluntary decrease in income and working hours have on consumer behavior and concern for of the environment are also examined. Special attention is paid to the fundamental characteristics of the phenomenon. An analysis of the value constellation of the voluntary simplicity movement, which is considered its precursor, is also conducted. The various stages through which the individual goes in the process of realizing the need for a career metamorphosis are specified, leading to an increased sense of well-being and improved mental health. The article serves to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding downshifting and its implications, enabling individuals to better address the motivations and outcomes associated with this lifestyle choice.

Keywords: new social phenomenon; downshifting; voluntary simplicity; career metamorphosis; well-being and mental health

1. An overview of the presuppositions for emergence of the phenomenon

Over the past 40 years, in the course of the cultural development of Western countries, the emergence of a social phenomenon has been observed, which question the values of the modern mass consumers and the effect that their beliefs exert on their way of life. The modern economy is characterized by an addiction to career, money, and purchases, fostering the notion that abundance is a sign of well-being. The increasing professional dedication starts to control decisions about where and how to live, how to invest money and leisure time. At the core of its impact is the return of rewards such as financial security, recognition and status. The result is the

growth of the career self in relation to other aspects of the personality (Schor 1998).

Reevaluating the current economic and career situation proves to be extremely favorable for withdrawing from socially accepted models for success and for redefining certain values. Naturally, movements aimed at social evolution arise. People seek more freedom, global relationships and prosperity, achieving and maintaining material sufficiency that prioritize the development of the spiritual dimensions of the personality and time for alternative activities such as reflection, communion with nature and developing individual potential.

2. Downshifting
Origin and development of the downshifting concept

The concept of downshifting emerged at the end of the twentieth century, although this phenomenon has a more distant predecessor in the ideology of voluntary simplicity, which will be discussed later. Ghazi and Jones (1997) believe that the earliest use of the term was in 1990 in the American news magazine *The Washington Post.* The term has been used to describe a trend associated with a new understanding of success through the abandonment of a promising career in favor of a new position that allows for a more flexible work environment and more time for family and community. The term itself originates from the idea of shifting from a high-paced, busy life to a slower, more relaxed one. A similar concept exists in mechanics, illustrating the gears in racing motor vehicles.

Analyzed data from studies conducted by psychologists and sociologists (Breakspear & Hamilton 2004; Kennedy, Krahn & Krogman 2013) provide a very adequate understanding of downshifting. They indicate that individuals are seeking for a voluntary lifestyle change that includes less working hours in order to open up opportunities to satisfy the need for finding meaning in life and achieving balance. The implementation of this transformation varies from changing job position or moving to lower-paid work to revising one's consumption habits and even changing place of residence. Table 1 presents several additional definitions of the term.

Table 1. Definitions of the Downshifting concept

Semantic Content of the Phenomenon
The practice of leaving a well-paid but demanding job to do something that gives you more time and satisfaction but less money (Cambridge Dictionary of American English (2006, p. 232)
A response to the stress caused by longer working hours and limited free time, as an individual or family decision that can lead to an improved quality of life (Kennedy et al. 2013)
Voluntary process of social mobility of the individual with the ultimate goal of achieving simplicity where consumption and other practices are reduced to sustainable levels (Nuga, Eimermann, & Hedberg 2023)

A process of transformation that includes a change in consumer culture, renunciation of material and economic benefits in favor for the development of spiritual values, harmony of soul and body (Etzioni 1996, p. 623)
A type of socio-territorial mobility that includes changing the place and nature of a person's primary profession, reducing their income, and transforming their lifestyle and quality of life (Zaritska 2015)

In the early years of studying downshifting, A. Saltzman (Saltzman 1991) focuses on creating an approximate profile of its representatives. The researcher describes five models of the career change: (1) people who choose to remain at a certain level within an organization, avoiding and refusing promotion and higher levels of responsibility (plateauers); (2) people who decide to move back a few positions in the organizational hierarchy (backtrackers); (3) people who use their acquired skills in a new non-corporate environment (career shifters); (4) people with their own business who leave organizations to work for themselves in a similar field; (5) people who leave big cities and set up businesses in small towns or regional centers, relying on electronic communication technologies. This classification is based on the degree of change in the job role and the extent of transformation within the organization itself.

