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What Do We Really Need? Questioning Consumption through Sufficiency

Hélène Gorge, Maud Herbert, Nil Özçağlar-Toulouse and Isabelle Robert¹

Abstract

This article introduces the concept of sufficiency in the literature on sustainability, by presenting its specific dual nature (voluntary and obliged) and its collective implication. Sufficiency implies a reorganization of consumption priorities that we introduce by a discussion on consumerism and the dominant social paradigm. Long interviews with sufficient people show the complexity of sufficiency, which creates semantic oppositions around the notion of *having* (everything vs. nothing and not nothing vs. not everything). After a semiotic analysis of people's interpretation of sufficiency, we propose a reflection about the use of macro-marketing tools to better enhance and enact sufficiency in a collective way.

Keywords

Sufficiency, sustainability, dominant social paradigm, frugality, downshifting, needs

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Introduction

Our economic model in recent years has come to be challenged by the globalization of consumerist lifestyles and their increasing pressure on natural resources. In response, several studies have focused on improving consumption by reducing its negative consequences, such as through reuse, repair, or recycling initiatives (Dobscha, Prothero, and McDonagh 2012; Moisander and Pesonen 2002; Shaw and Newholm 2002). A more radical view recommends consumption limitations, and calls for coercive measures, such as decreasing our over-consumption habits and eventually lowering our living standards (Dobson 2007; Illich 1973; Jonas 1979). In this research, we explore these more radical forms of consumption limitation by introducing the concept of *sufficiency* into the discussion on sustainability.

The concept of *sufficiency* emerged from activist circles at the beginning of the 2000s. It was particularly influenced by Ivan Illich's (1973) notion of "austerity," which promotes a style of living that should be both ecologically sustainable and socially enjoyable. Princen (2005, p. 6) defines sufficiency as a downward reassessment of needs, with the ultimate end of reducing consumption of raw materials and energy:

"Today, with the imperative to translate the self-evident limits of a single planet into the limits of everyday life, the organizing principle might be sufficiency. Such a translation is unlikely, arguably impossible, under the logic of a consumer economy where specialization, large-scale operation, and consumer demand prevail."

For Princen (2005), the logic of sufficiency consists of consuming a quantity of goods and services that is just sufficient for optimal well-being, refraining from both under-consumption and overconsumption.

"It is the sense that, as one does more and more of an activity, there can be enough and then there can be too much. I eat because I'm hungry, but at some point I'm satiated. If I keep eating, I become bloated. I go for a walk because it feels good - because I enjoy the movement, the fresh air, and the scenery, but if my physical exertion begins to override my pleasure, I've

had enough. If I keep walking to the point where all my attention is on my aching feet and tired legs, I've had too much. I can sense the excess (Princen 2005, p. 43)."

The French environmental association Virage Energie² (2013) has taken this logic of sufficiency a step further, compelling diverse actors to modify their consumption practices through sophisticated conceptualizations of sufficiency. Indeed, sufficiency cannot be limited to volunteer ecological behavior. Warnings about the end of abundant and low-cost oil imply an obligation to reduce energy consumption. Here, sufficiency is not a choice, but a situation of adaptation and resilience (Hopkins 2008). Actually, we can enlarge the scope of sufficiency by gathering both voluntary and obligatory consumption limitations. Thus, Virage Energie, based on the Négawatt manifesto (Association Négawatt 2012) defines three types of sufficiency enactment: (1) a dimensional sufficiency in which size is adjusted to meet needs (e.g., avoiding a 400 m² house for two persons); (2) a sufficiency of utilization, focused on the level and duration of use (e.g., not taking more food than needed, turning off the lights); and (3) a convivial sufficiency, based on collective urban planning to enhance social links (e.g., bikes instead of cars).

The notion of sufficiency is marked by three major distinctions from mainstream perspectives on sustainability. First, it is different from 3R initiatives (reuse, repair, or recycling; see Dobscha, Prothero, and McDonagh 2012), as such initiatives do not challenge consumption in itself, but rather encourage solutions that may require fewer material and energy resources. For example, where 3R initiatives would recommend solutions to build a hybrid, less energy-hungry car, sufficiency would directly encourage giving up on using cars altogether. Second, the concept of sufficiency diverges from "efficiency." As technological innovation and industrial progress have made products and services more efficient, the challenge becomes satisfying needs while using less energy. Distinct from 3R initiatives' inclination toward efficiency, sufficiency questions living choices and consumption norms. On this last point, sufficiency diverges from such concepts as voluntary simplicity, frugality, and downshifting as

² Virage Energie is a French association that in 2008 published a scientific climate plan widely acknowledged by European institutions. See http://www.virage-energie-npdc.org/IMG/pdf/Rapport_complet_Scenarios_sobriete_Virage-energie-NPDC_Ademe_sept2013_v2.pdf. They currently work on elaborating different scenarios of sufficiency in various regions of France.

these focus solely on voluntary behaviors maintaining only the essential features of consumption (Cherrier and Murray 2002; Elgin 1981). The doctrine of sufficiency prescribes an act of decreasing energy-demanding consumption that can be voluntary (see, e.g., the “de-growth movement”), but also obligatory. For example, our economies rely on massive inputs of cheap energy. To survive peak oil, according to advocates of sufficiency, we may be forced to limit our levels of consumption. A further point of departure is that, while the concepts of voluntary simplicity, frugality, and down-shifting hinge more on individual decisions regarding consumption levels, the concept of sufficiency highlights a collective one.

The concept of sufficiency advocates a radical decrease of material and energy-demanding consumption, which contrasts with the traditional forms of progress inculcated by ideas of growth, consumption, and production. Historically, consumption has been a tool to achieve equality and address individual needs (Cohen 2003), including psychological needs such as self-esteem and self-fulfillment. Yet consumer culture might also be criticized for its focus on materialistic values (Baudrillard 1969; Bauman 2001; Ritzer 1999). Materialism and the accumulation of material possessions might not create well-being (Ahuvia and Wong 1995; Kasser 2002), whether due to the alienation created by mass production and consumption (Debord 1967) or the necessary (though difficult) distinction between false (superficial/artificial) and true (objective/real) needs (Adorno and Heller 2008). At the very least, consumer research has confirmed that materialism and well-being are far from synonymous (Burroughs and Rindfleish 2002).

