Downshifter Families’
Housing and Homes

An exploration of lifestyle choice
and housing experience

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Abstract

‘Downshifting’ describes the phenomenon of people in the contemporary western world who voluntarily reduce their income and consumption to improve their life quality. It is estimated that around a quarter of Australians of working age have voluntarily reduced their incomes and spending (other than retirement). Family life is identified as a primary motivator for downshifting, yet just what this means is still to be explored. As well, reduced income associated with downshifting is likely to have significant implications for the capacity of households to negotiate an unequal housing system and for experiences of both housing and home. However, relationships between downshifting, housing and home also remain unexplored.

This research seeks to address these key knowledge gaps. Drawing downshifting, family life and housing experience together, it asks: how does downshifting, understood as a way of living or ‘lifestyle’, relate to the housing experiences and meaning of home of families with dependent children who have downshifted? The downshifting and family values and priorities, the lived housing experiences and circumstances and the influences and practices which ‘make’ downshifter family homes meaningful, among 25 families interviewed across metropolitan and rural Victoria for this research, form the foci of analysis in this interpretive, qualitative study.

Findings indicate that despite differences in the extent to which downshifter families are alternative, their financial wealth or residential location, common to all is a desire for a high level of control over the way their lives are lived, coupled with ‘time over money’ values, in many cases motivated by a prioritisation of family life. The implications of this for housing experience and the meaning of home are diverse and, in many cases, substantial. While home ownership remains a preferred tenure among this population, downshifter families’ housing pathways and circumstances vary in the extent to which they enable control and facilitate security. Relationships – between family, with the community, and with the environment – are found to be fundamentally important to the ways downshifter families ‘make’ their homes meaningful.
The findings of this research further our understanding of the downshifting phenomenon, they draw attention to the importance of housing to work life policy discourse and they contribute to our understandings of the relationship between lifestyle choice and housing experience within the sociology of housing literature. They lend support to the argument that, within late modernity, housing and home form an important medium for lifestyle choice.
Acknowledgements

Like many people, I became fascinated by the concept of ‘downshifting’ when it entered popular discourse. I was interested in the idea that people could choose to limit the extent to which they swam along in the tide. I was working in housing research at the time and couldn’t fathom how people who chose to reduce their incomes to pursue other ideals, could keep a roof overhead. No downshifting research had touched on this issue. As I read more about downshifting, I came to realise that family life is identified as the key motivator for downshifting by a majority of downshifters, but that just what this means had not been explored. Having come from a family research background, it seemed clear to me to link these three fields together: downshifting, housing and family life. So began this research journey, to which many people have contributed.

This research would not have been possible without the generosity, trust and openness of the families interviewed in this study. Sharing conversations with these families about their lives, experiences and philosophies, often in their own homes, was a privilege for me as researcher, through which I have learned a great deal. All families in this study are inspirational. I sincerely hope this research, and anything stemming from it, does justice to your views, voices and stories.

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Within months of starting this journey, we were joyously pregnant. In parallel with this research, we have had two babies, now beautiful children, who, together as a family, make me understand the meaning of this research, and what life, my life, is all about. I love you and thank you.
Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma, except where due reference has been made in the text of the thesis. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

David Hudson edited this thesis. The editing addressed only style and/or grammar and not its substantive content.

Signed........................................

Dated...........................................
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Chapter 1
Housing family life

I don’t want to judge people in a mass, sweeping sort of statement but I do feel that … Well, I knew people where I worked who had followed the standard paradigm where you buy a house where you can afford to, and you then, you’re committed to your workplace where you have to show up all day every day because if you want to keep that house, that’s what you have to do. And because you didn’t have a lot of money to start with, you have to buy a long way away from where you work so you spend a great deal of time at work and a great deal of time in the car, and it’s sort of like those people never choose to live like that. They never say ‘I want to spend all my time at work and in the car’ and, you know, ‘and leaving my kid in child care for 12 hours a day and ending up with enough spare money to hire a DVD on the weekend’. You know, I don’t think people decide, ‘That’s how I want to live’. I think that because they don’t see other options are available that that’s how they end up living and I don’t think it’s good for them and I don’t think it’s good for their kids … That’s just me. There are other people who may disagree with that. That’s my view. It’s not what I want for my family, so I was willing to jump at an opportunity to reinvent that particular wheel. [Stuart: male, early 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, resident of intentional community, rural Victoria (Case 1)]

For this member of Generation X downshifting represented a solution to the personal experience of what, in Australian policy and political rhetoric, is more publicly described as a problem of ‘work life balance’ (House of Representatives 2006; EOWA 2007). In the case of this young man, ‘reinventing the wheel’ involved not only a process of self-reflection leading to a re-negotiation of work life, but also of housing, home, place and all that these entail. He and his family relocated from an inner city rental house to a rural housing cooperative not long after their daughter was born, which they now call ‘home’. This thesis explores the strategies, negotiations and experiences of this young family and many like them who choose to downshift in order to reach a better fit between what they
see as the demands of work, the costs of living, their beliefs about children and parenting and what, for each of them respectively, constitutes ‘a better life’.

At its essence, downshifting can be understood as the voluntary reduction of income and consumption to pursue better life quality (see Chapter 2). Previous research suggests that around a quarter or more of Australian adults aged between 30 and 59 downshifted between 1993 and 2003 (Hamilton and Mail 2003) and that these numbers may have since increased (Chhetri, Stimson et al. 2009). Downshifting is conceptualised throughout this research as a way of living, or ‘lifestyle’, which enables the exercise of agency, in sometimes creative ways, to respond to the constraints and opportunities presented by structural conditions in which we live and cultural norms surrounding them.

The present study is unique within the downshifting literature. It differs from most research as it is not a study of downshifting and work (c.f. Tan 2000; Schor 1998; Hamilton and Mail 2003; Saltzman 1991), although work is centrally important to the experience of downshifting. Nor is the present study one of general patterns of consumption, another core theme within the literature (c.f. Etzioni 1998; Schor 1998; Craig-Lees and Hill 2002; Breakspear and Hamilton 2004). The focus is on how downshifting relates specifically to the experience of housing and home amongst downshifter families.

This study explores the way family, work and housing are renegotiated through lifestyle choices in the lives of downshifter families. Downshifters are ‘swimming against the tide’, often at odds with mainstream norms and behaviours and living life their own way. While so many Australians seem caught up in a way of life beyond their choosing, downshifting appears to represent a creative, alternative pathway through the social and economic conditions in which we live. With a focus on housing, this research explores this pathway through the viewpoints of downshifter families themselves who describe in detail their philosophies, perspectives, lived experiences and daily practices which, together, represent meaning in their lives and which form the focus of this research.
The context

The ‘problem’ being explored in this research is integrally related to the context in which it is taking place in two significant and distinct ways. First, the context, described below, is argued to be what downshifters are responding to (Saltzman 1991; Schor 1998; Etzioni 1998; Tan 2000; Hamilton and Mail 2003). This involves deep-seated dissatisfaction with the ‘normal’ structure of daily life, generally accompanied by a yearning for ‘more’ (Harwood Group 1995; Schor 1998; Tan 2000; Hamilton and Mail 2003). Second, from another perspective, the context can be seen as enabling of downshifting. The increased flexibility, fluidity and individualisation of daily life associated with late modernity and ‘risk society’ (Bauman 1998, 2000; Beck 1992, 1996, 2000; Giddens 1991, 1994) present opportunities for individuals to write their own life trajectories. It is this flexibility and forced navigation of one’s own life course which arguably enables alternative lifestyle choices – such as those associated with downshifting – to be made though. As this study demonstrates, however, such choices are not always easy or comfortable.

The ‘rat race’

In a country as diverse as Australia it is difficult to describe what a ‘normal’ or ‘usual’ pattern of life is. However, the following statistics provide insight into patterns of daily life experienced by a large proportion of the population and hence the structural conditions and cultural norms that support them. Despite a lengthy period of economic prosperity, the figures support the argument that working life in Australia has intensified in recent years, that the balance between work and non-work is ‘out of whack’ and that increased consumerism is at least one of the factors fuelling these patterns in a work-spend cycle. Many Australians are overworked, stressed by attempts to balance work and

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1 Throughout this research, the term ‘late modernity’ will be used, including in discussion of authors who typically use alternative terminology. Other like-terms include reflexive modernity, the postmodern era, high modernity and liquid or fluid modernity.

2 The recent and rapid economic downturn associated with the US sub-prime lending collapse has occurred since the data collection for this research. The patterns of work described here have, if anything, become more intensified since late 2008 as rates of unemployment in Australia have begun to rise and competition for jobs has increased.
family commitments, ‘overspent’ in their patterns of borrowing and expenditure and – not surprisingly – many feel dissatisfied as a result. Home provides little sanctuary as it, too, is affected by these trends.

Working hours have increased in Australia in the last 30 years, particularly for women (EOWA 2007), with significant implications for family and community relationships (Relationships Forum Australia 2007). Official statistics (ABS 2008) indicate 72 per cent of all men and 58 per cent of all women aged 15 years or over are currently engaged in paid work and that women’s employment rates increased from 48 per cent in the previous decade, largely as a result of increased take-up of part-time work (45 per cent among women, 18 per cent among men). The traditional ‘dip’ seen in women’s working rates for those aged 25 to 44 years has lessened in recent years due to delayed or foregone child bearing and an increase in the number combining work and family. Census data shows work participation rates increased for women with young children (aged 0 to 14) between 1996 and 2006 (59 per cent to 64 per cent), with these increases most pronounced for sole mothers (50 per cent to 59 per cent).

While some part-time employees would prefer more work hours (Drago et al. 2004), many full-time employees would prefer fewer hours (McDonald et al. 2006). Recent national survey results show over a third (36.7 per cent) of full-time working mothers would prefer part-time hours, wishing to join the estimated 45 per cent of Australian women who work part-time (Skinner and Pocock 2008: 9). Heady and Warren (2008: 78) suggest that a decrease in stated preferences for more working hours, found among males employed part-time between 2001 and 2005, indicates an increased preference for better work-life balance among men.

Patterns of working hours affect all family members. In 2005 roughly 60 per cent of Australian children aged 0 to 4 were cared for in either a formal or informal arrangement

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3 Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey (HILDA) data Waves 1 to 5.
away from immediate family on a regular basis. In some families, child rearing is delayed or reduced (de Vaus 2004; Weston et al. 2004). Many parents believe their working hours interfere with their capacity to provide ‘good parenting’ (de Vaus 2004: 313). Studies of time use consistently indicate parents feel ‘time stress’ caused by work and family demands (de Vaus 2004; Bittman 2005; Bittman and Saunders 2005; Edgar 2005; d’Souza et al. 2006; EOWA 2007; Skinner and Pocock 2008). Time-poor, stressed parents are at the mercy of marketers, buying their children ‘things’ rather than time in a bid to satisfy their needs (Pocock 2006). Yet preference studies indicate children and young people prefer time with parents over increased money, feelings most pronounced among those whose parents work long and/or unsocial hours (Lewis et al. 2001; Pocock and Clarke 2005).

When family time is pressured, other relationships suffer. Time for participation in community life, summed up in Putnam’s (1995) ‘bowling alone’ analogy, is squeezed out in families working long hours (Glezer and Wolcott 1997; Pocock 2001, 2003). While parents with school aged children are often active in formal community activities, it is often then informal community ties which are compromised (Pocock 2003: 62). Related to this, the management and organisation of daily life has become increasingly privatised. Many families now look first to the market rather than friends, neighbours or kin to ‘buy’ help when they need it. Leisure, the time in which common pursuits are able to draw communities together, is now also often commodified (Schor 1998). The focus on work at the cost of other relationships is the root cause of what Sennett (1998) argues is a ‘corrosion of character’ where individuals become morally bankrupt as relationships become secondary to work goals and where social networks are seen in terms of goal attainment rather than emotional, spiritual and personal fulfillment (Castells 2000).

So why do Australians work such long hours? There is growing consensus that at least part of the problem relates to patterns of generalised consumption. Commentators point to increased consumerism as binding workers to undesirable working conditions in a

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work-spend cycle involving highly intensified spending pressures (Schor 1998; Hamilton and Denniss 2005). US commentator Juliet Schor uses the term the ‘new consumerism’ to describe consumer desires based on the ‘haves’ of people we now compare ourselves with in a smaller, globalised set of relationships, coupled with an increase in standards where it is assumed people will ‘upgrade’, in a continuum of spending:

> [T]he comparisons we make are no longer restricted to those in our own general earning category, or even to those one rung above us on the ladder. Today a person is more likely to be making comparisons with, or choose as a ‘reference group,’ people whose incomes are three, four, or five times his or her own. The result is that millions of us have become participants in a national culture of upscaling spending. I call it the new consumerism. (Schor 1998: 4)

Patterns of consumerism and the working patterns that support them relate to the broader culture in which we live. Bauman (1998, 2000) argues that consumer desires and behaviours are a function of the loss of identity and authenticity associated with the insecurities of postmodern life, which he calls ‘liquid’ modernity, and that many people are left searching for their ‘true’ selves in the market place:

> Individual needs of personal autonomy, self-definition, authentic life or personal perfection are all translated into the need to possess, and consume, market-offered goods. This translation, however, pertains to the appearance of use value of such goods, rather than to the use value itself; as such, it is intrinsically inadequate and ultimately self-defeating, leading to momentary assuagement of desires and lasting frustration of needs … The gap between human needs and individual desires is produced by market domination; this gap is, at the same time, a condition of its reproduction. The market feeds on the unhappiness it generates: the fears, anxieties and the sufferings of personal inadequacy it induces release the consumer behaviour indispensable to its continuation. (Bauman 1989: 189)
The sanctuary of home

Feminist analyses have critiqued the notion of the sanctuary of home on the grounds that it can represent a place of hard work, isolation and also hidden violence perpetrated (primarily) against women and children (for example, Watson 2010). However, for many people, home has traditionally been a haven, a private sanctuary removed from the demands of the world ‘outside’. Far from being a sanctuary from the world of work, housing and home have now been caught up in the work-spend cycle, with significant implications. To a large extent, housing has always been linked to patterns of working hours since housing costs represent the largest single weekly budget item for most households (ABS 2007). Owning a home of one’s own, the ‘great Australian dream’, remains dominant in the psyche of most Australians (Wulff and Baum 2003) and many work long hours to achieve it (see Chapter 3), but the nature of these homes is changing.

