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# DOWNSHIFTING: FOUNDATIONS AND DYNAMICS OF PERSONAL CHOICE

*«Downshifting»: Fundamentos y la Dinámica de la Elección Personal*

*«Downshifting»: Fundações e Dinâmica de Escolha Pessoal*

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**Abstract:** Downshifting phenomenon is regarded as a process of inner choice between two options of personal actualization: personalization and personification. Cultural and social background of such choice is historically described. Some aspects of psychological dynamics of choice are illustrated by examples of different downshifting strategies.
**Keywords:** Downshifting; Self-Alienation; Self-Actualization; Experiencing society.

**Resumen:** El fenómeno "Downshifting" es considerado como un proceso de elección interna entre dos opciones de actualización personal: personalización y la personificación. Antecedentes culturales y sociales de dicha opción se describe históricamente. Algunos aspectos de la dinámica psicológica de elección se ilustran con ejemplos de estrategias de downshifting diferentes.
**Palabras clave:** Downshifting; La auto-alienación; La autorrealización; La sociedad experimenta.

**Resumo:** O fenômeno Downshifting é considerado como um processo de escolha interna entre duas opções de realização pessoal: personalização e personificação. Formação cultural e social de tal escolha é descrita historicamente. Alguns aspectos da dinâmica psicológica de escolha são ilustradas por exemplos de estratégias de downshifting diferentes.
**Palavras-chave:** Downshifting; Auto-alienação; Auto-realização; A sociedade experimentando.

*Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string.*
R.W. Emerson. Self-reliance

Downshifting as a specific phenomenon is becoming more and more wide-spread in modern society. Definitions of downshifting vary and involve such concepts as "voluntary simplicity", "asceticism", "frugal living", "sea change", "culture creatives movement" (Gandolfi, 2008) etc., so there is a problem to capture which downshifting exactly it is. In the public mind the picture seems to be even more complex. Downshifters are associated with very different images. One might think of a bearded hairy hippie, «a flower child», who doesn't care about the benefits and temptations of civilization. Another would draw a picture of a young cynical rentier who is ignorant of how to make a living on his own. A third might imagine a person attracted to some kind of religion belief, who has lost his or her interest to secular life and moved far away from sociality. Actually, all these people (as well as many other types) may be downshifters to some extent, but to suggest a scientific definition and systematization we need to take a closer look at the phenomenon and bring order to this diverse field.

There have been some attempts to understand downshifting from a sociological perspective, i.e. describing downshifters as an specific social group/class/movement/stratum (Lisova, 2008; Chhetri, Stimson & Western,

2009) on the basis of some objective criteria, but, as it appears, they cannot be understood as a whole homogeneous group. Their financial and marital status can vary and the only common feature which reveals is a rather high educational level (Cherrier, 2008). Usually, downshifting is defined as a voluntary refusal of career advancement and a high income in favor of a more simple and less stressful life (Drake, 2000). For the beginning, it is possible to follow this conceptualization to roughly outline the borders, but such definition doesn't clarify what "simple life" exactly is. The statement about "less stressful life" is not so obvious too, once different types of stress are usually defined (Selye, 1974) and downshifting may turns out to be a way of life with more "healthy" stresses, if we can say so.

From an external point of view, downshifters may seem strange and inadequate because of lack of interest in such conventional values as career achievements, money, social respect etc. So why people do that? Downshifting always implies some kind of self-limitation in order to acquire something else. Surprisingly, downshifters even tend to regard themselves as "upshifters" (Cherrier, 2008; Butonova, 2009).

It is very important to understand the meaning and psychological content of "upshifting of downshifters", as some researchers and HR-practicians assume downshifting to be a sort of modern «disease» which should

be treated. But if we go deeper maybe we will decide that other people need treatment in order to become down-shifters? This idea, to some extent, has been considered by Australia Institute which has conducted a research about the connection between downshifting and life fulfillment (Breakspear & Hamilton, 2004). *Institute for Studies in Happiness, Economy and Society* (ISHES), try-ing to define the conditions of Gross National Happiness, regard downshifting as an important phenomenon re-quiring substantial further investigation[1].