The sufficiency movement (obligatory or voluntary) instead suggests wholesale defection from what might be called “mainstream” living conditions and patterns of consumption. This impacts a vast range of consumption choices because it forces individual consumers to reassess their own needs. How do consumers negotiate this reassessment and interpret the logic of sufficiency? Can we find similar issues among voluntarily and obligatorily sufficient people? And how can sufficiency be informed and actualized at both individual and collective levels?

Sufficiency generally creates a confrontation between its logic of reduction and the ongoing consumption that has increasingly crystallized in our consumer culture (Princen 2005). In this context, we examine how consumers tend to experience sufficiency, and how it refines their

consumption standards and practices. We begin by reviewing the dominant interpretation of needs in social paradigms, and its confusion with the idea of desires. We then present our methodology, which is based on thirteen long interviews: we study the meanings of sufficiency for people whose engagement in the process is voluntary and those for whom it is obligatory. Our study revealed a fundamental binary opposition, which led us to use semiotic square analysis that we use in both its static and syntexic methods. The semiotic square shows how obligatorily and voluntarily sufficient people find balance between the two poles of “not (having) everything” and “not (having) nothing.” We thus clarify how the notion of needs is negotiated when engaged in sufficiency, shedding light on innovative and collective ways of thinking about and living out this consumption paradigm.

Negotiating Sufficiency in the Dominant Social Paradigm

Needs, individual attitudes, and beliefs all are conditioned by what Pirages and Ehrlich (1974, p. 43) call the “dominant social paradigm” (DSP), which they define as “the collection of norms, beliefs, values, habits, and so on that form the world view most commonly held within a culture.” To understand its different facets, studies address the DSP of Western industrial societies according to economic, political, and social dimensions (Dunlap and Van Liere 1984; Kilbourne et al. 2001; Kilbourne, Beckmann, and Thelen 2002; Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997), showing their incompatibility with the notion of ecological durability (Cotgrove 1982). For example, Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero (1997) propose a conceptual framework shaped by the combination of economic, educational, and religious policy, dominated by methodological individualism, material abundance, and continuous economic growth and faith in technological progress. The belief in technological progress and unlimited consumption also initiates a cycle of self-justification, and whose objective is the domination of nature. It leads to an anthropocentric project and demystification of nature in the DSP (Kilbourne 1998, 2005).

The DSP is reinforced by the consumer culture, which emphasizes a complex rhetoric about needs and desires. This rhetoric makes environmental choices more difficult because they stand in opposition to a mainstream rhetoric of excess and consumerism. In periods of economic scarcity, needs are “natural” and pertain to “survival (biological and social), and once that purpose [is] met (the needs have been satisfied), there [is] no point in consuming

more” (Wilk 2002, p. 12). Economic scarcity thus creates a state of conflict between needs and available resources. It results in a redefinition of well-being as finding an internal balance (Mardellat 2009), though this balance varies by social, economic, and cultural environment. In the pre-industrial era, for example, low production and consumption levels resulted in a narrow focus on fulfilling basic needs. Human needs also constitute a material cause of economic activity (Mardellat 2009), which has accelerated with industrialization and with growing, diversified access to consumer goods (Beck 1992). Modernity has aimed for progress in social well-being, as reflected in the importance placed on the production process, which seeks to expand the availability of goods to the mass market. At this point in history, needs became associated with the notion of production (Fullerton 1998), though cultural elements also have influenced perceptions of needs, shifting them toward the notion of desires.

In the postmodern era, “consumers would no longer be need-driven but have driven needs” (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 48). Desires are not structured, and consumers confuse the notions of wish, desire, want, and need. Thus conflicts arise in consumption activities, such as shopping, between the “economic instrumental activity of satisfying needs” and “desire-oriented practice” (Keller 2005, p. 4). Moreover, consumers refer to a need to legitimize their decisions or display their rationality (Keller 2005; Schor 1998). This rationalization remains in effect as long as needs remain subject to the notion of control (Schor 1998). For Wilk (2002, p. 10), “the transformation of desires into needs takes place through the interaction between individual choices and social rules.” Mass consumption in turn has prompted marketers to perpetuate this confusion of needs and desires (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003), creating an endless cycle (Baudrillard 1969) that boosts the “consuming desire of consuming” (Bauman 2001, p. 13). Consumers may “need” things not for what they are, but for the satisfaction of having bought them, showing off the capacity to afford them, or enjoying the acquisition process per se. The desire to acquire may end in an irrepressible quest, sometimes stronger and more intense than the gratification of possessing itself. Advertising, promotions, continuous desires, and renewal through the use of credit and planned obsolescence (Latouche 2012) stimulate the “thirst for consumption” and economic growth. Moreover, the imagery promoted by the notion of progress, as it is widely conceived among members of civil society, embraces a notion of a continually increasing consumption, symbolized by a materialist approach (Kilbourne 2004). However, environmental and economic crises call for

a way back to “real” needs (Dolan 2002) as a view on consumption. Different kinds of actors and influences—as depicted by the story of needs in the DSP frame or consumer culture—make this initiative much harder. The lack of a supportive macro dynamic often implies complex subjective justifications of “needs,” as in the case of people living under sufficiency.

The purpose of our investigation on how consumers explain and live their sufficiency is to overcome the traditional and somehow Manichean dichotomy of need vs. (un)need (superfluous) to build a macro dynamic based on their perspective.

Methodology

This article is part of an action-research project on sufficiency (Sobriétés 2013), initiated in 2010, to identify the potential and challenges offered by regional practices of sufficiency in France. The action-research perspective is particularly relevant for identifying micro issues and extrapolating them into macro challenges (Gustavsen 2008; Ozanne and Anderson 2010). In this spirit, we have worked with six territorial stakeholders chosen for their involvement in sufficiency, three of which focus on obligatory sufficiency, while the others have adopted voluntary sufficiency approaches. These organizations help individuals to adopt new lifestyles characterized by sufficiency.