The suburban notion of ‘keeping up with the Joneses’ is well known and represents an example of what Veblen (1934) termed ‘conspicuous consumption’. Schor (1998) argues that current versions of ‘Jonesism’ have taken on a frightening twist, as they too are subject to upscaled spending. Arguably, housing has become a major expression of social status, replacing older forms of social stratification based on occupation which have become more fluid and less clear as a consequence of changes associated with late modernity, discussed below. The proliferation of lifestyle magazines and television programs centred on housing reflect contemporary interest in housing and may also be acting to fuel the problem, setting ever increasing standards in housing quality, rapid turnover of housing related fashion, and contributing to an increase in housing consumerism.

In their analysis of recent Australian consumer trends, entitled Affluenza, Hamilton and Denniss argue that the home is now the key target of excessive consumption, with more people committing larger proportions of their future income to paying for the ‘house of their dreams’ (2005: 22). Noting the $7,000 barbeque as a particular threat to egalitarian Australia, they go on to document increased consumer spending around household goods
and appliances, DIY (‘do it yourself’) equipment and household makeovers. However, it is housing itself that is the largest consumer item. Houses today are built with more bedrooms, bathrooms and luxurious fittings and appliances than ever before. Between 1985 and 2000 the average floor space of new houses increased by 31 per cent, the number of bedrooms per occupant rose from 0.82 in 1970 to 1.15 in 2000, while the number of occupants per dwelling decreased from 3.6 in 1955 to 3.3 in 1970 and 2.6 in 2000 (Hamilton and Denniss 2005: 20). Today, higher housing costs are borne by fewer household members.

Numerous factors, including land prices, intergenerational discrepancies in wealth holdings and the small-scale nature of housing investment in Australia, affect housing affordability (Burke and Hulse 2009). Arguably, consumer trends also increase the cost of home purchase, with a ripple effect across the whole housing system. Historically, it was more possible for families to achieve home ownership. On average, Australian house prices have almost doubled between 1996 and 2006 relative to income, even controlling for inflation (Disney 2006). This is part of a longer-term trend. During the same period and the 10 years prior (1985-2004), income doubled while house prices increased fourfold (NATSEM 2008). By international standards Australian housing is now among the least affordable in the western world. A recent study of 227 housing markets across six nation states6 highlights Australia (along with New Zealand) as having the most unaffordable housing in the surveyed nations and as having no ‘affordable’ areas among the local housing markets studied (Cox and Pavletich 2008).

Deregulation of financial markets has led to high rates of lending, leaving many households with debt to income ratios far above those seen in previous times (Keen 2007). Rates of mortgage arrears and loan foreclosure are at an all-time national high (Standard & Poor’s in Sydney Morning Herald 2008), though unevenly distributed, with residents in some regions, for example, western Sydney, most likely to be experiencing this type of stress (Keen 2007; Berry et al. 2009). Combined with increases in other

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6 These are Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, UK and US. The Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey uses the ‘median multiple’ (median house price divided by median household income) to assess housing affordability (Cox and Pavletich 2008: 6).
living costs such as fuel (Dodson and Snipe 2006), current high levels of mortgage indebtedness may push these figures up still further. Housing debt masks other consumer debt as it has become easier to withdraw credit against existing mortgages (Berry et al. 2009), while financial deregulation has enabled an increase in household debt among public and private renters (Burke and Ralston 2003).

Australia’s current ‘housing crisis’ has altered policy discourse such that analysis of problems of housing affordability now includes home ownership as well as rental sectors (for example, Productivity Commission 2004; Senate Select Committee 2008). Yet, in volume and extent, affordability problems remain most acutely felt in the private rental market, with high levels of housing stress also seen among purchaser owners (Beer and Faulkner 2009; Burke 2007; Yates and Milligan 2007). In 2002-03 approximately 11 per cent of all households were paying at least 30 per cent of their gross income on housing costs (Yates and Gabriel 2006). Among low income private renters and purchasers, the incidence of housing stress was 65 per cent and 49 per cent respectively (Yates and Milligan 2007). Would-be purchasers residing in the rental market are squeezing out traditional occupants of this tenure, and are contributing to spiralling rental costs and record low vacancy rates (Yates and Milligan 2007). Social housing, now in decline, provides little relief, with long waiting lists and many occupants required to pay market rent (McNelis 2006).

The relative lack of housing choice in Australia arguably exacerbates the ‘heat’ in the housing system. Home ownership remains dominant because it affords the kind of ontological and financial security which other tenures, particularly private rental, arguably currently fail to provide (Hulse and Burke 2004 and discussion at Chapter 3). Households choosing either private or public rental almost always trade off perceived choice, security and control. Private tenancy agreements are typically short-term (often

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8 Low income households are defined as those in the bottom two quintiles of the income distribution. Housing stress is measured using a 30 per cent of income on housing costs rule.
9 In some other countries, regulatory bodies ensure that tenants are privy to at least some of these benefits, such as through longer tenancies involving their capacity to make minor dwelling changes (Hulse and Burke 2004).
12 months), and landlords are required to give only minimal notice to tenants to vacate.\textsuperscript{10}
At the same time, households have few alternatives but to fit within either the tenure system or type of dwellings available in the mainstream market. Traditional alternatives such as owner building and joint land purchase (such as multiple occupancy agreements) are subject to increased regulatory scrutiny and restricted land supply to non-developers, leaving cheaper, more individualised alternatives more difficult to achieve.

\textit{Individualised possibility}

Ironically, the deregulation and casualisation of large sectors of the work force and economy associated with late modernity present opportunity as well as insecurity. ‘Risk society’ is the term used by theorists such as Beck (1992, 1996, 2000), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and Giddens (1991, 1994) to describe what they see as a new world order that has evolved through the breakdown of tradition associated with late, or high, modernity. Consistent with Bauman’s (2000) analysis of the new ‘liquid’ and previous ‘solid’ periods of modernity, Beck (2000) argues that the age of risk society, characterised by ‘reflexive modernization’, represents a structural and epochal break or paradigm shift from earlier times, rather than merely an intensification of them. The assumption or argument he makes is that a ‘new kind of capitalism, a new kind of economy, a new kind of global order, a new kind of politics and law, a new kind of society and personal life are in the making which both separately and in context are clearly distinct from earlier phases of social evolution’ (Beck 2000: 81).

This period of late modernity has involved the loosening of traditions and norms which guided social life and has opened the way for individuals to choose their own life course, managing risks and opportunities along the way. According to ‘risk society’ authors, the certainties and givens of previous eras have been dissolved, markets have largely replaced nation states as the site of politics, and citizens are at once local and global, given the complexity of information, material and decisions to which they are exposed.

\textsuperscript{10} For example, in the state of Victoria, where this study was conducted, private landlords are required to give tenants between 14 and 120 days notice to end a lease prematurely, depending on the reason for termination (Consumer Affairs Victoria 2003).
(Castells 2000; Giddens 1991). In everyday life, individuals must negotiate risks and at the same time construct their own sense of self and identity rather than relying upon previously understood roles, norms and rules to do so. Drawing on Bauman, Beck (2000) asserts that one chooses and weights different overlapping identities and lives on the strength of the combination.

Along similar lines, Giddens (1991, 1994) argues that living in the world of high modernity involves distinctive tensions and difficulties at the level of the self. While everyone continues to have a ‘local life’, the transformations of place – the intrusion of distance (activities that occur in far-off places) into local activities – as well as the ‘mediated’ array of experiences we now face radically change what ‘the world’ is. One result, according to Giddens, is that individuals must engage in the ‘reflexive project of the self’ as a means of creating individual meaning in an otherwise fragmented world and that ‘lifestyle’ choices form a central part of this process.

The ‘self’ comprises a series of ‘sub-identities’ or, put simply, ways of living and being in the different contexts of any individual’s life. Social practices will to at least some extent fit their setting, even in the life of one individual, but these various forms of the self will generally conform, more or less, to an overarching coherent logic or ‘lifestyle’ (Beck 2000; Giddens 1991; Spaargaren and Van Vliet 2000). This enables individuals to function in the highly differentiated society in which we live where an individual typically occupies many roles, over space and time. As a result, variation can exist within as well as between chosen lifestyles (Spaargaren and Van Vliet 2000: 55).

Giddens’ focus on the self and individualisation as the key site through which life meaning is created and managed is consistent with Rose (1999) who argues that the proliferation of technology and information associated with late modernity have put specialist, expert knowledge in the hands of individuals who now use this to self-govern their own behaviour.
While traditional structures today are less significant than in previous times, their influence and the inequalities associated with them nonetheless continue. Within a society in which individuals are less sheltered from shocks by traditional systems in which they once lived, risks and opportunities are negotiated at a more individual level (Giddens 1991). Individuals with greater personal capabilities are likely to succeed (Sen 1985; Castells 2000, 2004; Ray and Anderson 2000; Florida 2002). Those more bound to traditional systems and who lack what can be termed human, cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1984) – as well as financial clout – are likely to experience the flexibility and fluidity of the late modern world as complex, risky and disjointed, compared with those who can readily negotiate the opportunities it presents.

The research

These conditions, in which individuality and lifestyle choices are possible, provide the apparent freedom for many Australians to step out of the ‘rat race’ discussed above and to recast the relationship they have with family life, work and housing. The highly reflexive processes involved, the decisions and daily practices which support them and the experiences of them form the focus of this research. Throughout this study, housing is of interest in its own right. Additionally, housing and home form a lens through which the lifestyle choices and experiences of family downshifting are explored.

The ‘problem’

The overarching question addressed by this research is this: how does downshifting, understood as a way of living or ‘lifestyle’, relate to the housing experiences and meaning of home of families with dependent children who have downshifted?

To address this, three lines of inquiry or sub-questions are explored. The first focuses on the interaction of downshifting and family life. It asks what the core values relating to downshifting are, and how these in turn relate to family values and priorities among downshifter families. The family focus of this research is discussed in detail at Chapter 4
and, as set out at Chapter 2, is identified as a key knowledge gap in the literature. This line of inquiry seeks to understand how significant family life is for downshifters, including how child bearing and rearing are played out in their lives. The various ways parenting and child rearing relate to processes and experiences of downshifting are explored.

The second sub-question focuses on downshifting and the negotiation and experience of housing. It explores the relationship between family downshifting, housing aspirations and preferences and the experience of housing — under the umbrella concept ‘housing pathways’. As discussed at Chapter 3, this analysis marks a sharp departure from traditional approaches to the study of the social experience of housing which rely heavily on objective indicators of housing circumstance. The housing preferences, aspirations and experiences of downshifter families are examined in terms of both tenure arrangements and housing circumstances, including the material conditions in which they live.

The third sub-question concerns the relationship between downshifting and the day to day domestic practices which contribute to the ‘making’ and meaning of home. It asks how downshifter families make their homes meaningful. Again representing a sharp departure from traditional housing research, key relationships both within and around the home are explored to illuminate the significance of home for the lifestyle and identity of downshifter families, and the common and diverse ways they ‘make’ home.

Finally, the research asks how the values held by downshifters as well as their experiences of housing and home differ within the downshifting population. Specifically, do the ways in which family values and lifestyle priorities differ reflect the extent to which downshifters are alternative, their level of financial resources and/or whether they live in metropolitan or non-metropolitan locations?
The research contribution

The present research aims to extend our understanding of the downshifting phenomenon in two principal ways. First, it aims to address the key knowledge gap identified at Chapter 2 between downshifting and family life. Second, drawing upon these newly developed understandings, it aims to explore, in detail, the relationship between family downshifting and housing experience and, specifically, in relation to the housing pathways and home lives of downshifter families.

It is anticipated that, through pursuing these aims, the research will have further significance. This is one of the few Australian studies to draw explicit links between housing experience and work life balance. It is anticipated that the findings will have implications for these fields of policy discourse, which are typically separate from one another. Finally, the present study aims to contribute to an emerging field of research within the sociology of housing literature which seeks to understand the contemporary importance of ‘lifestyle’ for experiences of housing and home.