For comparison, a little more than 30 years after the birth of this social phenomenon, its manifestations can be described as it follows (Kozmenko, Mykhailiuk & Chernetska-Biletska 2023): 1) people who decide to change their job and consciously choose lower income in exchange for more free time which they can invest as they wish; 2) advocates of the simple living movement who have stable and well-formed beliefs, adherents of a certain system (seeking spirituality or eco-activists); 3) individuals who decide to leave the "blessings" of civilization and settle in remote, sparsely populated areas (modern ascetics); 4) forced downshifters who change their lifestyle under the pressure of external circumstances (health reasons, newborn child or aging parent, change in the socio-cultural context); 5) freegans, or those who prefer not to buy new goods as a form of a boycott and refusal to financially support corporations, but choose used or expired items. It is noteworthy that over the years, downshifting has evolved in its development and spread. From a phenomenon narrowly focused on career, it has become synonymous with change that can affect various spheres of life, such as spirituality, ideology, consumer culture, environmental awareness and care, and last but not least, professional development.

One of the main goals of downshifting research is to determine the primary motives for the desire to change. To date, the literature identifies four main reasons, with the understanding that more than one factor influences such a decision. These are: desire for more time with family; a need for personal development; a healthier lifestyle; and a more balanced way of life. Downshifters with children are found to make this change mainly motivated by the desire to spend more time

with family, while those without children are more likely to reduce their income in order to achieve a more balanced and healthy lifestyle. Additionally, a statistically significant difference is identified in the reason related to post-material values between people with and without children, with the latter group less frequently showing a tendency to withdraw from these values. Older individuals (aged 50 to 59) often turn to downshifting due to a desire for a healthier lifestyle, compared to those aged 30 – 39. The youngest group mainly undertakes the change for the opportunity to have more family time. It is observed that women are more likely to reduce their income for the sake of family and a more balanced lifestyle, while men prioritize good health as their primary reason for the decision. For individuals with the lowest income, the main reason for downshifting is a healthier lifestyle, while participants from the wealthiest class tend to seek personal development. Logically, individuals who wish to spend more time with their family are inclined to reduce their working hours rather than change their profession, although many of them discontinue working altogether. People motivated by personal growth and gaining more control over their lives often choose a career change, while those seeking more balance tend to reduce their working hours or change their occupation (Hamilton & Mail 2003).

Another major focus of the downshifting research is determining the ways to fulfil the career change. Four main groups stand out: reducing working hours; changing to a lower paid job; taking a break from work responsibilities; shift in the professional field. The following patterns have been identified- women who have undertaken such a change are more likely to reduce the time spent at work or to quit, while men tend to change professional duties. Downshifters with children prefer to reduce their working hours or stop working altogether, while those without children tend to change their professional orientation. Middle-class representatives are more likely to leave their jobs, while those who are more affluent are more likely to turn to a different professional development. Statistically significant differences are noted between people with the lowest income and those with the highest earnings. The former tend to completely leave the work environment, while the latter are more inclined to reduce their working hours or shift to a lower-paid jobs, instead of having no income (Hamilton & Mail 2003).

Last but not least, a fundamental research interest is directed towards evaluating the change related to income reduction. Overall, the majority of downshifters feel happy about their decision, with some of them able to live without the extra income derived from their previous lifestyle. Other results indicate that some respondents "miss" the extra pay, while others acknowledge that they find it difficult to cope with the loss of their previous salary. Few are unhappy with the consequences associated with the change. Demographic characteristics reveal that women, compared to men, feel more dissatisfied with the decision they have made. Downshifters with children admit that they miss the additional income. People who continue to work

full time are less likely to express dissatisfaction with their earnings, albeit in a lower-paid job (Hamilton & Mail 2003).

Interestingly, downshifting initially occurred in wealthy families from the middle or highest socioeconomic classes, as their sufficient assets allowed them to take the risk of income change or because they were more inclined to uphold post-materialist values. However, research findings from the early 20th century prove that the phenomenon starts to spread among people from the so-called "working class", which again indicates for its constantly evolving nature (Hamilton & Mail 2003).