Unlike research focused on efficiency and energy renew- ability, sufficiency may contradict the DSP, as it requires a reevaluation of individual needs and deep changes to everyday behavior. What can individual choices of consumption teach us about sufficiency? To deepen the link between sufficiency and consumption, we began by conducting long interviews (McCracken 1988) with members and representatives of these organizations. Our yearlong immersions in each organization facilitated close observations of their functioning, as well as interactions with various representatives. Thanks to these immersions, we expanded recruitment of informants to 12 people through use of the snowball sampling (Goodman 1961). Taking the situation of obligatory sufficient consumers into account may be explained in two ways. First, disadvantaged consumers most acutely experience the environmental and energy crisis (Ingram, DeClerck, and Rumbaitis del Rio 2012), compelling us to learn more about their understanding of sufficiency. Second, taking account of restriction of consumption caused by acute constraints (e.g., peak oil) is still a challenge. Nevertheless, including

obligatory consumers in our study allows for exploring these constrained living experiences, and thus both dimensions of sufficiency: voluntary and obligatory.

We summarize some basic information about these consumers in Table 1, including their various pathways to sufficiency. The interviews were all carried out at the homes of the interviewees, recorded, and then transcribed. In a non-linear fashion, they focused on how these people understand the concept of sufficiency and how their consumption behaviors are modulated by its implementation.

Table 1: Presentation of sufficient people's paths

Informant	Occupation	Type of Sufficiency
Julie, 28	Tax inspector	<i>Voluntary:</i> Julie's sufficiency process has been strongly influenced by an environmental activist friend. For her, sufficiency has a political dimension and she is still negotiating a lot of behaviors (such as transportation), which places her between "not nothing" and "not everything".
Jean, 50	Biologist	<i>Voluntary:</i> Jean and his wife feel "engaged" in sufficiency for 20 years, when they started to buy organic food. They are now having "not everything" in many fields (transportation, food, house energy). To them, sufficiency is difficult to negotiate as it brings marginalization from mainstream consumption society.
Andrée, 60	Medical secretary	<i>Voluntary:</i> Andrée feels she has always been involved in sufficiency. But while her reflection on it is stronger, as having "not everything", she is also experiencing more tensions with applying it. This especially because she doesn't feel supported by other people or the society which only emphasizes consumption.
Christophe, 42	Biologist	<i>Voluntary:</i> Christophe is sensitive to environment through his work, which has influenced his sufficiency path. Not only

		he is vegetarian for it, and doesn't take car any more, but also pursues the process through renting a place to garden or stopping purchases as much as possible (such as for gifts), placing him as having "not everything".
Joseph, 30	Computer scientist	<i>Voluntary:</i> Joseph has started a process of sufficiency by being an anarchist activist. Indeed, he set up one of the first AMAP in eastern France. His current level is a balance between "not nothing" and "not everything", as he didn't give up on some consumption areas (such as transportation for vacations), and seems satisfied with it.
Marie-Pierre, 52	Social worker	<i>Voluntary:</i> Living alone, Marie-Pierre feels she has always been influenced by sufficiency, since living in countryside. Yet, she really engaged the process after experiencing a cancer. During her recover, she felt she wanted to get over things, and is now at the level of "not everything".
Raphael, 39	Computer science teacher	<i>Voluntary:</i> Married and having two kids, Raphael has started the process of sufficiency when being in couple, first with transportation (no car) and then with food. In many fields, he is almost having "nothing" and harmoniously experiences sufficiency. Yet, he feels he still has progresses to accomplish.
Géraldine, 40	Nurse	<i>Obliged:</i> Living in a couple with the kids of her partner, Géraldine has a low-income and has to face financial problems for four years. She expresses her sufficiency in a frustrating way, mostly as having "not nothing", as she would better enjoy consuming and having a higher access to consumption society.
Danielle, 52	Unemployed	<i>Obliged:</i> Living alone with her 18 years-old child, Danielle has lost her job for one year, and saw her income decreasing a

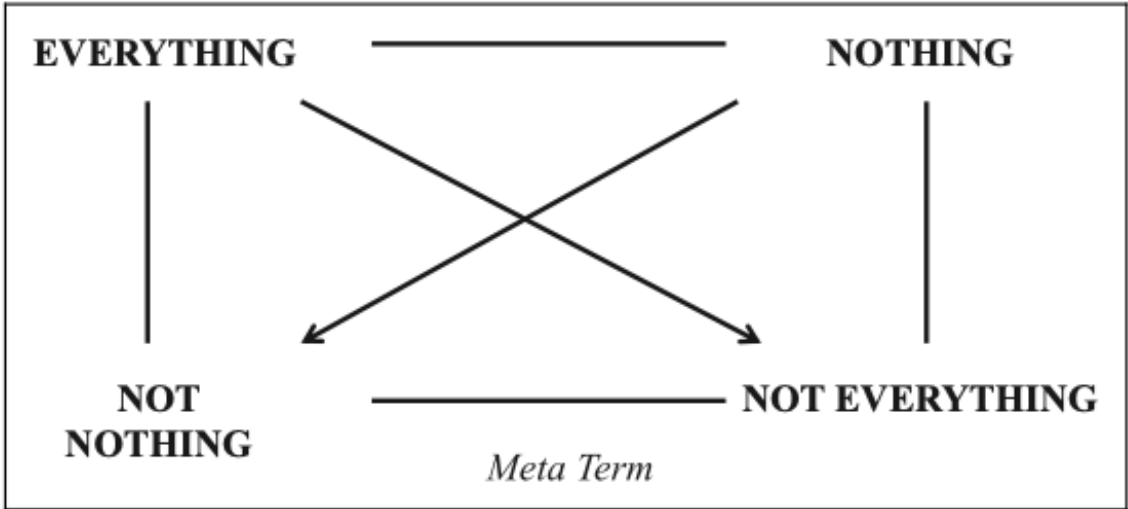
		lot. She is paying careful attention to her expenses (for example going to charity for food). She is frustrated and unsecure about her sufficiency, as having “not nothing”.
Laurine, 27	Human Resources assistant	<i>Obliged</i> : Coming from a thrifty family, Laurine now lives with scarce money, but has developed habits to deal with that. Although she is attracted by consumption goods, she rejects waste and carefully saves to develop a balance between "not nothing" and "not everything".
Bernadette, 50	Nurse’s aide	<i>Obliged</i> : While living a "comfortable" life, her divorce changed Bernadette's level of life, as she suddenly found herself deprived from economic resources. However, after several years, she tries to express her sufficiency in having "not everything", as a way to feel better about it.
Charlotte, 25	Student	<i>Obliged</i> : Charlotte comes from a working-class family, and doesn't have much money for her living. Consequently, she started scavenging several years ago, something which has become both a way of having "not nothing" as dealing with scarcity, and having "not everything" as enjoying to be sufficient.