Structure of the research

This research is presented over eight chapters. Following this introduction, it explores in detail the concept of downshifting (Chapter 2), conceptualising it as a lifestyle involving the creative exercise of agency in response to the ‘rat race’ – the structural conditions and cultural norms discussed above. Findings from existing research, with a particular focus on Australia, are explored. The chapter highlights key knowledge gaps in present understandings of downshifting, relating to both family life and housing. Chapter 3 examines the extent to which agency has been accommodated within several main traditions of housing research relating to housing preferences, housing careers and the meaning of home. Recent sociological influences on housing studies, which position centrally in research the meanings held by actors, are examined. Chapter 4 describes the epistemological foundation for the grounded, interpretivist approach used and the research strategy used to undertake it.
Chapters 5, 6 and 7 present detailed findings from three lines of inquiry discussed above. The first explores in depth the relationship between downshifting, family life and lifestyle priorities, representing the first analysis of this kind within the literature. Building on these findings, Chapters 6 and 7 focus upon the relationship of downshifter families to their housing and homes. Chapter 6 examines their housing preferences, aspirations and experiences, using a housing pathways approach (see Chapter 3). It explores, for example, how downshifting relates to the ‘great Australian dream’ of owning a home of one’s own. Tastes and preferences in relation to material aspects of dwellings are explored. Chapter 7 draws attention to key influences upon the meaning and making of home among downshifter families, and how these are played out domestically and locally, examining the central role home plays as a medium for lifestyle choice. Chapter 8 discusses the implications of these findings for the questions posed above and considers the contribution this research makes, in the light of its limitations and successes.
Chapter 2
Downshifting

This chapter explores the concept of downshifting. It argues that while the concept is problematic in that its definition varies from author to author and the types of people and behaviours it refers to are heterogenous, downshifting remains a useful term, describing a significant contemporary social trend. It is conceptualised as a lifestyle in which agency is exercised, in response to contemporary structural and cultural conditions set out at Chapter 1. Focusing on Australia, key findings from existing research are outlined. The limitations, notably the neglect of family life and housing, are highlighted. To conclude, the chapter argues that an exploration of the relationships between downshifting, family life and housing will improve our understanding of the downshifting experience.

Understanding downshifting: Meaning, definition and context

Throughout the first part of the 20th century, debates raged across the US, UK and Europe about the economic and social impact of the pending increase in leisure time, which was to be brought about through new ‘Fordist’ modes of production, and how this should best be managed (Schor 1991; Cross 1993). In 1920 there was a common belief that free time, not increased consumption, was the inevitable consequence of growth and that this would create a mass leisure society, even as leisure undermined the work ethic (Cross 1993: 7). Conservatives feared moral decline, and much energy was spent devising leisure time activities to maintain moral order. A progressive movement for ‘democratic leisure’ offered a different approach, arguing free time should be facilitated rather than managed by government (Cross 1993: 105). Conservatives and progressives alike were wrong – what emerged was not a culture of mass leisure, but a culture of work and spend.

It was soon realised, to the relief of many, that consumption was a ‘cure’ to leisure, and that consumer desires would both maintain working hours and regulate social life (Cross...
Public debates turned to the question of mass versus elite consumerism. By the 1950s growth in consumption had become a measure of economic and political success. Today, there is a general acceptance that ‘progress’ in terms of increased production is closely coupled with an increase in consumption, rather than ‘free time’. Yet it need not be this way. In his historical and cultural analysis of how consumer culture has come to be dominant in the US, UK and France, Cross (1993) presents the central argument that:

The accumulation of material wealth has reduced time to money; potential leisure is often sacrificed to work in order to earn the wherewithal to pile up still more goods. This consumerist bias has been acquired in a long historical process; but it reached its modern extreme only recently. Consumerism is not an inevitable stage in industrial development. Rather it has been a choice made within complex cultural, political, and social contexts. (Cross 1993: vii)

Despite an increase in hours spent at work (Schor 1991), today there is relatively little debate about working hours. Public or moral panic about the way time is spent now generally relates to who is working ‘enough’ hours, with a particular and recent targeting of single parents, usually mothers. Rather than choosing how to ‘spend’ increased productivity, each year “‘progress,’” in the form of annual productivity increases, is doled out by employers as extra income rather than as time off” (Schor 1991: 10):

The growth of worktime did not occur as a result of public debate. There has been little attention from government, academia, or civic organizations. For the most part, the issue has been off the agenda, a nonchoice, a hidden trade off … Throughout the 19th century, and well into the 20th, the reduction of worktime was one of the nation’s most pressing social issues. Employers and workers fought about the length of the working day, social activists delivered lectures, academics wrote treatises, courts handed down decisions, and government legislated hours of work. Through the Depression, hours remained a major preoccupation. Today these debates and conflicts are long forgotten. Since the 1930s, the choice between work and leisure has hardly been a choice at all, at least in any conscious sense. (Schor 1991: 3-4)
‘Downshifting’ suggests these debates and choices now take place in private rather than public spheres. At its essence, it is a term that describes the phenomenon of people in the contemporary western world who reduce their income and consumption, more or less voluntarily, to improve their life quality. Through their actions, they have reopened the debate about leisure and working hours, or at least made the choice visible. Time and the use of time is central to the phenomenon. Downshifters restructure their lives in order to spend more time on those pursuits they value most highly. Downshifting has become a sociologically ‘visible’ lifestyle choice precisely because this restructuring of life and the values underpinning it are at odds with the culture of ‘time is money’ and hence the way most people live. Typically, as discussed below, the process involves less time in paid work and more time devoted to other interests (although it can also mean a shift to work that is more intrinsically meaningful, often at the cost of reduced pay). In this way, downshifting can be seen as the individual pursuit of the type of life promised by industrialisation but not realised.

Towards a definition of downshifting

The term ‘downshifting’ derives from the idea of changing gear from a high gear on a fast track to a lower gear on a slower track, as in a car or bicycle (Tan 2004). It is traced to Gerald Celente, a futurist who considered it to be a ‘new Renaissance philosophy’: ‘people are very empty and they are looking for much deeper passions in life than those provided through material accumulation or through vicarious association with status symbols and the people who represent them’ (in Ghazi and Jones 1997: 44-45).

Definitions of downshifting and the way it is understood vary across national contexts as well as between authors, who tend to emphasise one or other aspect. Some definitions emphasise the psychological and values aspects, such as developing self-reliance and one’s intellect (Zavestoski 2002: 149). Others emphasise the increased role of the individual, such as Leonard-Barton (1981: 244) who describes downshifting in terms of maximisation of personal control over daily life. The definitional emphasis of most downshifting and related studies, however, is on working and consuming less (for
example, Saltzman 1991; Iwata 1999; Junui 2000; Etzioni 1998; Schor 1998; Hamilton and Mail 2003). Many attempt to define the apparent phenomenon of downshifting which does not fit easily into contemporaneous explanations of work, family and leisure.

Understandings of downshifting in the US have been highly influential in the way the phenomenon is conceptualised in Australia as well as in the UK. As discussed below, downshifting in the US is linked to a long-standing tradition of ideas and lifestyles which have informed current understandings and manifestations. From available evidence (Hamilton 2003a; Huggins-Cooper 2007), it appears that in the UK, downshifting has followed a similar course to that in Australia, detailed below, and that downshifting literatures in both countries have developed relatively recently, almost simultaneously. In part this is due to cross-fertilisation of research, with Australian Clive Hamilton (2003a) undertaking research in the UK as well as in Australia. A further similarity is the extent of sea change, a related concept which is also discussed later in this chapter, with reference to Australia.11

In other countries, downshifting tends not to be a term used, although behaviours related to it are often routinely practised (Hamilton and Mail 2003). The ‘slow movement’ in Italy (including ‘slow food’ and ‘slow cities’), for example, celebrates local produce and community ties (Honoré 2004) and the rapid increase in co-housing across Scandinavia demonstrates similar values (Schwarz and Schwarz 1998). Downshifting, at least conceptualised as such, is most prevalent in the US, UK and Australia. It is beyond the bounds of the present study to determine why this is so, but arguably it relates to cross-national similarities in structural and cultural conditions.

In the US, downshifting is typically contrasted and compared with the longer-running ‘voluntary simplicity’ movement (VS). Drawing on a term borrowed from the writings of Richard Gregg in 1936, in 1977 Duane Elgin co-authored a report at the Stanford Research Institute entitled *Voluntary Simplicity*. He went on to elaborate the values and

11 While the places households move to differ between the two nations (with Australian sea changers typically remaining in Australia, and UK sea changers more likely to move to another country), sea change in each place may overlap with downshifting to some degree, in ways outlined below.
tenets of VS in *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a way of life that is outwardly simple and inwardly rich* (originally published in 1981 and revised in 1993) which has become a key resource for discussion groups and internet chat rooms, as well as a resource used by many people making changes towards the VS lifestyle.

In the 1977 report, Elgin and Mitchell detailed what they saw as a growing and significant social movement which had the capacity, over the coming quarter-century and beyond, to change the face of American values, communities, business and culture. They acknowledged that VS was not new, linking its ideals to the Puritans, Thoreau’s Walden Pond, Emerson’s plea for ‘plain living and rich thinking’ as well as to the teachings of spiritual leaders including Jesus and Gandhi. The authors believed the movement was gaining significance and intensity due to contemporary conditions including increasing concern for the environment, dissatisfaction with bureaucracies and businesses alike, and a desire for greater self-determination and personal growth by a large number of Americans (and others internationally):

> The essence of voluntary simplicity is living in a way that is outwardly simple and inwardly rich. This way of life embraces frugality of consumption, a strong sense of environmental urgency, a desire to return to living and working environments which are of a more human scale, and an intention to realise our higher human potential – both psychological and spiritual – in community with others. (Elgin and Mitchell 1977: 1)

Two main types of voluntary simplifiers were identified. The first are described as ‘consisting of a heterogenous group of families and individuals who have taken up simple living following years or decades of active involvement in the mainstream’ whose motivations include leaving the ‘rat race’, personal disillusionment, work boredom, the desire to ‘lead a less plastic life’ and so on. The second group are described as ‘younger, more motivated by philosophical concerns, more activistic, and more given to promoting the VS view’. Characteristics of this second group include: a majority in their 20s or 30s; even numbers of men and women; many single but also many young families; almost exclusively white; from middle-class backgrounds, with high levels of education;
politically independent (uncomfortable with traditional parties); and predominantly urban (although many have a desire to live in small towns or rural environments) (Elgin and Mitchell 1977: 6).

Related to these two groups, two key lifestyles were identified. The first is described as ‘full voluntary simplicity’. This involves people who were at the leading edge of the movement and whose lifestyles were likely to include organised gardening, recycling, natural foods, simple clothing, bicycle riding to work, backpacking, being family oriented, and engaging in meditation or other personal growth behaviours. The second group are described as ‘partial simplifiers’ who act on some but not all of the basic VS tenets. These are ‘scattered through the adult population – probably a greater proportion of them are middle age and middle class, but they are still predominantly white and predominantly urban’ (Elgin and Mitchell 1977: 6). The authors also identified a large proportion of the US population who were not living a VS lifestyle but who were sympathetic to its ideals, as well as roughly 50 per cent who were indifferent or opposed.

Etzioni (1998) presents an account of how downshifting relates to Elgin and Mitchell’s voluntary simplifiers or the simple living movement. He distinguishes between downshifters (who may be wealthy individuals who downsize expenditure somewhat), strong simplifiers (who make significant consumption changes) and holistic simplifiers (who are typically seeking balanced earnings and consumption patterns in the spirit of ‘more for less’ and may also align themselves with the VS movement). Voluntary simplifiers and simple livers tend to be highly supported and form part of a social movement whereas downshifting, in this definition, tends to be more of an individual pursuit.

Schor (1998) distinguishes between ‘income downshifters’ who reduce their hours, income or stop working and ‘spending downshifters’ who reduce their spending. Her focus is upon those Americans who have made both these changes (in the preceding five year period). Like Etzioni, Schor draws a distinction between downshifters and voluntary simplifiers, or people who ‘live simply’: they are on a similar track, but VS is at least one
step further down that track. Schor sees both positions as ‘valid’, each with its own trials and rewards. Voluntary simplifiers, she argues, are rich in cultural and human capital, as well as social capital – or at least social networks that support and reinforce low-consumption choices and behaviours, providing ongoing legitimacy for those who live simply:

[I]t is helpful to think about the difference between downshifters and simple-livers. Downshifters have experienced a change in which time and quality of life became relatively more important than money. They would prefer more of both, but forced to choose, they make a lifestyle change that increases their time and reduces their earnings. Simple-livers, by contrast, transcend that trade-off. They find a (low) level of sufficiency income, beyond which spending more is no longer positive. Indeed, it may well be negative, because it creates ‘clutter,’ stuff that needs taking care of, harms the environment, or alienates them from their peer group. Less is more not only because it allows them freedom, but also because less just becomes more. (Schor 1998: 138)

Empirical investigation of downshifting highlights definitional differences between studies, with numerous variations in conceptualisation and operationalisation. Some studies are more likely than others to include in their categorisation of downshifter those who have adjusted to an initial trigger which may not have been voluntary such as job loss or divorce (Schor 1998; Hamilton and Mail 2003). Other studies do not explicitly limit their definition, but implicitly do so by only collecting data on particular sections of the labour market, notably professionals (for example, Saltzman 1991; Craig-Lees and Hill 2002; Tan 2000, 2004). As noted above, Schor (1998) focuses upon both income and consumption downshifting. In contrast, Saltzman (1991) includes a category who have not made significant reductions but who instead have chosen not to upshift whom she refers to as ‘plateauers’.

