

Original Research Article

Living Simply and Living Off Grid in Mark Sundeen's *The Unsettlers*

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Abstract: Mark Sundeen is an American born author of many successful books touching on various themes. One of his most prolific book is *The Unsettlers*, which was published in 2017, and focuses on two emerging practices, living off the grid and living simply. The author combines these two themes in *The Unsettlers* as though to imply that they are related. This provides a starting point for the reader to understand what they are. Living simply underscores the quest to resist the material culture prevailing in America and the world today. Living off the grid underscores the quest to be free from bills and utility connections for water, electricity, and gasoline. The simplicity theory by Nick Chater, Paul Vitanyi, Jacob Feldman, Jean-Louis Dessalles, and Jürgen Schmidhuber provide a better understanding of human affinity to noncomplex things. When examined through the concepts of anti-consumerism and environmentalism, simplicity theory helps understand Sundeen's ideas about living simply. The theory of Eco-psychology by Theodore Roszak offers a better understanding of the link between the environment and economic activities. This theory helps understand the ideas of Sundeen on living off the grid when evaluated through the concepts of environmental sustainability and ecological economics. This paper examines the motivations and processes of living simply and living off the grid.

Keywords: Living simply, living off grid, eco-psychology, sustainable living, unsettlers mark sundeen.

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INTRODUCTION

Living off the Grid and Living Simply

Living off the grid and living simply are two different practices that are interrelated, and they define emerging trends in lifestyle, attitude, and practice. The two define gradually developing tendencies associated with human relationships with the environment, money, materials, and themselves. They offer new perspectives about what to do and what not to do regarding lifestyle choices, financial sustainability, stress management, and work-life balance (Boushey, 2016: 65). Civilization, which describes the sequential evolution of humankind, has led to the emergence of a highly complex and materialist society. People's lives revolve around working hard to make money that is spent on bills to suit the contemporary lifestyles (Becker, 2018: 5). Although it is considered the measure of success, contemporary society exerts enormous pressure on people's finances, lifestyles, and minds. As a result, resorting to simplicity and living off the grid are becoming attractive options for sustainability, freedom, and mental health.

Living off the Grid

Living off the grid refers to shunning public utilities in support of creating your own energy. Some

homeowners decide to be partly off the grid by providing their own electricity and dumping their phone line while depending on the convenience of city sewerage and water (Varul, 2013: 293). There is a proliferation of bills in people's mailboxes ranging from telephone, power, gas, and water. The bills often come as a reminder that the hard-earned money is required, which is what modern life feels (Collier, 2013: 7).

People work hard, but bills deplete their earnings. The process of paying utility bills is frustrating and exhausting for many people. There is an option of getting out of the regular payment of utility bills, which involves the production of sustainable energy. People can make their own energy and stop relying on the grid (Hans-Ruediger, 2014: 34). This is what is commonly referred to as living off the grid, and people can literally go off the grid by making their sustainable energy.

Living off the grid is gaining popularity as more people prefer relying on their own sources of energy. However, this is just one of the reasons why living off the grid is gaining significance, and other reasons include independence, reducing carbon footprints, and eradicating dependence on fossil fuels. This implies that going off the grid is more useful than saving money used

to pay bills since it revolves around the emerging concepts of environmental sustainability, climate change, and zero carbon emissions (Zehner, 2012: 39). Although the financial aspect is relevant, living off the grid is an environmental imperative, considering that it facilitates the conservation of the environment to guarantee short-term and future sustainability.

"The grid" is a general reference to the power grid, the consolidated system through which electricity is delivered to the people (Varul, 2013: 293). In the United States, an ordinary house is linked to telephone, power, water, and natural gas lines. Living off the grid implies disconnecting such public utilities and generating private energy. More people are abandoning the grid by resorting to renewable forms of energy, digging water wells, and creating septic tanks to handle sewer. Although data on Americans living off the grid is scarce, it was estimated in 2006 that over 180,000 homes supply their own power, while 27,000 homes use wind and solar energy (Hans-Ruediger, 2014: 54).

Moreover, there is a growing number of urban dwellers who intend to get off the grid. In most cases, getting off the grid is considered environmentally friendly, and a sign of independence.

Living Simply

Living simply includes many diverse voluntary practices aimed at simplifying an individual's lifestyle (Millburn, 2013: 56). Simple living practices may include increasing self-sufficiency or reducing possessions. The practice of reducing possessions is commonly referred to as minimalism. The basis of simple living is being satisfied with what a person has and not what they want. However, simple living is differentiated from forced poverty because it is voluntary, and people living in poverty due to circumstances cannot be described as embracing simple living.

The many motivations for simple living include reducing stress, spirituality, work-life balance, health, and quality time with family, personal tastes, frugality, and financial sustainability (Millburn, 2013: 56). Simple living has also been considered a reaction to conspicuous consumption and materialism. It is also attached to socio-political goals like environmentalist, anti-war, and anti-consumerist to include tax resistance, conservation, deep ecology, and degrowth.