Perhaps, the concept of downshifting should be de-fined in the negative. What lifestyle it is opposed to? Downshifters seem to play outside the rules of modern society and invent their own. They often stress, they are not dropping out of society, but living within it in a new way (Breakspear & Hamilton, 2004). What do we mean by the phrase «the rules of modern society»?

## 1. Life = Work + Leisure

Historically, there has always been a strong differen-tiation between two spheres of human life: work and lei-sure (private life). But, curiously enough, while axiologi-cal and psychological content of leisure was devaluating (from ancient greek "skhole" defined as "contemplation of the supreme values of the world" to Middle ages' regard on leisure as ostentation and squander and, finally, leisure as idleness and wasting time in Puritan ethics) (Juniu, 2000), the meaning of work has become more and more significant: it was appreciated as constructive, positive human activity, which brings order and progress both to society and to people who work.

However, Karl Marx in the middle of the XIX century was the first who, looking back at the historical process, pointed out that while civilization and the economy were developing, humanity was coming closer to a real danger. Labor is the essential core of human way of being but it has a destructive element, becoming *estranged*:

(...) labor is *external* to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature; (...) in his work, there-fore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work he feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home (Marx, 1844/2007, §XXIII).

There was no single opinion if Marx' conceptualiza-tions could be correlated with and applied to analyze modern reality, but, anyway, the concepts of alienation

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[1]  http://ishes.org

and self-alienation were extensively developed by his fol-lowers and other theoretics.

Wilensky (1960), while developing the idea of alien-ation, proposed two models of possible relations between leisure and labor. The *spillover model* states that a per-son, experiencing alienation and "mental stultification" at work tends to be subjected to further alienation – in his or her leisure (i.e. private life). *The compensation* model explains how deprivation at work influences leisure ac-tivities: they are described as relaxing and hedonistic, as their function is to compensate for unsatisfying work and give enough energy to come back to professional duties. Later, Dubin (1973) suggested the *segmentation*, a third model which implies that there is a disconnect between attitudes and behavior "at work" and "at home".

In all these models "work" and "life" are considered as two specific modes of human life and such separa-tion is put as a fundamental truth. Thus, the personal world becomes split. All these models are to some ex-tent concerned with alienation. People are only partly alive and mostly disconnected with their real Self and its actual needs which they might even not be aware of. The logical consequence of this lack of awareness of inner needs, wishes, drives, etc. is the high suscepti-bility to external expectations and influences, uncriti-cal reception and interiorization of value systems, and this is the very basis for functioning of modern society which is called the "consumer society". Consumption should be considered in a broad sense: not only prod-ucts and services are consumed but also values, stan-dards, life goals and tasks. Very often people adopt them unreflectively as if preparing ready-to-cook food. Obviously, it is much easier just open a tin can with fa-mous Campbell's soup than to cook your flavorous one. It may be not that tasty but acceptable and satisfying, and little by little a person gets used to such easy and predictable life-without-taste.

As Erich Fromm claimed, describing a consumption society, a human becomes totally alienated to his work, to the products he consumes, to his friends and family and, finally, to himself (Fromm, 1955). He is lost in the world which he himself has created and it is hard to dif-ferentiate between real and artificial.

