

**The Importance of Self-Actualization for Degrowth:  
Does Personal Transformation Lead to Private and  
Professional Alternative Lifestyle Choices?**

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Master Thesis submitted in fulfillment of the Degree

Master of Business Administration

in General

Submitted to Mag. Dr. Christian Kerschner

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## **AFFIDAVIT**

I hereby affirm that this Master's Thesis represents my own written work and that I have used no sources and aids other than those indicated. All passages quoted from publications or paraphrased from these sources are properly cited and attributed.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Years of mounting pressure and manifold crises ranging from environmental to economic and financial, accompanied by growing social and health concerns, have led to increasing recognition that the growth imperative and the Western consumer lifestyle may have come dangerously close to collapsing our world. Although different perspectives and strong disagreements on how to deal with such a situation prevail, a growing number of actors within the global community agree that the current economic and social structures are unsustainable and that profound change is required.

Degrowth, one of the possible alternative pathways long disregarded as utopian, has started to receive more attention over the last decade owing to the burgeoning scientific literature and an active community. Voluntary simplicity, one of many concepts and grassroots practices within its broad umbrella, with millions of adherents globally, may be seen as the closest insight into the realm of Degrowth currently available by showcasing that such imaginaries are not only viable but achievable and realistic. Researching and a better understanding of voluntary simple living provide possibilities for approximating a new societal model based on human well-being and coexistence with the environment.

This thesis delves into two less-explored aspects of simple living: the characteristics of adherents to alternative lifestyles concerning Maslow's self-actualization process and their approach to work as seen through the lens of the self-employed. Through exploring narratives of adopters to alternative lifestyles, and the meaning-making they ascribe to their lived experiences, the research described in this thesis aims to gain deeper insights and a better understanding of the worldviews and characteristics of people who claim to be happier with having and consuming less. Revealing the nature of the lives of self-actualized individuals and the importance self-actualization may have for the Degrowth narrative contributes to the literature by bridging the existing gap between theory and practice within fields of Degrowth, voluntary simplicity, and self-actualization. This thesis gets us a step closer to understanding that the prime movers toward a Degrowth society are coming from the grassroots and that the imaginaries of Degrowth are within our reach – created and lived by self-actualized people in parallel to the mainstream on the margins of society.

**Keywords:** degrowth, voluntary simplicity, simple living, alternative lifestyle, self-actualization, work, business



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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

AI	Artificial Intelligence
CAGR	Compound Annual Growth Rate
CAM	Complementary and alternative medicine
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
IRB	Institutional Review Board
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WMO	World Meteorological Organization





# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Context

The pursuit of the good life has been woven into the very fabric of human existence; it is inherent in all human beings. Aristotle, in ancient Greece, argued that "other goals serve as subordinate strivings when compared to the goal of living well" (Thomas et al., 2021, p. 1888), suggesting that the goal of living the good life served as the ultimate goal of existence. Whether hedonic or eudaemonic, whether pursuing a life of abundance, a life centered on acquiring pleasures and material wealth or striving for a life that has threads of personal excellence, meaningful relationships, and societal contribution weaved into its fabric, aspiration for the good life has for millennia been a driving force in the activities of people around the world. It has been fueling their dreams and keeping them going in the face of the gravest challenges.

While pleasures and enjoyments may be good and worth having in life, according to Aristotle, they are inferior to other activities, namely contemplation, and self-mastery, which approximate the feeling of divinity and are associated with the traits of a virtuous person. Pondering the good life, Aristotle also claimed that "poverty, isolation, and dishonor are normally impediments to the exercise of virtue and therefore to happiness" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2022, para. 17). He even went as far as to claim that evil people, those driven by desires for ever-greater dominance and luxury who have been convinced that justice, temperance, or generosity have little or no value, are generally dissatisfied and full of self-hatred.

Given modern scientific research, achieving a certain level of material wealth and economic growth is necessary for enabling societal progress and the capacity to live lives of dignity. But as already evidenced in affluent societies and explained by the Easterlin paradox (Sekulova, 2015; Jackson, 2017), higher income, taken over time and across the nation, mainly due to hedonic adaptation and social comparison, does not result, on average, in higher life satisfaction. This implies that surpassing a certain comfortable level of income (per capita), material wealth not only becomes less significant for human well-being but evolves into an impediment as "frustration begins to exceed gratification" (Deriu, 2015, p. 84). Once well-being stops being driven by the accumulation of wealth, non-materialistic strivings emerge and gain importance (Jackson, 2017; O'Neill, 2015; Sekulova, 2015; Victor, 2015; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009).

"Widespread disenchantment with modern life" (Jackson, 2017, p. 172), heavily burdened with social and economic problems, including growing ecological threats, is making people question

the global capitalist system and Western consumer lifestyle and look for alternative imaginaries. By experimenting with different lifestyles and engaging in various non-materialistic pursuits ranging from art, philosophy, and religion to activism, people try to escape the trap of the work and spend cycle they have been falling into and reinvent and reclaim control of their lives. By distancing themselves from the mainstream lifestyle, they attempt to get closer to their purpose and fulfillment and rediscover a sense of well-being (Alexander, 2015; Jackson, 2017).

And while raising material living standards has been the best way of improving the quality of human life for centuries and continues to remain of high importance in poorer countries of the Global South, modern, affluent societies have experienced material wealth and a comfortable life unparalleled in human history. However, living standards and quality of life cannot be equated. The life of affluence built on the excessive exploitation of human and natural resources under the baton of a global capitalistic system dominated by political and economic elites with an insatiable appetite for wealth, power, and privileges (Alexander, 2012a; Latouche, 2009; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009), has directed us on a path of environmental destruction and a path toward a degraded and broken society. On the one side, we have been faced with global warming and climate change, soil degradation, ocean acidification, and biodiversity loss, while on the other, we have been witnessing a continuous increase in (income) inequality along with related and widespread health and social issues ranging from physical and mental illnesses to corroded trust between people, alienation, addictions, and violence (Dittmar et al., 2014; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). Taken together, these harsh realities evince that business as usual, accompanied by consumerism as a way of life, can no longer be maintained without fearing "the collapse of human civilization and much of the biosphere" (Horton and Horton, 2019, p. 89). Awareness that verbal diplomacy and offering "technological fixes" and "greening" capitalism (Andreucci and McDonough, 2015) as the solution can no longer be acceptable surges, encouraging the need for integrated, holistic alternatives and urgent actions, including envisioning new realms of prosperity and the good life.

Returning to the Aristotelian line of thought, which argued that human happiness and well-lived lives are dependent on the communities in which they live to provide the necessary equipment and foster good habits (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2022), it raises the question of whether a 21st-century society has enough virtuousness within its people and structures to take the path of creating an alternative model of the world capable of providing the good life for all, or if such imaginaries – to be understood as "thinking in alternatives" (Kerschner et al., 2018) and a representation of social reality worth pursuing – are pure utopia.

Degrowth is not only discussing a society where the good life for all is a reality but has even gone beyond such a vision. Over the last few decades, prominent thinkers, committed researchers, and ardent advocates have been advancing a burgeoning body of literature and

many practical, real-life projects for a global society beyond the need for constant economic growth. Faced with increasing global environmental and social crises, this vision appears more viable than ever.

The problem with accepting Degrowth as a viable alternative arises from the fact that a Degrowth society requires things to be done differently – having "a different structure and serving new functions" (Kallis et al., 2015, p. 32) and that the growth imperative, regarded as the driving force of society under global capitalism, now needs to be rethought and replaced. As this may mean taking power from those currently in charge – global corporations and governments – sustained resistance is to be expected. Alexander and Gleeson (2019, p. 6) argue, "given that a degrowth economy would directly undermine the economic interests of the most powerful corporations and institutions in society, one should expect merciless and sustained resistance from these vested interests if a degrowth movement ever began gaining ascendancy."

On the other hand, the global consumer society has seduced ordinary people into a life of materialism. And although material things have always carried a symbolic meaning and have been used in all cultures to communicate affection, identity, social position, or even dreams and aspirations, consumer culture added social and psychological dimensions to them. Material possessions today offer comfort and security, excitement, and hope. They have been used to construct identities, to fill the void felt within oneself, substitute for religious consolation in an ever-increasing secular culture, or even escape harsh reality (Belk, 1988; Jackson, 2017). The attachments to material possessions tend to be so strong, and the relationships created with them are so tightly knit that they are perceived as "part of us" and "that we even feel a sense of bereavement and loss when they are taken from us" (Jackson, 2017, p. 159). In a hierarchically structured society, material possessions carry information people rely on to understand the social context and their place within it (Røpke, 1999). Hence, imposing a new value system and asking people to forgo material possessions without offering viable alternatives would be socially and morally wrong (Jackson, 2017).

Over millennia, the world's great philosophies and religious teachings, whether of Eastern or Western origin, have indicated a simple life, a life deprived of excessive material wealth, to be the path to be taken for pursuing "higher" goals and salvation. While acknowledging the enticing seductiveness of acquisitiveness and possessiveness to humans, they were also admonishing that they were personally unfulfilling, leading to greed, pride, gluttony, and envy – feelings that erode spirit and undermine the quality of life (Belk, 1983; Dittmar et al., 2014). C.G. Jung argued that the more ego-oriented people become, the more their soul shrinks into the depths of sadness. In an attempt to compensate for such a state, people develop an even greater attachment to materialism. In his view, "at any rate, [a degree of simplicity] is healthier than affluence," immediately adding that "only a few people can enjoy [it] without ill effects, whether physical or psychic" (Jung 1979, cited by Gerber, 2021, p. 14). Given consumer habits

and lifestyles within contemporary society, materialism seems to be all-encompassing, and responding to the call of earthly bodies for indulgence and the attractiveness of worldly possessions took precedence over the appeal of knowing about eternal happiness or fearing God.

Voluntary simplicity is a valuable concept under the extensive Degrowth framework that, according to Alexander (2015, p. 164), provides the way of life for which the time has finally come and the one that "degrowth surely depends on." It is a lifestyle and philosophy that proposes the willing restriction of excessive material goods in favor of living a more meaningful and satisfying life and comprises anything from pursuing artistic goals or psycho-spiritual growth to being more engaged with family and community matters or ecological activism. Voluntary simplicity, however, "should not be equated with living in poverty" but more thought of as a life that is "outwardly simple and inwardly rich" (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977, p. 3). Voluntary simplicity is all about living the good life beyond consumer culture.

The voluntary nature of this way of life, along with its pro-environmental impact and pro-social effects, underpin Degrowth's imaginary of embedding an economy between the biosphere and society (Nesterova, 2020; Osikominu and Bocken, 2020). Considering that today's political and economic elites are almost religiously pursuing profits and power and the majority of people are being locked in within social structures and programmed to seek ever-higher material wealth, the readiness to change direction and depart from the growth path and Western consumer lifestyles is unlikely to occur, at least if it is expected to be initiated from the top-down, i.e., by governments and policymakers. Instead, it will largely depend upon people willing, out of their free will, to embrace lifestyles of reduced consumption and seek satisfaction in non-materialistic pursuits (Alexander, 2012a; Alexander and Gleeson, 2019). In such a scenario, voluntary simplifiers (even if they are unaware of it) are to play a critical role in the Degrowth movement, acting as the driving force behind the transition toward a society that can live within planetary boundaries while remaining in harmony with the environment and still being capable of flourishing.

But who are the people who consciously impose limits on themselves in pursuit of the good life? What makes them leave the mainstream way of living and opt for alternatives? Do they have anything in common? And what traits do they have or do not have that allow them to adopt lifestyles that the majority find inconceivable?

Elgin and Mitchell (1977) argued that the richness of a person's inner world allows their outer world to be simple. This is consistent with Maslow's (1954) concept of self-actualization, which states that only the state of mind of sufficiency, achieved after all of a person's pressing deficiency needs from the lower level of the hierarchy have been adequately met, is conducive to embracing a life of material frugality.

Existing literature on voluntary simplicity is rich and offers valuable knowledge of this phenomenon, equally revealing certain aspects that require further research and better understanding, several of which have been addressed in this thesis.

## 1.2 Literature gap

The widespread interest of researchers in Degrowth and voluntary simplicity topics over the last several decades has contributed to a proliferation of literature and a better understanding, acceptance, and spread of those concepts and practices. And while some claim that the Degrowth literature predominantly deals with the macroeconomic framework of a Degrowth society (Nesterova, 2020), voluntary simplicity literature largely explores the consumption aspect of this lifestyle. However well the philosophy of voluntary simplicity fits under the umbrella of Degrowth, the macroeconomic theory behind the Degrowth concept and the microeconomic lifestyle practices of voluntary simplicity are defined by a gap that needs to be bridged, with specific areas within both fields that require better addressing and research.

While the dominant concept of work represents a construct of the capitalist system designed to support the growth economy, the Degrowth imaginary calls for an entirely different perspective. Working less, working in decent conditions, and diminishing the importance of work and the ideology created around it (Parrique, 2019) are the prerequisites for an urged work paradigm shift in society. The Degrowth economy gives precedence and places thus far undervalued sectors that "serve genuine needs of the society" (Nesterova, 2020, p. 5) – care, education, culture, and art – at the center, equally relying on small businesses based in local communities (Kallis et al., 2015; Jackson, 2017). However, the literature on implementing such a vision and what businesses should look like to make such a vision possible is lacking, and rethinking work for a Degrowth society remains without accepted articulation and is considered a challenge within the Degrowth discourse (Nesterova, 2020; Saave and Muraca, 2021). Albeit some grassroots practices such as commons, eco-communities, and Nowtopia, through their diverse activities and "invisible" ways, "are working to escape (...) the money economy," and taken broadly, are "setting the foundation, technically and socially, for a genuine movement of liberation from market life" (Carlsson, 2015, p. 215), the closest insight currently available into the realm of Degrowth can be gained from the perspective of voluntary simplicity.

Existing literature on voluntary simplicity has explored and explained "who voluntary simplifiers are, why they become voluntary simplifiers, and how they practice voluntary simplicity" (Walther et al., 2016, p. 23), suggesting that a simple lifestyle impacts favorably not only the lives of the individuals but their immediate community as well. Owing to its contribution to providing alternatives to some of the major issues in society (Alexander, 2011), the role of simple living and material frugality became comprehensible in dealing with environmental problems, alienation, antagonism, and inequality in the world (Elgin and

Mitchell, 1977). However, some specific questions about people capable of embracing such a lifestyle, after years and decades of being involved in the mainstream, are still without an answer. For example, how does voluntary simplicity connect to spirituality, happiness, and well-being? Does personal growth play any role in adhering to such a lifestyle, or what kinds of business practices or social structures are compatible with the philosophy of simplicity?

Before we can understand the breadth of this phenomenon, under which people claim to be happier and experience greater life satisfaction with consuming and having less, and grasp the sense of people's agency to shift their lifestyle, we need to continue exploring and gaining insights into the individual traits, motivations, and ambitions of adherents of voluntary simplicity (regardless of variations and levels of adoption). We need to research and find ways to understand how they construct their identities and how they embody their worldviews in their day-to-day lives, as much as we need to know what role work plays in their newly embraced lifestyle, how they choose their business careers, and what kind of business practices they engage in after exiting the mainstream. Comprehending how they contribute to changing their communities and to what extent it reflects on society at large should be of no less importance (Huneke, 2005; Lestar and Böhm, 2020; Walther et al., 2016; Etzioni, 1999).

