

## **Lifestyle transformation and reduced consumption: a transformative learning process**

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### *Abstract*

*Overconsumption habits and structures have a huge environmental impact. The article uses a qualitative interview study of environmentally conscious Swedish citizens undertaking a lifestyle transformation process to reduce their overall consumption in the context of mass consumption society. The purpose is to emphasise the importance of a transformative learning perspective to understand pathways and challenges for transforming towards less consumerist lifestyles. The study demonstrates five mutually bolstering aspects of learning experiences in this lifestyle transformation process: 1) factual and theoretical learning; 2) practical, corporal and tacit learning; 3) personal and emotional learning; 4) social relational learning; and 5) critical learning. It stresses the importance of a social dimension including the interplay of macro, meso and micro levels.*

*Keywords: Social dimension, downsizing, consuming less, social practices, voluntary simplicity*

### **Introduction**

Public insights, anxieties and discontent regarding the escalating global and ecological crises are growing. People learn about overshoot days and their large ecological footprints. Given planetary crises, it is no surprise that we are currently seeing the rise of many new initiatives and movements attacking consumer culture. Some movements and citizens have started a lifestyle transformation process towards drastically reducing consumption of commoditised goods and services. This phenomenon is referred to by a variety of labels, such as *downsizing*, *anti-consumption*, *voluntary simplicity*, *minimalism*, *slow movements* and *transition networks*. This article builds on and contributes to a growing literature on such initiatives (see next section) and is informed by a qualitative interview study of environmentally conscious Swedish citizens

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who are in a process to reduce their overall consumption significantly and voluntarily. How can people learn to reduce consumption despite living in a mass consumption society and a culture that push them to continue mass consumption habits?

Based on research findings, the purpose of this work is to emphasise the need for and relevance of a *transformative learning* perspective to understand pathways and challenges for transforming towards less consumerist ways of life. Transformative learning is a perspective stressing a critical, self-reflective dimension of learning; learning that questions basic frames of reference and “habits of mind” (Mezirow 2009; see also Wals 2010; Lotz-Sisitka, Wals, Kronlid and McGarry 2015). The learning process is deeply personal but also relates to a social dimension on several levels. With reference to reduced consumption, it is argued here that such a transformative learning is essential because people in a welfare society context are deeply socialised and embedded into institutional and socio-material contexts and practices that in various ways force them to reproduce mass consumption habits (Boström 2020). Radically reducing the volume of consumption involves lifestyle change and/or deviating from normal lifestyles in current societies. Such a change is therefore demanding and necessarily entails a (re-)learning process, which involves giving up many mass consumption norms, practices, and taken-for-granted assumptions and worldviews for the development of new ones.

As significantly reducing consumption is a demanding process, it makes sense to think of it as a lifestyle transformation process. A lifestyle can be seen as an assemblage of practices (Oosterveer, Spaargaren and Kloppenbergh 2018; Osikominu/Bocken 2020). Practices of consuming less can be the reduced commoditised consumption of material objects and services, a different consumption or more of non-commoditised experiences (Shaw/Moraes 2009; Callmer 2019). “Consuming less” could thus mean to buy fewer things, but also to use things less (e.g. the car) or in a less resource-demanding way (e.g. lower indoor temperatures).

Transformative learning connected to lifestyle change and reduced consumption cannot appear in a social vacuum. The argument developed in this paper assumes the importance of a social dimension. The social dimension has macro, meso, and micro features, including both cultural and material aspects. Existing lifestyles as well as conditions for lifestyle change are shaped by overarching institutional structures in society (macro), which in contemporary societies nudge towards mass consumption habits. In addition, agency and meaning are shaped by social relations (both intimate – micro – and more distant – meso) in one’s social life. Hence, the intersubjective agency dimension in reproducing or challenging patterns of mass/excess consumption is emphasised (Boström 2020). This perspective includes paying attention to how people are born into and naturalise their social lives in their material contexts by developing worldviews, norms, roles, habits, and identities. Socio-material infrastructure and institutions (economic, political, cultural) on the macro level deeply shape social life but cannot alone explain the reproduction of mass consumption. Social agency must be included to understand the reproduction of social structure and culture, as well as to understand conditions for change. Furthermore, consumer desires are not just personal; they are social (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003). For instance, social practice theory argues that the thinking, the feeling, and the acting of individuals are embedded in social relations in the socio-material environment as well as informed by cultural values (Spaargaren 2011; Shove 2010; Kennedy/Hauslik 2018). The material culture perspective adds further important insights (Miller 1998, 2010). It views the material

landscape, including physical infrastructure and all physical objects, as providing meaning and symbolic significance to social life, social relations, and identities. Miller (2010) emphasises dialectics: things produced and consumed by people are, on the one hand, seen as objectifications of aspirations, values, thoughts, fantasies, and so on, whereas objectified things in turn shape people and provide conditions for ways of thinking, feeling, acting, and desiring in the world.

Although the perspectives stress structures and processes on multiple levels, this paper focuses primarily on individual experiences and efforts in the context of individuals' immediate social lives. Also, it delimits the focus to people that intentionally try to reduce their overall consumption because of concerns for the environment. The analysis is based on a qualitative interview study, with interviews conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic. To be sure, the focus on transformative learning for sustainable development needs to take into account both individual and collective levels as well as experiences from both voluntary and involuntary (for example by the pandemic) disruption of consumer practices. It is argued here that actions, experiences, and transformative learning on the micro and meso levels are important because transformative change on a collective level needs actions, role models and public legitimacy from below.

The next section reviews how learning has been (insufficiently) discussed in the interdisciplinary literature on reduced consumption and elaborates on the concept of transformative learning. The section thereafter provides details about the qualitative interview study. The results section is divided into two; the first part describes common features and challenges in the downsizing process, and the second discusses a number of mutually bolstering components of transformative learning. This is followed by the conclusion.