## 2. Foundations of downshifting as a social trend

Interestingly, in spite of the fact that downshifting is a rather new phenomenon, there are some precedents for "downshifting behavior" (as we could call it nowadays) in history and culture: Diocletian, the Emperor, who re-fused to govern and abdicated to cultivate cabbages in a countryside, or Leo Tolstoy, Russian count, who came to an ideology of life simplification during his spiritual cri-sis, which is described in "Confession", or H. D. Thoreau who experimented with living as an ascetic in a wood

and described the results in his book "Walden". There are few of them and they can hardly be recognized as a movement but they highlight some specific features and probably gave some framework for future downshifters. However, as it was said, these are only individual instances, deviations from the mainstream of lifestyle. The huge changes in the social structure which have facilitated the drastic spreading of downshifting have occurred in recent decades (in some countries about a quarter of population consider themselves as downshifters (Hamilton & Mail, 2003; Breakspear & Hamilton, 2004; Lisova, 2008).

The german philosopher and sociologist, Gerhard Schulze indicates a curious change in the society – a movement from consumption to experience (Schulze, 1993). As he writes, a modern western human starts to look for meanings of life not outside but inside his or her own mind or, more precisely saying, in his or her own feelings becoming more independent from «guidelines of the happy life» which describe a standardized way in achieving so called "objective happiness". Nowadays a human looks for emotional intensity by any means and his or her life is presented as an inviting and challenging «wonderful project», which is to be realized and experienced.

Therefore, rapid rise of interest to the problem of emotion, its philosophical, cultural, sociological foundations has occurred in the last decade. Rising culture of what can be called new emotionality» is assessed ambiguously. Now, on the one hand, emotion is seen finally justified after being unreliable and deceiving thing which distorts clear rational vision and interferes with attainment of truth for a long time. As Nussbaum (2001) notes, referring to Marcel Prust, emotions are "upheavals of thought" and "intelligent responses to the perception of value" (p. 1), they are "the most immediate, the most self-evident, and the most relevant of our orientations toward life" (Reddy, 2001, p. 3).

On the other hand, emotions may reveal vulnerability, becoming an object for manipulation or even a main target for advanced marketing techniques (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Moreover, when emotional intensity is cultivated, feelings may loose their substantiality and naturalness and are not really experienced but more likely are expected to be experienced. Illouz (2007) elaborated a concept of "emotional capitalism" which explores how emotions become a subject to trade in modern society.A person seeking emotions sometime in future rather than intensifying feeling of «here-and-now» loses contact with him- or herself. Such contact can be established only through direct, immediate experiencing, and the "congruence between object and subject of our experience" (Illouz, 2008, p.130).

The third problematic aspect of turning to an emotional life is "selfishness" and "infantilism" (Breakspear & Hamilton, 2004; Prikhidko, 2008;), which is often at-

tributed to people who, paying attention to their inner world and their life, may seem to be indifferent and cold to social problems, challenges and, eventually, values. But there is another perspective on this question, developed in humanistic psychology, especially by Carl Rogers:

> In persons who are moving toward greater openness to their experiencing, there is an organismic commonality of value directions. (...) These common value directions are of such kinds as to enhance the development of the individual himself, of others in his community, and to make for the survival and evolution of his species (Rogers, 1964, p. 165).

While introjected sociality is fragile and unstable, inner sociality which derives from vital valuing has deep roots in human being as it is. Without dismissing numerous facets of the issue, it is important to emphasize a revolutionary thing that happened: emotional experience is not denied anymore, it occupies a special position which allows people to be more involved into their own life. New social trends exacerbate and stimulate a new look on a problem of choice between Self and not-Self.

A lot has been said above about changes in the mindset of a contemporary person, but the second important change which characterizes modernity and must be taken into account has to do with rapid development of technologies, highly developed communications network, social and spatial mobility (see, for example, Toffler, 1970). There are much more opportunities to make a living without being attached to a single workplace. Freelance and self-employment, distant work, home-office - these are forms of occupation which could not be chosen before. Thus, high level of individualization in time-space organization of working activity can be noticed nowadays. Such a strategy can be developed which allows avoiding the situation when a substantial part of life is determined by somebody else. A person can become a subject of his or her life time to more extent.