Background

Mark Sundeen is a celebrated American author born in 1970 and has written many books covering many themes. One of the many books written by Sundeen is *The Unsettlers*, which focuses on the quest for a simple life and the motivations for this quest. This is done by covering stories of many people who have adopted peculiar but highly emerging practices of demystifying modern life. Mark Sundeen's earlier books include *Car*

Camping in 2000, *The Making of Toro* in 2003, *North by Northwestern: A Seafaring Family on Deadly Alaskan Waters* in 2010, and *The Man Who Quit Money, Riverhead* in 2012.

The Unsettlers was published in 2017 and offers a rather exploratory account of the merging trend of living simply by examining the ingenuity of many people and communities towards overcoming the shackles of modern life. The book started with the story of Sarah and Ethan, depicting how modern civilization's routines and lifestyles had choked their lives and their quest for a better life based on simplicity and self-sustainability (Dessalles, 2020: 1). The long story of Sarah and Ethan culminates into their resolve to build a house without electricity, avoid using airplanes and cars, and the use of public transport, walking, and bikes. This story indicates the quest for a much simpler and fulfilling life away from the hustle and bustle of modern life.

The book also offers a better understanding of the driving force of simplicity, including spirituality, health, and sociopolitical goals of anti-consumerism and environmentalism. The pursuit of a simple life is explained in this book as an emerging trend but also evaluated deeply as a fast-growing practice. The stories of people and families abandoning the fast-paced modernity life is more convincing than perplexing, particularly for a reader who has experienced the negative side of modern civilization (Sundeen, 2017: 75). Consumerism no longer offers the satisfaction it was created for as it chokes peoples' time and money, making it impossible to become rich and happy. The effect of modern lifestyles on the environment is also portrayed as a reason why many opt for living simply. However, more than an interesting account of how people are finding alternatives to modernity, this book portrays how difficult it is to overcome the challenges posed by civilization. This is done by the manifest sacrifices made by the people covered in the book to make their lives simpler (Boushey, 2016: 65). However, the author does not disappoint the readers since he presents the positive side of living simply irrespective of the hurdles encountered. A simple life is portrayed as good for the mind, the pocket, and the family, with many people embracing simplicity to spend time with their families, reduce the costs of modernity, move closer to god, and conserve the environment (Singh & Kumar, 2017 : 42). This book is multidimensional because it covers many angles of simplicity by examining the motivations, drivers, and outcomes of simple living.

I am interested in evaluating the quest for living simply and off the grid as they relate to the quality of life and fulfillment through modern civilization. I aim to examine what living off the grid and simply implies and how they are associated with a more rewarding experience amid the fast-paced, materialistic life. My analysis will focus on two aspects of the discussion, namely how people live simply and off the grid and why

they do so. It will be rewarding to understanding the processes of living off the grid and simply as well as the factors motivating such decisions. By extension, I would like to understand the results of living off the grid and simply.

METHODOLOGY

The study will apply the concepts of environmental sustainability and ecological economics under Eco-psychology by Theodore Roszak. The study will also use the concepts of Anti-consumerism and environmentalism under the simplicity theory by Nick Chater. Paul Vitanyi, Jacob Feldman, Jean-Louis Dessalles, and Jürgen Schmidhuber. A close reading of the text, together with applying these concepts and theories, will provide a more in-depth understanding of living simply and living off the grid. There will be efforts to link the contents of the book with the concepts and theories towards developing a better understanding.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Sundeen (2017: 10) illustrates the issues of simple living and living off the grid from the beginning of his book hence providing an actual picture of what it means to live simply and off the grid. The book explains living simply as decongesting life by abandoning the many complicated procedures and habits that are associated with typical modern living. It revolves around self-dependence, simplicity, peace, and cost sustainability. This is presented through the decision made by many characters in the book to abandon the complex routines of contemporary living to a more meaningful experience (Hans-Ruediger, 2014: 34). Therefore, the author helps the reader obtain a clear picture of what it means to live simply through practical examples.

The ideals of anti-consumerism and environmentalism are well explicated in the simplicity theory, which describes human affinity to simplicity (Dessalles, 2020: 1). This theory describes the human tendency to be drawn to matters that are not complicated. This can be described as the need to decongest and avoid issues or matters that make life difficult to live or comprehend. This human tendency can be explained through anti-consumerism, which underpins the need to overcome consumerism by living a simple life (Binkley & Littler, 2014: 87). Anti-consumerism is a growing movement against consumerism, which underscores that culture of buying expensive gadgets and materials to sustain life (Boushey, 2016: 65). Through consumerism, life is defined by what one owns, and there is a competition to have the best amenities. Anti-consumerism stipulates developing a life away from the dependence on materials and gadgets by pursuing happiness and peace of mind (Humphery, 2013: 56). This guarantees simplicity through the development of habits and routines that do not depend on the conventional supply chain. Environmentalism underscores the

movement to ensure that all human activities are considered from the perspective of environmental health (Huesemann & Joyce, 2011: 76). This concept defines the development of human activities that support the goals of environmental sustainability. Living simply is an example of environmentalism because it reduces the use of fossil fuels, dumping of hazardous materials in the environment, and promotion of environmental conservation (Zehner, 2012: 34).