The assumption driving this research comes from Maslow's motivation theory and hierarchy of needs, suggesting that only self-actualized individuals are "our great improvers and reformers of society, our most effective fighters against injustice, inequality, slavery, cruelty, exploitation (and also our best fighters for excellence, effectiveness, competence)" (Maslow, 1970, p. 4) – so I argue – key figures in leading and living the transformation toward a post-growth, post-carbon, human-centered society as postulated by the Degrowth imaginary.

Self-actualization, the final level of psychological development of an individual and, according to Carl G. Jung, "the main task of human life" (Gerber, 2021, p. 6), can be achieved only after surpassing what Maslow defined as deficiency needs – physiological, safety, love and belonging, and esteem needs. By rising to the level of sufficiency and growth needs, the awareness and perception of an individual's self and world become broad enough to embrace change, act beyond selfishness, and be motivated to do pure, unconditional good – the good for the sake of the good. Jung claimed that through widening of view and seeing problems from a higher level of personality and "a new level of consciousness," problems tend to be outgrown rather than solved by logic, as they appear in a different light, lose their urgency, and fade out (Wilhelm and Jung, 1947, pp. 89, 90). In the case of Degrowth, outgrowing the problems of the current economic system and society, which for decades has shown signs of being "morally and intellectually bankrupt" (Wallis, 2011, para. 4), will mean having the required capabilities to lead the transformation toward a society that is just, equal and sustainable.

In addition, the extensive literature review suggested that the work aspects of simple living arouse little interest among researchers. Narrowing voluntary simplicity to reduced consumer behavior and low-impact activities and accepting the view that voluntary simplifiers pertain to well-off members of society, as Etzioni (1999, pp. 18, 16) claims, "advocacy of voluntary simplicity addresses those who are in the higher reaches of income, those who are privileged," whose "basic needs are well satisfied," and "feel securely that these needs will be attended to in the future," tacitly implied that adopters of such lifestyle could afford it, thus presumably shifting the focus of research to other aspects, leaving the work aspect and, in particular, the business practices of adherents of the simple living inadequately explored.

However, research over the last two decades (Huneke, 2005; Peyer et al., 2017) has evidenced that adherents to voluntary simplicity belong to the middle class, are highly educated, and live in urban areas, which complies to a large extent with the data in Elgin and Mitchell's (1977) initial discussion on voluntary simplicity.

Given that voluntary simplifiers reduce their work hours and downshift their careers and that most of them frequently encounter structural obstacles in adjusting to a new lifestyle and finding appropriate employment, such as being cut off from support networks and business circles or unable to find suitable (part-time) work, which reflects on their finances, it raises the question of how people living a simple life provide for it. This question becomes even more relevant by knowing that simple living does not imply living cheaply and that specific dietary requirements or products that typically interest the adopters of this lifestyle, namely, organic food or ecological, crafted, and handmade products, are often more expensive than standard consumer goods. Taken together, it is hard to believe, especially in the long run, that a lifestyle of simplicity can be financed out of savings despite reduced consumption.

According to available literature, simple livers exit the mainstream after being disillusioned with the work and spend cycle of the Western consumer lifestyle and, in pursuing non-materialistic strivings, attempt to improve the quality of their lives. It has been argued that they are committed to studying (Eastern) philosophy, making art, or volunteering and activism and have been described as those who read books, ride bikes, cook, spend quality time with family and friends, declutter, or enjoy gardening. And while all those activities can be fulfilling and contribute to the quality of a person's life, drawing from Marx's (Belk, 1988) and Elgin's (Huneke, 2005) arguments about work, which imply that expressing oneself through work is a vital part of a person's life, it is doubtful that those activities can be meaningful in the long run. Knowing that simple livers are people with exceptional capabilities and achievements, who are diligent and well-educated, with specific skills and knowledge sought after in the employment market, who opted to leave their jobs and consumer way of life due to being overworked and disillusioned, believing that they will decide to permanently let go of work as a form of expressing their creativity to perpetuate their days and idle away their lives is rather unlikely.

Therefore, the main idea guiding this research was to explore what is behind people's motivation to leave the mainstream voluntarily and embrace alternative lifestyles, what drives their willingness to swim upstream, and how they approach work after adhering to a simple lifestyle, all to understand better what could be the repercussions of such an approach to life in a Degrowth society.

### **1.3 Research question**

Drawing from Maslow's motivation theory and hierarchy of needs, this research has been designed based on the assumption that self-actualization is the driving force behind individuals embracing alternative lifestyles. The formulation of the research question in this master's thesis reflects the intent to explore whether self-actualization could be grasped from the narratives of people adhering to simple lifestyles and how work, in particular, self-employment and owning businesses, is approached from their perspective. Gaining insights into the personal characteristics and world-making of individuals living and working in alternative ways should add to construct a narrative on the importance of self-actualization for a Degrowth society.

The research question(s):

*What role does self-actualization play in empowering individuals to "exit" mainstream living and embrace alternative lifestyles? In what ways (if any) are the worldviews of self-actualized adopters of simple living reflected in their approach to work and owning a business? What may be the overall role of self-actualization for a Degrowth society?*

Answering research questions can shed light on some under-researched areas of simple living and Degrowth and contribute to conveying the knowledge and practices necessary to build a society of prosperity and well-being that is not only fit for humans but non-violent towards the environment as well.

### **1.4 Research aims and objectives**

The research aims to address the existing gap in the literature on Degrowth and voluntary simplicity relating to the personalities of adherents to alternative lifestyles and the work aspects of their lives, focusing on the self-employed. By building on existing research, gaining new insights into the individual characteristics of adopters of simple living through their stories, and delving deeper into the worldviews that explain their lifestyle choices and business approach, the intent is to contribute a new understanding of the topics.

The ability to understand better how voluntary simple living relates to contentment in the lives of its adherents and what is behind the mindsets of people who can create different realms for

themselves from the mainstream they live in could help translate those world-makings into creating a Degrowth society.

The objectives that guided the research included finding out about the self-actualization characteristics of adherents to alternative lifestyles and assessing if and how they are reflected in the worldviews that drive such lifestyle choices. To explore the work aspect of simple lives, the goal was to examine the work practices and business approaches of the self-employed and determine the role of the worldviews of their owners in it. Lastly, based on the research findings, to assess how the world-making of simple lives, i.e., engaging in creating new "spaces for living, thinking and interacting" based on newly created worldviews, that can be seen as "fundamentally a process of social change" (Montesano Montessori, 2016, p. 538), relates to imaginaries of a Degrowth society.

## **1.5 Significance and contribution**

Living in the age of the Anthropocene means that human activity has become so dominant that it has started to have an adverse impact on the climate and the environment. After decades of greenwashing, faced with an existential crisis, taking responsibility and mitigating damages has become not only essential but urgent, as best echoed in calls (UN, 2022, para. 4, 16) sent by United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, "This is a climate emergency. (...) Climate promises and plans must be turned into reality and action, now."

Regardless of the proportions of devastation, as Alexander (2015a, p. xiv) states, climate change and peak oil are not to be considered a fundamental problem but rather "the symptoms of the cultures and systems of consumer capitalism that produce those problems." One of the possible and all-encompassing pathways to address them comes from Degrowth. By proposing a different approach to living well from the current growth narrative, Degrowth imaginaries were long ignored, disregarded as utopian, or marginalized. Even nowadays, despite the large body of scientific literature, among some mainstream economists, the approach is still being ridiculed (Kallis et al., 2015).

Voluntary simplicity is the concept that has its place under the broad Degrowth umbrella, even though living well with less is a philosophy and lifestyle difficult to understand and accept for those deeply immersed in the material mode of living typical of Western consumer society. However, an increasing number of people who take an alternative path and embrace simple living, the way of life that seems to come with incorporated answers to many of the global environmental and social problems that have been degrading the quality of life on the planet, show that other realms are possible and within our reach. And while voluntary simplicity as a movement has no political power, several real-life projects from Spain and Greece (Sekulova et al., 2017) instill hope that in the future, that might change and that simplifiers will be willing to take a more proactive role in shaping the society.

Apart from the momentum and the attempt to participate in "the most urgent task of our times" (Jackson, 2017, p. 62) by contributing with its findings and new understanding in providing a viable alternative, the significance of this research lies in exploring two aspects of voluntary simple living that have caught little attention from researchers over the last decades: the self-actualization of adherents to alternative lifestyles and their approach to work. By extending and deepening the understanding of those two aspects, gaining insights into the personal traits of adopters of simple living and the principles they live and work by, including their values, motivations, and practices, adds to the knowledge of the phenomenon. In addition to the existing literature on voluntary simplicity and Degrowth, broadening the Degrowth discourse and encouraging further exploration of the topic contributes to spawning the founding principles for and the emergence of a future Degrowth society.

## **1.6 Structure of thesis**

The thesis contains five chapters. Chapter one provides a context for the research, defines the literature gap and research question, and examines the aims and objectives and the significance and contribution of the conducted research. In chapter two, after outlining the theoretical framework and concepts contributing to the discussion within the topic of the thesis are illustrated, the literature on Degrowth, voluntary simplicity, and self-actualization, along with several emerging themes assisting in better comprehension of the research topic, is reviewed. Chapter three examines the research methodology and discusses narrative interviews in gathering information on less explored topics and marginalized population segments. Chapter four introduces the results and findings of the thematic analysis, followed by a grand narrative and discussion of the researcher's understanding of the research participants' worldviews and the meaning-makings they ascribe to their lived experiences. Lastly, chapter five concludes the thesis with an assessment of the results against the literature review, followed by an examination of the validity of the research and its limitations. The chapter ends with suggestions for possible future research.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, two fundamental concepts for this research topic – Degrowth and self-actualization – are introduced, and relevant literature is reviewed to acquaint with existing knowledge and identify challenges and literature gaps to be addressed. Both concepts relate to transformation, yet on different levels – self-actualization refers to a personal transformation, while Degrowth calls for an all-encompassing one that includes the entire society. Since there is no society without people, and the lives of individuals are defined by the culture they make part of, the two are conditioned and inextricably linked. The discussion of this research centers on adherents to simple living, their approach to life and work, and the meaning-making of their lived experiences. Accordingly, the subsections hereafter examine the relevant topics for the research, not omitting emerging themes that contribute to grasping more completely the phenomenon of living better with less.

### **2.2 Theoretical framework**

To explore the importance of self-actualization for a Degrowth society, the research under this thesis centers on examining the influence of self-actualization on people's lifestyles, in particular, their readiness to voluntarily leave a conventional, consumer way of living to embrace an alternative lifestyle. The emphasis in the research is put on the work aspect and the way adherents of such lifestyles approach business practices when self-employed. A theoretical framework for the research derives from two distinct concepts focusing on transformation only in different contexts: Degrowth through the prism of voluntary simple living and self-actualization following Maslow's view.

The first concept I shall employ is Degrowth (broadly speaking), which urges ecological and social transformation of society. A Degrowth society – human-centered and oriented to well-being and living in co-existence with the environment (Nesterova, 2020) – is the result of a Degrowth imaginary based on an alternative approach that opposes the growth narrative that has dominated our society for many decades. Woven into the fabric of a Degrowth society is the concept of voluntary simplicity, which has found its place under the broad umbrella of Degrowth and has been gaining momentum in recent years. The importance of voluntary simplicity for Degrowth is manifold. Not only has simple living as a philosophy been part of our heritage, but more importantly, as a lifestyle, voluntary simplicity has been recognized and practiced by millions of people for decades on all continents, slowly outgrowing the outskirts of society and dispelling the prevailing image of being rural or escapist – "die Aussteiger" lifestyle and moving into urban areas (Alexander and Ussher, 2012). For that reason, I would

argue that adopters of simple living could be considered the prime movers and true bearers (albeit unintentionally) of Degrowth, who also contribute valuably, just as Kerschner et al. (2018, p. 34) claim for the role of "technology" that "abstract goals such as the "good life" within biophysical limits" become more understandable and by that, "Degrowth futures more tangible," more workable, and more real.

Self-actualization, based on Maslow's motivation theory and the hierarchy of human needs, represents the second concept, which refers to the transformation of an individual resulting from satisfying ever-higher needs. According to Maslow (1954; 1970), self-actualized individuals have almost no deficiencies but a healthy personality, for which they could be considered as good as "superhuman," with a long list of personal traits that, to an average man, can look rather utopian. While being far from perfect, they are the best among us and those who may be willing to take on the burden of leading the change out of "a genuine desire to help the human race" (Maslow, 1954, p. 165).

Realizing, based on previous reading, that these concepts not only intertwine but are, in fact, complements sparked the idea to integrate them and explore how they relate within the scientific literature and in practice through field research. The assumption behind this research was that self-actualization and experienced personal transformation underpin alternative lifestyle choices based on a low-impact way of living and well-being that correlate with the principles of Degrowth and fit well within a future Degrowth society.

### **2.3 Climate Emergency: Your money or your life?**

By saying that "Economy is the art of making the most of life," George Bernard Shaw (1903 cited by Jackson, 2017, p. 187) gave us the definition of the economy in its overall beauty. While the economy, according to Shaw, is all about creativity, opportunities, and flourishing, looking at the current picture of the world, it appears that we somehow managed to reduce it to a single dimension: making a profit. "Narrow interests of the economic elites" (Alexander, 2012b, p. 23) and their pursuit of profit at any cost have been dominating society over the last century, subordinating nature, science, technology, and even people (Latouche, 2009; Picchio, 2015; D'Alisa and Kallis, 2015) to the growth imperative and profit-maximization and accumulation. Omitting social and environmental aspects of the vision of prosperity and making profit central to the activities and lives of people degraded not only the environment but also eroded genuine human values – the values that "made us cooperative, caring, intelligent, introspective, and creative" (Gowdy and Krall, 2013 cited by Nesterova, 2020, p. 4) and sustained us throughout millennia. Fred Hirsch's words sum it up well, "profit motivations crowd out moral or altruistic behaviors and social well-being diminishes as a result" (Hirsch, 1976 cited by Kallis et al., 2015, p. 34).

In 2007, after nearly two decades of warning of global warming coming from the excessive use of fossil fuels, the climate change activist Bill McKibben declared, "Even before we run out of oil, we're running out of planet" (McKibben, 2007 cited by Jackson, 2017, p. 59). Fifteen years later, despite extensive global discussions and initiatives, little has been done to tackle the issue, as best evidenced in April 2022, when United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres abandoned diplomatic talk in his video message on the launch of the third Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, calling it "a file of shame" to alert of the catastrophic consequences of "empty climate pledges," which lead towards an unliveable world, saying: "We are on a fast track to climate disaster. Major cities under water. Unprecedented heatwaves. Terrifying storms. Widespread water shortages. The extinction of a million species of plants and animals. This is not fiction or an exaggeration. It is what science tells us will result from our current energy policies. (...) This is a climate emergency" (UN, 2022, para. 3, 4).