Saltzman’s empirical approach differs from much other downshifting research as the focus is upon developing a typology. In it, Saltzman contrasts plateauers with four other downshifter types. These are, first, ‘career back-trackers’ who typically undergo a period
of realisation and sometimes painful decision making as they reflect on their values, work life, aims, life values and aspirations for their future in terms of work and non-work life and who therefore make some of the hardest and most radical changes in their search for better quality of life. Second are ‘career shifters’ who foster flexibility within their professional lives in order to enable diversity, balance between work and non-work life, and change at stages of the life course, such as to provide more time to care for small children or other family members. Third, ‘self-employers’ believe that ‘true happiness and genuine success are achieved only when one has the autonomy to set his or her own course’. Finally, Saltzman identifies the ‘urban escapees’: professionals who have successfully moved from large, stressed urban environments where they had limited attachment to family or community, to small towns or smaller, more manageable cities that enabled a more balanced life.

Despite differences, two common themes emerge in the literature about the core elements of downshifting. First, each definition encompasses behaviour as well as values. In addition to reduced emphasis upon earnings and expenditure, downshifters share a common ethos or set of values which prioritise non-material aspects of life such as personal liberty, spirituality and a sense of ‘authenticity’ over goods and activities associated with consumer based culture. Second, many of the studies suggest there are at least two levels of downshifting, one involving more of a holistic lifestyle change than the other. These ‘degrees’ of downshifting (or related terms) are generally seen as being behaviours and values along the same continuum. A third aspect is also evident: downshifting appears to represent an individual pursuit, rather than forming part of a supported, integrated social movement.

**Downshifting in an age of plenty**

Drawing a direct link between the structural conditions discussed at Chapter 1 and downshifting, Saltzman argues that downshifting has arisen from postwar economic (technological advances, restructuring of the labour market), social (consumer culture, wealth as success, women’s movement and increased female labour participation rates)
and demographic (Baby Boomers and their impact on the labour market) shifts which have resulted in an ideology of work for work’s sake. This ideology prioritises work and the meaningfulness of work to one's life over all other possible ways of measuring success. In terms of their response to these conditions, it is generally argued that downshifters (and similar) are seeking balance in a complex world, rather than opting out of it entirely:

What makes today’s trend different is that downshifters are not dropping out of society, few are living communally, and most are not ideologically motivated. They are smack in the middle of the American mainstream. But they are swimming against a long-standing current of ‘economic progress.’ (Schor 1998: 115)

Etzioni (1998), like Elgin and Mitchell (1977), distinguishes downshifting from the earlier counterculture movement founded on a rejection of the mainstream economy and consumption practices rather than an attempt to find balance between economic engagement and quality of life. Elgin and Mitchell (1977) also distinguished VS from the ‘back to nature’ movement of the time, arguing that it was not incompatible with urban lifestyles, and that although some voluntary simplifiers had migrated to rural areas and smaller towns, most activity was occurring in metropolitan settings. Further, they argue that VS should not be equated with poverty, which they perceived as in many ways ‘the opposite of simple living in that poverty tends to make life a struggle to maintain oneself and provides little opportunity to surpass oneself” (Elgin and Mitchell 1977: 4).

What existing research, discussed below, as well as the findings presented throughout this study indicate is that downshifters attempt to achieve life balance in individual ways, often creatively. In some cases, technology is used to increase work flexibility and to enable households to relocate to areas away from work. In others, downshifters reinvent their work selves to better fit their values. In all cases, they make conscious, informed choices about their behaviour in relation to the way they have defined or redefined their own life priorities (Tan 2000, 2004). Blurring the boundaries between libertarianism and
communitarianism, downshifting can involve a heightened sense of individual responsibility, but at the same time emphasise the importance of community.

In this way, downshifting may relate to other cultural changes such as the emergence of ‘cultural creatives’ (Ray and Anderson 2000) or the ‘creative class’ (Florida 2002). Ray and Anderson (2000) suggest cultural creatives comprise roughly a quarter of the US population, divided into two groups: core creatives and green cultural creatives. Core creatives are seen as the leading edge of the sub-culture, are generally well-educated leading thinkers, and many are writers, artists, musicians, psychotherapists, environmentalists, feminists, alternative health care providers, among other professionals. Green cultural creatives are more ‘secular and extroverted’ and tend to follow the opinions of the core group (Ray and Anderson 2000: 14-15). Like downshifters, cultural creatives, overall, are seen as rejecting or wishing to change many aspects of conventional American life:

They are disenchanted with ‘owning more stuff’, materialism, greed, me-firstism, status display, glaring social inequalities of race and class, society’s failure to care adequately for elders, women and children, and the hedonism and cynicism that pass for realism in modern society. They also reject the intolerance and narrowness of social conservatives and the Religious Right. They are critical of almost every big institution in modern society, including both corporations and government. (Ray and Anderson 2000: 17)

It may be that, despite the pressures associated with late modernity which many downshifters are reacting to, it is paradoxically the societies in which these pressures exist where there is sufficient wealth and a sufficiently broad public safety net which enable downshifting to take place. This argument is in keeping with Sen’s (1985) concept of capabilities, as well as Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs, in which basic human

12 Cultural creatives are contrasted with ‘heartlanders’ (29 per cent) who are conservative and provincial and ‘moderns’ who are the dominant group within the population (47 per cent) and are described as ‘materialistic, egoistic, oriented towards consumption and success and the newest technologies’ (Ray and Anderson 2000: 7-38).
needs must be met before others – such as choices about how to live – can be pursued. It is also consistent with the contemporary focus on lifestyle:

Lifestyle is about the use of leisure time, but it may encompass individuals’ choices about how to allocate their time between different groups of activities, such as work and leisure, as well as choices about household and family structure and the nature of the relationships involved. (Clapham 2005: 16)

Hence, despite variation in the way it is defined, there is broad agreement among commentators that a social phenomenon which can be called downshifting is occurring. Further, all argue that this differs from earlier similar movements, including the ‘drop-out’ counterculture of the 1960s. The argument is two-pronged: that the contemporary context in which downshifting occurs differs significantly from earlier social and economic contexts, and that people’s response to this context also differs from earlier behaviours. As set out at Chapter 1, the context includes work intensification associated with increased consumerism. It also involves the transformation of modern life from one of relative stability and predictability to one in which individuals experience greater risks and are required to become more active agents in shaping their own life trajectories.

Existing downshifting research

Existing Australian and international research informs our understanding of the motivations for downshifting, its associated demographic characteristics, how it is undertaken in relation to work and consumption patterns, as well as how downshifters feel about their life choices. These findings are briefly outlined, before a discussion of key gaps in the existing literature is presented.

Motivations for downshifting

Research evidence indicates a disjuncture between how a sizable proportion of the population would like to live and how they do live. As part of increasing policy and academic interest in the extent of dissatisfaction with contemporary life in the 1990s, the
Harwood Group in the US conducted a survey that led to the 1995 report, *Yearning for Balance: Views of Americans on consumption, materialism, and the environment*. This involved a series of focus group discussions to learn about key concerns affecting Americans, as well as about how to frame these in everyday language. The research emphasises discrepancies between values and lifestyle. Its findings informed the development of the first major survey of downshifting in the US (Schor 1998), which has subsequently formed the basis for research in Australia (Hamilton and Mail 2003; Breakspear and Hamilton 2004) and the UK (Hamilton 2003a), discussed below. More recently, some of these items have been replicated in one region of Australia by Chhetri, Khan et al. (2009) and Chhetri, Stimson et al. (2009).

Four key findings about Americans’ values emerged from the Harwood Group research:

- **A belief that values are ‘out of whack’**. That ‘materialism, greed, and selfishness increasingly dominate American life, crowding out a more meaningful set of values centered on family, responsibility, and community’ and that people express a strong desire for more balance in their lives;

- **Fear for the future because of these values**. This includes concerns about the impact of materialism (now) for future generations;

- **Ambivalence**. ‘Most people express strong ambivalence about making changes in their own lives and in our society. They want to have financial security and live in material comfort, but their deepest aspirations are non-material ones. People also struggle to reconcile their condemnation of other Americans’ choices on consumption with their core belief in the freedom to live as we choose. Thus, while people may want to act on their concerns, they are paralyzed by the tensions and contradictions embedded in their own beliefs. In turn, they shy away from examining too closely not only their own behavior, but that of others’;

- **Concerns related to the environment**. Americans see the environment as connected to these concerns in general terms although their understanding of the link is vague: ‘People have not thought deeply about the ecological implications of their own lifestyles; yet there is an intuitive sense that our propensity for “more, more, more” is unsustainable.’ (Harwood Group 1995: 1-2)
Informed by these findings, in 2003 The Australia Institute (TAI) undertook the first major survey of downshifting in Australia. A small number of related studies had previously been undertaken here (for example, Tan 1998, 2000, 2004; Trainer 1995; Craig-Lees and Hill 2002), yet none provided a broad overview. The TAI survey included 981 persons identified as downshifters and was followed up in further research with qualitative interviews with people who had downshifted. The major focus of the survey (Hamilton and Mail 2003) and follow-up interviews (Breakspear and Hamilton 2004) was on the extent to which downshifting can be understood as ‘post-materialism’ – a rejection of over-consumption in contemporary Australia (Hamilton 2003b; Hamilton and Denniss 2005).

Not surprisingly, the TAI survey results confirm that downshifting is chosen only by a minority of Australian adults, but the results are nonetheless striking. Almost a quarter of respondents reported having ‘made a voluntary decision to change their lives in ways that reduce their incomes and spending (other than retirement)’ (Breakspear and Hamilton 2004: vii). Using a narrow definition (excluding particular groups for whom motivations were deemed ambiguous, discussed below), 23 per cent of adults in the 30-59 age range had downshifted in the 10 years prior to the survey. A broader definition (including all those reporting a voluntary reduction in income and spending) indicates that 39 per cent of Australian adults had done so.13

When asked to nominate the main reason for making their lifestyle changes (from a fixed set of response options, of which respondents could nominate more than one), the most commonly cited was ‘more time with family’ (35 per cent). The next most common reason was a ‘healthier lifestyle’ (23 per cent), followed by ‘more balanced lifestyle’ and

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13 Clive Hamilton, who led the Australian TAI downshifting research, undertook a parallel UK study in 2003. Results indicate that the trend is roughly equally widespread there as in Australia. Using the following question, results showed 25 per cent of UK adults aged 30-59 had downshifted in the preceding 10 years: ‘In the last 10 years have you voluntarily made a long-term change in your lifestyle, other than planned retirement, which has resulted in you earning less money?’ Where those who answered ‘yes’ on the basis that they had stopped work to look after a baby or to set up their own business were included, the proportion of downshifters increases to 30 per cent (Hamilton 2003a). The results indicate very similar trends in UK and Australian experiences of downshifting.
'more control and personal fulfillment (each nominated by 16 per cent of respondents). Small numbers reported that the main reason they had downshifted was the pursuit of either a 'less materialistic lifestyle' (5 per cent) or a 'more environmentally friendly lifestyle' (7 per cent) (Hamilton and Mail 2003: 21).

Tan (2004) compares the motivations reported by downshifters in the Australian, US and UK studies, with results indicating significant similarities across national contexts (see Table 1). For the purposes of the present study, the main difference is the increased importance Australians, as compared with those from the UK and in particular from the US, place upon ‘more time with family’ and ‘more balanced/healthier lifestyle’.

Table 1. Main reasons for downshifting in Australia, US and UK (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Australia</th>
<th>US</th>
<th>UK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More time with family</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More balanced/healthier lifestyle</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More control and personal fulfillment</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less materialistic lifestyle</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More environmentally friendly lifestyle</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/don’t know</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Tan (2004: 19, Table 22).
Notes: Australian percentages include multiple responses which sum to more than 100. Australian figures are reproduced from Hamilton and Mail (2003); US figures are reproduced from Schor (1998); UK figures are reproduced from Hamilton (2003a).

Recently, items from the TAI survey have been included in a quality of life survey of 773 respondents undertaken in South East Queensland (Chhetri, Khan et al. 2009; Chhetri, Stimson et al. 2009). The results strongly support both the extent of downshifting reported in the TAI study as well as the characteristics of the downshifting population, the nature of their related life changes and levels of satisfaction with their lifestyle.

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14 Given that each result includes around 1,000 respondents (Australia N = 981; US N = 800; UK N = 1071), it is likely that when compared directly, these differences would be statistically significant.
choices. There are some differences in the proportion of respondents who nominated each of the listed reasons for downshifting as most important. As in the TAI study, ‘more time with family’ is reported in the Queensland survey as one of the foremost reasons (23 per cent reported this as the main reason), alongside the most nominated reason ‘more control and personal fulfillment’ (nominated by 24 per cent). These two main motivations are followed by reasons such as ‘a healthier lifestyle’ (16 per cent) and ‘more balance in life’ (14 per cent) (Chhetri, Stimson et al. 2009: 352).