Downshifting is often associated with practicing a sustainable lifestyle (Schreurs, Martens & Kok 2012). Both concepts can be considered as a part of an effective financial model, resulting from the reduced income. The ecological footprint of conscientious consumer behavior, the focus on improving the social environment and the personal well-being of individuals who choose to live modestly seem to have common nature. Those who voluntarily reduced their income, compared to people who did not make such a transformation, show a greater tendency to save energy and more often practice activities related to personal development and household maintenance. Additionally, they recycle plastic, paper, glass and organic waste, treat their belongings with care, avoid generating unnecessary waste, use products to the last and maximum, and save electricity. They tend to be conscious consumers, carefully considering the longevity and functionality of products before purchasing and often opting for high-quality second-hand goods (Nelson 2007). In this way, they align closely with environmentally-friendly behaviors, encompassing the principles of reduction, reuse, and recycling, and become active community members, demonstrating their lifestyle choices. Downshifters exhibit well-developed budgeting skills and efficiently allocate income toward essential goods. Effective resource management is a common characteristic among them, evolving as they refine their lifestyle changes. They often maintain this their state of mind by ignoring advertisements and reinforcing their personal convictions. This attitude serves as a defense mechanism against marketing stimuli for impulse purchases and shields them from societal criticism (Breakspear & Hamilton 2004; Kennedy et al. 2013).

It is important to note that in the absence of an explicit commitment to ethical or sustainable behavior, reducing paid working hours, not caused or accompanied by adherence to a specific ideology, is unlikely to change high consumption levels. It has been established that some downshifters economize by primarily reducing their expenditure on food, entertainment, and transport, and actually spending less, but their consumption is not necessarily environmentally friendly (Lindsay, Lane & Humphery 2020).

In various countries, downshifting can be manifested in specific ways, although the main tendencies are retained: limiting material consumption, focusing on personal development and self-improvement, and rejecting socially accepted

values (Nuga et al. 2023). In Britain in particular, downshifting resembles more of an environmental movement, promoting the consumption of organic products, recycling and nature conservation. In the USA, it is seen as a change in workplace and residence and life reassessment which leads to adopting long-term changes, reducing the importance of income, increasing leisure time, and revising family values. In European countries, particularly in Hungary, downshifting is associated with consumer culture and environmental awareness (Balsa-Budai et al. 2019). Interestingly, in Sweden the proportion of people becoming downshifters during the 2014 – 2016 period is insignificant compared to Western countries. Researchers admit that this can be influenced largely by the political, social, and economic conditions of Scandinavian nations. However, findings indicate that imposed restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic and broader societal transformations related to political and economic situations globally, especially the conflict in the European part of the continent, significantly impact preferences among Swedes which results in renewing the interest in the concept of downshifting (Eimermann, Lindgren & Lundmark 2021).

Referring to the recent years of isolation and labor market changes resulting from COVID-19 coping strategies, it is noteworthy mentioning a study conducted in the Netherlands in 2021. Findings from semi-structured interviews indicate that increased leisure time has a positive impact on subjective well-being and environmental practices, through achieving a better balance between work and personal life, as well as through changes in consumer practices. The imposed disruption to work routines helps understand the social function of employment, fostering a sense of connection and belonging. However, the lack of structure and daily routine resulting from it negatively affects satisfaction, productivity, and feelings of usefulness. Nevertheless, after the initial discomfort, participants also shared favorable aspects of the experienced change such as more free time, greater autonomy, diverse activities of recreation and achieving a balance between professional and personal life. Researchers believe that the higher levels of autonomy, which can be achieved outside periods of restrictions through workplace flexibility or a reduced workweek, have a positive effect on mental health. Importantly, the study is designed to demonstrate that increased leisure time can improve quality of life and relaxation, potentially leading to more environmentally friendly consumer behavior, which in turn can be seen as a form of downshifting (Klaver & Lambrechts 2021). Of course, these results only serve as a foundation, since two key elements – the reduction of income and the voluntary desire to change - are not entirely clarified. In the next paragraph, we will delve deeper into the structure-determining factors of the downshifting phenomenon.