The impact of human activities on the environment was first evidenced in the late 18th century, indicating what some call the beginning of the Anthropocene – the era in which humankind became responsible for undermining the climate and ecosystem (Crutzen, 2002). Two centuries later, "civilization faces an existential environmental crisis" (Horton and Horton, 2019, p. 86). The massive footprints of climate change and global warming are widespread. Natural disasters – prolonged droughts, intense tropical storms, wildfires, and severe flooding – have surged dramatically over the last several decades, causing, besides material damage, deaths to millions of people (UN, 2021). Massive biodiversity loss, rapid soil degradation, air pollution, and alarming ocean acidification have further increased the risks of "hunger, displacement, unemployment, illness, and death" (Amnesty International, n.d., para. 1), contributing to an ever-higher vulnerability of people and widening existing inequalities in society.

Since the early 1970s and the emergence of the modern environmental movement, we have been "well aware of what is happening, (...) but we refuse to listen" (Latouche, 2009, pp. 2, 3). By making growth central to economic stability and prosperity under the capitalist system, its pursuit becomes the goal in and of itself. As Latouche (2009, p. 3) described it, we have become "a society that has been swallowed up by an economy whose only goal is growth for the sake of growth." In the state of addiction and relentless pursuit of growth, human beings and natural resources have been reduced to a means to an end of capitalism's machinery (Latouche, 2009). The human supremacy attitude and "the idea that everything on Earth is a resource for humans to use" (Horton and Horton, 2019, p. 89) prevailed. Human resources were not exempt from exploitation, and "the lives of workers become means of production that are to be kept for the sake of profit" (Piccio, 2015, p. 242). "The capitalist, in Marx's view, is seen not only as an exploiter of labor, but also as a thief of the worker's very self" (Marx, 1964 cited by Belk, 1988, p. 146).

To "be green and grow" (Stern, 2006 cited by Latouche, 2009, p. 10) sums up the idea behind sustainable development, the overarching paradigm of the UN for "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (UN, n.d., para. 2). What was supposed to be a global collaboration on mitigating human-induced climate change and environmental devastation turned out to be a "fashionable concept, both in the world of business and in any social debate" (Latouche, 2009, p. 10), lacking any strong results after decades of vast initiatives, calls to action, and laws and policy implementations. It appears that we have been turning a blind eye to "the most urgent task of our times" (Jackson, 2017, p. 62) and that "technological and market-based solutions offered by proponents of decoupling remained far from adequate for the scale of the challenge faced" (Lorek, 2015, p. 111) because the priorities of decision-makers have been somewhere else – business as usual with everything and everyone subordinated to amassing profits. The harsh words from António Guterres (UN, 2022, para. 4) underpin it: "Some government and business leaders are saying one thing, but doing another. Simply put, they are lying."

However, natural resources have not been the only thing subjected to exploitation and destruction. Cultural values shape society, and "social conditions determine the rules by which ordinary people seek to live" (Jackson, 2017, p. 177). We managed to create a culture and a social structure that have gradually degraded many social values – the guiding principles for good living within a social system. The word "value" comes from the Latin "valeo," which in its origin stands for strength and health. Even at the symbolic level, this becomes so indicative; by taking away people's "strength and health" by blurring the core principles they are supposed to build their lives around, they end up being left empty-handed and with nothing to hang onto. Introducing and promoting "anything goes" behavior within a society by making competition come before compassion, where wealth comes before dignity, or winning at any cost before kindness, the kind of values that oppose everything genuine in human beings and all the values that have been taught and cherished for millennia, is making people confused and lost and thus objects of unscrupulous manipulation and exploitation. The system that was supposed to "provide a cultural framework within which people can flourish, allowing [them] to live meaningful, purposive lives" (Jackson, 2017, p. 177), a tenet that dates back to ancient Greece, has become exploitative, and by serving only the interests of a few under the growth imperative, has turned all the others into a means to an end.

## **2.4 Degrowth: Pursuing Transformation "From Soil to Soul"<sup>1</sup>**

The good life for all is an idea and ideal ingrained in the Degrowth vision of society. Degrowth was "primarily designed to make it perfectly clear that we must abandon the goal of

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<sup>1</sup> From 'Embodying degrowth and turning the movement inside out,' by Degrowth, 2022, 8 July, para. 1.

exponential growth, the goal promoted as nothing other than a quest for profits on the part of owners of capital and has disastrous implications for the environment, and therefore for humanity" (Latouche, 2009, p. 8). Today, Degrowth is "a frame where different lines of thought, imaginaries, or courses of action come together" (D'Alisa et al., 2015, p. 20); "a social movement that ranges from the soil to the soul" (Degrowth, 2022, para. 1). It is an alternative approach to building a more just, equal, and sustainable society, a society with a human fit that is at the same time respectful towards all non-human life and the environment. It is an "all-encompassing and non-anthropogenic" concept of "wellbeing in coexistence" (Bonnedahl and Heikkurinen, 2019 cited by Nesterova, 2020, p. 7).

Consumer culture is central to the growth economy, and according to Latouche (2009), it takes only three components for consumer culture to bloom – advertising to create the desire, credit to secure the means, and built-in obsolescence to make sure that the purchase will be repeated within a given timeframe. And while these components are the enablers of consumer culture, a key component, I would argue, is missing – the feeling of misery and insecurity, the state of deep unhappiness and vulnerability that makes people seek support and comfort. According to Hervé Martin (1999 cited by Latouche, 2003, p. 4), "a happy person does not take anti-depressants, does not consult psychiatrists, does not attempt suicide, does not shatter shop windows, does not spend the day shopping for things as expensive as they are unnecessary, in other words, participates only marginally in society's economic activity." In a material world where we are taught from earliest childhood to quantify happiness, to create our identities through consumption, and to believe that acquiring things is a viable path to well-being and fulfillment (Belk, 1983), along with widespread "anonymity, social atomization and spiritual alienation" (Bookchin, 1962 cited by Jackson, 2017, p. 168), comfort, a sense of worth, and safety are sought in acquiring all sorts of material things, instead of in the company of family members and good friends.

Acquisitiveness and possessiveness tend to provide a sense of control and uniqueness, and "we regard our possessions as part of ourselves (...) they are a major contributor to and reflection of our identities." They are part of our extended self, and in the consumer society, "we are what we have, (...) we become the sum of our possessions" (Belk, 1988, p. 139). Objects in our possession enhance our personal power, enlarge our sense of self, and contribute to our sense of being and doing. We learn to incorporate possessions into the extended self through controlling, creating, and knowing them. Thus, the extended self is not only limited to things and personal possessions but also includes people and pets, places and experiences, knowledge and ideas, and even body parts like a hairstyle, tattoos, or plastic surgery, which all serve the purpose of enlarging the self (Belk, 1988). The extended self assists in coping with our empty self that emerges as a result of the functioning of the institutions of modern society and social forces, continually craving to be filled up, reducing people to trivial and petty concerns like consumption and entertainment. Being caught in the rat race is often

followed by a loss of meaning and malaise that again find their endings in pathologies and destruction (Jackson, 2017; Alexander and Ussher, 2012).

Degrowth "is a possible exit, a way to rediscover self-esteem by fitting harmoniously in the human and natural environments" (Latouche, 2020, p. 150). Human flourishing is the underlying goal of a Degrowth society, which advocates a slower, more labor-intensive economy. Businesses that currently sit on the margins of consumer society and do not feature too high on consumer radar, such as repair and maintenance services, health and fitness centers, yoga studios, etc. (Jackson, 2017), in a Degrowth society would become more dominant, while sectors that have been undervalued under the current economic system, like social care, healthcare, education, or art and culture, would gain more significance. By redefining the importance and value of work and enabling people to work less, thus freeing more of their time to "live meaningfully, enjoy simple pleasures, sharing and relating more with others" (Kallis et al., p. 127), we will finally be able to restore our humanity and "recover the rights of man against corporations" (Illich, 1975 cited by Deriu, 2015, p. 84). It might also give us a chance to start measuring societal prosperity by well-being instead of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), an indicator of economic activity that, despite harsh criticism for failing to measure what is important and for belonging to some past times, manages to maintain its power (O'Neill, 2015).

Despite academic proliferation, media coverage, and growing numbers of supporters, it would be incorrect to assume that Degrowth already plays a strong enough role in dominant socio-political discourses. But the times are rapidly changing, and the quiet majority, after decades of sitting in silence, have started to swirl. Emerging social movements and changing work and lifestyle habits have become more evident, suggesting that people have begun to withdraw from the constraints of the capitalist system to reclaim control over their lives. Immense power lies in those shifts. Hence, it is reasonable to expect that by taking responsibility for their lives and exiting the mainstream to live satisfying and authentic lives, those people may soon be ready to take on the challenge of leading society's transformation "from below" (Alexander and Gleeson, 2019).

## **2.5 Voluntary simple living: Is there life before death?**

"Life is occupied in both perpetuating itself and in surpassing itself; if all it does is maintaining itself, then living is only not dying" (Simone de Beauvoir cited by Elgin and Mitchell, 1977, p. 9).

Voluntary simplicity is an approach to life and philosophy that urges distancing from the materialistic way of life and accumulating needless possessions in favor of engaging in more purposeful activities related to personal and social progress. It is a lifestyle of thoughtful moderation and frugality that prioritizes time and freedom for "the cultivation of relationships and development of social, intellectual, aesthetic and/or spiritual potentials" (Segal, 2003 cited

by The Simplicity Collective, n.d., para. 3) over "self-indulgence and consumption" (Shi, 2007 cited by Alexander, 2015, p. 163). Given that Degrowth's vision of an ecologically sustainable and socially just society primarily requires downscaling of production and consumption and that it centers the economy around "care, craft and culture" sectors, or in other words, "social and personal services" sectors (Jackson, 2017, p. 196), voluntary simplicity, with a tendency to reject excessive consumption and accumulation of material goods, a focus on meaningful social and environmental activities, and its voluntary nature, represents one of its cornerstones. Apart from that, voluntary simplicity contributes to Degrowth through its credibility. It quiets the critics and demonstrates that voluntary simplicity is a viable option for millions of people worldwide and that a higher level of life satisfaction and well-being by acquiring and consuming less is achievable and within our reach.

### **2.5.1 The good life**

The question of the good life, a meaningful life, is as old as civilization. Park and Petersen (2009 cited by Thomas et al., 2021, p. 1888) suggested that knowing a lot in psychology about people's problems and how to solve them does not help much with knowing "what it means to live well and how to encourage and maintain such a life." In Aristotle's view, the good life was the ultimate goal in life, while Carl Rogers (1961 cited by Thomas et al., 2022, p. 1887) thought of it as "a direction not a destination." While all major religious teachings and philosophical debates throughout human history have shared the view that simple and conscious living based on core human values and upholding excessive material wealth is crucial to finding meaning, to ordinary people, the good life is all about "doing well and feeling good" (Thomas et al., 2022, p. 1894) in life. Since the question of meaning is utterly individualistic and no universal recipe or manual exists, everyone is left to find their own answer by following an individual path – the one directed inward. It requires that the "having" mode of existence be deserted and the "being" mode, which incorporates "self-respect, peace of mind, health, and the mastery over one's desires and negative emotions" (Alexander, 2011, p. 3), be privileged. Outgrowing deficiency needs and adopting the state of mind of abundance advances the emergence of simplicity as a way of life.

### **2.5.2 Voluntary simplicity**

Historically, simple living is integral to human existence and "old as civilization itself" (Alexander, 2015), with deep roots in religious and spiritual teachings and philosophy from Buddha and Jesus to Greek and Roman philosophers to Gandhi and Mother Theresa to Henry D. Thoreau. Voluntary simplicity as a phenomenon emerged in the 20th century. The term was first introduced by Elgin and Mitchell back in the 1970s as a phrase "borrowed" from social philosopher Richard Gregg, who used it forty years earlier to describe "a way of life marked by a new balance between inner and outer growth" (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977, p. 1).

Voluntary simplicity due to its appeal to millions of people who were ready, in an affluent consumer culture, to voluntarily forgo the comfort of mainstream living in favor of a life of simplicity and non-material striving, raised research interest in a variety of fields, including sociology, psychology, economics, marketing, and ecology. While voluntary simplicity, as a philosophy, is rethinking what it means to live the good life as a lifestyle, it is a dormant force with enormous potential to disrupt prevailing consumer habits and trends. According to Huneke (2005, p. 548), "voluntary simplifiers may be blazing a trail that more mainstream consumers would be willing to follow." Moreover, due to its "desire to return to living and working environments which are of a more human scale" (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977, p. 2), voluntary simplicity is considered a promising alternative to mounting environmental problems and, presumably, the main driver for change in values that have been rapidly degrading society over the past century (Elgin, 2010; Etzioni, 1999; Alexander and Ussher, 2012).

Despite impediments often presented in the form of social and economic infrastructure and a considerable level of change in behavior, namely work habits and daily practices (Huneke, 2005; Alexander, 2012a), voluntary simple living keeps attracting and appealing to millions of people around the world (Huneke, 2005; Elgin, 2010). Although estimating the number of simplifiers is a challenging task since "it is a social movement of great diversity and richness" (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977, p. 3) and "simplicity means many things to different people" (Huneke, 2005, p. 543), it is thought that voluntary simplifiers account for 15% to 25% of adults in the developed world (Alexander and Ussher, 2012; Jebrowski, 2000, Elgin, 2000 cited by Huneke, 2005; Peyer et al., 2017). However, it would be worth noticing that the given estimates are rather old and pre-pandemic. Recent occurrences such as the global lock-down and its impact on the values and life habits of a sizable number of people, or that Millennials, with their distinct approach to life, have entered the scene in entirety and taken primacy in the market, all widely evidenced in new trends such as The Big Quit, embracing the lifestyle of Thoughtful Thrifters and Climate Changers, or Rural Urbanities and incorporating sustainable initiatives like urban gardening into city neighborhoods or relocating to rural areas (Euromonitor International, 2021, 2022), allow the conclusion that this number could be even higher. Knowing that many of them do not identify as adherents and do not "label" themselves with any of the social movements or lifestyles can further strengthen this argument.

It is also worth noting that, according to Elgin and Mitchell (1977, p. 18), sympathizers of voluntary simplicity, those who are fond of values but do not act on them, "constitute a major reservoir of dormant support," with their number estimated as large as one-half of the population but not less than one-third. Given that the growth economy and consumer lifestyle keep people firmly locked within structures with numerous impediments for those who try to live "beyond the market" society (Alexander, 2012b; Huneke, 2005; Jackson, 2017), people tend to be reluctant to embrace such a lifestyle despite the promise of multiple dividends

coming from it, primarily personal well-being and a decreased environmental footprint, but also including benefits for the whole community.

Unlike previously held beliefs, research from 2018 (Noonan, 2018) shows that only a committed minority of 25% of the population can be sufficient to bring about social change. Although simplifiers appear to be heterogeneous and loosely connected at the time, and many of them do not even use voluntary simplicity or Degrowth vocabulary, they should not be dismissed as "a naive "lifestyle movement" of little consequence" (Alexander, 2019, p. 13), but rather perceived as a quiet revolution bubbling beneath the surface (Elgin, 2010; Alexander, 2012b).