### **Transformative learning and reducing consumption in everyday social life**

After a few decades of research on sustainable and green consumption which predominantly focused on the greening of existing consumption – incentives, barriers, challenges, opportunities to choose more environmentally friendly products – there is now a growing research field focusing on reduced volumes of consumption. Examples of related concepts are *downshifting*, *downsizing*, *anti-consumption*, *brand resistance/rejection*, *voluntary simplicity*, *minimalism*, *slow consumption*, *zero-waste living*, *lifestyle political consumerism* and other more radical lifestyle changes.<sup>2</sup>

Voluntary reduced consumption is still a niche phenomenon, albeit growing. Much of the literature studies socio-demographics among participants and the motivations, benefits, difficulties and challenges that downsizers experience, as well as barriers to upscaling and mainstreaming of the phenomenon. A recent systematic review of voluntary simplicity, which included 106 articles on the topic, indicated a research gap on the topic of learning in relation to this phenomenon (Rebouças/Soares 2020: 4). Yet, issues of learning, skills, competences and

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<sup>2</sup> For more information, see Schor 1998; Zavestoski 2002; Pedersen/Neergaard 2006; Hogg, Banister and Stephenson 2008; Lee, Fernandez and Hyman 2009; Shaw/Moraes 2009; Black/Cherrier 2010; Isenhour 2010; Nelson, Rademacher and Peak 2010; Sassatelli/Davolio 2010; Hards 2011, 2012; Portwood-Stacer 2012; Hagbert/Bradley 2017; Shirani, Butler, Henwood, Parkhill and Pidgeon 2015; Lorenzen 2017; Callmer 2019; Uggla 2019; Osikomunu/Bocken 2020; Lee, Ortega Egea and Garcia de-Frutos 2020; Rebouças/Soares 2020.

knowledge are covered to some extent in literature on the phenomenon. For example, consumer learning may be connected to modern information technology and feedback systems (Grønhøj/Thøgersen 2011), to new consumer practices such as rejection, reuse and repair (Black/Cherrier 2010), to becoming vegan (McDonald 2000), or to the new skills and knowledge that people need when they cultivate alternatives to consumption (Kasser 2017; Osikominu/Bocken 2020). Armstrong, Hiller Connell, Lang, Ruppert-Stroescu and LeHew (2016) discuss a pedagogical concept, *experiential learning*, and refer to the individual's skills and knowledge development, including the evolution of critical thinking that grows organically from a lived process. Such learning can be gained through lived experiments such as a buy-nothing period of consumption in general (see Grauerholz/Bubriski-McKenzie 2012; Callmer 2019) or of specific consumer items, for example clothing (see Armstrong et al. 2016). Learning may involve value change during the lifestyle transformation process. Facilitated by an initial open-mindedness, learning could entail becoming aware of values that the voluntary simplifier previously suppressed (Osikominu/Bocken 2020).

Even if some literature discusses knowledge, skills, and learning connected to lifestyle change, transformative aspects of learning remain at best implicit. I argue that there is a need for more systematic attention to a *critical learning perspective*, particularly of the more disruptive kind. The argument here is that the challenges downsizers face can fruitfully be explored and understood through the concept of transformative learning. I argue that *transformative learning* is an apt concept for characterising the type of lifestyle change this article focusses on (see also Kerton/Sinclair 2010; Moyer/Sinclair 2020). Transformative learning is a perspective stressing a critical, self-reflective dimension of learning (Kovan/Dirkx 2003; Mezirow 2009; Wals 2010, Lotz-Sisitka et al. 2015; Ojala 2016; Boström et al. 2018; Moyer/Sinclair 2020). It entails questioning basic frames of reference: "Transformative learning is defined as the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives)" (Mezirow 2009: 92). It enables actors to recognise and reassess assumptions and views that have, so far in their lives, been taken for granted and which steer their ways of thinking, feeling, expecting, and acting. It is important to consider that such learning must be anchored in social life, as social life is deeply shaped by the forces of mass consumption (Belk et al. 2003; Jackson 2005). The habits of mind in a mass consumption society and culture include that consumption is considered as the default tool to solve a huge variety of problems (Bauman 2007). Needs, wants and desires are to be satisfied by the act of consuming. It has become a normal habit to consume without making any conscious decision to buy or not to buy. It is done automatically and without reflection (Jackson 2005, 2017), embedded in everyday social practices and part of practical consciousness (Shove 2003; Hards 2011). This default mode of consuming can only be countered by a process of transformative learning.

As transformative learning is necessarily self-reflective and includes questioning one's (or one's fellows') worldviews, assumptions and ways of thinking and doing, it is almost by necessity very demanding and unsettling, and requires time (Kerton/Sinclair 2010). It is therefore more gradual than sudden and evolves during an extended period of time (Kovan/Dirkx 2003). Furthermore, the process is social in kind. People's habits of mind remain tied to existing institutional structures, social practices and relations. Questioning one's own and others' frames of reference is difficult, even threatening, because one has to re-evaluate one's own socialisation

and social relations. Research has pointed out that participants are experiencing difficulties in deviating from consumption standards, not least their standard of living, because it is a deviation from social norms and gives rise to feelings of shame (Isenhour 2010; Shove 2010; Black/Cherrier 2010; Armstrong et al. 2016). People trying out a buy-nothing period have experienced recurring difficulties with not comparing themselves with others (Isenhour 2010; Callmer 2019: 94–96). Cherrier, Szuba and Özçağlar-Toulouse (2013) use the metaphor of a glass floor to represent sociocultural standards which prevent people from achieving goals of reducing carbon footprints. Transformative learning therefore requires a facilitating social context (Wals 2010).

Transformative learning can be contrasted with instrumental learning, which aims at controlling, manipulating, or improving performance. To be sure, transformative learning also includes the inflow of new information and can entail elements of instrumental learning (Moyer/Sinclair 2020). Information and education provide awareness and insights. Knowing more is crucial because learning to reduce consumption takes place in a general context of ignorance, even mass ignorance of the social and ecological consequences of consumption. However, critical reflections on the very conditions that shape information, knowledge and learning imply that there are also many matters that need to be reconsidered, unlearned and relearned. Moreover, the development of new competences relies as much on moral, conative, affective and aesthetic components as on a cognitive element (Kasser 2009, 2017; Lotz-Sisitka et al. 2015; Ojala 2016). Also, the transformative learning process involves handling norm and value conflicts as well as confronting the structural and cultural forces that narrow one's perspectives (Mezirow 2009); it can hence be seen as transgressive and disruptive (Lotz-Sisitka et al. 2015; Ojala 2016).