Key characteristics of the concept
Willingness to move away from a strictly defined path to successful career devel-

opment, which inevitably moves forward and upward, is the first important aspect in defining downshifting. Popcorn (1996) pays special attention to the fact that this type of withdrawal should not be understood as dropping out of the organizational system or escaping from social obligations. Saltzman (1991) distinguishes down-shifting from the hippie movement, the motivated desire to return to homeland, or the romantic view of rural life as an image of tranquility and idyll. It is a lifestyle applied in practice and represents a well-considered choice made by certain individuals, which are participants in the contemporary context of organizational life.

The second important aspect is a desire for a lifestyle change. If we assume that such behavior is motivated mainly by the need to reduce unwanted stressful situations and problems associated with professional engagement and increased consumption levels, we may fail to take into account other factors that could play a role in making such a choice (Popcorn 1996).

The third criterion in defining downshifting is the presence of a voluntary choice. This clarification is of the utmost importance as the data from the psychological literature indicate that the people who are forced to end their career development have higher levels of dissatisfaction than those who initiate this transformation of their own accord.

Authors like Popcorn (1996) and Ghazi & Jones (1997) point out that opting for a slower-paced life is not necessarily the final step in professional development. Studies shows that some individuals decide to make this change at a certain point in their lives (e.g. career women during their children's early years) and plan to prioritize their work at a later stage. Furthermore, E. McKenna (1997) suggests that some individuals may experience periods of reprogramming of their career trajectories up and down in the matrix of enhancement. In other words, downshifting can be temporary or periodically repeated depending on an individual's development needs.

The voluntary simplicity movement as a major precursor to downshifting

Most contemporary researchers equate downshifting with the voluntary simplicity movement. The term "voluntary simplicity" is introduced by Richard Gregg but the overall concept was further developed by A. Elgin (1981) in his book "Voluntary simplicity" (cited in Etzioni, 1998). A. Etzioni (1998) defines voluntary simplicity as a choice of free will to limit expenditures on consumer goods and services and to seek sources of satisfaction and meaning beyond materialism. This is a social phenomenon that encompasses a wide variety of behavioral and psychological manifestations. There are different values associated with it. They have a specific yet dualistic nature, affecting both global and personal perceptions, idealistic as well as practical motivations, and even issues related to organizing one's own household or the world.

The first value is associated with achieving material simplicity in various aspects of life. It involves reducing unnecessary luxury items while focusing on discovering the valuable beauty and joy of life. Supposedly, it can provoke creativity, a desire to share the communal resources, greater independence aimed at restoring a balance

between material and non-material aspects. It is important to note that living simply does not equate to living cheaply. On the contrary, consumer styles emerge that are less ascetic and more related to personal assessments on the practicality of things, the concern for the environment and the labor involved in producing these goods. Material possessions play less of a central, but more of a supporting role in people's development (Burch 2000).

A preference for a small-scale working and living environment is central to the value constellation of voluntary simplicity (Burch 2000). This theme can be found in many aspects of daily life, occupation and society, and suggests that whenever possible, they should be decentralized into more manageable and understandable units. Furthermore, this idea suggests that human aspirations should also be directed towards mutual aid and contribution. In this way, everyone builds a sense of shared benefits, but also responsibilities. Downscaling is seen as a way of returning to a more human sense of proportion and perspective (Burch 2000).

Voluntary simplicity as a behavioral manifestation embraces the idea of greater control over one's own actions and less dependence on large, complex institutions, regardless of whether they affect the private sector (the economy) or the public sector (political processes). Self-determination as a value influences the overall orientation and consumption as dictated by the desire to manage one's own intentions. It also manifests in the labor market as a behavior aimed at reducing the unnecessary division of labor. Therefore, rather than specializing in a specific field, persons with such a value may find better integration and symbiosis in their professional pursuits. In the public sector, the drive for greater self-determination manifests as a growing distrust and a sense of alienation from large and complex social bureaucracies (Burch 2000).

Environmental awareness and concern is also strongly emphasized in the voluntary simplicity movement, leading to an awareness of the connection and interdependence between people and the surrounding natural world. It triggers an awareness that Earth's resources are indeed limited and encourages their conservation, as well as reducing pollution and proper maintenance and management of the natural environment. Some specific behaviors stemming from this value may include: willingness to share resources with disadvantaged people; a sense of global citizenship with a readiness to adapt diverse lifestyles, social vision and political beliefs; a preference for living in a place that offers quicker and easier access to nature (Burch 2000).