From its emergence in the 1970s to the present, voluntary simplicity has evolved from an "individualized way of life" to a social movement with "group consciousness" (Alexander and Ussher, 2012, p. 15). If organized and expanded, this "remarkably coherent philosophy of life" (Alexander and Ussher, 2012, p. 16) has the potential to become a potent economic, social, and political force, driving significant shifts in values and consumer patterns and from grassroots actions affecting national policies and institutional operations (Elgin and Mitchell, 1977), necessary for a transformation of the economy and society toward a more sustainable and prosperous world. Another contributing factor to the momentum of social change, as postulated in the literature, can be a (deep) crisis, whether financial or ecological, perceived or actual (Friedman, 2002, Solnit, 2016 cited by Alexander, 2019). Given that the world has witnessed a variety of crises since the beginning of the 21st century, ranging from global financial to health crises and pandemic, including most recently, the Russia-Ukraine war, with its repercussions on the global energy and food supply and prices, followed by growing inflationary pressures (IMF, 2022; University of Oxford, 2021), it is reasonable to believe that constant unrest and insecurity, along with the ubiquity of inequality, fake news, poverty, and ecological emergencies that are shaking the world and have made the crisis mode of living the way of life, would eventually direct people *en masse* to look for alternative pathways.

While the simple life has its roots in religious and spiritual teachings and practices (Elgin, 2010; Alexander, 2015), pressing conditions of contemporary life, whether disillusionment with the consumer lifestyle or social responsibility, have been driving its emergence since the 1970s, while the 1990s added momentum as people were increasingly trying to distance themselves from their hectic lifestyles (Zavestoski, 2002). By adhering to voluntary simple living after being caught in the work and spend cycle of consumer capitalism, people wanted to take back control of their lives, release spiritual malaise, and redefine their life purposes, supporting Elgin and Mitchell's (1977, p. 3) argument that voluntary simplicity is a "rational response to a pressing situation." But by arguing that "without the compelling goal of exploring inner potentials, it seems unlikely that there will be sufficient motivation to adopt voluntarily a way of life of material simplicity," Elgin and Mitchell (1977, p. 10) are most probably providing the answer to the question of why the majority of people succumb to the illusion of a good life offered by the consumer society, while only a relatively few can live happily with less.

Over the years, in an attempt to understand this phenomenon and learn as much as possible about it by researching different aspects, adherents, motives, or practices and building a large amount of valuable literature, the underlying goal of embracing simple living – realizing one's higher potential and exploring a sense of self – seems to have been pushed aside and somehow went out of focus. Adhering to a simple lifestyle has been reduced to its external manifestations, where restrained consumption, decluttering from excessive things, obligations, and people, recycling, or shifting diets have become an end in themselves (Elgin, 2010). And living a simple, conscious life, in its essence, is "a vital ally in achieving our life purpose because it enables us to cut through the complexity and busyness of the world" (Elgin, 2010, p. 76). It is all about the inner-directed way of life, developing one's potential – physical, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual – and being capable of living a fulfilled and meaningful life.

Living a simple life is everything but simple in the consumer world, with infrastructural barriers found in all spheres of life, from employment and housing to transportation and diet. Voluntary simplifiers "are ill-served by economic and social structures (...) and are swimming upstream" (Huneke, 2005, p. 544). Despite impediments, living an authentic life by being in coherence with personal values and balancing the inner and outer dimensions of life leads to living a life not driven by insatiable desires and a need for excessive material wealth, raising social status, or gaining prestige. A growing body of research over the last several decades (Dittmar et al., 2014; Alexander and Ussher, 2012; Huneke, 2005) shows that living a simple life, regardless of the motivations or extent to which it has been adopted, leads to higher levels of contentment, well-being, and happiness than the life lived by the values of a mainstream culture immersed in consumerism.

Characterized by their willingness to distance themselves from society's economic activities and trivial entertainments typical for contemporary society, the mindsets and lifestyles of adherents to simple living enable them to take only marginal participation in the economy, thus not supporting to a large extent the goals of the growth economy and consumer culture. While extreme simplifiers could be found on the outskirts of society, living in wilderness or communes, recent research shows that the majority belong to urban areas and have no intention of exiting, but with their presence and activities, they are (quietly) changing their communities (Peyer et al., 2017; Alexander, 2011).

Half a century ago, Elgin and Mitchell (1977, p. 22), in predicting the development of the voluntary simplicity movement, stated in one of the scenarios that it "will progress unobtrusively in the form of countless millions of small, unannounced decisions made so inconspicuously that almost no one is aware of the total effect until, suddenly, it is clear that a major values transformation has occurred." Recent years have brought increased interest from marketers in the lives of adherents to voluntary simplicity. And although they are currently positioned as niche markets, the readiness of marketers to adjust their products and services to the ill-served needs of simplifiers speaks for itself in terms of their growing number and

power. Judging by the market trends and analysis of the popularity of plant-based diets, yoga practices, or alternative medicine, to name a few with double-digit compound annual growth rates (CAGR) (Grand View Research, n.d.a, n.d.b), it is reasonable to expect that, in the long run, the widespread influence of simplifiers is to be reflected in societal values as well.

## 2.6 Self-actualization: "What a woman can be, she must be"<sup>2</sup>

"What a man can be, he must be" (Maslow, 1954, p. 46). According to Maslow (1970, p. 28), self-actualization is the need in man to live up to his highest potential, "to become the best he is capable of becoming."

In his theory of human motivation, Maslow (2017, p. 29, 30) claimed that a basically satisfied man, one whose all basic needs – physiological, safety, love and affection, and esteem needs – have been relatively well satisfied, could be considered a healthy man. Being in that state, he "is primarily motivated by his needs to develop and actualize his fullest potentialities and capacities." Otherwise, if any of the basic needs tend to dominate him chronically, he may be considered unhealthy, and "as a sick man," just as a man "who lacks vitamins or minerals," is considered sick too. And although it may seem somewhat odd at first, after asking, "Who is to say that a lack of love is less important than a lack of vitamins?" Maslow gets to remove barriers and open the door to a new perspective for us.

Lack of bread, lack of safety, lack of love, or lack of self-esteem are all needs that call to be satisfied, locking a man in the lower deficiency stages of the hierarchy of needs and occupying all his capacities for fulfilling them by attending to the pre-potent ones first while leaving all other needs dormant. Only after a dominant need has been gratified and, as such, stops being a motivator a new (higher) need emerges.

Maslow (1954) argued that the traits of self-actualized individuals are many and "quite different" from those of the average man, or in his words, "less evolved, less mature, less healthy people" (Maslow, 1954, p. xi). Many traits are rooted in core human virtues like acceptance of self, others, and nature, autonomy, problem-solving, humanity, profound relationships, sense of humor, spontaneity, or creativity, and enable them to be free and unbound, to be what they are in their nature, their essence (no need for masks) and to live their lives in full, to live contented lives. Because of their inner freedom, which allows them to perceive the world and act in a novel and atypical way, self-actualized individuals are distinguished by their holistic way of thinking and a better sense of their inner lives. They are

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<sup>2</sup> Paraphrased from *Motivation and Personality*, (p. 46), by Maslow, A.H., 1954, New York: Harper & Row Publishers.

flexible and capable of adapting to different people, situations, or environments. The lack of selfishness combined with the more profound happiness, serenity, and richness of their inner lives drive them toward "excellence, truth, beauty, lawfulness, simplicity" (Maslow, 1954, p. 117).

Material frugality is a manifestation of inner growth and richness. By pursuing inner incentives, people start "to realize the limits of materialism" (Murtaza, 2011, p. 583). The higher the sense of inner contentment is, the less attracted people are to material possessions, and the appeal of external pleasures and validations such as conspicuous goods, social status, and wealth lessens or fades completely.

Maslow also claimed that the basic thwarting that people cope with comes from outside forces and that sickness in man is a product of sickness within society. Discussing his view on a healthy society, he said, "the "good" or healthy society would then be defined as one that permits man's highest purposes to emerge by satisfying all his prepotent basic needs" (Maslow, 2017, p. 35). This view has been echoed in the words of Murtaza (2011, p. 581), saying that "a sustainable society is a collection of self-actualized individuals."

### **2.6.1 Character traits of a self-actualized person**

Characterized by many unique traits, self-actualized individuals, compared to average men, may appear godlike or superhuman. However, according to Maslow (1954), they are far from perfect – they are only healthy. Following is a list of the most typical characteristics of a self-actualized person as proposed by Maslow (1954, pp. 153 – 178):

**Superiority in the perception of and relation to reality; Curiosity.** The self-actualized can judge people correctly and efficiently and see concealed or perplexing situations quickly and accurately. Enhanced perception of reality leads to a higher level of reasoning, perception of the truth, the ability to draw logical conclusions, and cognitive efficiency in general. Additionally, they are typically unthreatened and unfrightened by the unknown. They are accustomed to it, accept it, and find it more alluring than the known and predictable. And although the majority may view doubt and uncertainty as distressing, for self-actualized individuals, it appears to be an intriguing challenge.

**Acceptance of oneself, others, and nature.** Shame, guilt, and anxiety are frequent and yet often unnecessary components of the average person's actions and behaviors. Self-actualized individuals can accept human nature, both their own and that of others, as it is, without unrealistic expectations and with all its shortcomings. With a distaste for artificialities in behavior and playing games, a lack of defensiveness, protective coloration, or pose characterizes their conduct.

**Problem-centering.** With a capacity to be heavily focused on problems that are generally nonpersonal or unselfish, they live within a frame of values that is broad and not petty, universal and not local, and in terms of a century rather than the moment.

**The quality of detachment; Autonomy.** Self-actualizing individuals do not need others in the ordinary sense. They like solitude and privacy. They can face personal misfortunes with calmness, smile through periods of problems and worries, and retain their dignity even in undignified situations. Their autonomy is evident in their tendency to be self-starters and active agents in making their own decisions. Self-disciplined and self-governed, they take responsibility for their lives. They are self-contained and not dependent on external satisfaction, whether as other people, validations of various sorts, or wealth.

**Spontaneity; Simplicity; Naturalness.** Unusually unconventional, spontaneous, and natural behavior typical for self-actualized individuals only reflects their ability to think and perceive in an alternative way. Recognizing that their approach to life cannot be accepted by the people around them due to a lack of understanding, despite a genuine dislike of ordinarily accepted trivialities and inconsistencies of social life, they will choose to follow conventions and routine behavior and not be rebellious about it. On the other hand, they will not hesitate to cast aside customs and codes of behavior if something collides with their high ethical standards or threatens what they consider of extreme importance.

**Deep personal relationships; A genuine desire to help the human race.** While having no interest in everyday trivialities and superficial connections, they cherish deep ties and interpersonal relationships with a close circle of friends. Their brotherly attitude, or better yet, to use a term coined by Alfred Adler, "gemeinschaftsgefühl," accurately captures the profound identification with humanity and the sympathy and affection for those around them. Their selflessness and acts for the higher good stem from the realization that they have been endowed with a unique, and thus almost compelling, ability to discern hidden truths and carry out duties better than most people. Humble, respectful, and benevolent, it is not unusual for them to attract admirers or even disciples, who are often perceived as unneeded and, if possible, gracefully avoided.

**Refusal to be enculturated; Creativity; Sense of humor.** With the tendency to accept most situations that they consider irrelevant, or on the other hand, inescapable, self-actualized people, although immersed in certain cultures, manage to maintain a dose of detachment from them and resist enculturation. Self-actualized people appear to have practical creativity, spontaneous, philosophical, unhostile sense of humor with "something to say," and an edifying note that is intrinsic to the situation.

## 2.6.2 A healthy individual in a broken society?

Self-actualized individuals are utterly intellectual and realistic, with the intrinsic need to contribute "to improve the culture, usually from within, rather than to reject it wholly and fight it from without" (Maslow, 1954, p. 173). They are not rebellious (without a cause) and are unwilling to make useless sacrifices.

However affluent life in today's world may be, facing inhibitions and restrictions is part of it, and self-actualized people make no exception. They are not free of guilt, anxiety, sadness, or conflict, and they can be boring, selfish, angry, and possess silly, wasteful, or thoughtless habits at times. They are, however, compelling people with a complex combination of inner autonomy and outer acceptance that allow them to maintain their health in a less-than-healthy society. Their perceptions of the physical, social, and private psychological worlds are profoundly different, and their value systems are distinctive. "Such people will sacrifice more for the higher satisfaction, and furthermore will more readily be able to withstand lower deprivation. For example, they will find it easier to live ascetic lives, to withstand danger for the sake of principle, and to give up money and prestige for the sake of self-actualization" (Maslow, 1954, p. 99).

According to Maslow, self-actualized individuals understand that the problems they face are not intrinsic but created by the less capable men from trivialities. Such comprehension enables them to resolve rather than solve many of the conflicts, frustrations, and threats they face. C.G. Jung (Wilhelm and Jung, 1947) shared a similar view arguing about outgrowing life problems based on broader perception and higher consciousness.

The dichotomies, typical for less mature people, disappear and become synergic in self-actualized individuals, allowing them at the same time to be both active and passive, selfish and unselfish, detached from and identified with others, serious and humorous, spiritual and pagan. For them, desires are in perfect accord with reason, and duty cannot be contrasted with pleasure or work with play. They seek pleasure through duty and happiness through virtuousness.

Maslow (1954, p. xxii) claimed that "healthy persons exist even though not in great numbers," some recent research (Kaufman, 2018b) indicates that self-actualized people may have a higher representation within the population than has been believed over the past decades. Knowing that such individuals exist among us represents an attainable reality and something to strive for, as we understand that "it becomes possible for the human species (who mostly want to be good) to model themselves on these paragons and improve" as a result (Maslow, 1954, p. 275).

While in today's world, self-actualized people are not that visible, I would argue that a Degrowth society will depend on them. Degrowth transformation (Degrowth, 2022) requires not only changing policies and institutions but shifts in values and the deconstruction of the

growth mentality that has been unconsciously internalized by many. Drawing from Theodore Roszak's (2001 cited by Degrowth, 2022, para. 8) argument that "personal, social and ecological healing always go together," the embodiment of Degrowth into the daily practices and activities of people can support the movement in enacting all-encompassing grassroots change towards creating a Degrowth society. The qualities and capabilities of self-actualized make them "the best wo/men for the job," credible enough to "walk the talk" of a Degrowth imaginary and create a prosperous society driven by well-being that is equal, just, and sustainable.

### **2.6.3 Simple work**

Work plays a significant role in people's lives. In Karl Marx's (1978 cited by Belk, 1988, p. 146) view, "doing, and particularly working, is central to existence and self-worth." Based on Elgin's (1993 cited by Huneke, 2005) functions of work, in addition to making a means of providing a living, work enables people to express their talents and character and allows them an opportunity for personal growth through learning. Marx (1967 cited by Belk, 1988) argued that by the excess commodification of goods and over-specialization of work inherent to the capitalist system, people are being deprived of "doing meaningful and properly rewarding work" and thus distanced from the sense of creating and sense of being. Hence Marx considered the capitalists responsible not only for the exploitation of the worker's labor but also for related and widespread alienation. "The capitalist, in Marx's view, is seen not only as an exploiter of labor but also as a thief of the worker's very self" (Marx, 1964 cited by Belk, 1988, p. 146). Hundred years later, "even with health and safety regulations in place, seemingly decent working conditions, higher salaries and shorter working hours, work remains alienating, involves deskilling, and lacks meaning for the majority of people" (Chertkovskaya and Stoborod, 2018 cited by Chertkovskaya and Paulsson, 2021).