While reading the interviews, we found a semantic opposition between two basic notions (i.e., the term “nothing” and the term “everything”). This binary dimension encouraged us to use a linguistic analysis called the semiotic square (Greimas 1970), which provided a framework for understanding and explaining the meanings of our interviewees’ discourses about sufficiency. The semiotic square is an analytical tool used in structural linguistics. It is based on the Paris school of semiotic theory promoted by Greimas (1970) and Courte`s (1991), who extended the early work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1916). The aim of the semiotic square is to reveal the meaning of a discourse based on an initial opposition scheme found in its rhetoric, which is represented as A versus B (for example bad versus good). To use the semiotic

square, this initial scheme must be extended on the diagonals. The diagonal represents the contradiction scheme, wherein the contradiction of A is “not A” (for example bad and not bad), and the contradiction of B is “not B” (good and not good). Then, the square reveals meanings through the vertical schemes, known as the complementary scheme: not A is close to B (for example not bad means nearly good) and not B is close to A (not good could be bad).

In our data the initial opposition scheme is everything opposed to nothing. This binary opposition is found in the respondents’ discourses because they use those words frequently enough to consider that their argumentation is based on this core opposition (Greimas 1970). Even if they use them with diverse meanings, the theory of the semiotic square assumes to first decontextualize those words and consider the “Everything / Nothing” as a pure structural binary scheme (Courte`s 1991) and second to lean on this scheme to construct a semiotic square in which the first contradiction term is not everything, and the second contradiction term is not nothing (see Figure 1). This semiotic square supports two new complementary meanings: not everything is close to nothing and not nothing could mean everything. The semiotic square should be interpreted as a homogeneous universe (Floch 1985, 1990). Each term of the square has a meaning related to the others, and all of them intermingle. In our square, the four terms are meaningful and symbolize specific common speech; thus when people say “it is not like I have nothing” they assume that they have a lot (nearly everything).

Figure 1: Representation of sufficiency through Semiotics



Starting with this semiotic square, we went back to the discourses to recontextualize and analyze the interviews in order to enrich the meanings of each term of the square. We pursued a semantic analysis of the discourses of our informants (occurrences of the words nothing and everything, and semantic similarities) and an interpretive analysis of the quotes based on the semantic analysis. This mixed method gives a deeper understanding of the four terms of the square. By doing so, we use the first reading level of this linguistic tool, in what Greimas (1970) refers to as a static use of the semiotic square.

Static Analysis of Semiotic Square: A Better Understanding of Sufficiency Through the Four Terms

The static analysis of the square goes deeper into the meaning of each term by analyzing how informants use those terms in their own discourses.

The Meaning of Everything

In our data, everything appears closely linked to the idea of “too much” and “too many.” Jean said: “There is too much of everything,” while Laurine explained: “There is too much choice, too many things, you don’t know what to buy anymore.” Thus, everything means the plenty of consumption, a representation of abundance. But the informants (both obligatory and voluntary) almost always refer to the negative side of this plenty, such as excess and overwhelming choices: “I was throwing away many things because I was buying too much” (Géraldine). Many informants express the idea that everything leads to waste: “There are too many things, too much waste, plenty of things to throw away, too much to choose... I wonder what I am going to take among all of these” (Bernadette).

The Meaning of Nothing

Opposed to everything, the meaning of nothing refers in some way to scarcity and is logically more commonly invoked (and experienced) by obligatorily sufficient consumers. For example, Bernadette left her former home “with nothing except the car, a table and four chairs.” Nothing is also linked to the word “never”: “Excepting holidays, I do nothing, I never go to the cinema, I never buy any clothes” (Géraldine). Voluntarily informants also refer to nothing, but not as a romantic vision of asceticism. Instead, it represents an old-fashioned, uncomfortable

way of life as expressed by Françoise: “My mother for example used to be a farmer; she buys nothing, she grows her own vegetables, she does poultry farming, she lives in an old house, does nothing in it, no comfort at all, and she lives at risk.” This point of view helps distinguish sufficiency from asceticism or chosen frugality. Clearly, in our data, “nothing” is not considered to be a comfortable situation or lifestyle.

We should note that both the “everything” term and the “nothing” term represent unpleasant positions for our informants. For sufficiency practitioners, there seems to be no balance in this fundamental opposition. Yet, the meanings of the other terms help in understanding why those terms are rejected.

The Meaning of Not Nothing

This third term of the square refers to the idea of a restrained consumption but without making too many sacrifices. Semantically, not nothing could be everything but is not. There are two distinct features, however. First, it refers to the idea that people cannot lessen all consumption patterns at once. For example, some informants explain that they decided to go on vacation (spend money, take plane trips) because it seemed they could not jeopardize this aspect of life. As Géraldine explains: “we cannot deprive the children of vacations, it is important for keeping the family together.” This is why we may refer to her as expressing “not nothing” concerning holiday expenses (i.e., she tries to keep holidays as they were before, in the everything sphere), but a “nothing” concerning other expenses that she eliminates to preserve those vacations. Similar backwards and forwards consumption movements characterize transportation modes (e.g., car ownership). Informants note that they could not get rid of their car, but did modify their use of it. Thus, they keep the car but increase their use of public transportation for ecological and economic reasons. This kind of phenomenon shows that “not nothing” implies constant negotiation of consumption habits by both kinds of informants. Obligatory consumers feel frustrated that they do not have everything and simply cope with it (as Géraldine does), while voluntary consumers struggle to eliminate their overconsumption habits.