The Queensland survey indicates that women are most likely to downshift for family reasons, although a substantial proportion of men also report doing so. Sixty-seven per cent of the 23 per cent of downshifters who indicated they had downshifted to spend more time with family were women. Consistent with the TAI findings, women and all downshifters who nominated family time as a key driver for downshifting were more likely to have stopped work or reduced their working hours rather than to have changed jobs (Chhetri, Stimson et al. 2009).

Chhetri, Khan et al. (2009) and Chhetri, Stimson et al. (2009) develop a typology based on demographic characteristics of respondents as well as key survey items pertaining to the nature of their downshifting experiences, using cluster analysis to identify three groups or types of downshifter in the South East Queensland region: ‘Non-working, mature married women downshifters’, ‘Family-focussed, change-seeking mature downshifters’ and ‘Singles and single parents, eco-centric, disadvantaged downshifters’.

While the first group comprises more women than men, and the second is gender balanced, family life features as a key reason for downshifting in the first two, at least. The first group ‘see downshifting as strengthening family support networks to enable the creation of social capital through social bonding at the family level’ and the second are also motivated by time with family (Chhetri, Stimson et al. 2009: 358).
Who downshifts?

A key finding of the TAI research relates to the apparent diversity of the downshifter population in Australia. Downshifting is not confined to middle-class, middle-aged persons as depicted in popular images of sea change, as discussed below. Rather, respondents from diverse backgrounds, age groups, family types and income levels reported having voluntarily reduced both their income and spending. The TAI results indicate that: men are marginally more likely to downshift than women; downshifters are about equally likely to be in their 30s, 40s or 50s; households with children are as likely to downshift as those without; and slightly more downshifters reside in capital cities than outside of metropolitan areas, though differences are slight (Hamilton and Mail 2003: 15). In contrast, and possibly due to the inclusion of a slightly younger sample, Chhetri, Stimson et al. (2009: 351) find that more women than men downshift (56 per cent compared with 46 per cent).

Despite popular imagery of wealthy downshifters, the TAI results also indicate that downshifting occurs across the income spectrum, as well as across socio-economic groups, when occupational measures are taken into account. Reporting on weighted data representing the narrow definition of downshifting adopted, 28 per cent of those with gross household incomes less than $30,000 in 2002 had downshifted, compared with 26 per cent of those with incomes over $30,000 and less than $59,000 and 21 per cent of those with incomes greater than $60,000 (the top end of the income spectrum may be under-represented as reported incomes are post-downshifting).

Other Australian (Tan 2000, 2004) and US (Schor 1998; Etzioni 1998) research indicates that downshifters are typically well resourced, at least in some ways. Many have higher than average levels of human and cultural capital, although not necessarily financial capital, suggesting the wherewithal to negotiate the complexities of the individualised late modern era in which we live, discussed at Chapter 1. These findings are supported by the South East Queensland survey which indicates post-secondary education is associated
with a higher likelihood to downshift, with 56 per cent having had post-secondary education compared with 44 per cent who had not (Chhetri, Stimson et al. 2009: 351).

Of note for the present study, Chhetri, Stimson et al. (2009: 351) report that downshifters ‘are more likely to comprise couples with children and those in extended family relationships’. Fifty-six per cent of their sample fall into this category. In the same study non-downshifters are found primarily to be single (21 per cent) or in a couple relationship with no children (26 per cent).

Changes associated with downshifting

Downshifting involves internal, psychological change as well as external, behavioural change. Australian research by Tan (1998, 2000, 2004) indicates it is a highly personal process with four key stages. The first is ‘preparation’, in which consideration of leaving the ‘rat race’ is explored. This is followed by ‘impact’ in which the ramifications of any changes made are managed. Third are ‘turning points’ in which many of the issues surrounding downshifting start to resolve. Fourth is ‘emergence’ in which a different lifestyle starts to consolidate (Tan 2004: 12-13). Combined, these stages represent a shift from being tied to the constraints of work to a mindset of lifestyle choice. Tan’s research also shows that the behavioural and structural changes individuals make as they downshift is a process, sometimes taking many years to complete.

Most research focuses on behavioural aspects of downshifting changes, such as engagement in the labour market and consumer spending. In terms of labour market change, the TAI study suggests that downshifting in Australia takes a variety of forms. It typically involves leaving high paying, high pressured jobs for lower paid employment or to pursue small business ventures. These changes were reported to result in losses of earnings in the order of half or three-quarters of previous incomes (although exact dollar amount data about pre- and post-downshifting incomes was not collected). Types of labour market changes include stopping work or reducing hours (more prevalent among women) and changing careers (more prevalent among men).
Distinct differences emerge in the types of changes downshifters make in the labour market, according to their reasons for downshifting. Those motivated by increasing their time with family are more likely to have stopped work or reduced working hours whereas those seeking greater control and personal fulfillment are more likely to change careers, with few stopping work (although as the TAI note, using the broader definition of downshifting, many of this group report having returned to study). The qualitative research that followed on from the TAI survey suggests that at least some of those who make more radical changes to their lives wait until their children are grown or in their mid- to late teens before making changes.

The TAI argue that the increasing flexibility within the Australian labour market has resulted in changes in the way downshifters engage with paid work. Those who had downshifted five to 10 years prior to the survey were more likely to report having changed careers rather than reduced their working hours, whereas recent downshifters (0-five years prior to the study) were more likely to have changed to lower-paying jobs or to have reduced working hours. While not specifically explored within the TAI research or other downshifting literature, it is also likely that among those employed in information and related professions, telecommuting via internet and related technology enhances the capacity for home based work (for example, Wajcman et al. 2009).

The qualitative component of the TAI research indicates downshifting involves significant changes in consumption patterns, approaches to money and the way time is ‘spent’. For many, adjusting to lower household incomes involved adopting an entirely new approach to spending. In addition to reducing ‘luxury items’ such as eating out, taking expensive holidays or buying expensive clothes (including for work), many became what one respondent described as ‘aware buyers’. Summing up the experience of many downshifters from the sample, this included only buying necessities, avoiding shopping centres and avoiding ‘retail therapy’. Much of the change in consumption patterns involved giving up the ownership or purchase of symbols of status that had previously been enjoyed (Breakspear and Hamilton 2004: 16-17). This is consistent with
Schor (1998) who found that even among downshifters reporting anti-consumption sentiment, it was typically a reduction in income that led to changed patterns of consumption.

‘Recapturing time’ is reported by the TAI as being dominant in the lives of most downshifters, with many spending greater amounts of time outdoors and often doing away with the ‘preoccupation of imposing a structure on the day and measuring one’s performance against it’ (Hamilton and Mail 2003: 18). More time spent with family was reported, particularly among those with young children.

The way time is used and conceptualised may relate to patterns of consumption and ultimately to wellbeing. In their detailed study of workers in Germany who had significantly reduced their working hours, Horning et al. (1995) distinguish between ‘time pioneers’ and ‘time conventionalists’. Time pioneers actively and reflexively re-defined their sense and perspective of time, including placing significant value on ‘free time’. Conventionalists, in contrast, reduced their working hours but replaced them with assigned activities such as child care, study and part-time work. A heightened sense of value placed on free time explained the differences in adjustment to patterns of material consumption, status and so forth the total sample experienced following their reduction of working hours. Those who had re-defined their sense of time coped well and were able to adapt their consumer habits relatively easily to accommodate their newly reduced income, whereas those who were conventionalists struggled.

Satisfaction with downshifting

The downshifters surveyed by the TAI were asked to assess their experience by rating how they ‘personally feel about the lifestyle change they made’. Possible responses focused upon the trade-off between money and life satisfaction. Results indicating that an overwhelming proportion of respondents were happy with the choices they had made (88 per cent) are reproduced at Table 2. Only a third report not missing the extra income they previously had at all, with others missing it to varying degrees. Results show a clear
difference between those with and without dependent children, indicating that families with dependent children are more likely to find the loss of previous income difficult, despite being mostly happy with their lifestyle changes.\footnote{These results are similar to the recent South East Queensland findings which indicated 83 per cent of downshifters in that region were happy with the choices they had made (Chhetri, Stimson et al. 2009: 354).}
Table 2. Australian downshifters’ assessment of lifestyle change, showing gender and whether have children (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy with the change and do not miss the extra income at all</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy with the change but miss the extra income</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy with the change but found losing the income very hard</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unhappy with the change</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None/don’t know</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Hamilton and Mail (2003: 24, Table 8).

In the qualitative research that followed the TAI survey, respondents were also asked about the reaction of others to the lifestyle changes they had made. Results show that responses can be mixed, and that not all downshifters receive a high level of support from their social networks for the types of changes they undertake, although some receive nothing but support. Reactions from others include a mix of shock (with many told they must be ‘crazy’, ‘mad’ or ‘nuts’), curiosity and envy (particularly from colleagues) and stimulation (with some reporting that friends or family members had been inspired to make lifestyle changes of their own). Many reported that their personal networks had changed considerably, with the changes ‘sorting out their true friends’ and opening doors to new relationships (Breakspear and Hamilton 2004: 21).

In the US there are widespread support networks, particularly for those who identify with the VS movement. However, downshifting appears to be more of an isolated activity made at individual and household levels. Referring to its extent within the Australian
population, Hamilton and Mail (2003) suggest the isolation felt by many downshifters is ‘isolation within a crowd’ and that publicity about the findings of their research may help support would-be downshifters as well as those who have already made lifestyle changes. With greater recognition of downshifting as a lifestyle option, the TAI suggest:

Downshifters may come to see themselves as normal and levelheaded members of society because they have chosen balanced lives over ones obsessed with material acquisition. Those who are the prisoners of overwork and find themselves beset by stress, ill-health and family strain, all in pursuit of an ever-higher standard of living, may come to be seen as the crazy ones. (Hamilton and Mail 2003: 39)

Limitations in existing research

Despite definitional variation, existing research and commentary around the phenomenon provide insights into what downshifting is, why it is occurring, who downshifters are and how they downshift, but key fields of information are missing from current understandings. These are the fields which the present research is attempting to draw together. In particular, the relationships between downshifting and family life, and downshifting and housing and downshifting and the meaning of home (see Chapter 3) remain underexplored in the literature. This chapter concludes with a discussion of these key research gaps.

Downshifting and family life

Clearly, results from the TAI studies (Hamilton and Mail 2003; Breakspear and Hamilton 2004), the South East Queensland quality of life survey (Chhetri, Khan et al. 2009; Chhetri, Stimson et al. 2009) and related research indicate the importance of family life for many, if not a large majority, of downshifters. ‘Spending more time with family’ and finding better balance in life are the two key reasons nominated for lifestyle changes. Further, downshifters with dependent children are more likely to leave the labour market or reduce their working hours than make career changes, compared with those with no dependent children, yet little is known about how this motivation plays out in the
downshifting experience. To a large degree this is due to the empirical emphasis on work and consumption in existing research, but, it is also due to limitations in research design.

In the empirical research undertaken by the TAI, particular groups of the population were excluded on the grounds that their motivations for downshifting were not clear, including some families. Respondents who indicated they had voluntarily reduced their income to improve their life quality, and whose reasons for doing so included ‘time off to look after a baby’, were excluded from the main part of the study on the grounds that ‘such a change may not represent a deliberate decision to change one’s lifestyle even though it may mean a cut in income’ (Hamilton and Mail 2003: 14). Hence, a group of respondents with small children, including those who do not return to the working patterns they held prior to having children, are excluded from the TAI research. Results of the South East Queensland survey indicate this is around 10 per cent of potential downshifters (Chhetri, Stimson et al. 2009: 353).

Additionally, the TAI research excludes the following groups: students (who may be improving their training in order to earn more), the self-employed (for whom starting a business can involve working harder and potentially earning more income), those who indicated they reduced their income for ‘greater financial independence’ (whose financial circumstances were unclear) and retirees (for whom the reduction of income and consumption is usual).

It is noteworthy that each of these two major surveys in Australia find family life to be of central significance to downshifters, yet do not investigate exactly what this means. In one of the very few studies to touch directly on the relationship between downshifting and family life, Donahoo (2005) briefly details insights into how they intersect, with particular regard to flexibility and ‘transition’ in labour market engagement. Based on a series of interviews with downshifter families in rural Victoria, he makes several key observations: that downshifting offers a way for rural families in particular to contribute to society in a way that is sustainable – not only through labour market exchange but also in terms of community and family input; that it can enable the development of new (also...
sustainable) skills for family members in the domestic sphere such as food production and processing; (in keeping with the results from the TAI research) that it is not only Baby Boomers who are making the transition but also younger, often low income, families with younger children; that current policy systems can be utilised as supports by downshifter families even if the way in which this is done is not the way intended by policy makers (for example, using income support as maternity/paternity payments to assist in the first year of a child’s life); and that moves into flexible ‘transitional’ labour markets by income earners in downshifter families can be an effective way of securing occasional funds (although this is not always reliable).

