

## Short paper

Downshifting – rejecting the growth imperative or internalizing the neoliberal order?

### Abstract

In this paper we analyze stories of “downshifting” one’s standard of living, which we encountered when interviewing environmentally conscious people about their lifestyle choices. We found that downshifting narratives shared common structure and themes, including taking a career turn which abandons previous career ambitions either for something more personally meaningful, or for something that is experienced as more “acceptable” in terms of ecological sustainability or/and social equity. We also found that, though the same elements appeared in the structure of the narratives, they were interpreted along different available storylines about downshifting. While analyzing these storylines, we placed these downshifting narratives within the larger context of changes in working life in current post-industrialist capitalist societies, especially related to the individualization and personification of work. Finally, we reflect upon if these findings could also give some hints about how the role of work and consumption could be addressed and redesigned in post-growth societies.

**Keywords: Downshifting, Class, Responsible Careers, Meaningful Work, Degrowth**

### Background and aim

In this paper we introduce our research on downshifting in the form of narratives we encountered when interviewing people about their consumption, career, and life-style choices. The complete data consists of 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews with people who defined themselves as environmentally conscious. We have identified clear downshifting narratives within four of the 20 interviews, where each of the four interviews formed a storyline where a voluntary decrease of living standards was described through changes in working life and career, and related to changing patterns of consumption. By voluntary we mean that this change was not related to un- or underemployment. This short paper is based on the narrative analysis of these four interviews as downshifting narratives. These interviewees were females aged 30-60 and lived in southern Finland.

The aim of this paper is to explore how downshifting can and could contribute to a shift towards a degrowth/post-growth society. We will approach this problem by, firstly connecting the discussions of downshifting, meaningful work, and degrowth; and secondly to analyze whether these downshifting decisions and narratives stems from a questioning of the growth imperative, or if it is more of a reaction to it?

### Approach

We studied downshifting from a narrative and social constructionist perspective. Here, we use the idea of narrative at two levels. First, we believe that narratives provide a means for gaining more and a better understanding of the broader culture shared by a community of individuals. We believe that there is a variety of available metanarratives that shape the experience of people living in certain social and cultural contexts (Thompson & Rayner 1998). Based on previous studies we expected that downshifting would offer a counter narrative to the traditional linear career narrative

(Baruch 2003). We also expected that the possibility of there being more than one variation of this downshifting narrative, which reflects the way the narrator makes use of cultural resources and struggles (Chase 1995: 20 in Elliot). We also used the idea of structure as an analytical tool in order to address the common features of downshifting found in our data. This means giving attention to the themes and elements that are repeated across different narratives.

## **Findings**

We found that all the interviewees who had decreased their living standard had the following same elements in their downshifting narrative: 1. Experienced unsustainability related to workload or management style in previous employment, 2. Career change towards “more meaningful” work, 3. Change in the nature of employment relation, 4. Change in consumption and other lifestyle patterns, 5. Evaluation of values.

In our preliminary analysis we found that though all the stories had the same elements, they reflected different values and expectations related to work. We have categorized these narratives as follows (cf. Etzioni 1998):

- 1) Environmentalist/egalitarian downshifting (Holistic simplifiers)
- 2) Downshifting from high income status career path. (Strong simplifying)
- 3) Better work/life balance narrative (Moderate Downshifting)
- 4) Quality of life narrative (Moderate Downshifting)

These narratives differed from each other on various dimensions. The first narrative differs from the rest, because this environmentalist/egalitarian narrative emphasizes social justice and ecological sustainability (degrowth values) as the main reason for downshifting from a previous career. We interpret this narrative to have elements of what Etzioni (1998) has described as holistic simplifiers, who *‘adjust their whole life patterns according to the ethos of voluntary simplicity.’*

Contrary to the holistic simplifying narrative, in other narratives the change in career was interpreted as an “escape” from personally untenable position in working life, and was not caused by social or environmental concerns. The experiences that causes the need for “escape” were related to either bad management (narrative 3) or intensification in working condition (narrative 4), or to experiencing the previous career as unsustainable (narrative 2.)

These narratives also differed in terms of experienced change in consumption patterns. In the holistic simplifying narrative, the loss of income was described to have led to anti-consumption values and practices, and made also impossible some green consumption practices experienced as too expensive or luxurious, such as organic food. In narrative 2, downshifting from high income and status career (strong simplifying, Etzioni 1998) had also caused clear changes in the family consumption patterns: From conspicuous consumption towards more moderate consumption, which instead of status artifacts was oriented to well-being through consumption of services and high-quality products.

These narratives also differed from each other in the way downshifting led to questioning the current economic system. The first two narratives included a clear growth-critique, which when reflecting one's choices as downshifting also led to questioning the current economic order. In the moderate downshifting narratives, downshifting was related to finding better work-life-balance and quality of life, and led to more limited critique of the economy. In sum, the reflections on downshifting ranged from questioning the current growth agenda and capitalist mode of production as a system, to questioning limited local practices. These differences could be understood to reflect different class and professional backgrounds.

These downshifting narratives can also be read through the changes in the wider social context, as reactions to the 'new employment contract'. The emphasis on meaningfulness seems to reflect the individualization, personification and even 'biocracy' of working life, described by for example Fleming (2012, 2014). From this point of departure the previously naturally experienced relation between paid labour, adequate consumption levels and social wellbeing (at the national level) and welfare is broken under global capitalism, and meaningfulness is searched at a more personal level. At the same time, one's values and political agenda (such as environmentalism) enters the picture as a valid work life/career option, like Tams and Marshall (2010) describe in their paper on responsible careers.

## **Conclusions and implications**

Capitalism (more historically) and the current neoliberal order have had a large impact on issues related to working life and employment arrangements (Gorz 1988; Bauman 1998). But the same can also be said of one of the main, if not solutions, then at least consequences and answers to the changes in working life, namely downshifting. Fittingly, within the growth imperative and neoliberal order, downshifting has remained an individualized form of action. An action performed by individuals of whom many have not only lost much of the meaningfulness in their work (ibid.), but they have also lost their class consciousness. This latter loss will make it ever more difficult for downshifting to become anything more than an individualized form of action performed by individuals for whom the possibility of collective action and the common good becomes an ever more blur and distant unrealistic utopia.

Still, downshifting can be understood to be one of key elements in the degrowth agenda, but it could be so much more. Downshifting consumption and production levels, slowing down, and finding new ways to work towards community needs have been seen as essential in forming degrowth societies. A degrowth perspective demands a re-imagining of economic relations, identities and activities (Fournier 2008; Nierling 2012). As work and working life is one of the central spheres where economic relations and social identities, hierarchies and agency are formed, the re-imagining of organizations and the societal conception of work is also one of the central problems in moving towards a degrowth/post-growth society.

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