Thus, even if the obligatory consumer can be trapped in the “not nothing” position, the “not nothing” term can also be interpreted as a transitory state preceding wiser consumption. As

Raphaël says: “I struggle to improve my consumption,” and as Laurine explains: “it is just that sometimes I realize that I’m still buying useless stuff!” Both intend to move on to another stage.

The Meaning of Not Everything

Opposed to “not nothing” in the square, “not everything” represents the achievement of the sufficiency process. This fourth term of the square refers to a genuine “less,” in that it semantically implies almost nothing. In some way, it can be connected to the notion of voluntary simplicity. In the static analysis, informants express the idea that they have arrived at a position in which they quantitatively buy less or live without products, like Bernadette: “I’m really buying less, nearly nothing.” The meaning of “not everything” thus relates more to a global downward reassessment of consumption habits. Obligatory consumers consider it to be an economic shift toward sufficiency, such as switching to public transportation, buying smaller food portions, reducing electric bills, and finding new heating sources. Nevertheless, they do not (seem to) express frustration when they evoke this position.

For voluntarily sufficient consumers, the changes are more philosophically rooted and, in a way, “not everything” represents an ideal for them. Some respondents mention that they choose to get rid of material objects. Again the car is a symptomatic object here that sheds light on the opposition between “not nothing” and “not everything.” In the “not everything” position, informants do not have a car anymore (opposed to the “not nothing” position, where they keep the car and modify only the use of it). Data reveal that they have made their decision and are engaged in a disposal process, such as when Raphaël asserts: “life is much more weightless without a car.”

The static analysis of “not everything” also reveals that for voluntarily consumers fully engaged in sufficiency, ending in that position requires effort and compromises, especially to avoid being perceived as someone on the fringe of society. When they break away from past consumption habits, and thus depart from a more globally dominant economic model, voluntarily sufficient people become increasingly stigmatized as marginal or extremist by their relatives. According to Françoise:

“People see us as a little extreme, whereas we are far from being extremists; we have some friends who are even more involved into ecological actions . . . they don’t really understand our way of consuming, and we no longer really understand theirs, but that’s all. You can’t go on exhausting yourself fighting all the time, because we really are not in the mainstream.”

This idea of stigmatization helps to understand how vital the idea of community is in the process of achieving sufficiency, not only in its definition as a collective goal but also in its implementation and practice. Groups, associations, forums, and social gatherings may prevent ostracism and stave off loneliness or discouragement.

For a better understanding of how individuals might gather and share experiences and moral support, we propose to use the semiotic square as a map that reveals the different ways of achieving downward reassessment of consumption patterns. To explain these sufficiency paths, we propose a dynamic level of analysis of the semiotic square known as the “syntactic use” (Greimas 1970).

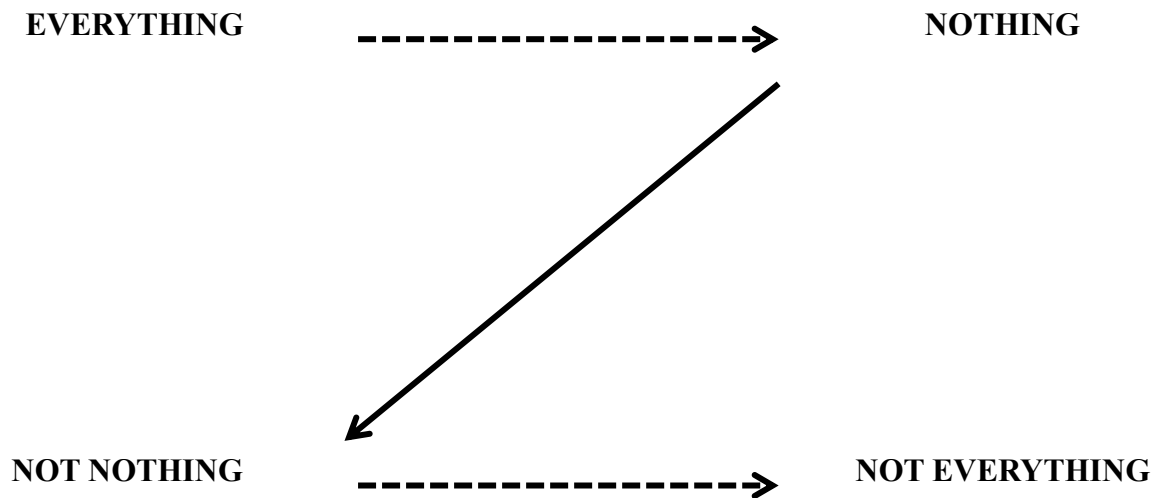
Syntactic Use of the Square: Two Journeys through Sufficiency and a Common Pathway

The syntactic use of the semiotic square accounts for successions of positions of the same or several objects in the square, granting meaning to these movements as a dynamic path. We identified two paths, which we called “journey through sufficiency,” among obligatorily sufficient people on one hand and voluntarily sufficient people on the other hand. The aim of describing both journeys and thereby distinguishing the type of informants is to determine whether there is any space for a mutual pathway where collective movement could come to support individuals’ trajectories.

Journey 1: Obligatorily Sufficient People

Figure 2 shows the different steps (everything/nothing/not nothing/ not everything) that people who experience obligatory sufficiency can follow.

Figure 2: Journey 1: Obligatorily sufficient people.



They may start with everything but plunge into nothing quickly when they experience a big change in their lives (e.g. divorce, illness, loss of a job). Bernadette describes her transition from having everything to suddenly nothing:

“I was married to a businessman, there was no misery! I wasn’t working and I didn’t value money. We had high social standards: a big house, vacations abroad, etc. I didn’t calculate, I was not paying attention to money while shopping . . . well, you see Then, [after her divorce] I started with nothing, only a car and a table with four chairs.”