Living simply offers the best conduit to guarantee the sustainability of the environment and humans because it creates a rewarding system of life and overcomes the material urges. Materialism, which defines contemporary life, is a dangerous human tendency that does not bode well with sustainability (Singh & Kumar, 2017: 42). The best way to guarantee future sustainability of the human race is to abandon materialism, which has a negative effect on mental health, financial sustainability, and the welfare of the environment (Boushey, 2016: 65). Most people living in this age lack meaningful investments because most of their earning are depleted in the materialist culture (Wherry & Woodward, 2019: 83). Moreover, most people live frustrated and stressful lives due to the materialist culture, as their little money is used to chase materialist culture's comforts. Living simply fulfills the mandates of environmentalism, which links all human activity with the goals of preserving and protecting the environment (Collier, 2013: 7). This provides short and long-term benefits for health, financial sustainability, and future sustainability of humans and nature.

Sundeen (2017: 10) also explains the issues of living off the grid throughout the book by providing first-hand experiences by people who decided to shut their activity, water, and gasoline connections. This provides a practical glimpse of what it means to live off the grid, particularly the motivations and the process. In the story of Sarah and Ethan, it is apparent that the motivation to live off the grid was influenced by the need to abandon consumerist tendencies that are financially exhaustive but also mundane and boring (Becker, 2018: 3).

The couple embraced various actions of living off the grid, like building a house without electricity, drilling a borehole, building septic tanks, and preferring public transport and cycling. The two significant motivations for their decisions included financial sustainability and overcoming the pressure of fast-paced living. Through this example, the book helps obtain a proper understanding of what it means to decide and apply living off the grid. However, another essential insight provided from this narrative is the benefits of living off the grid. Ethan and Sarah were happy to get over the pressure of paying bills every month, which provided a peace of mind and freedom from the pressures of contemporary living.

The concepts of environmental sustainability and ecological economics can be construed under Eco-psychology by Theodore Roszak. Ecopsychology is a therapy that involves bringing individuals close to nature as a remedy for their illness (Fisher, 2013: 43). The contemporary lifestyles have exerted maximum pressure and strain on people in the form of stress and depression, making it necessary to embrace alternative methods of overcoming them. Getting off the grid is one of the therapeutic processes of overcoming the stress brought about by modern living. The constant reminders of bills for water, gasoline, and electricity cause psychological strain for most people, and paying the bills every month exhausts people's earnings, making it a vicious cycle of earning and spending. Therefore, living off the grid provides people the opportunity to pursue other natural resources that are sustainable and therapeutic (Collier, 2013: 7). For example, a person who abandons city life to live on a farm without water and electricity connections achieves mental relief from city life's constant disturbances. Farm life is peaceful and therapeutic, helping people improve their mental wellbeing.

Environmental sustainability is a concept that promotes the development of practices and habits that preserve the environment for future generations. Living off the grid is an example of environmental sustainability because it reduces carbon footprint, eradicates reliance on fossil fuels, and promotes renewable energy, which is friendly to the environment (Huesemann & Joyce, 2011: 76). Ecological economics is a broad concept that refers to a system of managing economic activities to promote human sustainability and wellbeing. Through ecological economics, the pursuit of economic gain must be balanced with the ideals of sustainability. The economic activities of today should not compromise future activities. Living off the grid promotes the ideals of ecological economics by developing renewable energy like solar and wind. These forms of energy are sustainable since they do not compromise the future pursuit of energy.

CONCLUSION

In summary, *The Unsettlers* is a novel by Mark Sundeen that exemplifies the practices of living simply and living off the grid. The book offers a practical understanding of how and why people decide to live simply and get off the grid. Through this book, it is possible to understand how the pressures of modern life push people to the limits causing a necessity to develop alternative ideas about sustainability. Living simply is an idea based on the need to decongest life by avoiding the pressures of modern life. Sundeen presents the resolve by many people in America to resort to farms as away from keeping away from the hustle and bustle of daily

life. Living off the grid refers to the decision or practice to create private sources of energy and water supply to avoid electricity, water, and gasoline connections. Living off the grid has financial, mental, religious, and environmental connotations. By living simply and getting off the grid, people achieve a sense of liberty, serenity, life balance, peace of mind, and self-sustainability. Through evaluating the concepts of environmental sustainability and ecological economics, anti-consumerism, and environmentalism and simplicity theory and Eco-psychology theory by Theodore Roszak, this paper has examined the practices of living off the grid and living simply as expounded by Mark Sundeen in *The Unsettlers*.

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