For many people who have made the voluntary change towards a simpler lifestyle, personal growth facilitates exploring their inner world. The main goal is one to become free from external influences and to secure a space for development–both psychologically and spiritually. By revising their professional employment and traditional values and goals, more and more people are focusing on the holistic growth of their personality. This often involves a

spiritual aspect, even though engagement with the inner/immaterial dimensions of life are not necessarily associated with a particular philosophy or religion – the concept of this value borrows techniques and practices from the realms of personal feedback, transpersonal psychology, Eastern philosophies and many others (Burch 2000).

The five themes discussed most likely do not cover the entire list of values represented in a lifestyle defined by the ideology of voluntary simplicity. Moreover, they certainly manifest to varying degrees and in diverse combinations among different individuals. However, they possess a logical sequence suggesting that they do not arise randomly, but rather follow a strictly defined pattern of emergence. Indeed, none of these values can independently trigger the change that results from the synergistic interconnection between them.

Experiencing the change - stages of the process and assessment of the consequences

In a study by Tan (2000), based on interviews and content analysis, seven themes related to lifestyle change are highlighted, which will be examined in more detail. These stages are not arranged in absolute sequence but rather depict an approximate order of progression through the transition. While almost every downshifter experiences the described stages, some may go through more than one simultaneously or move back and forth through their approximate order.

The first step towards downshifting is usually initiated by a conscious need for change. This may be motivated by workplace difficulties, an assessment of the discrepancy between personal values and organizational demands or a sense of boredom and routine in tasks. Depending on the age of the individuals, it may coincide with external events such as changes in the family (children leaving home or becoming less dependent, aging parents) or personal crises (the death or severe illness of one or more family members), which can lead to a reevaluation and desire for more independence and balance (Tan 2000).

During the second stage - struggling with the need for change – an inner tension from abandoning the previous comfortable and secure way of life is observed, as well as assessment of risks and even fear of consequences. The two main strategies undertaken by the participants in the study are: changes within the workplace (e.g. responsibilities, role, activities or working hours) and exploring opportunities outside the organization in terms of similar activities or entirely different ventures (Tan 2000).

The third stage is characterized by a sense of sadness soon after the change in the previous lifestyle is made. This does not necessarily mean depression, but includes negative moods and states such as feelings of loss, remorse, and regret. It can be mainly related to the sense of missing specific aspects of everyday life such as income, status, certain people and/or activities. The adequacy of the decision made is often questioned (Tan 2000).

The fourth stage is characterized by facing the difficulties and problems resulting from the change, with the main issue being how to survive on a lower income. This is also a moment for coming to terms with the loss of status, reevaluating professional identity, forging a path in a new professional field or own business, balancing the process of withdrawal from the common belief that material success is the dominant necessity, and reviewing completed personal life matters (since downshifting is usually undertaken by people at or above middle age) (Tan 2000).

During the so-called incubation phase, the reconstruction of the personality occurs. It is marked by a transition to a more relaxed pace, withdrawal from work-related tasks and routines and reevaluation of life priorities through introspection, psychotherapy and self-confrontation. Different types of support play an essential role, such as self-help, an intimate partner, family and friends, a mentor, books, and courses for career transformation. The main result is overcoming obstacles, dealing with the unknown, achieving greater clarity, and mastering a plan and finding direction (Tan 2000).

In the process of emerging from the difficult situation, the individuals begin to rediscover their new lifestyle, career and identity through active, rational actions and spiritual growth. The new professional orientation and direction in life develop, evolving through the following themes: accepting the loss of the higher income and finding alternative financial resources; reaching a partial or complete resolution of the status loss issue; eliminating doubt and regret about leaving the previous job; coping with uncertainty and flexibility; gaining greater clarity, drafting a plan and course of action; taking on the role of a beginner; building a new structure and way of life; strengthening identity; redefining the concept of success; gaining confidence in the subjective evaluation of the progress and the outcomes of the change process (Tan 2000).