More often, obligatorily sufficient consumers have always experienced poverty and start from the nothing position, a situation which transforms their perspective on their needs. Forced to cope with this uncomfortable situation, informants as well as people we met during the immersions in the organizations first move to the “not nothing” position. At this level, they experience difficulties in dealing with their situation, forcing them to adapt and negotiate their consumption habits. Yet they still sense consumption desires, and sufficiency remains difficult:

“If we didn’t have all our problems, I’d like to get a new car, I’d like to go on vacations, in the islands with the kids and Veronique [partner]. I’d like many things (sigh). Yes, if I could, I would

change my car and I would take the one I really like because I never had a beautiful new car” (Géraldine).

Most informants stay in the “not nothing” position, having a hard time enduring their sufficiency. However, some move toward the “not everything” position, trying to rationalize their situation and find positive aspects in this sufficiency. This movement can be related to emotional coping (Hamilton and Catterall 2008), including tactics such as positive perceptions of their situation:

“I have less and less desire for consuming things, finally it’s not so bad. I tell myself, ‘no, come on!’ and I am getting proud of my new philosophical approach. Now I just tell myself, ‘you could envy, but don’t . . . because I know that if I give up, it will capture me and give me a hard feeling of frustration” (Bernadette).

Journey 2: Voluntarily Sufficient People

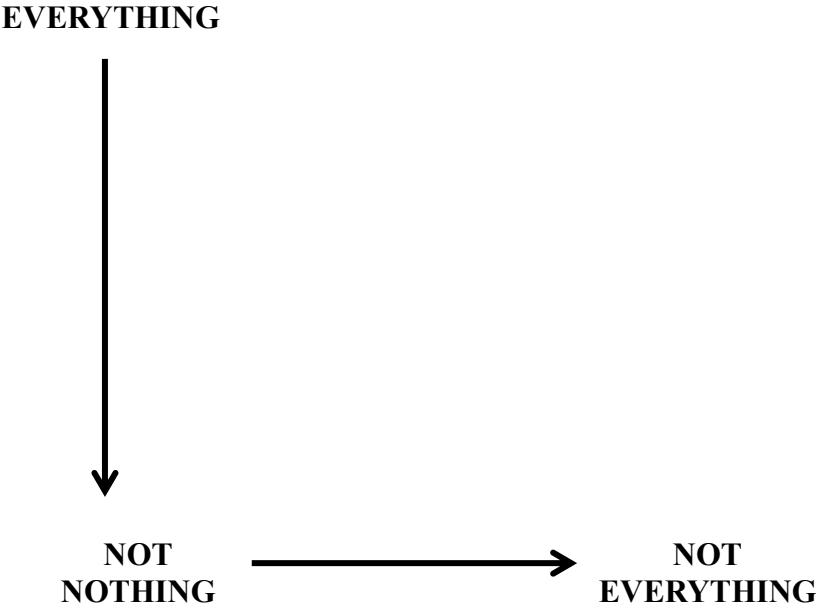
Among voluntary people, sufficiency also appears as a non-linear progressive path, constructed through different steps that we identify using the semiotic square (see Figure 3). Here informants had everything, but have progressively become more conscious of their consumption patterns, cutting back and reassessing their needs. Generally, they start this process with initiatives that are related to a “better consumption,” such as consuming organic and/or local food, and rejecting shopping in big supermarkets. In doing so, they progressively shift to a “consuming less” lifestyle that fits with the definition of sufficiency (ecological footprint concerns, control of waste, less food storage, decrease of purchases). As Jean explains:

“It’s an ongoing approach. We’ve been buying organic food for twenty years now, but there are things we came to more recently. Six years ago, we decided for example to only use a bike for our ‘home–work’ trips. We try to hold on to that. It’s a progressive initiative; we try to reduce our ecological footprint, globally reduce our carbon use, and also reduce any useless consumption.”

Thus, they slowly move from the “not nothing” position as a first step of adaptation to the “not everything” position, which represents an ideal: a balance between consumption-

dominant standards and their new life values. For Jean, “not everything” constitutes a step toward a more global change in society: “The ideal would be managing to restrict our consumption level in order for everyone to live decently.”

Figure 3: Journey 2: Voluntarily sufficient people.



In the case of voluntary consumers, the idea of sufficiency can be well exemplified and symbolized by concrete experiences. For example, Raphael explains his idea of “not everything” as a box that contains important objects for him to use but which he needs to be able to close. The size of the box (a shoebox) forces him to select what is really important to him or what he can eliminate because he sees it as superfluous or meaningless. The selection of his items is closely related to the duration and the use of the objects in the box. After one year, if he does not use an item, he excludes it from his consumption.

“I have a ‘memories box’ in which there are things sometimes like 20 or 30 years old, but it’s a shoebox, and I try to limit to this box. When there is something that I am really attached to and that I want to keep, I put it into the box and if it doesn’t fit, I have to remove something.

If there are things I don't use, I put them in the box and I put a date on it. If I don't use it within a year, I don't have the right to use it anymore and it goes to the stuff I give away" (Raphaël).

A box that will not supersize is an interesting metaphor for the reassessment of needs as well as the trade-offs and discipline that sufficiency entails.

Discussion

Our data show that the dominant social paradigm and consumerist values remain highly influential in people's paths to sufficiency. However, they experience it in manners that suggest ways to exit this paradigm, first by refining the very concept of needs, and then by sustaining sufficiency on a more collective level. In the following discussion, we articulate individual and collective trajectories together in order to clarify the concept of sufficiency.