## 2. Downshifting: dynamics of choice

However, all stated above does not mean that an individual is just automatically guided toward his personal fulfillment, authenticity, full functioning etc. by socioeconomic processes. Modern social state provides some opportunities and preconditions for cultivating awareness and making personal choice. There are, roughly speaking, two options: 1) Choice of Self; 2) Choice of non-Self. This can be described as a process of personification in comparison with a process of personalization (Orlov, 2002). The latter implies human wish to become significant and important for other people and his success can

be assessed in three dimensions: attractiveness, referentiality and authority (Petrovsky & Yaroshevsky, 1998). According to this model there is a number of personality types which may be considered as personalized in the context of society. They are, for example, "the idol", "the god", "the judge", "the adviser", etc. (Petrovsky & Yaroshevsky, 1998). Such choices are made in conformity with rather rigid social value systems.

Personification as another way of actualization implies that a person moves not towards social models but foremost towards him or herself, becoming closer to the core of psyche, the unique essence (not I but Self) and its dimensions are empathy, congruence, unconditional positive regard. Personification means living in accordance with value process (not value systems), which derives from the choices of organism as psychophysical integrity (Rogers, 1964).

Downshifting phenomenon sharpens the dimensions and highlights the complexity of choice between personalization and personification. People can live in a process of this choice for a long time, even not being aware of it clearly, sometimes all life long. It may at the same time reveal as and be intensified by life crises, questions about life meaning, occasional breakdowns and so on. Such episodes may become points of bifurcation in personal history. According to downshifters' reports (Breakspear & Hamilton, 2004; Chhetri, Stimson & Western, 2009), the general question which initiates downshifting is like: How do I live my life? How do I spend my lifetime? What do I really want in comparison with what I am expected to be? Is that my personal wish to be involved in «rat races» (Tan, 2004), trying to come first by any means, even by refusal of my own life?

According to the study of Granova (2010), there is no significant difference in the level of achievement motivation between downshifters and non-dowshifters. However, self-elevation and power as specific values have less significance for downshifters in comparison with non-downshifters. This leads to the idea that downshifters are not kind of escapists who desire nothing, they have some aspirations and realize them, but they quit the situation of social competition where positions of losers and winners are clearly defined. Thus, from our point of view, downshifting can be considered as a specific way of personal actualization which in many aspects differs from common ways of actualization in a modern western society.

In order to illustrate dynamics of choice between personalization and personification we offer to consider some typical examples of downshifting and focus on some of its options, such as "time-out", balancing/compromise and total life reorganization. There is no aim to propose any kind of rigor systematization or classification. Suggested examples are only some empirical data, given there to reflect and highlight specific moments.

One of the most famous types of downshifters is so called "Goa-shifter" (Butonova, 2009). This tag describes a person who decided to leave work for a while and moved to any country or a region with developing economics, where living expenses are relatively cheap (for example, Thailand, Dahab (Egypt), Goa (India) etc.). There are some options of making a living: subletting a property, spending savings or doing some sort of occasional work requiring minimal skills (waiters, diving instructors). A lot of lifestyles among such downshifters can be defined: seekers for calm and relaxation, for personal growth and altered states of consciousness, party girls and boys and many others. The length of such vacations can vary from a single trip for a couple of months to regular "escapes", when the rest life is organized around them. But in spite of the evident differences, there is a common feature: such downshifting has some time limits. Thus, not all, but many cases of Goa-shifting imply life fragmentation: reality of leisure which is perceived as intense, fulfilling and genuine and reality of work or «rest life» which is subject to social regulation are separate.

As it can be assumed, a person makes no clear choice in this case, it is actually postponed. He or she begins to feel vague dissatisfaction with life but yet have no clear idea of what exactly could be changed.