## Method and material

The argument developed in this article is based on a qualitative methodology, with an interpretivist-oriented interview study of environmentally conscious people who undertake a lifestyle transformation process by reducing consumption. The study involves adult people with experiences of growing up and living in a mass consumption society and culture. It is particularly in adulthood that people develop a capacity for transformative learning, when they are fully able to “learn to transform their frames of reference through critical reflection on assumptions, self-reflection on assumptions and dialogic reasoning when the beliefs and understandings they generate become problematic” (Mezirow 2009: 104). A total of 22 interviews were conducted with 24 individuals. The study used a relatively open form of interviewing, with few standardised questions and many follow-up questions. The interviews, which took place between November 2018 and January 2020, lasted between 40 and 80 minutes.

Interviewees were recruited using an advert via social media. The ambition was to achieve a heterogenous sample in relation to gender, residence and age. From the abundant expressions of interest, a selection was made to achieve heterogeneity. For that we also considered information about the potential interviewees' experiences and efforts, which they briefly described in the initial email. The age varied between 24 and 78; the interviewees were from different cities in Sweden, from both rural and urban areas, and lived in different types of housing situations.

The study included eighteen women and six men; an asymmetry reflecting the gendered nature of the phenomenon of environmental and consumption concerns. The sample also had an academic and middle-class bias (a common pattern among environmentally conscious populations; see Carfagna, Dubois, Fitzmaurice, Oimette, Schor and Willis 2014), although it did vary in terms of occupation, employment status, education level and income levels. However, the study did not aim to analyse topics related to social stratification but rather to explore common experiences despite some heterogeneity as regards background conditions.

Seventeen interviews were conducted face to face by the author and five via Skype by a research assistant. That amount was considered sufficient for developing the theoretical arguments in this article (theoretical saturation). In the article, I summarise common themes gained from the analysis of the material and use a few selected quotes to illustrate them.<sup>3</sup>

The interviews were relatively unstructured, conducted by an interviewer with a set of open questions. The interviewees could talk freely about their ambitions, challenges and experiences, including key learning experiences. For example, they were asked to talk about their reasons for reducing consumption, their goals, what they had done, which consumption areas they focused on, which obstacles and facilitating factors they had encountered, about lifestyle gains and sacrifices, and how they had tackled difficulties. There were some explicit questions about learning: about the most important learning insights, aha experiences, about how they had developed the practical and theoretical know-how to develop their alternative ways of life, and whether and how they had to challenge previous thoughts and practices.

Further, five interviewees were selected and asked to complement the interview by writing monthly memos and filling in a questionnaire with open questions. They were research participants that, firstly, had already defined goals for their coming year – such as reducing their car use or changing to a more vegetarian diet –, and had secondly expressed an interest in documenting their experience once every month. Each month, they were asked to freely reflect on their experience and answer questions in relation to their own stated ambition, specifically: (A) new difficulties/challenges; (B) new possibilities; (C) new insights; (D) positive/negative experiences related to one's life quality; (E) other reflections. A short follow-up interview with four of the participants was conducted afterwards.<sup>4</sup> Their memos largely confirmed key insights from the analysis of the interview material and gave further insights into the gradual process of reducing consumption as well as into experiences or challenges related to the different seasons of the year. The short follow-up interview generally confirmed issues addressed and was helpful for evaluating the method.

The analysis of the interviews was guided by themes related to theories on transformative learning and related concepts. The components of transformative learning discussed in section five were developed from an abductive kind of analysis, by juxtaposing theory and empirical interpretation. Research participants within the heterogenous sample had varying ambitions, experiences and conditions and faced different challenges. However, because of the ambition to develop the theoretical themes, the analysis mainly focused on similar patterns in the transformative learning and lifestyle transformation process.

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<sup>3</sup> Quotes are identified using a code such as "IP2w78" to denote an interviewee who is a woman and 78 years old.

<sup>4</sup> One of the interviewees only responded for two months; apparent repetitiveness was indicated as the reason.

Even if the sample reflects niche experiences in society, they are also important on a larger scale. The people studied are not representative within the current larger societal context but represent some important experiences regarding lifestyle and societal transformation. In terms of representativeness, it is also important to emphasise that the people interviewed undergo a process that is voluntary and deliberate.

### **Reducing consumption: a stepwise, long-term, and social process**

Based on the interview material, this section describes some common features of this downsizing lifestyle change process, including what kinds of reduction in consumption have been attempted and which not.

The material shows that downsizing in a mass consumption society is not done overnight. It is a slow, long-term, and stepwise process, as has been previously shown (e.g. Osikominu/Bocken 2020). Many interviewees claimed to have been environmentally conscious for a long time, even decades. Indeed, a few spoke of an overall consistent lifestyle throughout their life in that they had an ecological consciousness since childhood, although the emphasis on minimising consumption was radicalised in recent years due to deeper levels of awareness and reflections (see next section). It generally resulted in lifestyle changes in form of different assemblages of practices. The changes varied between more and less profound among the interviewees.

When asked what they did to reduce consumption, the interviewees described a mix of strategies. They refrain from or reduce consumption of commoditised objects and services (aviation, cars, car use, energy consumption, meat, clothes, electronics, kitchenware, fashion, etc.). They search for and develop alternatives, such as homegrown vegetables, keeping chickens, repairing, buying second-hand, sharing things in a social network, using libraries or workshops, driving alternative cars (electric, biogas, hybrid), installing solar panels, using public transport, cycling, vacationing in Sweden and not abroad, buying organic, becoming vegetarian/vegan, reducing food waste and giving alternative presents. If they need to buy something they carefully consider why and what they buy. Some of the interviewees spoke of decision rules that they had invented for themselves and which they are trying to follow in a consistent manner. An ideal type constructed from several interviews looks as follows. If something they own breaks down, they ask themselves:

1. Can it be repaired (by myself, by a friend, in a repair outlet)?
2. If not, can I do without it?
3. If not, can I make it?
4. If not, can I borrow it from someone?
5. If not, can I buy it second-hand?
6. If not, can I buy it taking into account social and environmental sustainability (e.g. organic, seasonal, etc.)?