At the end of the experienced change, there are possible positive outcomes. Most downshifters have the opportunity to practice what they feel is their calling and/or is more meaningful to them, providing satisfactory financial income. Individuals describe a sense of more control and autonomy, flexibility in their time and activities, and greater professional focus. Personality development is another consequence of this change, including time for non-work related activities, ceasing identification with the career self, and more time for social interactions. Authenticity is another positive side of the change. Individuals practice a lifestyle and profession that are more aligned with their values and priorities, without being enslaved to the contemporary ideals of success, materialism, and progress (Tan 2000).

Downshifting, well-being and mental health
The construct of mental health represents a process of optimal positive functioning, achieved through self-initiative for various health-oriented practices, experiencing satisfaction, or optimizing personal characteristics in

a positive direction (Ryff & Keyes 1995). Based on this brief definition, we can view downshifting as a phenomenon within the biopsychosocial model in psychology, where the individuals actively participate in the decision-making process, understand the situation they are in, and can exercise control over it, with the main focus being on promoting and maintaining high levels of well-being.

A research focused on the emotional and psychological consequences of downshifting shows that the reported positive results include increased self-esteem, confidence, pride, independence, and an enhanced sense of autonomy (Schreurs et al. 2012). Respondents report gaining greater self-knowledge and strengthening various aspects of their personality. Additionally, they describe a renewed attitude towards money, a lower degree of attachment to things, and a greater appreciation for current material possessions. There is also a social effect, which refers to strengthening community ties, family relationships, and friendships. The subjects report a better quality of life, resulting from experiencing less stress, having more free time, improved physical health, and more opportunities to travel. Many believe that the new conscious consumer behavior contributes to the state of the environment and makes them more compassionate towards disadvantaged people.

In line with the presented data, participants in Tan's (2000) study mention improved self-esteem and the ability to adapt to change. They also report an improved quality of life, subjectively assessed in emotional and health terms, as well as more time for relationships and interests outside of work. Daily life is described as less stressful, happier, and more peaceful. Many of the respondents see their personal growth as a result of the downshifting process. They note higher levels of self-confidence, accompanied by an expectation of a happy future (Tan 2000).

The results from an empirical study in the Bulgarian socio-cultural context largely confirm the positive correlation between the voluntary simplicity values, intrinsic personal aspirations, ecological beliefs, and different aspects of well-being. It shows that mainly the intrinsic aspiration of relatedness mediates the experience of a positive affect, while the aspiration of competence mediates the influence of the voluntary simplicity values thus achieving eudemonic well-being (Buzovska 2016).

The provided data on the positive consequences of downshifting largely overlap with the eudemonic concept, where the lifestyle is in accordance with the true nature of the individual by identifying potential character strengths and fostering motivations that bring meaning and development (Waterman 2005). Achieving autonomy, following personal beliefs, and setting intrinsically oriented goals increase levels of well-being. One of the main reasons for undertaking a lifestyle shift is driven by the need of maintaining

positive and warm relationships with others, which in turn fosters closeness, friendship, empathy, and mutual trust, leading to high levels of mental health (Ryff & Singer 2008).

Conclusion

Downshifting can be described in various ways - from a political concept to a life strategy or a social phenomenon. For many contemporary authors, its manifestations carry the motif of the renewed public intellectual critique against hyper-materialism, hyper-velocity and consumption of Western culture, growing on a global scale (Hamilton & Mail 2003). Downshifting enters the vocabulary of time alongside concepts such as ethical and fair trade, and sustainable development, as they collectively consolidate ways to challenge consumer norms. Thus, it remains part of the language of non-materialistic politics, becoming synonymous with the rejection of a stressful career path. The benefits of lifestyle change are numerous: reduced tension, slowing down the pace, greater control and flexibility in professional life, more free time, new perspectives on the nature of success (Chhetri, Khan, Stimson & Western 2009a; Chhetri, Stimson & Western 2009b). The ideology of voluntary simplicity can contribute to higher levels of subjective well-being and provoke environmentally friendly behavior. Advocates of this movement are reported to have higher motivation for personal development, an increased well-being and improved mental health, which leads to better quality of life (Burch 2000).

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