Many families in Donahoo’s (2005) research reported a commitment to parent and informal community provided child care involving great flexibility in terms of labour force attachment as well as a sound belief in the importance of non-institutionalised care environments for their children. Overall, the results suggest that these beliefs on the part of parents may be one of the most central aspects of the relationship between downshifting and family life. Assessing responses from participants to his research, he poses the following question:

after listening to many downshifters, I have reservations about our belief and trust in our ability to create a level of quality child care that we, as a society, can be happy with. Can paid care ever compete with the level of care provided by a parent? Is it more beneficial for future prosperity for children to be raised by parents and informal community arrangements, rather than institutional care?

(Donahoo 2005: 14)

Donahoo’s research begins to highlight the interactions between family values and preferences, family resources and labour market engagement. It emphasises the care of children as central to the downshifting experience for some families, but the findings are brief. Further, increasingly nuanced understandings about complex patterns of preferences and work-family arrangements relating to mothering, and to a more limited degree fathering, developed as a result of interpretive, longitudinal and cross-national
analyses in the broader literature remain absent from most considerations of downshifting.

Various studies have explored, for example, the preferences of parents, most often mothers but also fathers, in relation to time spent in paid work versus time spent with children and domestic work, as well as the interaction of these preferences with policy frameworks and employment cultures and conditions (for example, Charlesworth 2005; Charlesworth et al. 2007; Glezer and Wolcott 1997; Pocock 2003, 2006). Such studies reveal the difficulties in pursuing desired work-family arrangements in some cases, and have increased understandings of parental preferences.

Catherine Hakim (2000, 2003) demonstrates the existence of multiple preferences among mothers, regardless of class or education, pointing to those who are ‘career oriented’, ‘home oriented’ and – in contrast with traditional notions that women fall in to one or other of these groups – a third ‘adaptive’ group comprising mothers who prefer to combine work and family. These findings and other recent developments are pertinent to understanding the values held by downshifter mothers and fathers in the present study – a group likely to have relatively high levels of education and hence employment opportunity, yet who choose not to maximise the financial advantages of these.

Folbre (2001) and Folbre and Bittman (2004) make important contributions with regard to the way parents may perceive and/or experience reduced working hours in favour of increased family and parenting time, such as associated with family downshifting. In The Invisible Heart: Economics and family values, Folbre (2001) documents the low value given to the caring and loving roles associated with family life within a monetary focused economic framework. The results can include low status, changed identity and substantial financial impacts through foregone earnings. In sum, such studies show that being on the ‘outer’ in this way can have significant implications for other spheres of life. One of the questions addressed in this thesis is what the implications are for housing.
Several authors also cite family relationships, as well as relationships with others such as friends and community members, as being the drivers of high levels of life quality, rather than increased financial wellbeing (Lane 1993; Diener and Biswas 2002). This is consistent with the general pattern suggested by downshifting literature that relationships, rather than money or material goods, are valued most among individuals and families who choose to downshift.

With specific reference to family downshifters, these and other aspects of the interaction between lifestyle choice and lived experience remain unexplored. This includes questions such as which aspects of family life act as motivators for downshifting, how parents weigh up the value of providing their children with greater quantities of time versus money, and how decisions and experiences are played out in the domestic sphere. Are decisions to downshift typically household based and democratic, or do other household members adapt to the choices made by one who downshifts? How does downshifting relate to gender roles, particularly around engagement in paid work and parenting? Is family downshifting a short-term behaviour which occurs while children are young, or does it represent a more sustained values and lifestyle shift?

Addressing questions such as these is fundamental to understanding the ways in which a significant minority of Australian parents engage in labour markets and with other aspects of the social and economic structure, and may also provide insights into the work-family nexus among non-downshifter families.

**Downshifting, housing and home**

There is a disappointing lack of information about the relationship between downshifting, housing and home available in existing research. Indeed, despite a focus upon patterns of consumption, patterns of housing usage and consumption are typically ignored. A small number of studies provide limited insights into the relationship between downshifting and place. As described below, some insights about downshifting and housing mobility can be drawn from the sea change literature, although its applicability for understanding
downshifting is also limited. Despite the increased amount of time downshifters are likely to spend at home, existing literature provides no insights about the nature of the relationship between downshifting and home.

In Australia, Hamilton and Mail (2003) suggest that marginally more downshifters reside in metropolitan than non-metropolitan areas, but that sea change strategies can be an important aspect of the downshifting experience. Unfortunately, neither housing nor mobility were examined in detail in the TAI study. In her earlier US study, Saltzman (1991), discussed above, indicates mobility is an integral part of the experience, at least for some downshifters. The motivations for Saltzman’s fourth type of downshifter, the urban escapees, relate to the financial costs of living including housing affordability, and to working and living in large urban centres as a stressor. Having moved from stressful urban environments, they continue to employ their professional skills, but in a way that enables them to achieve a sense of balance by having a more rounded, fulfilling lifestyle involving non-work pursuits, time with friends, family or community groups and, in some cases, time with nature:

No matter what route they ultimately decide to take, most urban escapees are motivated in large part by the need to re-establish closer ties with community and family. (Saltzman 1991: 183-184)

The extent to which this group typifies downshifters as a whole or can translate into the Australian context remains unknown. Some information about the extent of mobility amongst the Australian downshifting population can be gleaned from literature about the related sea change phenomenon. ‘Sea change’, like ‘downshifting’, is a term which has fairly recently entered Australian popular discourse and has attracted much policy attention, particularly in localities which attract large numbers of new residents (Gurran et al. 2005). The term no doubt gained traction following the highly successful ABC television drama of the same name. In a major study, Burnley and Murphy (2004) provide insights into how the concepts of downshifting and sea changing intersect. This

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16 *SeaChange* was a popular Australian Broadcasting Corporation program that ran for 39 episodes between 1998 and 2001, depicting the lifestyle change of ‘Laura’, a city magistrate who moved to a small town to start a ‘new life’. See: http://www.abc.net.au/seachange/homeflsh.htm.
presents the most detailed account of sea change migration within Australia as well as a useful typology of both localities and households.

Sea change, according to these authors, does not necessarily involve a literal move to coastal Australia, although often this is the case. Rather, Burnley and Murphy use it as short-hand for what they describe as ‘turn-around’ locations – locations away from urban centres that have seen high levels of growth through in-migration since the 1970s, marking a shift from the population in those areas in the years immediately prior:

[T]he term ‘sea change’ is used in a metaphorical sense to connote people making a fundamental change in their lifestyles, in some cases such shifts are accompanied by relocation to certain favoured non-metropolitan areas. Many who leave cities move literally to the coast; many also shift to non-coastal areas (especially areas within striking distance of the bigger cities), but often have the same motivations as people moving to the coast. (Burnley and Murphy 2004: 3)

Like the downshifters identified in the TAI research, Burnley and Murphy also report that there is a high degree of diversity among sea change households and provide a typology of what they see as being the main sea change population groups. First, they draw a sharp distinction between free agents who relocate voluntarily to areas they perceive as being more attractive than urban areas, and forced relocators who, as the name suggests, have fled urban centres due to various constraints, such as prohibitive housing costs. The authors note that there is some ambiguity about this distinction (acknowledging that people who may be perceived as moving voluntarily may themselves believe that, for example, housing costs have contributed to their move), but they see the distinction as nonetheless a useful one.

Free agents, according to this categorisation, include retirees who have been a driving force in turn-around localities for decades: ‘retirees represent a small but significant part of the ageing and mature-aged population of the cities, but have a larger demographic effect in sea change localities, where the population base is relatively small’ (Burnley and
Murphy 2004: 35). Some return to areas they grew up in or had lived in previously, others move to areas they had become familiar with through holidays or day trips.

By far the largest group of free agents, however, are of working age. By the turn of the century – the time of Burnley and Murphy’s research – these made up approximately 70 per cent of all in-movers to turn-around locations, obtaining the advantages of cheaper housing and high levels of amenity, and their numbers were increasing. They cover the socioeconomic range from professionals to labourers, as job opportunities arise out of the needs of retirees and tourists.

Forced relocators, in contrast, have low household incomes, typically in the form of income support payments. They include unemployed, single parent families and disabled persons. Drawing on unpublished data from the Department of Family and Community Services Longitudinal Data Set, the authors report that:

Over a recent 12 month period, Australia wide, around 11 000 unemployed people moved from the cities to non-metropolitan areas and around 5000 single parent households did so. (Burnley and Murphy 2004: 39)

Other sea changers identified include periodic populations (weekend residents or tourists – who may become full-time sea changers), gentrifiers (households moving to turn-around localities and renovating old, cheap housing into more expensive real estate) and interstate movers (who move to places they have a sentimental attachment to, for example, from holidays, such as people moving to Tasmania). Again, there may be ambiguity between categories, but the distinction is useful in drawing attention to different types of migration patterns and effects.

Clearly, downshifters may fall anywhere along this spectrum of sea changers – however, not all sea changers will be downshifters. Some of the downshifting population will fall into another category of free agents Burnley and Murphy (2004: 37) describe as ‘alternatives’. This category includes capital ‘A’ alternatives who are noticeably ‘hippy’ and are embedded within networks of like-minded people who may share an anti-
materialist outlook, value the environment and so on, and small ‘a’ alternatives who may look mainstream but who, on closer examination, share many of the post-materialist values of other alternative lifestyler s. Other downshifters will more closely resemble some other groups of households moving to sea change locations (coastal or otherwise).

A key point of distinction between downshifters and sea changers is that not all downshifters relocate geographically. Additionally, while they may be a highly heterogenous group that is difficult to define precisely, common to all downshifters is a focus upon life quality rather than income and earnings. Not all sea changers will share the views of downshifters about life priorities. Some will continue to work in high pressure, high income employment from their new locations, whereas for others (particularly early retiree Baby Boomers) the move will involve little or no loss of income due to previous wealth creation.

Further, while the sea change literature is useful in identifying some key patterns of relocation downshifters, of various types, may engage in, it does not inform our understanding of housing change in the absence of geographic mobility. Clapham (2005), for example, draws our attention to some ways the relationship between housing and householders may change within the same dwelling, discussed further at Chapter 3. Changes can occur, for example, through variations to household composition such as marriage, divorce or the arrival of children, or via changed tenurial rights such as the paying out of a mortgage or purchase of formerly state owned public housing dwellings. In the present study, lifestyle changes are expected to impact on the relationship between family downshifters and their housing and homes, whether or not they move.

Hence, despite insights from sea change literature, the relationships between downshifting and housing, and between downshifting and home, remain key knowledge gaps. Downshifters’ experiences of housing as well as their ‘housing strategies’ will be influenced by current housing structures and systems, as well as by their own values and preferences. Problems of housing affordability discussed at Chapter 1, and the desire for simpler lifestyles, mean that they are likely to reside in rural and regional settings as well
as metropolitan locations and that, for at least some, relocation as well as changes to patterns of housing consumption may be integral to the experience. The locations downshifters move to may reflect those of the broader sea change population, but the extent to which they are represented in any of the core sea change locations is unknown.

Furthermore, the lifestyle choices downshifters make, the values underpinning them and the way these manifest within the home lives of downshifter families remain unexplored within existing literature. As will be seen at Chapter 3, there is a rich, multidisciplinary literature about ‘home’, concerning the way life is lived at home and its meaning to households. It is likely that reduction of income, as well as the relatively high volume of time away from paid work among at least some downshifters, will impact upon what is affordable at home, as well as the ways time at home is used and experienced. As an important facet of housing experience, the home lives of downshifter families form one of the empirical foci within this research.

In sum

Drawing heavily on the review of existing research above, throughout this research downshifting can be understood as a lifestyle, chosen in response to the constraints and opportunities of late modern society. Within a downshifting lifestyle, agency can be exercised, often creatively, in line with the values and priorities underlining it.

While definitions vary, existing research indicates that the concept of downshifting appears to describe a genuine social phenomenon and presents a useful tool for understanding lifestyle choices in the present study. It involves behavioural and psychological elements, including reduced emphasis on money and consumption and increased prioritisation of life quality. US literature suggests there are degrees of downshifting (and related behaviour) along a continuum, with those making more minor adjustments to lifestyle at one end, and holistic downshifters or simplifiers at the other. Those at the high end also appear to have highest levels of support.
Empirical research in Australia confirms downshifting includes behavioural and psychological components as per international studies. It also suggests that the downshifting population is diverse, possibly reflecting the continuum found in the US (although the downshifting population has not been studied in this way in Australia). Further, while research in the US indicates that downshifters tend to be resourced, at least in terms of human and cultural capital, some Australian research suggests they may be represented across the entire population spectrum. Differences in culture and history between the US and Australia also indicate that in Australia downshifting appears to be more of an individual pursuit, often undertaken with limited or no support (in contrast with the highly networked US voluntary simplicity movement).

Existing literature indicates that downshifters may reside in metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations, with more in urban than non-urban settings. However, mobility can be part of the process of downshifting. Literature describing the related sea change phenomenon indicates the types of locations people, possibly including downshifters, move to are coastal and as well as non-coastal areas, particularly those providing access to major metropolitan centres. What is less known is how downshifting relates to either family life, apart from indications of the importance of family time and the centrality of children, or to downshifters’ housing and home experiences— the foci of this research.