The last step can also involve an investment, such as buying a bicycle, installing solar panels or buying the monthly bus ticket for commuting to work by bus instead of by car.

There is much variation among the interviewees regarding how they employ the above-mentioned strategies, including levels of engagement (see also Rebouças/Soares 2020). While

some focus on completely refraining from doing or buying things, others generally focus on reducing. Some have come far in their lifestyle transformation and mostly speak of it in past tense; others are experimenting in an earlier phase. However, very few of the interviewees consider themselves done.

Several interviewees also mentioned more holistic strategies, such as changing jobs (e.g. because of their unwillingness to fly), moving to a place that facilitates their lifestyle transformation, or reducing working hours and thus their income. People who reduce both income (by working less) and consumption in exchange for free time are often referred to as *voluntary simplifiers* (Osikominu/Bocken 2020; Rebouças/Soares 2020). Working fewer hours not only reduces income (and consequently consumption) but provides more time to engage in many of the alternative activities mentioned above, as the following interviewee explained. Both she and her husband work 80 per cent of full time.

*Something I think I see in people around me is that many who work very long days tend to consume more without extra thought [...]. If I would stress myself out and work 100 per cent, then pick up the children, then maybe it would be faster to buy a new pair of jeans than to fix the jeans that wore through because I do not have the time to sit for an hour and a half at the sewing machine in the evening. Because I am so tired or because there is so much else that I need to find time for. While if I work an hour and a half less, I have some more time to do things. So I think it has definitely played a role for me, I have noticed that connection: If I have more time, I can do more things myself instead of buying. (IP8w34)*

When asked “Are you trying to make further changes?”, the respondents referred to efforts to be more systematic and disciplined, to include more areas of consumption, to be less susceptible to impulsive buying and smart advertisement, to improve their skills in repairing things or growing vegetables, to find new ways to commute, to become more self-sufficient, to collaborate more with their neighbours, to work fewer hours, among others. The interview also examined which consumption items were especially difficult to reduce or relinquish. Interviewees mostly mentioned meat, dairy products, and cars or car use. Avoiding aviation is generally considered an acceptable sacrifice. Items and services connected to children were frequently depicted as a difficult matter. In general, difficulties were presented as related to family situations rather than individual needs and desires.<sup>5</sup>

Several of the interviewees described their process to reduce consumption as stepwise, which makes sense given the thorough embeddedness of mainstream lifestyles in mass consumption society: “I think it’s a process, too, after all you’ve had a very high consumption pattern for a very long time and then you have to kind of switch over, so it takes some time” (IP9w48). This stepwise process is about successively adding areas to one’s attention and efforts, adopting new routines or decision rules, learning more and acquiring new skills needed for the new lifestyle. One activity leads to another, known in research as a spill-over effect (Osikominu/Bocken 2020). Even small and seemingly insignificant changes can have snowballing and long-lasting effects (Hards 2012). One man who used the phrase “stepwise process” explained that the challenge often lies in what comes before the next step:

<sup>5</sup> See also Boström (2021a) which, based on the same material, focuses on social relational challenges.

*Once I start trying, I discover it is not that difficult. But it is to take the step that is difficult, to change my habitual behaviour. [...] [I]t is difficult to forget the old [habit] [...] You step on unknown ground a bit, just by making the decision. But once you are out there and are on that ground, you discover, well, this was not that difficult.*  
(IP5m54)

Furthermore, the downsizing process is fundamentally a social process. For most of the people interviewed, the relation to a partner, the family or a broader social context appears as central. The household economy, the home, and to a large extent the routines are shared, thus it is impossible to undergo a thorough lifestyle altering process without considering one's closest relations (Boström 2021a). The interviews show that couples are in this together (though some of the interviewees live in single households): they plan, support, discuss, debate, negotiate, compromise, question purchases, help resist impulsive buying, assess purchases made, criticize and try out new activities together. One partner may push more than the other, but many interviewees describe that it is essential to have the backing and approval of the less pushy supporter(s). Offspring – children, teenagers, and young adults – are often included in the family discussions. Sometimes they push for change, such as in relation to vegetarian or vegan food, but in many ways family formation is tied to mass consumption and difficulties in reducing consumption (Isenhour 2010; Callmer 2019). The social sphere beyond the household members includes relatives, friends, work colleagues and engagement in civil society associations. This larger sphere also provides a social context for their lifestyle transformation and appears as important in the interviews, involving support, role models, discussions, compromises and conflicts.

### **Components of transformative learning: challenging habits of mind**

The transformative learning involved in this downsizing process is about challenging many frames of reference and habits of mind. To be sure, no person claimed they totally changed their ways of thinking, which was not to be expected. For several, values connected to nature, outdoor life, care of animals, careful treatment of waste, and clean environment were internalised long ago. Some of the people interviewed had grown up in families with values connected to frugality and self-sufficiency. Nonetheless, most of the interviewees spoke of recent relatively radical changes regarding practices, interpretative frames, and assumptions. By juxtaposing theory and empirical interpretation, I distinguish five different learning components which I argue are essential for lifestyle transformation. They are not ordered in any hierarchical or sequential sense but should rather be seen as mutually bolstering.

#### *Factual and theoretical learning*

The sample is on average relatively well educated. Interviewees engage in both formal and informal learning contexts (see Moyer/Sinclair 2020) and, as similarly observed by McDonald (2000) in her study on becoming vegan, develop a commitment to learn more about topics of relevance for the lifestyle transformation process.