The other widespread kind of downshifter is a person who reduced working hours or re-organized his occupancy in terms of time and space, in favor of more flexibility (distant work, home office etc). In this case, a choice turns out to be a balance or a compromise. If a job is not something estranged from a person, if he or she has interest and is genuinely ready to contribute in it, this can give the impression of harmony. If working duties are frustrating and have no personal meaning, then still, in spite of "working stultification", now it takes less time and life in general becomes more "acquired". There are some research evidences concerning sources which are found after setting more appropriate balance between personal and working life. The personal meanings of leisure are being changed, it becomes less related to consumption activities and more oriented to postmaterialistic values such as personal development and education, deep interpersonal communication, volunteer activities etc. (Hampton, 2008).

One more option of downshifting behavior seems to be the most radical and overwhelming. In this case, a person not just escapes from the choice between authentic and inauthentic life or looks for a compromise between them but makes a huge reorganization of his or her whole life strategy. A person commits downshifting to globally align his life and personality. It's not that easy to give some set of examples because of high individualization in that case. Moreover, quite often, such downshifting is not a local (but, evidently, significant) change, not a single decision which is made, but rather

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a shift to a new track set by dynamic, flexible process of valuing. Thus, choices become immanent to life. A person can say: Now I'm living like this but I have no idea of what will be important for me in next ten, five, one year. Unprejudiced, unconditioned mindset towards experience is realized.

Nevertheless, in spite of all specific features, some common, basic trends in downshifting process can be traced. Generally, it can be conceptualized as an attempt of a human to become closer to himself and obtain the congruence between him and his way of life.

When downshift, personal perception of abilities, wishes, identifications related to Self are changing, moreover, people tend to re-open themselves experientially, in concrete, real situations. The fundamental discrepancy between "Ideal self" (visions and images borrowed from other people) and organismic experience (Rogers, 1964) is being reduced, thus, the area of *Real self* (ideas about myself which are validated by real experience) is growing. Ibarra (2003) describes such mechanisms of changes in self-concept among downshifters: a person moves to strengthening the Real self by testing so called "possible selves". He or she cannot just jump into the desired image and status of Self: positive changes are always imply searching for a solid ground and relating to complex reality which may not support personal ideas of what is appropriate.

When a person commits acts uncharacteristic for him or her earlier, questions introjected values and comes to more sensitivity to himself, that marks a movement *from self-alienation to self-empathy and congruence*. Now Self is perceived not as something which has to be controlled, handled, subordinated or even suppressed during process of achievement of goals (which were not taken as really meaningful), i.e. as an "object", as something estranged, but as "my own Self", which is experienced «from inside» and should not be ignored.

As soon as a person becomes more receptive to his or her organismic experiences, the differentiation between *intrinsic and extrinsic motivation* becomes possible: either it is an organic impulse from inside or a push from outside.

While a human finds support not in structures of meaning pre-existing in society and culture but in his own Self, he or she less depends on things and objects of outer world. This does not mean that he loses interest to everything. In fact, as he does not compensate inner deficits but realizes natural unselfish curiosity, he tends not to *having but being* (Fromm, 1976) and, thus, give enough space and respect to Other's being. As being, in comparison with having, implies a certain kind of autonomy, a downshifter acquires less dependence on financial wealth and «expensive pleasures», as soon as a lot of other activities, possibilities and meanings appear. As a result of getting a human more familiar to himself and rising self-reliance, a split Self, different parts of which

were disconnected from each other, acquires *wholeness*, *integrity*, *totality*. A person exists as full individuality, dissolving partial identities and roles.

## Conclusion

Oppositions between authenticity and inauthenticity, genuineness and false, spontaneity and rigidity, reproduction and creative self-expression, being outlined in culture, art, history, philosophy and psychology, nowadays, in the context of modern society, are presented experientially, at the level of individual consciousness. Numerous possibilities for lifestyle individualization sharpen question of choice and confronts a human with a question of searching and finding self, coming back to "inner home". After the period of alienation of life from its subject, a human, a wave of "acquiring" life, making it "my own" comes, and downshifting, becoming more and more popular, may be a symptom of these positive changes. On the over hand, the personal responsibility for making this choice now seems to be even higher than before.

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