Maslow (1954) argued that with self-actualized individuals, duty cannot be contrasted with pleasure, or work with play because they seek pleasure through duty and happiness through virtuousness. On the other hand, according to Johnston and Burton (2003), those who choose a simple life "are not just moving toward a preferred lifestyle as much as they are moving away from a life that they find oppressive." They want to live a life freed from hectic trivia and shallow business, a life to be lived with "engagement and enthusiasm" (Elgin, 2010). Therefore, those who voluntarily choose to leave their affluent lives for a life of material frugality are not doing it to live idle lives but to pursue meaning and fulfillment. By saying, "if only simplicity were not the most difficult of all things," C.G. Jung (Wilhelm and Jung, 1947, p. 90) suggested that a simple life is everything but a life of leisure, "nor is simplifying necessary simple" (Huneke, 2005). Therefore, we should know that simple livers are ready to work hard, only they seek different rewards.

Prioritizing human well-being over the growth imperative of mainstream economic thinking is central to the Degrowth imaginary. "Dignified work, equitable salary distribution, free time, universal care, and access to housing and food" are proposed policies within the advocated transformation of socioeconomics that should "support collaborative and creative construction of lives that are pleasurable, healthy, satisfying, and sustainable" (Kallis et al., 2020, p. 99, 109). Even though the Degrowth imaginary offers many perspectives on Degrowth work on a macroeconomic level, the literature and discussion on implementing a Degrowth business are rudimentary.

In Johanisova et al.'s (2013) view, social enterprises pave the way for the Degrowth businesses of tomorrow as they embody the essence of the Degrowth business concept by having a focus on social and environmental concerns and the exclusion of the profit maximization principle, typical of mainstream businesses, despite participating in the market and creating jobs. Before accepting social enterprises as a viable alternative, knowing that all existing literature comes from the dominant economic perspective, further research and more attunement to the principles of Degrowth are required.

In an attempt to connect Degrowth and business, examining what characteristics firms should entail to be compatible with a Degrowth business and society, Nesterova (2020) emphasizes the importance of embracing a holistic approach and having the ability to incorporate pro-environmental and pro-social dimensions next to the centrality of sufficiency. Embedding the Degrowth economy and, therefore, Degrowth business between environment and society, she argues that small private-owned and locally based businesses and work cooperatives are to be relied on in meeting the production and consumption needs (not desires) within a Degrowth society. This view also echoes Alexander's (2015a, 2012) position on the topic. She also argues that, based on the non-monetary perception of success of their owner-managers, such firms are primarily characterized by the pursuit of self-management, freedom, and autonomy, high ethical standards, prioritizing cooperation over competition, and orientation to well-being.

But as she points out, in transitioning toward a Degrowth society, change cannot be reduced only to firms, no matter how significant it may be; instead, it pertains to a multifaceted undertaking that includes different agents, structures, and institutions where a change of worldviews and values, or in the words of Alexander (2015a, p. xiv), "replacing the cultures and systems that produce those problems," underpins the entire transformation process.

## **2.7 Summary and conclusion Chapter 2**

This chapter first introduced the two fundamental concepts for the research – Degrowth and self-actualization – which have been integrated with this thesis based on the assumption that they may have been complements arising from their orientation on transformation – self-

actualization on an individual level, and Degrowth on a global, societal level – and shared consideration of both being utopian.

Chapter two also provided an overview of the key literature for introduced concepts, related topics, and emerging themes. The synthesis of existing lines of thought and research from scholarly sources had been used to examine how they interact with each other, what have been some of the less explored areas, and to set the background for the research.

The self-actualization concept was approached based on Maslow's motivation theory and has explored the characteristics and worldviews of people who have reached their full potential. Degrowth, yet, given the context of this research and its pro-environmental and pro-social orientation, was reviewed primarily through the prism of voluntary simplicity, one of the many contributing ideas and practices under its broad umbrella. Since the work aspect represents a vital part of the research, it was reviewed separately. The notion of the good life and the question of a climate emergency – the roots of all Degrowth activities – have been outlined in a separate section.

The next chapter discusses the research methodology – narrative research design and the narrative interview as the research instrument. It also describes the study site, sampling procedure, and data analysis.

## **3 METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Introduction**

C.G. Jung said, "the basis of every real understanding is man, and therefore I had to speak of human things" (Wilhelm and Jung, 1947, p. 136). And there is no better way to speak of human things than through stories. Stories are inherent to our culture and society. Through stories, we create bonds, share experiences, and convey knowledge. Stories help us understand the history and give meaning to the present, but they also inspire our future.

### **3.2 Methodology: Narrative research design**

The idea behind this research was to understand better individuals who have chosen to voluntarily exit the conventional, mainstream way of living and embrace alternative lifestyles. In particular, the aim was to explore the importance of self-actualization, following Maslow's motivation theory, in adhering to simple living. Additionally, by focusing on the business aspects and how adopters of the corresponding lifestyles regard their business experiences, notably becoming and being self-employed, the attempt was made to gain insight into their approach to business and a better understanding of how it fits into the Degrowth imaginary.

#### **3.2.1 Narrative stories**

"Stories are in life as well as about life" (Cox, 2003 cited by Elliott, 2005, p. 24).

Finding out about the world, exploring social and human activities and occurrences, and grasping the meanings that individuals and groups ascribe to them require a qualitative approach to research. Under qualitative research methods, the narrative research design is suited for exploring the "common experiences of a group of people who are typically marginalized, silenced, or excluded from more dominant narratives and discourses in society" (Elliott, 2005, p. 164). Interviews with open-ended questions are central to data collection. By not being rigidly structured, narrative interviews put people at the core of the research and give research participants control over the interview and the freedom to dictate its direction, content, and pace. By telling their life stories in their own words, interviewees are allowing researchers access to their direct realities and enabling them to collect rich data about their "lives, experiences, and perceptions" (Elliott, 2005, p. 21). Given the opportunity to explore participants' unfragmented stories filled with various facets of lived experiences, researchers have become well-suited to expose valuable data that would otherwise remain concealed (Creswell, 2009; Elliott, 2005).

Rather than making generalizations to apply to a larger population typical for quantitative research, the focus of qualitative research methodology is on grasping an understanding of broader social patterns and structures by exploring the meaning-making individuals attach to their experiences. Employing a narrative research design and collecting data through narrative interviews requires a small sample of even one or two purposefully selected participants (Creswell, 2009) to provide the information detailed enough to comprehend a particular context.

Narrative interviews set no fixed agenda. The purpose of the interview guides in semi-structured narrative interviews is to keep the interview focused on the particular interest. Allowing participants to reflect on the course of events, recall their thoughts and emotions, and tell their stories by using their own vocabulary, even if they deviate from a given frame, results in gaining an in-depth picture of the life experiences of each individual and obtaining data that is of high quality, and more truthful, or trustworthy compared to a standardized set of questions.

By collecting personal narratives of people living alternative lifestyles and learning more about the underlying values, motivations, and attitudes driving their behavior, the aim was to explore the importance of self-actualization in deciding to downshift voluntarily from the mainstream toward simple living. Gaining a better understanding of the phenomenon is expected to contribute to narrowing the existing gap between research and practice. A narrative research design with semi-structured narrative interviews was considered the most appropriate approach for this type of research.

### **3.3 Research instrument: Narrative interview**

Narrative data were obtained through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. Interviews were conducted in person with each participant and scheduled for 60 to 90 minutes.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted in August and September 2022. Based on the specific requirements of the research topic, three participants were carefully recruited using a purposeful sampling technique.

The interview questions were designed based on the key insights into the topic gained from the existing literature on self-actualization and voluntary simplicity. The interview guide (see Appendix 2) was structured in four sections. Apart from the first section, Background Story, which was intended for participants to introduce themselves by telling basic demographic information about themselves, the other three sections – Exiting Story; Work Story; and Self-actualization Story – contained main questions and sets of sub-questions that were designed to help participants tell their stories following the interests of the research, given that not all participants are eloquent enough to narrate freely and prefer guidance instead. Firmly sticking

to the interview guide was not considered as important as making participants feel comfortable and letting them tell their stories as they suited them best.

Establishing rapport with participants before the interview, active listening, and using non-verbal encouragement to confirm that the stories told were following the focus of the interview and were in line with the specific topic during the interview were used to support participants in telling their stories most naturally.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of MODUL University Vienna approved the interview questions on July 25, 2022.

Before initiating the interview, all participants were informed about the basic terms and the confidentiality of the research, upon which they were given the Interview consent form (see Appendix 1) to read and sign.

### **3.4 Research site: Urban Croatia**

The social context is important for the experience of individuals. People are embodied in the world, and their "experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted" (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2006 cited by Clandinin, 2006, p. 46) within. By exploring people's stories and studying individual experiences, we also gain insight into the community and cultural framework despite having a relatively small sample (Clandinin, 2006; Elliott, 2005), as in narrative research.

The participants in this research came from urban areas in Croatia.

The Croatian context is rather specific. Croatia is a South Eastern European country forged in a war in the 90s. Secession from the former Yugoslavia did not only come at a high cost, paid in human lives and destruction but also left deep wounds and "ghosts" whose traces are all-present even today, thirty years later. Moreover, the legacy of the socialist political system, the transition to a neoliberal economy, and the emergence of the digital age have defined, to a large extent, the way people in Croatia live their lives (Ančić et al., 2019).

Even though part of the European Union since 2013, Croatia is far from being considered an affluent country and consistently ranks low on the scales measuring economic performance and well-being among member states. Decades of political, economic, and cultural turbulence have created an environment marked by constant change and uncertainty. However, alternative lifestyles related to leading voluntarily simple lives are increasingly present. For example, while Croatian cuisine traditionally relies heavily on meat, recent estimates say that there are over 200.000 people (more than 5% of the total population) whose diet is plant-based, and even up to one-third of the overall population who are considering dietary change and becoming vegetarians (The Vegan Society, 2022; Animal Friends Croatia, 2007).

Furthermore, food provisioning practices driven by ecological and social motives such as food self-provisioning and sharing "garden products" – a widespread activity in Croatia – or community-supported agriculture, e.g., grocery shopping from local farmers and urban gardening (Ančić et al., 2019; Bokan and Lay, 2018) that cross-paths with proposed practices by Degrowth for the new economy have been showing growing trends in particular in urban areas and between younger and highly educated population. Available research focusing on complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), in part referring to yoga, meditation, deep breathing exercises, and spirituality and prayer, suggests these treatments are the most used for maintaining or improving health among 15 – 30% of the population (Doko et al., 2020). Taken together, it could be concluded that people increasingly seek a "way out" of mainstream living by pursuing various alternative practices, which is consistent with the trends in the (East) EU countries.

The research on alternative lifestyles in Croatia adds to the literature by demonstrating that voluntary adhering to such a lifestyle is not typical or unique to affluent societies but rather the result of a more abundant state of mind.

### **3.5 Pilot tests**

A pilot interview is a valuable tool for researchers to verify the interview design's clarity, determine the interview's length, and identify potential limitations. Talking about personal experiences, especially in an immersed and reflective way, is a delicate and demanding process, even for people who are open to such practices in their everyday lives. Therefore, pilot tests are often helpful for the researchers in preparing for the interviews by fine-tuning their skills in eliciting rich stories instead of getting participants' responses in the form of "reports" (Elliott, 2005).

The pilot interview for this research implied that individuals who were long-term adherents to alternative ways of life should not be regarded as relevant research participants. The ability of the participants to reflect on and compare current and past lifestyles was considered very important for the research because it would allow insight into the state of mind of participants both before and after the lifestyle change took place and, as a result, the opportunity to establish if the process of self-actualization contributed to it. In this case, individuals who had become entirely detached from the mainstream way of life appeared to have no helpful recalls of their past lives. As a result, the intended list of research participants needed to be adjusted.

### **3.6 Sampling procedures: Purposeful sampling**

The sampling criteria were an important consideration for this research. The purposeful sampling technique was chosen for its adequacy in identifying suitable individuals to explore the phenomenon in-depth through their lived experiences (Creswell, 2009). Because of the

small number of participants, setting strict criteria to ensure that the sample was representative was of the utmost importance. The research participants to be chosen for this research needed to be born and have lived conventional lives for most of their lives. They were required to live an alternative lifestyle currently and to have been adhering to it for several years at least, but not more than a decade (to avoid the risk of not having relevant information to share due to "memory loss"). A further requirement was to be self-employed and to have businesses in sectors prioritized by Degrowth, e.g., care, craft, and culture (Jackson, 2017). The sample size of three did not allow for many variations in the demographic characteristics of participants, yet, being distinguished by their age, marital status, and education resulted in gathering a variety of data and allowing in-depth insight into their perceptions of different aspects of their lives. Due to strict sampling criteria and a limited timeframe, no male participants considered suitable for the research were available at the time scheduled for conducting interviews.

Three women were approached and agreed to participate in this research. All three embodied all the requirements set for the research; however, their personalities and living habits were very different. One of them was in her early thirties, and two of them were in their late forties. Two had master's degrees, and one had a high school diploma. Two were single, and one was married with children. Two lived in their own homes, and one lived in a rented apartment. Two of them had pets; one was a cat person, and the other was a dog lover.

They all lived in urban areas and had been vegetarians and yoga practitioners for many years. All three declared themselves immersed in spirituality. While these characteristics have been shared by all three, it is important to note that they were not the criteria by which participants were selected.

All research participants were anonymized and assigned a pseudonym. Further, all data that could be related to them, such as names of cities where they live, details referring to their business practices, etc., have also been concealed.

Table 3-1 shows general data on research participants' pseudonyms, ages, education levels, marital status, and the type of business they run.

Interviewee	Age	Education	Marital status	Business type	Employees
Daya	31	Master's degree	Single	Art/Musician	Project based
Maya	48	Master's degree	Single	Yoga studio	No
Kaya	49	High school diploma	Married with children	Alternative healing practice	No

TABLE 3-1 RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS - OVERVIEW

All three research participants started their businesses not long before the pandemic and endured the difficulties of the COVID-19 restrictions despite being service-oriented and thus largely dependent on people's attendance and face-to-face interactions. While all three are finding ways to stay self-sustaining, the business endeavor of the one who is a musician has started to flourish. Due to its dynamics and project-based principals, the specificities of such a business are ample, not only in comparison to the other two firms in this research but to the majority of micro and small businesses in the market. It requires significantly more financial resources and creative and collaborative efforts to run it. Nevertheless, the music business has already started to provide more income to the owner than her previous mainstream employment.