Despite being environmentally conscious for a long time, interviewees spoke of more recent lifestyle changes in terms of reduced consumption as a response to new levels of awareness and

reflection. Interviewees described some new – sometimes sudden and shocking – insights. They spoke of insights and anxieties regarding the climate issue and ecological footprints, cotton and water usage, cruelty in animal processing factories, endocrine disruptors in plastics, plastics in oceans, or just the shocking fact that Trump won the election in the US. There were various sources behind these insights: news media, academic, or other kinds of adult education. For several, inspiration came from their social environment through arguments by family members, relatives, or friends (on social relational learning, see below).

After an initial episode of new insights and greater awareness, the typical interviewee continued to obtain information from a variety of sources, including digital platforms. They spoke of learning insights into a huge variety of empirical topics, from palm oil issues to what is edible in the forest, about how fair trade works in practice or how the world is connected through the commodities that permeate everyday life. Learning such factual matters may not necessarily lead to questioning basic frames of reference. Nonetheless, facts can provide important stepping stones towards transformative learning if they trigger a “constructive dissonance” (Wals 2010). Theoretical knowledge is needed as well because matters of sustainability and consumption tend to be complex and abstract. One woman reflects on how important a fair-trade education was to her:

*My worldview was shaken a bit in connection with this education and I came to insights that I had not really had before, about how the world works. I got the global perspective in a different way, it was very... It has been very useful and it has, yes, it has led to a number of re-evaluations for me. So my values have changed quite a lot in the last ten years, if you compare with the ten years before that, maybe. (IP21w38)*

Theoretical or discursive (Portwood-Stacer 2012) knowledge helps the downsizer not only to make sense of the world but also to develop arguments and justifications to defend their new ways of living. Such knowledge provides self-confidence and facilitates critical learning (see below) as well as the ability to respond to critique and counter-arguments from people in their social surroundings. As they deviate from mass consumption norms and understandings, interviewees frequently said that they were questioned by relatives, friends, colleagues, and others – not least on social media – and felt a need to give adequate justifications. Factual and theoretical learning both give a foundation to the other components of learning and continues to evolve through the process.

### *Practical, corporal and tacit learning*

Everyday consumers in the mass consumption context lack many traditional competences connected to making, growing, sewing, maintaining, repairing and sharing things. Late modern societies, with their extreme division of labour, have generally lost such practical expertise and self-sufficiency skills. In these respects, many downsizers try to again become do-it-yourself experts following older generations in terms of how to live in a more independent and self-sufficient way, as emphasised in previous literature (see Portwood-Stacer 2012; Carfagna et al. 2014; Hagbert/Bradley 2017; Osikominu/Bocken 2020). Interviewees described how they successfully learnt new skills through their engagement and experiments, and that they even en-

joyed the creativity involved in such learning practices and skill development (see also Armstrong et al. 2016; Kasser 2009, 2017). To try to make things work is a motivator to continue the stepwise downsizing process, which itself could be interpreted as continuous and cumulative learning.

Practical learning entails corporal learning. Such learning involves adopting new mobility and bodily practices, such as gardening, walking, bicycling, or experiencing temporal rhythms by taking a long-distance train for international travel instead of aviation. This too challenges previous habits of mind. Mind and body can do things previously not conceivable. Home-grown food tastes better. What was previously thought of as impossible or inconvenient – for example walking or cycling relatively long distances on an everyday basis – is now experienced as joyful, healthy and refreshing. In the interview, one woman mentioned her plan to change from commuting by car to bus, a practice she gradually implemented during the year when she wrote memos for the study. In these, she reflects:

*The times I didn't take the car, I have instead taken a bus and then walked 1.8 km home from the bus (or vice versa) – even if the weather has not been so nice, it is still always a nature experience – forest countryside, beautiful views, animals, etc. This in combination with the everyday exercise (walk) always feels positive (at least afterwards, when you get into the warm). (IP8w34, January memo)*

*[...] can only state once again that it is terribly nice not to drive a car in city traffic. It is a pure pleasure to be able to breathe for a while in the bus after a day at work before it is time to pick up the children. (IP8w34, October memo)*

Learning to downsize in this sense entails questioning assumptions of speed, learning to slow down and letting activities such as travelling take time. To be sure, time, distance, and logistics are no small matters for the downsizers, especially if they live an everyday life without a car. Everyone needs to cope with time and space constraints and achieve some work-life balance. In general, regardless of the place of residence, the local physical infrastructure has not been well constructed for a downsized life, particularly not a car-free life. It is furthermore important to stress that temporal, geographical and infrastructural aspects, including issues of mobility and proximity, are also very closely connected to access to work and other resources as well as to maintaining social relations.

The consumer in mass consumption society is socialised into a default buying mode (Bauman 2007), which becomes tacit knowledge or practical consciousness. Transformative learning is needed to confront this tacit knowledge and to gradually integrate *not* buying into the tacit knowledge. Initially, developing a default mode of not buying requires much reflection, and may for some require explicit strategies of temporary buy-nothing periods. One needs to learn not to buy something, to resist the buying impulse, to learn to make decisions to not consume. It appears as an inverted consumer rationality. This new default mode includes a higher level of reflection and planning in everyday life, as well as implementing decision rules such as the one described in the previous section. A buy-nothing period can bring many new insights:

*[W]hen we had our purchase stop, we saved an incredible amount of money and then we were completely horrified by how much money was wasted in normal cases. (IP18w35)*

*[N]ow I do not buy anything for a certain period to, somehow, train myself to think about what one actually buys. (IP22w50)*

Interviewees mention they tend to deliberate over more or less all purchases. One retired woman who possesses most of what she needs reasoned: “Well, because I buy so damn little [...], every single thing I buy, I think before I buy it: ‘Do I need this?’” (IP2w78). Fewer products to procure implies less information to gather and more possible time for reflection to spend on each item. Less consumption thus makes possible higher levels of rationality in consumption, in planning and in practices of acquisition, while a default mode of not buying gradually internalises as tacit knowledge. Another strategy is to delimit one’s scope of action. A woman whose environmental commitment grew in her youth says that she refrained from obtaining a driving licence to deprive herself of the opportunity to use a car:

*It’s easy to justify to oneself [...], ”Ah, but I can take the car because I have a child after all and it’s so cold or it’s raining” and such, but since I have opted out of the opportunity, I do not need to think, I do not need to wrestle with it because then I only have one alternative. (IP19w31)*

### *Personal and emotional learning*

In several cases, the start of the lifestyle changing processes involved reflecting about some problematic aspects in one’s own life situation, thus questioning some so far taken-for-granted assumptions (see also Schor 1998; Kovan/Dirkx 2002; Callmer 2019; Rebouças/Soares 2020). This can be thought of as a “transformative moment”, which is an “experience occurring during a short time-period which results in a significant change in pro-environmental practice” (Hards 2012: 763). Some such reflections concerned personal issues. For example, interviewees told how they started to question the norm of full-time work and what it is that provides true life quality, well-being and happiness. Situations that triggered such reflexivity included divorce, new job experiences – a woman working in a developing country context was perplexed that its citizens seemed to enjoy high levels of life satisfaction despite harsh conditions –, education or having children. Several interviewees, like the two examples below, expressed how consumption levels increased dramatically when they got children and their children grew up: nappies, push-chairs, toys, safety equipment, presents, birthday parties, larger house, car(s), moving to a safer area to live in, which increased car dependence, and so forth.

*Suddenly we were sitting there with two cars even though I thought I would live a car-free life. (IP12w36)*

*When I was pregnant, I thought about what I ate in different ways and about consumption of anything. It can be shampoo, it can be the kind of textile you use. It started a bit like that with the kids, I started to wonder if it was really reasonable to consume so much with small children. It is their Earth that we are consuming, and it does not feel great. (IP18w35)*

Many learning insights and reflections recounted by interviewees hence concern the personal level. “Why do we consume?”, “What kind of person am I that have these types of desires?”,

“What constitutes a good life?”, “What am I doing with my time?”, “Does this object really make me happy?” Interviewees expressed how surprised they were about the possibilities and personal gains by living with less, working less and about all the benefits – and some great sacrifices – of consuming and demanding less. Almost everyone in the material expressed having had learning experiences in relation to quality of life, something also confirmed by previous literature (see for example Kasser 2009, 2017; Isenhour 2010; Carfagna et al. 2014; Hagbert/Bradley 2017; Callmer 2019; Rebouças/Soares 2020). The following quotes illustrate the themes that appeared frequently in the material:

*I think I have a higher quality of life; I value things in a different way today. When I look at my consumption then, I reflect on my life in some way. I value experiences more than I value stuff. (IP5m54)*

*Everything you are very happy about is often for free. (IP10w50)*

*The feeling that it is possible, you feel that you can do more if there is a crisis in society. Then I am more prepared than anyone else who has to run to Ica [the supermarket] for everything they need. I know what I can eat. I have learned through the courses I have taken everything about what you can eat in the forest, what is not weeds. (IP13w61)*

*It feels so nice that when I open the wardrobe, the clothes I see are the ones that reflect the real life I live. (IP14w50)*

*As I said before, it is very important to me to be able to stand for what I do; I do not feel good otherwise. Therefore, I feel good when I can live based on my values. I am also not at all as afraid of the change that is coming as many are. (IP16w43)*

*I have more fun in my life than I have ever had before. (IP23m42)*

Even if this outcome is well-known within the research on reduced consumption, the point here is to emphasise transformative learning as part of the process and outcome. There is *learning* about what one truly likes and dislikes, about things which are possible to refrain from without sacrifices, and about things that are very difficult to reduce or relinquish. The interview itself meant, for some, reflecting about how much their values had changed in the last decade or so. For some, being satisfied with what one has and not constantly longing for more appears as a virtue passed on from earlier generations. Such virtues were rediscovered from role models like a grandmother, forgotten when they had previously endorsed a consumerist lifestyle. Some say they could have done the transformation earlier if they had only understood better the personal gains from consuming less.

Personal learning entails an increasing awareness of emotional dissonance. Dissonance can be felt as unease, bad conscience, anxiety and frustration. Reflecting on such emotions must not lead to passivity but can lead to a “critical emotional awareness” (Ojala 2016) and they can become constructive forces in the learning process (see also McDonald 2000; Hards 2012). Interviewees spoke of better conscience, higher self-esteem and pride and related such emotions to doing the right thing, having one’s feet on the ground, and the satisfaction that stems from better congruence between values and actions.<sup>6</sup> Several interviewees spoke of the positive feelings connected to a sense of influence, to noticing how one’s thoughts and actions are affecting

<sup>6</sup> See also Kovan/Dirkx (2003) on transformative learning among environmental activists.

others in one's social spheres: spouse, friends, colleagues, relatives and not least one's children. Some spoke of how their worries about the climate and the environment were reduced by perceiving such an influence (see also Ojala 2016).

The impossibilities of transforming one's lifestyle completely in line with one's new values and aspirations due to the dependency on mass consumption structures give rise to inner tensions. Ambivalence, dilemmas and inner compromises are common themes in the interviews, particularly often related to car use, family matters, children, and presents (see Boström 2021a). Interviewees expressed tendencies of self-criticism and self-blame in this regard:

*It would be nice if you did not have a lot of ideas about things and were just someone who could go shopping and did not care. (IP6w45)*

*When you become aware, you also become more aware of the more unnecessary purchases you make. (IP9w48)*

*It can be very hard to make conscious choices all the time. And you can have a constantly bad conscience, even if you make wise choices; you sometimes know that there are even wiser choices to make. (IP21w38)*

It appears that downsizers need to develop a sense of discipline as well as knowing when to compromise. One self-disciplinary strategy is learning not to expose oneself to temptations, such as visiting shopping centres, receiving advertisements or living in an area with a social life based on high levels of consumption. This also involves learning about the myriad and subtle consume-more norms and messages that are deeply integrated in advertisements of various kinds, not least by social media and search engines. Unsurprisingly, the interviewees were also able to give many examples of when their discipline failed them. Stress and tiredness can stand in the way: "When I'm tired or have a lot to do, I easily fall back into old, ordinary, quick dishes and then often with meat. I try to choose organically labelled then, but it still does not feel good" (IP9w48 March memo). Such imperfections and deviations from a perceived ideal situation also trigger critical reflexivity (see below), including learning about personal and societal barriers and realising how deeply embedded the consumerist norms and structures are in everyday social life (Black/Cherrier 2010; Armstrong et al. 2016).