The understanding of downshifting developed through existing literature is operationalised in this research using a broad approach (see Chapter 4). In particular, in order to fully explore the experience in relation to housing and home, few assumptions are made a priori about the nature, motivations or behaviours of downshifters included in this study. Rather, these are explored through the research process. This approach marks a departure from some previous research, including that undertaken by the TAI (Hamilton and Mail 2003). Importantly, no families are excluded on the grounds of ‘ambiguity’ (for example, relating to maternity leave). Following the approach of Saltzman (1991), the present study also includes downshifters who have opted to always follow a modest, simple life, rather than pursuing other ambitions and then ‘backtracking’. Finally, it includes those who have jumped and those who were pushed.
That is, downshifting for the present study does not distinguish eligibility according to the degree of voluntariness to downshift. Those who have embraced downshifting as a result of a perceived forced change as well as those who have chosen it with more apparent freedom are included. It is anticipated that the broad, inclusive approach taken will enable a nuanced analysis of the downshifting phenomenon, with particular regard to the relationships between family life, housing and home.
Chapter 3
Downshifting as a new housing ‘problem’

As seen at Chapter 2, downshifting can be understood as a highly reflexive lifestyle choice, typically involving a questioning of mainstream norms and behaviours and often involving the creative exercise of agency to restructure daily life according to a conscious set of values and priorities. As discussed at Chapter 1, this can include profound changes to family and working lives. While housing forms the backdrop to these changes, setting the scene for the way they are played out domestically, little is known about how downshifting relates to either housing or home. This chapter focuses on housing experiences and how these might be understood in the present study.

The chapter begins by conceptualising the relationship between downshifting and housing. Dominant approaches to understanding the relationships of households to their housing decisions and experiences are discussed, including traditional approaches as well as more recent developments. It is argued that while each of these has merit, in order to understand the relationships between downshifter families, housing and home, a research approach is needed which investigates the meanings attached to housing and home by household members themselves. The chapter concludes with a review of select literature which informs on approaching and understanding two of the research questions addressed: how downshifting among families relates to housing experiences; and how downshifting, among the same households, relates to the meaning and making of home. Key insights of relevance to the present study are identified.

The ‘problem’ with downshifting

Lifestyles explain ‘what people do, why they do it and what doing it means to them or others’ (Chaney 1996: 4). People use lifestyles to explain aspects of their identity and affiliation and make lifestyle choices reflective and supportive of their identities, which can be denoted and/or ‘read’ through patterns of consumption (Chaney 1996: 12).
According to Giddens (1991: 81), a lifestyle can be understood as a ‘more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfil utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity’. Conceptualised as a lifestyle choice, downshifting may be reflected in the housing and home lives of downshifter families, in numerous ways.

By definition, downshifters question normative priorities and behaviours in order to reach the best fit between their priorities and circumstances. An implication is that they may also be rewriting usual, normative relationships with housing and home. The relationship downshifters have with their housing and homes may or may not, for example, conform to mainstream ideals associated with Australian housing such as home ownership, suburban or urban living, or upward socio-economic mobility via tenure or dwelling change. Downshifting, as discussed at Chapter 2, also involves a focus on quality of life. With regard to housing, this could mean downshifters value aspects of housing or location not typically included in analysis of housing choices such as environmental concerns or a focus on family living. Relatedly, downshifting appears to involve a high level of reflexivity and control asserted by individuals and households about the way they live. This control might be expected to form an important aspect of downshifters’ housing choices, although how this might manifest is to be explored.

Additionally, reduced incomes associated with downshifting will affect the capacity of at least some families to negotiate choices in Australia’s unequal housing market where affluence is typically associated with private ownership and other tenures are typically viewed as residual. As was seen at Chapter 2, there is also a diversity of downshifting style and types. In addition to variation in housing circumstances based on differential income and wealth levels, this may relate to other factors and also be reflected in a variety of housing aspirations and experiences among downshifter families.

That housing might be expected to be affected by downshifting is consistent with recent assertions that it is increasingly significant as a reflection of lifestyle. Clapham (2004, 2005), for example, argues that within late modernity housing is increasingly perceived
by households as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself. The ‘end’ in this case is lifestyle and identity, whereby housing increasingly reflects lifestyle choices.

These claims are supported in some recent research and are, to a large degree, the focus of the present study. In their analysis of housing change in Australia, Beer and Faulkner (2009) conclude that housing careers are increasingly complex and varied and that lifestyle factors contribute to this. Arguably, they also lie at the heart of some other factors identified as influential, most notably, changed partnering and child bearing patterns:

[H]ousing transitions in 21st century Australia have become more complex both at the level of the individual and society as a whole. There are now more pathways through the housing market – and greater diversity in their depth and direction – than previously. Many factors have contributed to this change including declining marriage and fertility rates; institutional change; the ageing of the population and the associated phenomenon of increased life expectancy; the buoyant economy; movements in the housing market; growing rates of participation in higher education and an increasing tendency to link housing to broader consumption – and lifestyle – aspirations. (Beer and Faulkner 2009: 18)

Housing and home

The way in which downshifting as a lifestyle choice is reflected in the housing experiences of downshifter families is explored in two separate analyses in this research. The first concerns the ways downshifters negotiate the housing system, including the tenure choices they make, the types of dwellings they live in, their residential mobility and the locations in which they reside. The second way in which the downshifting-housing relationship is explored is via a focus on the way downshifter families live within their housing to make their home lives meaningful, including the key influences and factors affecting this relationship. The distinction drawn here is somewhat artificial, as housing and home are integrally related, but is also useful for emphasising differing aspects of the downshifting-housing relationship.
The relationship between home and house is treated differently according to disciplinary emphases as well as cultural and historical influences. An important contribution in the sociology of housing is made by Saunders and Williams (1988) who, drawing on Giddens (1984), distinguish ‘household’ from ‘housing’ from ‘home’ using the concept ‘locale’. Following Pahl (1984), it is the household, they suggest, that is the most basic unit of society through which relationships of consumption and production can be analysed (Saunders and Williams 1988: 82). Housing, or dwellings, are the physical sites in and around which social action occurs, a place ‘invested with special social meaning’.

Drawing on Giddens, home is conceptualised as a ‘locale’, ‘simultaneously and indivisibly a spatial and a social unit of interaction’ (Saunders and Williams 1988: 82).

This distinction is consistent with that drawn by other housing researchers. Dovey (1985: 33) also conceptualises a house as an object, ‘part of the environment’ and contrasts this with ‘home’: a ‘relationship between people and their environment’. Housing and home can be conceived of as being in a permanent although changeable state of interdependency and iterative meaning. Following Arias (1993: 1), housing and home influence one another, whereby use ‘gives meaning to housing, and at the same time meaning guides how housing is used’.

Following the logic of both Dovey (1985) and Saunders and Williams (1988), ‘housing’ in this study includes the physical sites and dwellings around which social action occurs, but can also be broadened to include analysis of the negotiations, motivations, aspirations and preferences that have led households to occupy these physical dwellings, as well as the nature of the dwellings themselves: the legal, tenurial rights households hold with regard to their dwellings; the style, type and quality of dwellings; and the locations in which dwellings are situated. ‘Home’, in contrast, focuses on social relationships, actions and activities around and within these dwellings which generate meaning for household members living within them.
Interpreting the social experience of housing

To understand the relationship between downshifter families and their housing and home experiences, various research approaches can be used, each founded in its own assumptions about the motivations of households and ways in which they navigate the housing system.

_Housing experience as careers or histories_

In Australia the social experience of housing has typically been studied via survey or census data, using one or more of a collection of approaches concerned with household progression through a series of steps or stages in the housing system. Most commonly, these steps have been conceptualised in terms of either ‘housing careers’ or ‘housing histories’. Sometimes, one or both has been linked to the ‘life course’ (and formerly ‘family life cycle’)\(^\text{17}\) concept, thereby drawing explicit links between changes to housing with labour market and/or demographic changes experienced by the household. These studies borrow heavily on demographic methods and are typically undertaken using cohort analyses (or similar) in which individuals are grouped together according to their birth year within statistical analyses based on survey or census data, and their experiences then typically compared with the experiences of another birth year cohort, in recognition that housing experiences are likely to also be influenced by age and historical context (Winter and Stone 1999; Baum and Wulff 2003; Beer et al. 2006).

Baum and Wulff (2003) describe housing careers as focusing primarily on housing tenure, and of being a framework which conceptualises tenure circumstances in terms of a ladder, whereby households begin at the lowest rung (leaving home, and typically moving into private rental) and moving upwardly throughout their lives to reach the top, home ownership. Housing careers are thus founded firmly in a normative view of housing

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\(^{17}\) The ‘family life cycle’ concept referred to stages involved in partnering, child rearing and leaving home and was heavily based in normative behaviours (Mayer and Tuma 1990). See also Baum and Wulff (2003: 4-5) for discussion.
whereby progressions from the parental home to rental to home purchase and outright ownership are positive, and other moves negative. Relating housing careers to life course events, (Baum and Wulff 2003: 5) assert that ‘the former is generally related to traditional moves through the life course – getting married, having children –, while the latter are generally associated with failed life course transitions – divorce or breakdown of relationship’.

Beer et al. (2006) emphasise the linkages drawn between housing careers and labour market careers as well as the family life course, with individuals conceptualised as simultaneously moving upward along the three careers. As Saunders has described, aspirational households are perceived as having housing careers equivalent to their employment careers, with more successful workers also attaining home ownership. In this way, housing careers have been linked to debates about property classes (see, for example, Saunders 1984 and Beer et al. 2006 for discussion). In the Australian context, these debates are also linked to residential mobility. In his influential studies, Kendig (1981, 1984) explored motivations for residential mobility, finding the win-win situation of residential moves made by home owners where long-term residents could gain benefits in property values over time, with more mobile successful employees gaining from rapid purchase and resale of property.

Conceptualised as such, the housing career is firmly rooted in an individual maximisation framework in which individuals and households exercise a great deal of agency, or free will, in their housing choices. In this framework:

the decision to make a housing career move is dependent on the costs and benefits of the move, together with the resources needed to make the move. In the case of a move from rental to owning, a move will be made when the balance between benefits and costs of owning outweigh those of renting. Moreover, whether a preference will be met will depend on the availability of resources. Considering the impact of the life course on these decisions, on balance the benefits and costs of different tenure combinations will differ between households and these will change over the life course. (Baum and Wulff 2003: 6)
The concept of ‘housing histories’ provides an alternative framework, this time far more grounded in external conditions other than life course factors which influence the housing circumstances of individuals and households. Once again, the focus is on housing tenure. As discussed by Beer et al. (2006: 9), Forrest has been particularly influential in the way housing histories have been conceptualised and researched (for example, Forrest 1987; Forrest and Murie 1991). A key difference between this framework and that of housing careers is that structural, institutional conditions are seen as having substantial impact on the position of individuals and households within any given local housing system.

With this emphasis, Beer et al. (2006: 11) assert that housing careers and housing histories frameworks are ‘diametrically opposed concepts in many respects’, despite sharing many commonalities in assumptions and practical approach. Whereas housing careers emphasise freedom of choice within the housing system, which households will negotiate upwardly wherever possible, housing histories emphasises the structural constraints on housing circumstances, underplaying the extent of agency involved in housing change. Beer et al. (2006: 11) also assert each approach is useful, as ‘[i]ndividuals act according to their free will and attempt to satisfy their personal needs and wants. They act, however, within a range of limiting constraints, which may proscribe the outcomes available to them.’

In short, each of housing careers, housing histories and similar approaches is useful in that each, from differing perspectives, enables analysis of key events and circumstances, conceptualised through the category ‘housing tenure’, typically via analysis of secondary survey or administrative data. To varying degrees, each approach enables analysis of the relationship of key housing events and circumstances to other aspects of life, such as labour market and family change.

However, each has significant limitations in its capacity to inform upon the relationship between downshifters, housing and home. Most fundamentally, both the housing careers and histories approaches rely heavily on universal assumptions about households’
motivations for housing and locational change. Typically, the maximisation of wealth or status is assumed. Given what is already known about the population of downshifters, it is unlikely these same assumptions are able to account for changes in the housing circumstances of downshifter families who are more likely to be driven by other priorities related to life quality.

Additionally, one aspect central to each of the careers and histories approaches is the reliance on housing change and mobility and/or geographic mobility as a point of analysis. One or various forms of objectively observable housing change are the events studied, around which analyses of other events, such as labour market or family change, are undertaken. This reliance on mobility and housing change is problematic for understanding downshifting. As set out at Chapter 2, some but not all downshifting is likely to involve housing relocation and/or change of tenure. In other cases it is likely that the way family households live within their existing dwellings will change as a result of a reprioritisation about how to live. This is likely to affect the relationship downshifter family members have with their housing and homes, yet may involve no objectively observable change at all.

Each of these traditionally dominant approaches focuses on the objective circumstances of households, with regard to their position within the housing system. They do not include a focus on the home lives within these housing circumstances. Differences in the motivations, experiences and ways of living within apparently similar housing circumstances (using measures such as tenure) are not accounted for at all by these approaches. Rather, alternative approaches able to examine the meaning and construction of ‘home’ are needed to explore this aspect of downshifters’ housing experience.