### **3.7 Data analysis**

Recorded narrative interviews were transcribed using the Rev speech-to-text service powered by artificial intelligence (AI). The transcribed data were also checked for accuracy with the original audio recordings to ensure that details were well captured and meanings were not lost. The interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 60 and 75 minutes. The three stories contained around 20.000 words. Initially, inductive content analysis was applied, and each story was analyzed using an iterative process of reinspecting and reevaluating the narrative data to identify themes, both pre-defined and emergent. Later, identified themes were examined deductively across all three stories for patterns, similarities, and differences to gain insights into the realms of adherents to alternative lifestyles.

Since "there is no standard approach or list of procedures that is generally recognized as representing the narrative method of analysis" (Elliott, 2005, p. 36), the process largely relies on qualitative data analysis and the interpreting abilities of a researcher who plays an active role in understanding the meaning participants attach to their experiences in told narratives. This makes the whole process rather intuitive, especially in the early stages when transcripts are being read for the first time since this is when the researcher is required to go beyond the mere content of the information and think about the underlying meaning while at the same time perceiving personal emotional and intellectual responses to the data collected (Creswell, 2009; Elliott, 2005).

However, the data analysis process is, to a large extent, linear and systematic. After collected interviews have been transcribed and prepared for analysis, the next step entails a thorough read of the data to have a broader understanding of the information, followed by a coding process to produce the themes, i.e., the main findings in the research, which are typically five to seven. Before starting with the final step and the researcher's interpretation of the data, which can be done through a personal or theoretical lens, themes are presented, and findings are communicated, whether as chronological events or detailed discussions of separate or interconnected themes (Creswell, 2009).

Having a long-standing interest in the subject of personal growth and experimenting with simple life for years – from decluttering and conscious consumption to changing diet to more plant-based, practicing yoga, to enjoying gardening and learning different healing techniques – and as a result, experiencing the benefits of those practices, helped me relate to shared participants' stories in the research and grasp the meaning behind their lived experiences, which allowed me to produce an eligible interpretation of qualitative narrative data and contribute to narrowing the gap between everyday practices and existing literature.

Backed by scientific literature, results derived from collected narratives, and my personal views and reflections, were interpreted in the descriptive narrative form.

### **3.8 Internal and External Validity**

According to some authors, the question of validity, because of the concept of "measuring" and its "connotations of quantification and comparison" (Elliott, 2005, p. 22), is not an appropriate criterion for evaluating qualitative research. However, seeking trustworthiness and providing a valid representation of reality in the descriptions are still important issues that require the utmost attention.

In narrative research, the participants' stories serve as the input data. As a result, gathering data that, because of the subjectiveness of interviewees in their interpretations, are distorted or do not have a "firm" relation to reality may threaten validity, as the findings and conclusions derived from the information obtained do not provide a realistic description of the situation of concern. On the other hand, as Portelli (1991 cited by Elliott, 2005, p. 26) argues, "oral sources (...) are not always reliable in point of fact. Rather than being a weakness, this is however, their strength: errors, inventions and myths lead us through and beyond facts to their meanings." Accordingly, the authors who advocate using narratives in research argue that empowering people to tell about the meaning-making of their lived experiences in their stories adds to the validity and trustworthiness by providing rich details on the topics discussed, which in structured interviews with standardized questions, due to fragmentation, often remain disclosed.

Generalizability in terms of extending findings to a broader population with narrative research that prioritizes "detail description and contextualized data" (Elliott, 2005, p. 26), based on the small number of relatively homogenous individuals, is not applicable. However, by adopting "a "common-sense" view of generalizability" (Elliott, 2005, p. 26), readers are entrusted with determining whether the narrative provided for a particular setting could be applied to other settings as well.

The researcher's ability to interpret and communicate the meaning of experiences shared by research participants when placed within a larger context contributes to the narrative's trustworthiness and coherence (Elliott, 2005).

Validity threats in this research have been advanced by a purposeful sampling of the research participants, an extensive literature review, and the researcher's familiarity, including a direct personal experience with various practices, referred to within the research. Additionally, member checking was conducted to ensure the accuracy of the findings. Thematic analysis was offered to the research participants for review, and they were allowed to comment on how it resonated with their lifestyles and worldviews.

### **3.9 Summary and conclusion Chapter 3**

This chapter discusses the research methodology and the suitability of a narrative research design for this particular research. Given that narrative research design is widely used for exploring unknown phenomena or less represented segments of a population, it is deemed suitable for research focused on understanding the world-making of individuals pursuing alternative lifestyles. Semi-structured narrative interviews with open-ended questions enabled purposefully selected individuals to tell their unfragmented stories in their own words. As a result, invaluable data were gathered, revealing the meaning-making that underpins their lives and shedding light on some less-explored aspects of it.

Chapter four examines findings from the narrative data analysis, categorized into five themes, and tells the collective story of self-actualized people living alternative lifestyles.

## **4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter introduces findings based on data collection through narrative interviews and analysis done by repetitively reading through all data, asking questions for better understanding, hand-coding, and reflecting. Five themes have been identified. The grand narrative and telling of a collective story at the end of the chapter seek to reconstruct the interviewees' realities by encapsulating insights gained and the researcher's garnered tacit knowledge to depict the shared experience of a growing number of people from the margins of society, bearing the potential for re-storying the mainstream narrative in the (near) future.

### **4.2 Thematic analysis: Findings about simple living**

Three women from urban areas in Croatia who own small businesses told individual stories about their experiences of adhering to alternative lifestyles and simple living. Their stories regarded not only the personal but also the business aspect of such lifestyles, which, despite the increasing interest of researchers in simple living in recent years, caught little attention.

The primary aim of this research was to explore the importance of self-actualization in adhering to alternative lifestyles and consequently to Degrowth, given that voluntary simplicity belongs to one of the concepts under the broad Degrowth umbrella necessary for building a new society based on different postulates than the one lived by today. Hence, the idea was to explore if self-actualization characteristics, defined under Maslow's motivation theory, could be identified in individuals who have been living alternative lifestyles related to voluntary simplicity by listening to their life stories and grasping the meaning they make of their experiences. Learning about the nature of their lives should contribute to a better understanding of this phenomenon that is becoming increasingly established in everyday practices and has the potential to affect a broader social context.

Analysis of narrative data showed all interviewees could be characterized as self-actualized as they demonstrated a set of traits typical of self-actualized individuals, following Maslow's (1954) argument in his motivation theory, namely, natural behavior and candidness, autonomy, a genuine desire to help people, refusal to enculturation, and courage, to name a few. Despite the different personalities and life habits of research participants, the analysis of their stories resulted in the identification of common themes, suggesting the universality of their underlying values and motives.

Five major themes were identified in this research. Three pre-defined themes were derived (and then applied deductively) from the existing literature on self-actualization and voluntary

simplicity, and two additional themes emerged from the research through inductive thematic analysis. Both pre-defined themes – mainstream vs. alternative lifestyle, professional experience, and self-actualization – and emergent themes – spirituality, and personal growth and contentment – have served as a framework for forming a grand narrative.

#### 4.2.1 Mainstream vs. alternative lifestyle

**The pressure of mainstream living.** Over the last several decades, no aspect of people's lives has been exempt from the unprecedented burden arising from the growing demands of constant change and fast-paced living, generating immense sociocultural pressure (Røpke, 1999) "experienced as stress, competition, overwork, and loneliness" (Kallis et al., 2020, p. 50). Social dynamics and cultural narratives "co-created by marketers, investors, advertisers, businesses and politicians" (Jackson, 2017, p. 257) keep people in a constant fight-or-flight mode that is damaging their bodies and degrading the quality of their lives (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009).

**Earning a living.** "Work is trouble but so is its absence" (Parrique, 2019, p. 566). The role work plays in one's life has become so significant that it cannot be separated from one's identity. Even in this research (to my surprise), when participants were asked to share their stories on how their present-day lives differed from their lives before, they began their stories with the (disturbing) work story. Work directs and dominates all aspects of people's lives, from how we behave and consume to who we spend or do not spend time with and the choices we make regarding health and beauty. In a work-obsessed culture and a society in which "work has become a code of conduct" (Parrique, 2019, p. 611), an enormous source of pressure in one's life derives from the socially imposed role of work, as the words of research participants confirm.

*Maya: "I was one year without a job. I couldn't get a job anywhere. I was too old (author's note: in her early forties). Nobody wanted to hire me."*

*Kaya: "I was working in a clothing store that was closed, and I got fired. And I was looking for something that would ease my mind because I was very concerned about employment, money, and life."*

When reflecting on their prior work experiences, research participants depicted the working conditions as stressful and exploitative. Malicious use of power does not always come from employers; it can come from work colleagues and clients.

*Maya: "Nobody yells at me today. And when I worked for different companies, they all yelled because the business culture is like that. And you yell and scream at everybody else. My life was stressful before. I used to count my days, thinking of how and when they will finish. Today I am peaceful and calm and enjoying my days."*

*Daya: "The clients were just more and more mean. (...) All my hard work had been taken for granted. (...) They were in a position of power that they used in a really mean way. (...) The clients can call you even during the weekends. The clients can call you late at night. (...) Everything is always on fire. There are always projects that need to be done yesterday, and on top of that, you always get new projects with due dates already expired. (...) There was a lot of stress that I said yes to for a really low wage, but for the experience, as I had just finished college. (...) I learned through that working environment that (...) somebody's always going to sit on my shoulders and call themselves tall (...) and that sometimes I have to say no because I cannot take all the weight that somebody is putting on me. So I guess something needed to hit me that hard so that later in my life, I could decide that I did not want that. That wasn't a quality of life I would recommend to anybody."*

How far the pressure from mainstream life, particularly concerning the professional aspect, can be extended is illustrated by the testimonies of research participants about the significance of appearance in their work environments.

*Maya: "I had to be at my workplace in suits, full makeup, and high heels (...) to please other people or to distinguish myself with my wardrobe."*

*Daya: "I also had this haircut that was more professional but was not me at all. I'm a girl with curly, messy hair, and I had this really short haircut, and I looked different and felt not like myself."*

**The inner circle.** Another weighty source of pressure comes from close personal relationships. Family members and friends or authority figures are perceived as supportive and trusting environments; hence, their beliefs, expectations, and words of wisdom become deeply embedded in one's personal structures, for which they tend to be rarely questioned.

*Maya: "My family wanted me to have a faculty degree and to have a career."*

*Kaya: "My father was strict. He wanted me to hang out with the right people. (...) My husband was not happy when I started with my healing practice because he was raised to believe that you cannot progress if you do something that you like. This was taken as something very selfish to do. (...) He is still afraid that I might go too far <laugh> and that he might not cope with me."*

*Daya: "I wanted to be a musician. (...) An authority figure told me at 19 that I was already too late because I was supposed to do it at 16, which actually blocked me for five more years to try to do what I really wanted to do."*

Interestingly, Maya and Kaya have stated that they do not want to be "slaves to the system" anymore. And although Daya did not share their choice of words, she shared their feeling. While such strong language probably best reflects the years of being overworked and unappreciated within a work context, looking at the bigger picture, it also includes the pressure experienced in obeying imposed rules and regulations in an attempt to blend within a given framework that felt too narrow. Being freed from "system" constraints and having the experience of living an authentic life allowed them to develop a new perspective and through embracing the autonomy to enact it. They have created a whole new world (for themselves).

Furthermore, reflecting on the mainstream pressure nowadays that they do not live that kind of life, they all have claimed not to feel any of it any longer. Daya even stated that she successfully combines the best of both worlds, supporting her claims with examples of government support for businesses granted to her on two occasions, first to start her business and then again during the COVID-19 pandemic that helped her bypass the period of not being able to work because of a lockdown.

Even the pressure typical of close-knit circles that include families, close friends, colleagues, or peers is not experienced anymore.

*Maya: "I was really surprised when I started with this change in my life. I thought my parents would be horrified, but no, they took it really, really well. Because they always wanted me to be happy (...) and I wasn't. And they saw that I was really happy now."*

*Daya: "I actually don't even have people in my surroundings anymore that would even dare to tell me that (author's note: that she cannot do something) because they know that they can only speak for themselves."*

**Unhealthy life.** A life of materialism is seen as an unhealthy life. In the narratives shared, all participants reflecting on their mainstream lives described them as lives of bad habits, bad diets, and bad choices. Discontentment and health issues have been an inextricable part of their lives.

*Daya: "At that point, I was already really losing it. I stopped eating; she (author's note: her boss) was gaining weight; I was losing weight like crazy. I was really looking bad and had immunity problems because I was just overworking myself."*

*Maya: "I smoked, I did drugs, and I drank alcohol too much. Oh, I did shopping too. Yes, I did it all! (...) I was diagnosed with depression and anxiety. (...) When I started with this path of life, they just went away. It was not my wish that they go away. They just disappeared. Yes, without any difficulties."*

Moreover, feelings of emptiness and unworthiness had been a constant struggle in participants' lives.

*Daya: "I realized that being what everybody else expected me to be – a successful businesswoman – was not fulfilling me. I was empty, while everybody else saw me as a successful young woman. This was not enough to fill my cup in any way."*

*Maya: "Before, I was always unhappy with a big hole inside of me that I wanted to fill with different things. (...) You always try to find something that will make you happy."*

*Kaya: "I used to think that I had to do certain things and do them for others. Like, I'm not the one that matters in any possible way. I didn't feel that I was, I guess, worthy enough to be part of something that was significant. I was kind of living my day-to-day life like a creature of habit."*

**The change.** Referring to the transformation they experienced, research participants were completely aware that it happened at a personal level resulting from a new perspective and a different mindset.

*Maya: "What's changed, I guess, is my reactions to the world changed. The world didn't change. The world is exactly the same."*

*Daya: "I realized, at that point, I was starting to live my Dharma because everything was coming into place. (...) As I'm becoming more and more of this (author's note: living (happy) life on her own terms), I see the reflection of that in the world a lot more. And in the people I inspire or in the people that are in my immediate surroundings."*

*Kaya: "My life has changed because I have changed. (...) I've just decided to make this (author's note: work and life choice) my mainstream."*

#### **4.2.2 Professional experience: running an own business**

**Dharma business.** The research participants refer to their businesses as their "calling" or "dharma," the soul's purpose. Based on the lines offered in their narratives, it is evident that they do not see their current businesses as businesses in the usual sense of the word or as an obligation. They perceive them as an integral part of their lives, something very private and personal, and tend to associate them with play.

*Daya: "With the singing, I really like the word "calling." It's not a profession. It's a "calling." It's something that I feel that I should be doing in this life. And I always felt that singing was that, and that being a musician was that. (...) I live like a child. I'm in pure-play the whole day. And I get paid for it. I would never ever change that for anything else, like more money."*

*Kaya: "The thing that I do, I don't take it as a business. It's more sort of a "calling" than a business."*

**Money.** The concept of money is entirely separate from their businesses and by no means a motivation for doing them. And however welcome money may be in their lives, it is seen only for its function as a means of providing for life's necessities and simple pleasures. They perceive it as energy.