### *Social relational learning*

As emphasised earlier, not just the lifestyle change process itself but also the transformative learning process contained in it are fundamentally social and, more precisely, *social relational*. Theorists of transformative learning stress the dialogical (Mezirow 2009), relational (Cran-ton/Taylor, 2012), and social (Wals 2010) nature of the process that involves negotiations and critical discussions. Social learning refers to learning by mirroring one's own ideas, views, values and perspectives with those of others (Wals 2010). A transformative learning in matters of reducing consumption needs to reveal and engage with how consumption is involved in relational work and shaped by social norms, social comparison, pursuit of status and a variety of social circumstances (Boström 2020, 2021a). Crucial questions are: "What characterises healthy social relations?", "How can I see and question social norms that induce excess consumption and which are penetrating our social lives?" The interviews yield many responses to such issues.

Even if several interviewees themselves seem to have developed something of a social robustness towards status consumption, they consider their children vulnerable:

*Much of my consumption is about my children, and I haven't really figured anything out that works. Of course I try to hold back, but I buy significantly more, or we buy significantly more than I would like. And it's also very much a question of comparisons, with other children getting more. On this issue, I don't have... I don't know the key to going forward with that thought. It's rather that I don't want my children to feel neglected or set aside or treated worse by other people's children. It's like a very sore spot. (IP23m42)*

Downsizers learn by negotiating and discussing with their fellows at home or in other social circles. Values, viewpoints, assumptions, barriers and norms are exposed by their attempts and by discussions. There is also an increased attention to the high importance of relations as such. Here is a response to the interview question about learning insights:

*[Learning includes] that I have become happier by shifting my focus away from material things. I place more emphasis on relationships than material status symbols that are not important to me at all anymore. Relationships have emerged as much more important. (IP18w35)*

Interviewees discussed the social norms related to mass consumption. All perceive that the dominant norms are tied to mass consumption, which makes it challenging to deal with matters connected with reduced consumption within families and among relatives, friends, neighbours and colleagues. Wals (2010) stresses that interaction with trustful but disagreeing others facilitates social learning. However, interviewees spoke of the burden of being the killjoy and described demanding discussions with their relatives and acquaintances (Black/Cherrier 2010; Callmer 2019; Boström 2021a). In connection with that there is also learning about choosing one's fights, about when it makes sense to argue and when it only triggers fruitless conflicts.

At the same time, there are both old and new norms about frugality and self-sufficiency that come to the rescue, including new trends and frames connected to vegetarianism, veganism, second-hand, the sharing economy and similar. Transformative learning in this respect has to do with reinventing traditional or alternative frames of reference, including norms, values and ideas from the past, and building on the memories from grandparents or other role models who could live well with few things and in a marginal economy. Such kinds of positive social comparison can be facilitated by a growing "eco-habitus" (Carfagna et al. 2014) apparent among like-minded in social networks. Such an eco-habitus implies a positive social identification of being environmentally conscious, including self-esteem connected to doing the right thing.

### *Critical learning*

By definition, transformative learning is critical learning as it involves "reflecting critically on the source, nature and consequences of relevant assumptions – our own and those of others" (Mezirow 2009: 94). It involves imagining that life could be otherwise. It involves critique and conflict in the case of sustainability transformation (Boström et al. 2018). When someone recognises dominant discourses and beliefs as oppressive, unfair or unsustainable, they can engage

in a transformative learning process. For the interviewees, the process started with critique, often based on new factual or theoretical knowledge, which might have been shared within the social network and triggered personal reflection and emotional dissonance: excess consumption and mainstream everyday life was perceived as wrong, as it is both damaging the planet and personally detrimental. At the same time, the downsizing processes itself seem to have sharpened this critical attitude, as it made them engage in accumulating more knowledge, new practices and embodied insights and re-evaluations of matters in personal and interpersonal life. All the learning elements previously discussed culminate in a growing critique that an alternative lifestyle is not just urgently needed but possible and even personally enriching. The anger and frustration that society continues as usual increases in parallel with increasing knowledge. They criticise how societies force and reproduce mass consumption patterns and make it practically and culturally difficult to live an alternative life without excess consumption. For some, the decision to work fewer hours implied more time to educate oneself (theory, practice, skills) and for critical reflection.

Interviewees assume individual responsibility but argue it is insufficient: “There will never be a meaningful difference if only those who are willing to pay five times more [compared to aviation] take the train [down to mainland Europe]” (IP16w43). This woman paid for her international train tickets but, like other interviewees, stressed the need for structural transformation in society. Although downsizers are not passive victims in relation to inhibiting or facilitating social structures and norms, they cannot wish away their dependence on existing infrastructures of buildings, transportation, energy provision and retailing. Critique can turn into a search for other ways of influence. Interviewees spoke about their actions both in relation to concrete others (as potential role models, in discussions, through provocation) and to larger collectives. In her memos, one woman wrote:

*I emailed a garden magazine that attached an offer for air travel and questioned them promoting air travel while urging readers to think climate-smart about their cultivation and their garden. I got a good response, namely that they will review their advertising policy, so I hope it has an effect. I did not think I would get that reaction, so it felt hopeful. (IP9w48 March memo)*

Transformative learning, here, implies reflecting on how one’s actions, responsibilities, interactions, and exchanges potentially relate to a larger collective. For some of the interviewees reflecting on the insufficiencies of individual acts, personal engagement expanded into a more outward commitment. Resulting types of action included participating in civil society associations such as transition networks, arranging study circles, running a website, writing blogs, confronting consumerist norms and practices in the workplace, contacting magazines, as in the example above, and discussing on social media or in other circumstances. Acting as role models was not initially a goal, a woman explained, but gradually evolved in her and her husband’s lifestyle transformation:

*I think we started quite a lot with a desire to change our own lifestyle but then we got to a point where it feels like it would make a bigger difference to the environment if we got more [people] with us than if we just change ourselves even more, so to speak. So we think quite a lot about how we inspire others. (IP3w45)*

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## Conclusions

The people interviewed for this study have been undertaking a significant lifestyle transformation. They generally perceive that they left or are leaving the consumerist standard way of life and its norms behind, and many have made several other related changes, such as working fewer hours, changing work, or changing the place of residence. Some describe the process of reduced consumption as linked to values and a mindset they had since childhood, thus expressing elements of continuity. Most of the interviewees say that the changes involve basically all parts of their everyday life. It is about a complex whole of interrelated parts that involves much questioning of society's structures, routines, values, and norms around consumption. What their experiences tell us is that this is a demanding and disruptive process of transformative learning, involving both forgetting old habits, habits of mind and frames of reference and inventing new ones. As we seek transformative pathways to sustainable futures, this message is of high relevance.

As Kovan and Dirkx (2003) argue in their study of environmental activists, a transformative learning process is not sudden. The process can involve an initial "transformative moment" (Hards 2012) with intensive reflection, whereas the process seen as a whole is gradual, stepwise, and extended over a longer period of time. It is linked to the experiences and challenges that a person encounters from situation to situation in everyday social life (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015; Armstrong et al., 2016; Osikomunu/Bocken, 2020) and characterised by continual openness and commitment to learning (Kovan/Dirkx 2003; McDonald 2000) in both formal and informal learning contexts (Moyer/Sinclair, 2020) and with unexpected gains and obstacles. A key argument based on the analysis of the empirical material is that transformative learning regarding such lifestyle change needs to entail several components of learning in a processual and mutually bolstering way: factual and theoretical learning; practical, corporal and tacit learning; personal and emotional learning; social relational learning; and critical learning. It is suggested that all these components of learning – although in varied ways – are needed for transformative learning and lifestyle transformation to happen.

This article furthermore contributes to the argument that we need to take the social dimension more seriously when addressing sustainability transformation in general and lifestyle transformation towards reduced consumption specifically. Considering the social is much more than adding a social science perspective to a particular research topic. It is acknowledging the necessity, in politics, policy and public planning, of involving the social and getting away from an idea that reducing the climatic and ecological impact of consumption is mostly a technological and/or informational issue. It means questioning basic assumptions and worldviews regarding mass consumption and how it is deeply embedded in the ways contemporary society works. Transformative learning can therefore never be just an individual enterprise on the personal level; it is a social relational affair and there have to be collective efforts of transformative learning in various spheres of society (see Boström et al. 2018; Boström 2020), within "communitas" (Buechner, Dirkx, Konvisser, Myers and Peleg-Baker 2020) grounded in social interaction and shared experiences (associations, neighbourhoods, communities, workplaces, schools, etc.). Even though this article has rather emphasised the micro and meso social relational as-

pects of downsizing (see also Boström 2021a), it is connected to larger issues of social sustainability, such as: fair access to local infrastructure (e.g. renewable electricity, bicycle lanes, green areas), access to alternative systems of provisions (e.g. sharing platforms, libraries of various kinds, repair cafés). It also touches upon issues of equality because increased inequality gaps spur unsustainable consumerism and undermine senses of individual and collective responsibility (see Wilkinson/Pickett 2010, 2018). And it underlines the importance of deliberative forums in which issues of social norms and the quality of life can be addressed, confronted and reframed.

Transformative learning is not sufficient by itself because a lot of the individual behaviour is pre-configured by existing institutions and socio-material arrangements. Various infrastructural changes (transportation, renewable energy, digitalisation) ought to be facilitated by economic, political and cultural institutions on macro levels.<sup>7</sup> Without going into details, a couple of key factors that would have a strong impact on people's possibilities to realise their downsizing ambitions relate to innovations within the social security system (e.g. universal basic income or services) as well as to achieving a general reduction of the work week. A shorter work week would reduce spending capacities, reduce stress and time poverty, and free up time for cultivating alternative practices (see Knight, Rosa and Schor 2014). As interviewees indicate, more time is also critical for opportunities to engage in reflective and educative practices that directly facilitate transformative learning.

For policy change in favour of lifestyle transformation and reduced consumption to happen, a broader public social critique and a legitimacy for more effective top-down intervention need to evolve bottom-up. This in turn requires transformative learning among the population. Can the transformative learning described in this article inspire and spill over to a larger public and scale up, perhaps via a social tipping-point dynamic, to a collective level? Can the COVID-19 pandemic, with its associated involuntary disruption of consumer practices in some areas due to lockdowns and social distancing policies, trigger transformative learning? To be sure, the people interviewed for this study and their learning is still best described as niche in society; it is a long way to the mainstream, even though environmental awareness is growing and concepts and practices such as second-hand, transition networks, repairing and sharing economies are becoming more common in society. Regardless of the answers to these questions concerning the possibilities to scale up and the pandemic experiences,<sup>8</sup> there is much to gain by recognising and understanding that sustainability lifestyle transformation, indeed, requires a process of transformative learning involving large segments of the population. This needs to be fully acknowledged in future studies and policies regarding reduced consumption. Lifestyle transformation, urgently needed in our overconsuming societies, will not happen automatically. It will require elements of questioning and learning that have been emphasised in this article. It is a core question for both society and social science how everybody in overconsuming welfare societies can learn to consume less.

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<sup>7</sup> On macro issues, see Boström 2021b.

<sup>8</sup> There are some interesting experiences relating to, for example, digitalisation and home office work, time saving, localisation, mindful consumption, domestic recreation and vacationing, DIY practices related to gardening, cooking, repairing and more; see e.g. Boström 2021b, 2021c; Echegaray, Brachya, Vergraft, and Zhang 2021.

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