Acknowledging Individual Sufficiency through Needs

At the very heart of sufficiency stands the idea that individuals can reassess their needs, in that "sufficiency as an idea is straightforward, indeed simple and intuitive, arguably 'rational.' It is the sense that, as one does more and more of an activity, there can be enough and there can be too much" (Princen 2005, p. 6). Thus sufficiency as a principle cannot entail sacrifice (Princen 2005). Instead, it reaches the point of well-being by finding a balance between excess and emptiness, or as exemplified by the semiotic square, between "every-thing" and "nothing." For Semal and Szuba (2010), sufficiency can even be considered as a source of autonomy, because it implies knowledge of both the limits of the planet's resources and people's own consumption limits. Sufficiency nevertheless remains a poorly constructed concept. On one hand, it is marked by great subjectivity, as exemplified by the diverse perceptions of needs, which makes it a relative and individualized concept. On the other hand, sufficiency is difficult to define, as our data show the sufficient individual as much more engaged in a process (the journey) than in a static position.

Through the use of the semiotic square, we have highlighted different sufficiency paths. Obligatory sufficiency requires people to focus more on what they really need, in the sense that they make consumption choices to balance their budgets. These choices imply a movement toward "not nothing," dealing with material scarcity. Reflection on sufficiency is

thus based on ways of avoiding surpassing one's budget, which can be associated with coping strategies (Hamilton and Catterall 2008). In the case of voluntary sufficiency, we notice a deeper reflection on choices connected to ideological values, as well as decisions made to reduce consumption. Thus, these consumers focus more on what they really do not need, as an outcome of their ideological struggle between ideals of consumption and ideals of sufficiency. In contrast, obligatorily sufficient people focus on their individual survival. This difference of perception has been informed by Schor's (1998) explanation that voluntarily frugal people experience their situation much more positively, because they know they can still afford goods if needed. Schor (1998) mostly observes downgrades by people who happily embrace their new living style. However, and especially in times of economic crisis, sufficiency can also be experienced by people who do not choose it, but are nevertheless forced to adapt. Plus, constraints such as the peak oil crisis may one day put everyone in a situation of sufficiency whether they choose it or not. If even the voluntarily sufficient people come to experience higher levels of constraint, would they perceive sufficiency in the same way as they do in Schor's (1998) and our own research records? This is one of the reasons sufficiency requires examination by way of these two perspectives, as it reveals differences that may be addressed at a macro level.

Despite their contrasts, obligatorily and voluntarily sufficient people meet at one level, exemplified by the meta-term C in the semiotic square (cf. not nothing–not everything). According to the semiotic of Greimas (1970), the relations that constitute the square give meaning to certain positions (i.e., meta-term in Figure 1), even when there is no pre-existing expression. The meta-term represents a neutral term. In this position, informants refer both to not nothing and to not every- thing in the same context, revealing a balance that fits with the ideal purpose of sufficiency (Princen 2005). The meta-term C reveals a connection between not nothing and not everything, whereby they might be considered as opposed poles. Instead, they should be viewed as a continuum, in which having “not everything” is a process of detachment from everything, starting with a position of having “not nothing.” In this way, the experiences of sufficiency taking place at the level of the meta-term C could provide the best insights for public policy aimed at designing ways of enacting sufficiency.

Enacting Collective Sufficiency

From the action research perspective (Ozanne and Anderson 2010), our study highlights institutionalization prospects for sufficiency policies. The previously mentioned modern changes in and threats to our economic system influence people's visions of consumption and needs. In this way, sufficiency covers both individual and collective perspectives, such that it "is also a commonsense idea at the collective level when risks are readily perceived and serious.... The idea of sufficiency begins to shift to the principle of sufficiency when structure is needed for enactment, when more than sensory perception of 'enoughness' or 'too muchness' is needed to recognize excess and to act" (Princen 2005, p. 6).

Most informants explain the difficulty of embracing a path to sufficiency because of the feelings of isolation it implies. The tension between consumption norms and sufficiency—best exemplified by having "not nothing"—involves contradictions between a marginal and a mainstream consumption lifestyle. People engaged in sufficiency justify these contradictions in different ways. For voluntarily sufficient consumers, marginalization is experienced in relation to peers, colleagues, or family members who do not understand their choices. For obligatory ones, isolation is expressed when they feel frustrated with a restriction that does not provide a real living choice. To compensate for these difficulties, sufficiency must evolve from an individual undertaking to a collective movement (Association Virage Energie 2013). This would help the voluntarily sufficient people to overcome the exclusion created by the rupture with mainstream consumption, and the obligatorily sufficient people to secure some dignity and visibility. For example, the organizations that our interviewees are connected with constitute platforms for exchanges on best practices. However, to better implement sufficiency, they would have to create real accompanying measures for their participants, such as the example of carbon rationing action groups (CRAGs). CRAGs envision downgrading through accurate collective measures: "A CRAG is a group of around a dozen individuals who meet on a regular basis to calculate their GHG emissions together, set reduction goals and exchange tips on how to reach them. Symbolic financial penalties are sometimes meted out if members exceed set targets" (Cherrier, Szuba, and Özçağlar -Toulouse 2012, p. 402). In the same way, macro structures have to inspire and create forms of sufficiency. The increasing number of local networks based on solidarity and social interaction are some examples to follow. Community gardens, local exchange trading systems (LETS; see Williams 1996), and

the transition towns movement (Hopkins 2008) demonstrate the necessity of collective spaces and actions in guaranteeing well-being for sufficient people. In our data, informants are coming from organizations that are focused on reflecting on sufficiency, missing the practical step that would help them to deal with marginalization.

Sufficiency Versus the Dominant Social Paradigm

Through its values and the behaviors it requires, sufficiency deeply contradicts the dominant social paradigm in industrialized societies. While the DSP focuses on an individual logic of “always more,” the enactment of sufficiency requires collective dynamics based on “having less.” These main tensions—collectivity vs. atomization of the individual and downgrading vs. material prodigality—generate paradigmatic conflicts between groups of people that do not share the same values and beliefs, and create personal tensions for the sufficient individual as well. As Dunlap and Van Liere (1984) show about the relations between the DSP and sustainability, sufficient consumers have conflicting cognitions, sustained by macro discourses on economic growth and consumption. Informants interpret these contradictions, most commonly declaring that their lack of consumption is an obstacle to economic growth. This economic and political ideology concerning growth and abundance is anchored in marketing practices. As Shankar, Whittaker, and Fitchett (2006, p. 4) contend:

“with the dominance of neo-classical economic discourse through its acceptance and implementation across the political spectrum, progress and improvement in the quality of peoples’ lives has become conflated to the acquisition of material wealth. Moreover a growing economy is considered a successful economy and we demonstrate how marketing practices have been instrumental in this regard.”