*Daya: "I didn't want to give away my songs. A song is something really private to me. So I didn't wanna give that away for some money. (...) And when I finally got my album out, people asked me if it was worth it – money spent and money earned, but my worth is not in numbers. My worth is in something a lot more transcendent than just numbers. So I could never even put my life on this type of scale. This is not my scale. (...) Money is just energy. And now, because I know my worth (...) I know that I am worthy of this energy. (...) People are ready to pay a lot of money (...) to be in my presence and see me live my highest true (...) because I can fully inspire them through my music. And I love this type of pure money because this type of money is pure energy."*

*Maya: "I didn't want a business for money. I wanted to have a business for people, for healthy people."*

*Kaya: "If I have enough money to pay taxes and have a simple life, then I am very satisfied. (...) If I have to complicate my life and do something that I am not comfortable with in order to make more money, then (...) I don't want it."*

**Time.** Time has become the most precious resource of our time, and time scarcity has become the largest source of the pressure felt in people's day-to-day lives. The narratives of research participants reveal changes in attitudes toward time and time management in running their businesses.

*Daya: "I realized that time is the most important currency for me and that I don't want to work for wages, that I am a lot more worthy than that. (...) And I love, love, love this type of freedom (...) being my own time manager <laugh>."*

*Maya: "I have many ideas for my business, but I do not have to run with anything. When you work in big companies, you always have to do something. And you are non-stop doing something. All day long, every day. But now I do not have to do it. I can take time and think about it and see if it is the best option for me."*

*Kaya: "I do not have to worry about getting to work at a specific time. I can work when I want to. (...) I have more freedom. I can take the courses I want at a time when I want to. I can have clients at a time that suits me."*

### **4.2.3 Self-actualization**

Researching self-actualization is not an easy task as it represents an elusive concept. Self-actualization in this research was not tested directly by asking specific questions but indirectly by collecting narrative data from individuals ready to share their perceptions of the world and themselves. Hence the findings could not be anyhow foreseen. On that account, revealing that all the research participants embodied a variety of traits typical for self-actualized individuals according to Maslow's (1954) list of self-actualizing characteristics was striking.

**Courage and confidence.** It takes courage to swim upstream, and participants in this research do not lack it. Evident from their narratives is also their confidence, which comes from a mixture of not only believing in their abilities and strengths that they are aware of but also in the ability of the Universe to provide for what they need.

*Kaya: "All my friends know me as brave, and I have always been brave. (...) There were scary moments, but I just kind of proceeded with what I wanted. (...) Everything just turned out fine. It just turned out in my favor. (...) The Universe knows that you want to find the right path and that you want to do the right thing, so it kind of conspires <laugh> in a good way for you."*

*Daya: "I am so happy that I was brave enough to exit the marketing world and follow my calling. (...) I'm going to continue doing that bravely as I did before."*

*Maya: "As I saw in these three, four, five years that I've been living this kind of life, whatever you need, the Universe will provide for you."*

**Problem-centering and altruism.** Holistic and creative thinking, compassion, and generosity guide the behavior of self-actualized individuals. A wide frame of reference and sympathy for people make them choose for themselves tasks beyond petty individualistic concerns (Maslow, 1954). Testimonies from research participants confirm it.

*Daya: "And I realize I can be a part of that change. (...) I have an all-girl band because I think more girls should be on stage. So with every gig now, there's somebody I am paying, and I'm so happy I can share the abundance I'm getting with other people."*

*Kaya: "I came to understand that you can make a difference. (...) The most important thing for me in my business is to help people."*

*Maya: "I'm growing a community, and people are really happy. I can see their bodies changing, their minds changing, so that is the best sign of my success."*

**Perception of reality and acceptance.** Ability to view life rationally, accept what cannot be changed, and embrace whatever comes with gratitude and grace. Coming from their stories, it appears that acceptance is also portrayed in the tendency of research participants not to have long-term plans. They have goals and strivings but no set plans.

*Kaya: "It's kind of a challenge, and I wish things were different, but they're not. And it's part of my self-growth."*

*Daya: "I don't have plans. I have a one-year-in-advance plan. And I always manage to kind of fulfill all of the plans, all of the crazy plans. (...) I have no idea actually what the future holds for me. I can just see intuitively where I wanna turn to. And I think that's, that's the best plan I've got. Just listening to my gut. <laugh>"*

**Self-reliance and autonomy.** Maslow (1954) describes self-actualized people as self-disciplined, independent thinkers who are active and responsible and prefer self-governance over dependence on others. He also claims that they are not threatened by the big world and that they chose freedom over conformity. Stories from research participants confirm that.

*Daya: "I stood there on the stage as a part of the collective, but I realized I really wanted to be there as an individual with my own creations. (...) At that point, I felt like I had no skills yet, so it was easier for me to just work alone and rely on myself. (...) I can make decisions for myself, and before, somebody else was making decisions for me. (...) I want to continue living the happy life that I am living right now, being my own boss, being an artist, being all of those things that I love to see in the world."*

*Kaya: "I feel more freedom. I feel free to do what I want to do and not so much what people tell me to do. I'm my own boss. <laugh>"*

*Maya: "I went to a yoga teacher training course to treat myself to something and not to become a yoga teacher. And while I was there, I was saying to everybody and myself that I would not be a yoga teacher because it was not for me and that I could not survive by being a yoga teacher. But after I held my first class, I felt such incredible energy and sensed that this was all I ever wanted to do. When I came back home, I immediately took all the steps and started with yoga classes."*

**The joy of learning.** Deriving from their stories, the need for research participants to learn and grow seems utterly insatiable. They use every opportunity for it and draw immense happiness from it.

*Kaya: "I have so many interests, different interests, and every day something comes along that makes me think, "OK, I should learn more about that." (...) I can learn every day and feed my curiosity every day. And that makes me happy."*

*Maya: "Today, for me, it is important to be happy and to have fulfilled days. To have my time for learning, for doing yoga, for teaching. (...) I plan to keep up with education, to keep with lifelong learning, and to grow."*

**Resistance to enculturation.** A sense of belonging to a particular culture, whether local or global, private or public, comes with a tacit promise of acceptance and safety in exchange for a sense of personal uniqueness and individuality. The personalities of well-adjusted individuals reflect prevailing cultural conditions in their backgrounds. Hence, being different, having the ability to withhold cultural identification, and retaining integrity and personal freedom, represent the uniqueness of itself.

*Daya: "The definition of myself started to change. (...) In Croatia, nobody was doing that at that point. (...) I was something else. (...) I'm not just a Croatian girl. I feel like I'm a citizen of the world."*

*Kaya: "You do what you have to do, but most of the time, I do not care. I do not care, this is not my world (author's note: the mainstream)."*

*Maya: "When you are in your regular environment, (...) you have to go here, there, everywhere, and you have to do all kinds of stuff. You always hear some little voice in your head saying you have to do this or that. Now I don't have it anymore, but earlier I had it."*

**Peak experiences.** Peak experiences are unexpected events in life, "god-sent" occurrences beyond logical explanation, provoking awe and wonder. Highly intrinsically rewarding, they become indelible memories.

*Daya: "In the worst period of my life I had a mystical experience and I got this whisper of my new name. Out of this fall, came the most important thing to me, which is my new identity and my new name."*

*Maya: "I wanted to continue my teacher training the next year, but I did not have any money. I struggled for months with barely enough to pay my bills. But one month before the beginning of the training, the money just came from different sources. The money just came. So, if you are on your Dharma, on your path, (...) the Universe will provide for you."*

**Dichotomies in synergy.** According to Maslow (1954), self-actualized people have the unique characteristic of reconciling dichotomies. They seem to have the quality of making polarities merge in collaboration and be synergetic rather than in opposition. The following words from participants reflect that.

*Daya: "We are living in a dual Universe and happiness comes with sadness, and the nice thing comes with the bad, and you know, the good, the bad, and the ugly. Everything is here. But now I just know how to use it all for my own growth and to be at peace with myself in any type of emotions I am experiencing."*

*Kaya: "I see things differently. I see the whole picture, where others, well, most people see one negative thing and they go after that. I don't. I see negative things in a positive way because I think that if you have a negative situation, you can learn from it. And I believe that negative things have to come to light in order to be resolved. And I don't think that many people think that."*

#### **4.2.4 Spirituality**

Spirituality is an important part of the lives of participants in this research. It changed their beliefs and enabled them to approach life differently, giving them a new perspective.

*Kaya: "I loved Vedic philosophy immediately. I found some answers that I couldn't find before, and that made me kind of hopeful that you are always protected in every way. My beliefs changed a lot. I think I found security in that relationship with God."*

*Maya: "My spirituality grows stronger every day. My faith is growing and I'm amazed by that because some 10, 20 years ago, I was without religion. I hated everything. I hated everybody. <laugh> And today, I love everybody. And I believe in God or whatever we call it."*

*Daya: "I am deep into spiritual practices, into manifestation practices, and into being a leader in a feminine way. I'm learning these things from teachers. I'm paying people to teach me how to manifest my dreams in an easier way and more, I would say, more five-D way than three-D way. So I'm learning how to change my thoughts and to think better. And so I'm learning how to change the way that I use my energy or protect my energy. I'm really deeply into these practices on an everyday basis."*

#### **4.2.5 Personal growth and contentment**

All participants were aware of the progress they had made in life and were confident about their future. They all declared to be highly content with the life they live today, and every situation in their lives, in their eyes, is an opportunity to grow.

*Daya: "I had a big breakup earlier this year, and I was sad for months, and I used that for my music. I used that to make the most fragile, beautiful songs I could, which is a new part of me that my fans didn't get to hear yet. And I am so thankful now for the breakup so I could make even more deep and beautiful art. (...) I'm just more at peace with who I am, and I see myself growing every day."*

*Kaya: "I am satisfied with the life I live today. I am satisfied with the way I am in my life."*

*Maya: "There are no difficulties in living a simpler life, there are only joys. (...) I am in full Santosha. Santosha means contentment. I'm content, especially if I compare it with my life before. (...) But I think I am only at the beginning of my path because when you start with your Dharma, your path, it just develops. It grows. (...) I am fine with my life. I am enjoying my life, but I know all kinds of stuff is coming."*

### **4.3 Grand narrative and discussion**

The grand narrative encapsulates commonalities shared between research participants and presents a collective story that illustrates the nature of their lives and the meaning-making of lived experiences within a particular social context from the researcher's point of view – lives lived in an alternative way underpinned by self-actualization. The discussion segment uses the theoretical lens of Degrowth, voluntary simplicity, and self-actualization to evaluate findings against the existing knowledge outlined in the literature review.

Maslow (1954) argued that being born human is not enough. Instead, one needs to become human. This understands living a life of a healthy human being who has fulfilled one's highest potential and become self-actualized. Alternatively, as long as a person remains locked in within deficiency needs relating to physiological, safety, love and belonging, and esteem needs, typical of an average man, one cannot be considered healthy. Maslow continued his argument by claiming that "growth is often a painful process" (Maslow, 1954, p. xiii) and that the higher the need in the hierarchy of needs, the less pressing it is and more easily postponed longer for gratification, serving good foundation to estimate that self-actualized people do not come in large numbers within the general population. Even though some recent research indicates that this number (today) could be higher than Maslow's first thought, consistent with the argument that the development of society (up to a certain extent) supports human well-being, the significance of the number within the total population remains low. Nevertheless, finding self-actualized individuals among adherents to alternative lifestyles, even in Croatia, which is not considered an affluent country, was not difficult. This case, therefore, contests the prevalent view in the voluntary simplicity literature that simple living is typical for affluent countries and well-off individuals and is more in line with research done by Heneke (2005) in the United States and Kala et al. (2017) in the Czech Republic indicating that behind the pursuit of such a lifestyle is an individual's inner richness and intrinsic needs based on values, rather

than material wealth. This case also suggests and contributes to the understanding that adherents to simple living are not exclusive to the well-off members of society but are (more likely) to be found among people of moderate income and modest background – people who live the type of life advocated by Degrowth (Kallis et al., 2020).

Given the traits of self-actualized individuals that, from the perspective of an average person, look completely utopian, the lives they create for themselves do not belong to the mainstream realm and, therefore, must be lived aside from it. As evidenced by the narratives of research participants, the decision to forgo their mainstream lifestyle and pursue alternative pathways came as a result of long and dedicated work on personal development and growth that resulted in new perceptions and strengths that fueled the change. Contrary to what might be expected about distancing from the mainstream – to come in a physical sense and some form of off-grid lifestyle – it has been done in line with their nature; they choose to stay in their communities and through "everyday efforts to improve the culture, usually from within, rather than to reject it wholly and fight it from without" (Maslow, 1954, p. 173). Their "older-brotherly attitude" and the "genuine desire to help the human race" (Maslow, 1954, p. 166, 165) make them remain close and offer a helping hand almost in an utterly tacit way to less healthy members of their community, our society.

Kind and compassionate, they run their small businesses founded in high ethical standards that reflect their values, beliefs, and lifestyles. By seeking autonomy in the work aspects of their lives and embodying their alternative and people-centered businesses in local communities, they are breaking free from the dominant narrative and also contributing, on a small scale, to making change within society by "creating and amplifying cracks in otherwise stable social and economic relationships" (Rindova et al., 2009 cited by Montesano Montessori, 2016, p. 557). Building alternatives within the mainstream is one of the proposed pathways within Degrowth imaginaries (Kallis et al., 2020) necessary for directing society toward the desired change. Self-actualized individuals living the lives they create for themselves (even unknowingly) appear to be the prime movers of a Degrowth society.

The worldviews of the self-actualized not only underlie their private lives but are also reflected in the type of business they choose to run and how they do it. The non-monetary definition of success and perceiving the role of money and profits within their businesses as nothing more than an exchange of energy define their distinctive managing approach. Self-actualized people are guided by the desire to help those in need by offering support and inspiration, whether through yoga, alternative healing, or music, as in the examples from the research – practices that contribute to raising awareness and lifting the human spirit and as such needed for realizing one's fullest potential. And while we all have been given the ability to become what we can be, the paths that we need to walk toward self-actualization, or Dharma, as participants like to call it, are unique and need to be discovered for oneself. But once the path of individualization and authentic life is ascertained and starts to be walked, according to the

understanding of participants, the Universe begins to act on one's behalf, opening the doors to well-being and flourishing.

Self-actualized individuals have the courage to take the paths less traveled and swim upstream. They forgo their "safe" and often affluent lives in the mainstream and opt for alternative lifestyles and work practices. They stand alone, often unaware of others walking similar paths and sharing the experiencing of transformation. They rely on their own strengths, capacities, and problem-solving skills in embracing the unknown on the margins of society. Being true to themselves, they are not reconciling with the status quo but withstanding the difficulties, enacting their worldviews and values, and creating new realms, new worlds for themselves and the (loving) people around them.

This is probably the reason why simple lives are (tacitly) growing their presence within communities and society but are still not politically engaged to vocalize their actions, push back, and make mainstream institutions and structures acknowledge their presence and power. As a result, they play a much more active role in galvanizing societal change and transformation than generally expected (Alexander and Gleeson, 2019; Jackson, 2017).

Self-actualization in and of itself is a quest that involves learning by trial and error (Huneke, 2005) and requires endurance that is rewarded with living a fulfilled and contented life once it has been achieved. Self-actualization allows people to loosen their grip on material possessions and distance themselves from mainstream trivialities, opening doors for lives of authenticity and acceptance. It enables new perceptions and meaning-making and forms the basis for different world-making and the construction of new realms better suited to human well-being. It provides opportunities for living lives of full humanness that, according to the stories told, have been lives worth pursuing.