Even international institutions (such as UNO) are now promoting sustainable consumption, but they still are advocating more efficient schemes of consumption rather than consuming less (Ourahmoune et al., 2014). However, new research on sustainability (Martin and Schouten 2011) advances an emancipation of marketing from this DSP model, and intends to reconcile human needs and environmental protection.

In order to further this process and contribute to the emergence of a social paradigm favoring sufficiency, macromarketing techniques could aim to “decolonize people’s imaginary”

(Latouche 2011) from the dominant economic ideology. However, this contribution requires redefining marketing under the logic of “being rather than having” (Shankar and Fitchett 2002). If marketing were to focus on “sufficient needs” economic development (Illich 2004), it could facilitate and ease sufficiency by supporting its motor element (i.e., the collective) and its corollary (i.e., participative democracy). Social bonds (Godbout and Caillé 2001) and the “collective” are inseparable from sufficiency. Contrary to the political principles embodied by the DSP (Kilbourne 2004), developing sufficiency could rehabilitate democratic principles, such as favoring participative, deliberative democracy, but also promoting “communicative action” (Habermas 1981). Communicative action is defined as a situation of interaction between free individuals, based on the search for an understanding on a practical action, and the will to enact projects and actions. Inter-association cooperation (such as between obligatorily and voluntarily sufficiency organizations) is therefore a key element of this process, allowing the obligatorily sufficient people for example to obtain a form of citizen recognition. From this balance between goods and relations and between material and immaterial well-being, associations may generate a feeling of belonging to a community sharing sufficiency values.

Which Marketing Tools to Accompany the Journey Through Sufficiency?

The collective dimension of sufficiency can be understood as the search for relationships rather than goods (Godbout and Caillé 2001). Yet material sufficiency, and consequently individual downshifting, requires innovative pedagogical processes that facilitate the adoption of new behaviors (Kilbourne and Carlson 2008, Schaefer and Crane 2005). Sufficiency is a nonlinear journey. For example, the voluntarily sufficient must move toward “consuming better” (i.e., not nothing) before consuming less (i.e., not everything). This implies a step-by-step management. Initially, we might consider pedagogical tools focusing on a macro environmental education, such as the ecological footprint, to move from “everything” to “not nothing.” Later, moving from “not nothing” to “not everything” could best be managed through techniques of communication such as storytelling. In 2009, for example, a fake British ministry (Ministry of Trying to Do Something about It) has created an innovative communication tool titled Ration Me Up: Carbon Ration Book (Semal and Szuba 2010):

“it involved handing out ‘ration’ books containing one month’s ‘equitable carbon ration’, in the form of coupons for watching television, having a shower, buying food and clothes, and using various forms of transport. The project aimed to show participants their ‘fair share of the world’s resources’” (Bramall 2013, p. 26).

The New Economics Foundation has described this as a perfect narrative tool to catch the attention of citizens. Not only does it elicit awareness of energy constraints in their daily lives, but also creates the feeling of living in a society where scarcity is a reality. Other tools inspired from individual creative management, such as Raphael’s “shoebox” in our data, could be translated to a larger scale.

From being focused on economic and consumption growth, the social paradigm could best evolve to a more sufficient one by offering platforms that support new collective imaginaries. This mutation is only possible through innovative macromarketing tools focusing on a collective knowledge of practices of sufficiency.

Conclusion

Considering the newness of the sufficiency concept, this article gives insights on how people are engaged in and experience sufficiency practices. At one point, sufficiency and marginalization seem to align, for both obligatorily and voluntarily sufficient people. The link between the feeling of emotional solitude and obsessive or addictive behaviors is well established (Cherrier 2009; Elgin 1981), but the discourses of sufficient consumers suggest another form of solitude, namely isolation, induced by other consumers who embrace sufficiency (such as in the case of Françoise), combined with exclusion from the consumer sphere (such as in the case of Géraldine). A more in-depth analysis of the feelings of solitude or marginalization felt by obligatorily or voluntarily sufficient people, in conjunction with a consideration of the emotional solitude stemming from obsessive consumption (Cherrier, Szuba, and Özçağlar-Toulouse 2012), would help to clarify the main stages of the process that leads to sufficiency, and to identify the hurdles to living fully up to ideals of sufficiency. Thus, it would be interesting to complement our research with other methodological tools such as direct and indirect observation. Within the framework of this action research, observations across both private and public spheres would have enabled us to delve more deeply into the

meaning granted to the act of consumption (Holt 1995; Kozinets 2002) and specifically to sufficiency practices in concrete terms. Within the framework of action research, a direct or indirect analysis of the composition of household waste (e.g., photos) created by consumers—in line with the archeological methods applied to waste disposal by Rathje and Murphy (2001), the originators of garbology, and by Gouhier (1988), the founder of rudology (systematic study of waste, derives from the latin word rudus –ruins-) would have enabled us to enrich the informants' discourses about their sufficiency practices, to create distance from their sometimes rational discourses, and to fine-tune our study of the tensions between needs and desires.

Our interviewees also explain that being a group is an important matter. Questions remain regarding the connections between sufficiency and the group. It would be interesting to understand if sufficiency is the process leading to seek collective links, or if it is the social exclusion, and therefore the need for support from social solidarity networks, that drive individuals to participate in sufficiency practices. Finally, results show that there is a path where obligatory and voluntary consumers can meet and share their experiences. Our interviews highlight that people can learn to do with less, especially when they work together, such that they seek social links through sharing and new forms of collaborative consumption (Albinsson and Perera 2012), which manifest a form of resistance to mainstream consumption. Thus, one could investigate the types of cohabitations made possible between obligatory and voluntary sufficient people. It could lead to avenues which explore the potential spaces and times for consumers to share experiences and competences, and to understand how they experience these new types of solidarity networks.

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