#### **4.4 Summary and conclusion Chapter 4**

Chapter four first provides findings of theme analysis with five themes identified to introduce the grand narrative in the section that follows afterward. Themes – pre-defined and emerging – derived from narrative interviews discussed lives lived in the mainstream compared to current alternative lifestyle choices, the experience of running one's own business, self-actualization, spirituality, and personal growth and contentment. The grand narrative and discussion section captures commonalities shared between research participants, sheds light on worldviews and the nature of their lives from the researcher's point of view, and discusses them using the theoretical lens of Degrowth, voluntary simplicity, and self-actualization.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Living a life of affluence is not a guarantee of happiness or well-being. Enchanted by the Western consumer lifestyle, people find themselves caught up in the work and spend cycle of the global capitalist system driven by profit maximization. Vicious exploitation of human and natural resources led to facing an existential crisis, both environmental and social. Disillusioned by the mainstream, with "soil and souls" (Degrowth, 2022) exhausted, people are increasingly looking for alternative ways of living. By embracing simple living, they try to take control of their lives, search for lost meaning, and find fulfillment (Huneke, 2005).

Arguing on voluntary simplicity, Shama and Wisenblit (1984 cited by Johnston and Burton, 2003, p. 26) agreed that "the main goals of this lifestyle (voluntary simplicity) were rational moral behavior, spiritual growth and self-actualization, which together manifest the economic behaviors of low consumption, ecological responsibility, and self-sufficiency."

Simple living is a conscious decision that stems from a desire to live meaningfully, and simple living is the people who find satisfaction in non-materialistic strivings. And while such lifestyle choices are not widespread in our society, they are products of a mindset of people who created different realms for themselves by managing to gratify relatively well basic needs from the lower order of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, e.g., deficiency needs to reach a self-actualizing tier characterized by growth needs and a sufficiency mindset. Their life's approach is based on *being* rather than *having* mode, and their inner richness allows them to live their outer lives in utter simplicity.

Drawing from Maslow's theory of motivation (1954), we are all born with the capacity to become the best version of ourselves. We all have the seed planted within us. Unfortunately, the world we live in, the world that we have created, the world deeply immersed in materialism, is more limiting than supportive, and the seed for most of us remains dormant. Spiritual practices appear to be a great tool, enabler, and creator of favorable conditions for getting seeds to grow. Once the plant is full-grown, it flourishes and rewards us with fruits. By living our authentic, fulfilled lives, the lives of our highest potential, we live lives worthy of healthy human beings. And only healthy human beings can create a healthy society, a society we strive for and Degrowth calls for, one that will make up for the damage done (because we did not know better) while we have been coping with our deficiency needs and overgrowing them.

Hearing stories narrated by participants in this research belonging to different generations and different value systems, and comparing their life paths, added to construing that we are products of our environments and background cultures. By adopting different sets of values within society, we could create self-actualized individuals and healthy people on a larger scale.

On that account, it is reasonable to believe that a prosperous society, one that, from today's point of view, still looks like a utopia, is within our reach.

Looking at a Degrowth society through the prism of self-actualized individuals word utopian seems less qualifying and misused. The world-makings and realms created by self-actualized people living their alternative lives in parallel with the mainstream are those depicted in Degrowth's imaginary, those on whom Degrowth society will depend (Alexander, 2012a) for the change (in values) to be enacted. Therefore, two utopian concepts – self-actualized people and Degrowth society – appear to be directed toward each other, and if implemented together, a prosperous society, a society of the future based on well-being that is just, equal, and sustainable – might be given a chance.

## **5.1 Contribution to knowledge**

The research under this thesis contributes to the literature on Degrowth, voluntary simplicity, and self-actualization. Insights gained by delving into two less-explored aspects of simple living through the analysis of the personal narratives of research participants: the characteristics of adherents to alternative lifestyles concerning Maslow's self-actualization process and their approach to work as seen through the lens of the self-employed add significantly to understanding that the change in lifestyle toward simple living comes as a result of personal transformation and developing sufficiency state of mind. Becoming self-actualized and the corresponding change in perception are reflected in all aspects of one's life, and forgoing material possessions for non-materialistic pursuits extends to the professional sphere as well; businesses started and run by self-actualized individuals are focused on social goals and supporting people in their personal transformation rather than driven by making a profit. Although not explicitly, this also implies that the core interests and priorities of the self-actualized, including the rewards they seek, are utterly different from those of an average person living a mainstream lifestyle. Self-actualized seem to have outgrown religion, the hedonism and seductiveness of materialism, and even the tech infatuation of recent times and centered their lives on human flourishing and well-being.

This understanding, apart from adding to the credibility of Degrowth imaginaries indicating that they are viable, attainable, and realistic (Sekulova et al., 2017), can, by identifying and profiling the prime movers and possible change agents (although self-actualized do not perceive themselves as such, while in Maslow's view, they are our best option for preserving the livable world in the future), contribute to determining and directing the course of actions and setting conditions and networks of support necessary for enabling the process of social change and creating a Degrowth society as "producing new kinds of people and relationships is fundamental to any cultural transformation and great transition" (Kallis et al., 2020, p. 64).

In connection, as indicated in the feedback from research participants gained in the member checking process, contribution comes from offering perspective to those perplexed about having it all but still feeling empty, as well as those who are "yet to embark on the journey of their soul purpose and Dharma."

The contribution to knowledge is evident in the findings, which complement some earlier research (Huneke, 2005; Kala et al., 2017), illustrating that lifestyles of voluntary simplicity are not only typical for affluent societies but also exist in less affluent and post-socialist countries like Croatia. This also supports the argument that pursuing such lifestyles is fundamentally intrinsic rather than driven by a purpose like helping the environment or changing the system (Kala et al., 2017), commonly accepted as motivation rather than understood as manifestation.

## **5.2 Implications for relevant stakeholders**

Realizing that the scale of existential crises we have been facing is far too big for the fixes proposed by power structures is finally forcing the global community to look in some other directions for solutions and making it more open to new approaches. To address the pressing environmental crisis with success, according to the growing number of scholars from different fields, requires social change preconditioned by a change in values that can be probable only if voluntary. Degrowth, one of the approaches that urge for environmental and social transformation, within its imaginaries, calls for voluntary simplicity as a preferable lifestyle that, despite its growing number of adherents over the last decades, remains inconceivable for the majority of the population. The reason may be hidden in the fact that only healthy individuals, as Maslow characterizes them, those who are self-actualized due to their psychological traits, can sustain the life that Elgin and Mitchell (1977) described as "outwardly simple and inwardly rich." If this is correct, as implied by scholars like Maslow (1954) or Murtaza (2011), and stems from the research under this thesis, it opens the door for the transformation of society we look for as it identifies the direction and change agents. Establishing those parameters, as Clandinin (2006, p. 52) states, "perhaps we can begin to work together to change those social, cultural and institutional narratives" that are outdated and allow ourselves more possibilities and different outcomes of the stories we live by.

## **5.3 Future research**

The question asked by van Dijk (2014) in the future research section of her working paper referring to identifying characteristics of voluntary simplifiers as possible enabling factors for such a lifestyle may be answered in this research. To explore and establish if what has been outlined here stands, future research involving a larger number of research participants and different social contexts is required to increase validity and mitigate the identified demographic limitations present in this research. Further, employing different research

approaches, designs, and methodologies can contribute significantly to yielding new insights and exploring the topic more thoroughly.

One of the suggestions for future research is to address the question of self-actualization unrelated to spirituality but in the context of other life-changing events like extreme (sports) endeavors, serious health conditions, the sudden death of family members, etc. Another suggestion for future research related to establishing the role and impact of self-actualized people and the businesses they run on the community can include exploring the experiences and perceptions of people involved in consuming the goods and services they provide. Finally, it would be rather interesting to know how such individuals would respond to the strong growth and scaling up of their businesses and whether and how it would affect their current private and professional lifestyle tenets and choices.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix 1: Interview consent form

Research project:

**The Importance of Self-Actualization for Degrowth:  
Does Personal Transformation Lead to Embracing an Alternative Lifestyle?**

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Research investigator: \_\_\_\_\_

Research participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Place and date: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of the above research project.

Ethical procedures for academic research require the explicit consent of interviewees for the interview and their agreement to the conditions of participation and how the information contained in the interview will be used.

The research project is designed to gather the necessary information for the purpose of writing a master's thesis as part of the Master of Business Administration (MBA) program at Modul University Vienna.

Due to the nature of the research design, the sample size for this research project is small (three participants).

Participation involves being interviewed by the research investigator, as mentioned above.

Participation is confidential. You will not be identified by your name but given a pseudonym that will be used in any reports based on the information obtained from this interview.

There are no anticipated risks associated with your participation in this research project. Still, if you feel uncomfortable during the interview session, you have the right to decline to respond to any questions or to end the interview and withdraw from the research.

The interview will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes (depending entirely on the length of the story you are about to share) and will be audio-recorded. Notes may be written during the interview, too. Within two weeks after the interview date, the transcript will be produced. Upon request, a copy of the transcript will be made available to you for revision and factual error correction. In the case of doubts, you will be contacted for further clarification of the given information.

Access to the interview transcript will be limited to the research investigator and academic colleagues at Modul University Vienna. Transcripts will be stored on the personal computer of the research investigator and at Modul University Vienna following academic regulations.

Apart from being used for writing the master's thesis, all or part of the content of your interview, including direct quotes of your words, may be used in academic papers, news articles, websites, or other media.

Participation is voluntary and no benefit or compensation can be expected in return.

Interview questions have been reviewed and approved by the Modul University Vienna Institutional Review Board (IRB) on July 25, 2022.

In case of any questions or concerns about this research project, you can contact research investigator Senka Radić at [61904323@modul.ac.at](mailto:61904323@modul.ac.at) or the research investigator's supervisor Dr. Christian Kerschner at [christian.kerschner@modul.ac.at](mailto:christian.kerschner@modul.ac.at).

Any variation of the conditions above will only occur with your further explicit approval.

By signing this consent form, you certify that you understand the purpose of your involvement and that you agree to the conditions of your participation.

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Researcher's signature

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Participant's signature

## Appendix 2: Interview guide

### Part 0: Introduction & Explanation

Explaining to research participants the interview process and informing them about the terms of the interview before offering them an Interview consent form to read and sign if everything presented was considered agreeable.

### Part I: Background Story/Demographics

- *Where Do You Come From?*
- *How Old Are You?*
- *Education/Background*
- *Occupation (today & before simplifying)*
- **Optional Question!** *Income: Before Simplifying Vs. Current (In Relative Numbers)*
- *Family Matters: Marital Status, Children, Housing (city/country, rented/owned), Pets? (Past, Present & Future)*
- *Interests? Vacations? (before & after simplifying)*

### Part II: Exiting Story

*Main Question:*

***Your lifestyle today differs from your lifestyle before. Could you please tell me about this change?***

*Subquestions:*

- *If you think of a good early (e.g. childhood) friend i.e. someone who knew you well before you changed your lifestyle, how would that person describe this transformation (from your point of view)?*
- *How do you perceive the change? How would you describe it? How was your life then, and how is it now? Where do you find the biggest differences?*
- *Can you tell me the role of "simplicity" in this transformation?*
- *Can you tell me if you have any challenges or difficulties living your life as you do today? What are they? What do you do to overcome them?*
- *What made you leave the mainstream (change) and opt for an unconventional/alternative lifestyle?*

- *Could you tell me about the process? Was there a trigger, or did you somehow evolve to it? Was it a decision and a clean-cut, or was it a gradual transition with one thing leading to another?*
- *Living our day-to-day lives we often do not get to see the wood for the trees, but looking back, what would you identify as the most significant thing that influenced you to live the way you live today?*
- *Can you identify any links between how you lived your life before and how you live it today? Can you find any traces of going toward the life you are living today? Something as if you were "preparing" for it somehow (intentionally or unintentionally)? Were there any specific experiences that set you on the course?*
- *What role would you ascribe to your beliefs and values for the way you live and for who you are today?*
- *And conversely, what role does your (simpler) way of life play with regard to the evolution of your values and belief systems?*
- *Can you describe any common (normal) features of your previous life that you do not tolerate (anymore)?*
- *What is important for you in your life today?*

### **Part III: Work & Growth Story**

*Main Question:*

***Focusing on your professional life and the business context: How would you describe the evolution of your professional life and your business? What is your business story, so to say?***

*Subquestions:*

- *When did you start? What kind of business do you run? Who are your clients – the profiles of your followers? What is your reach and influence – not simply in terms of quantity, but of quality – how do you affect their lives? How big is your business today (compared to when you started)?*
- *What made you choose that path? Why did you decide to do what you do?*
- *What role did your chosen lifestyle play in your business story? Was your business a result of a new lifestyle or was it part of changing a lifestyle?*
- *What relation (if any) do you see between your current worldview and your business?*
- *How do you feel about your business story today? What does success in business mean for you personally?*
- *What are the most important things to you in (your) business? And how does that differ from your business experiences before?*
- *What role do money and profits play in your business?*

- *How important is business growth to you? How would you respond to an opportunity to grow your business substantially? Would you self-impose any limits to such developments, and if so, which kind?*
- *What does the future of your business look like? Where do you see your business in the next ten years?*
- *New developments in the markets and society in general lead to new business approaches. Are there any trends in particular that you think will affect your business in the future? If yes, how do you plan to respond to them? Will you consider other business models – different or alternative ways of operating a business (different concepts, different payment options (donations), potential partnerships, etc.)?*

## **Part IV: Self-Actualization & Transformation Story**

*Main Question:*

***Focusing now on yourself as a person: How do you feel about yourself and your life today?***

*Subquestions:*

- *And when compared to your life (in general) from before?*
- *In terms of your own experience, what are your thoughts on the self-actualization process – self-development, transformation, or personal growth? What does that include, and what role does it play in living a good life?*
- *How would you describe your inner transformation process?*
- *What made you first notice that you had changed? What influenced it, and what contributed to it the most? Can you also share more details about the timeline?*
- *What exactly did change?*
- *In what ways would you say your life today differs from that of most people (around you)?*
- *What does your future in 10 years look like lifestyle-wise? What role does business play in it? How important is self-development going to be?*
- *What role, if any, does religion or spirituality play in your life?*
- *Can you describe anything in your life you would still like to change? Can you think of any aspects of yourself and your personal development that you consider a major construction site, e.g. bad habits, etc.?*
- *Do you fancy or are you adherent to any lifestyle approaches or movements involving health, diet, physical activities, housing, the environment, etc.? If yes, can you share more details on it?*
- *Have you, by any chance, heard about "Degrowth" or "Voluntary simplicity" concepts? If yes, what are your thoughts on it, and how do they or could they fit into your life?*

- *All in all, how would you describe your life today, contentment-wise? Which advice would you give to anyone who is considering following a similar path to yourself?*
- *And the last question to conclude this interview with:*

*Is there anything else you would like to share, e.g. something that we have not talked about but that you consider to be important (for this research)? If so, please go ahead.*