In addition to these limitations, which are specific to the present study, are criticisms directed at both the careers and histories survey based approaches as well as other research examining the social experience of housing based on administrative data. Most notably, Kemeny (1992) has been very critical of assumption based housing research as well as what he terms an atheoretical approach found in much administratively based
housing research. This type of research, in which administrative records have been used as data in government funded and directed studies, has typified much research undertaken in relation to traditional housing ‘problems’. Kemeny’s criticisms are described in detail and find support elsewhere (for example, Marston 2004; Clapham 2005; Atkinson and Jacobs 2008), and have been highly influential in changing the way much current research is conducted.

In response to the limitations of traditional approaches to understanding the social experience of housing, there has been a recent and energetic re-analysis of traditional housing ‘problems’, as well as the pursuit of ‘new’ types of problems associated with late modernity. These approaches are strongly influenced by sociological theory. Examples relevant to understanding downshifter families’ experiences of housing and home within the present study are described next.

Towards an understanding of downshifters’ housing experiences

To understand the relationship between downshifters’ lifestyle choices and their housing experiences, an approach is needed which takes account of the meanings attached to housing and experiences of it by householders themselves. Traditional approaches based on survey methodologies, such as housing careers and housing histories, can inform upon only part of this story: there is likely to be a high degree of variation, questioning and ‘rewriting’ of housing experiences among downshifters which these methods cannot reveal. Similarly, while the focus on discourse and the construction of meaning within a social constructionist approach mark a departure from traditional approaches, these, too, are limited for the purposes of the present study.

In this section, two potentially fruitful lines of inquiry, each based in the meanings households themselves attach to their housing experience, are described. The first outlines an approach for future research, whereas the second draws upon conceptualisations and empirical exploration of aspects of housing experience likely to be
significant for downshifter families, and others, with respect to their housing motivations, decisions and experiences.

*Housing pathways*

Recently, David Clapham (2002, 2004, 2005) has proposed what he calls a ‘housing pathways’ approach. At its essence, this emphasises subjectivity as a means of overcoming the application of universal assumptions about housing preferences, and limited awareness of housing dynamism, as well as the multiple meanings of home associated with earlier research frameworks. As described, ‘in order to understand the fulfillment that housing provides, it is necessary to employ a framework that places the subjective nature of the meanings held by households at the centre of the analysis’ (Clapham, 2005: 17) and, following King (1996: 23-24), presents a personalised view of housing.

Clapham presents a comprehensive summary of the need for a subjective approach, able to overcome many of the limitations of traditionally dominant approaches to the social experience of housing based on positivist, survey based analyses, proposes ways forward. Thus in many ways the pathways approach is not entirely new. It draws upon the long-and well-established traditions of ‘housing careers’ and associated concepts discussed above, yet makes a significant departure from these by positioning at its centre a household’s subjective assessment of its housing circumstances.

The approach also borrows heavily from the work of Giddens as well as others concerned with issues of power. In drawing upon Giddens’ work, in particular, concepts such as risk, life planning, time and space, as well as others such as lifestyle, identity and power, are brought together with traditional housing research concepts such as housing careers. In doing so, traditional approaches are expanded to potentially enable a far deeper understanding of, among other things, the relationships between the meaning of housing and lifestyle choices in late modernity (or postmodernity, in Clapham’s terms).
Fundamentally, the housing pathway approach can be understood as ‘patterns of interaction (practices) concerning house and home, over time and space’ (Clapham 2002: 63). It is a continually changing set of relationships and interactions, which it experiences over time in its consumption of housing (Clapham 2002: 64). Research undertaken with this perspective is not normative; no universality about housing preferences, motivations, behaviours or experiences is assumed. Hence, one of the most important implications is a recognition that there may be extensive variation in household experience of housing, despite occupying objectively similar positions in the housing market. This point is critical for the present research in which the housing pathways of downshifters may or may not deviate from the broader population:

Households will travel along a particular housing pathway over time. Sometimes the pathway will be a motorway and they will be travelling along with many others. However, there will be junctions at which choices have to be made and part of a journey could be along a small track not often frequented or even involve marking out a new trail. Nor does the journey necessarily lead to the same or even any predetermined destination. Travellers can travel in hope or enjoy the journey for its own sake. Neither is any destination necessarily further forward than the starting point. Journeys can be regressions or vary in direction. They may be straight or meander indeterminately. (Clapham 2002: 65)

Clapham (2005) also makes the highly pertinent point that the nature of housing experience can change even where no tenure change or geographic mobility is experienced, representing a sharp departure from either the careers or histories approaches. The types of changes experienced by households can be explored through subjective methods but would likely remain ‘invisible’ in research based in traditional approaches. Exploring ‘invisible’ housing changes is of interest in the present study. Among downshifter families it is likely that lifestyle changes associated with having children and the processes involved in downshifting itself will significantly impact upon the relationship family members have with their homes, even where this involves no objectively measurable housing change.
Finally, Clapham (2005) proposes that the concept of ‘life planning’ can be incorporated into the housing pathways approach. Life plans, according to Giddens (1991: 85), are ‘the substantial content of the reflexively organised trajectory of the self. Life planning is a means of preparing a course of future actions mobilised in terms of the self’s biography’. Clapham sees life planning as a linking tool, useful for integrating various aspects of life and the extent to which these are deliberately ‘managed’. The concept can be used to explore the extent to which life spheres are consciously ‘managed’ and how this ‘management’ relates to housing decisions and experiences. This approach, in which a high degree of agency and reflexivity about housing and home on the part of households is assumed, or at least recognised as a possibility, is of relevance to the highly reflexive nature of downshifting, discussed at Chapter 2.

Clapham (2002: 61) aligns the housing pathways approach with social constructionism. The constructionist approach distinguishes between objectivist and subjectivist or ‘realist’ and ‘constructionist’ research (and policy). As Clapham describes, the field of housing research informed by social constructionism is diverse, yet shares a focus on situated interaction (2005: 19). In large part, the surge in housing research undertaken within a social constructionist framework has concerned the interaction of households and the state (for example, Jacobs et al. 2004a, 2004b; Arthurson and Jacobs 2006; Manzi and Jacobs 2008). Within this body of work there has been a strong emphasis upon power relations, which has fuelled the emphasis within this strand of research on symbols and in particular upon language, defined as a system of vocal signs, as producing and reproducing unequal power based relationships or systems in relation to housing (Jacobs and Manzi 1996; Jacobs 2006).

Employed within a housing pathways approach, social constructionism can illuminate the interactions and symbols which give meaning to householders’ experiences of housing and their experiences of home. Arguably, however, the housing pathways approach need not be limited to the social constructionist tradition and is equally applicable to research undertaken using other approaches, such as interpretivist, grounded methods. Within an interpretivist framework, housing pathways can be explored through a focus on the
meanings held by households about their own pathways, and their experiences of these, rather than necessarily focusing on the systems of meaning and discourse which shape these meanings (see Chapter 4 for discussion).

Various authors have questioned the linkage Clapham draws between his approach to social constructionism (Bengtsson 2002; King 2002) and/or the aspects of structuration theory he also draws upon (for example, Somerville 2002). The emphasis upon social constructionism within Clapham’s articulation of the way the housing pathways approach can be applied is arguably influenced by the relative dominance of the constructionist approach within subjectively oriented housing studies at the present time, discussed above (see, for example, Jacobs and Manzi 2000 and Kemeny 2004 for discussion).

When aligned with an interpretivist perspective, Clapham’s articulation of the housing pathways approach is highly relevant for the present study. Fundamentally, the approach places at its centre the subjective meanings held by households themselves about their own experiences. It makes explicit the assumptions that there are no universal motivations driving housing choices and that households will experience aspects of housing and home in ways related to their unique histories, current circumstances and lifestyle choices. The approach recognises that meanings surrounding housing and homes can change in subtle or profound ways which may or may not relate to observable changes in housing or location and that households may be highly active agents in their housing and home relationships. The practical implication is that research must seek to understand meanings gleaned from households themselves, rather than relying upon ‘objective’ measures derived from either secondary survey data or administrative sources.

*Ontological security*

In addition to the possibilities offered by the pathways approach, one notable field of inquiry to have emerged about the relationships between households and their housing draws together concepts such as control, freedom and privacy all of which have been related to the umbrella concept of ontological security.
In his elaboration of risk society (see Chapter 1), Giddens (1984) identifies ontological security as an emotional state rooted in the unconscious, which provides a sense of order in the world for individuals. This sense of security is based in trust, routine and the rituals of everyday life primarily in the private sphere, and developed particularly during early childhood. Dupuis and Thorns (1998: 27) describe ontological security in simple terms as ‘a sense of confidence and trust in the world as it appears to be’ and ‘a security of being’. Giddens argues that in late modernity, where the nature of relationships has changed from face to face contact with known others, to ones based on impersonal and abstract systems, ontological security is threatened. Linking ontological security to housing, he asserts that the private realm is a place where people’s basic security systems can be restored (see discussion in Dupuis and Thorns 1998: 27).

Extending Giddens’ argument that the private sphere is linked to ontological security, Saunders (1984, 1990) and Saunders and Williams (1988) have drawn theoretical and empirical links between ontological security and housing, as a site of constancy and security in late modernity, which have been elaborated by Dupuis and Thorns (1998). Saunders (1984, 1990) suggests that some forms of private world are more likely to facilitate a sense of ontological security than others. Specifically, he argues that it is through the control and security afforded by home ownership that a sense of ontological security can be developed and maintained. In this housing tenure, individuals can feel ‘in control of their environment, free from surveillance, free to be themselves and at ease, in the deepest psychological sense, in a world that might at times be experienced as threatening and uncontrollable’ (Saunders 1990: 361).

Extending the relationship still further, Dupuis and Thorns (1998) have operationalised the ontological security concept with regard to housing, for empirical study. They also argue that what they term a ‘search for ontological security’ can be seen as a form of social action, ‘shaped and constrained by the particular framework or setting in which it

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18 Giddens took this concept from R. D. Laing (1960) who, in the context of people with schizophrenia, suggested the need for a sense of continuity and constancy in everyday life (ontological security) to enable a stable mental state. See Hulse and Saugeres (2008).
occurs’ (1998: 30). With particular regard to home ownership, they argue that ontological security for householders is maintained when four conditions are met:

- Home is the site of constancy in the social and material environment;
- Home is a spatial context in which the day to day routines of human existence are performed;
- Home is a site where people feel most in control of their lives because they feel free from the surveillance that is part of the contemporary world;
- Home is a secure base around which identities are constructed (Dupuis and Thorns 1998: 29).

An important aspect of this field of research for the present study are the direct linkages drawn between housing and control. Control, as set out at Chapter 2, relates strongly to the capacity of downshifter families to consciously and reflexively organise their lives according to their own life priorities. It is also likely that security itself – including the sense of security provided by control – is significant for downshifter families, just as it is for other households. Downshifters are likely to benefit from ontological security in the ways outlined by Giddens (1984) and others. It may also be that the potential security afforded via housing and home may take on increased significance where other aspects of their lives are in a state of flux, brought about through the process of downshifting itself.

Dupuis and Thorns (1998) use a subjective, qualitative approach to explore the nature of these four elements in the meanings held by elderly New Zealand home owners as well as in some domestic practices relating to them. The analysis is heavily couched in terms of the following concepts which, they argue, contribute to a sense of ontological security among their sample: familiarity, permanence, continuity, privacy, security, stability, financial security and investment. Their research strongly endorses Saunders’ (1990) and Saunders and Williams’ (1988) emphasis upon ownership as the type of household-housing relationship which best supports ontological security.
Similar findings emerge in the Australian context. In their review of home ownership aspirations, for example, Baum and Wulff (2003: 5) find that numerous Australian surveys demonstrate that ‘on the whole factors such as security of tenure, increased levels of privacy, freedom and having an appreciating asset all rate highly in the mindset of owners’ (see also Burgess and Skeltys 1992). Similar factors are identified in qualitative research. Noting studies undertaken by Stevens and Hassan (1990), Richards (1991) and Winter (1994), Baum and Wulff (2003) identify the concepts of ‘security’, ‘permanence’ and ‘financial investment’ as strongly relating to home ownership, the first two of which directly mirror Saunders’ (1984) and Saunders and Williams’ (1988) conceptualisation of the relationship of housing to ontological security.

Housing security is linked to a host of non-housing benefits, including improved educational and health outcomes (Bridge et al. 2003) and general wellbeing (Cummins et al. 2006). Factors such as control over housing, and the ontological security that flows from this, contribute to the dominance of home ownership in Australia.

Within Australia, research consistently indicates home ownership is the housing tenure of choice (Wulff 1993; Baum and Wulff 2003). This is borne out in official statistics which indicate that the historically high rates of private ownership have continued in recent years, despite the increased problems of affordability described at Chapter 1 (Yates and Milligan 2007). The extent to which home purchase and ownership dominate the Australian housing system and individual household experiences of housing consumption is well documented elsewhere (see Stevens et al. 1992, Burgess and Skeltys 1992, Beer et al. 2006 and Baum and Wulff 2003 for discussion). The pertinent point to note is the relevance of the ontological security concept for understanding these preferences in the Australian as well as UK and New Zealand contexts.

Financial gain can be linked to both ontological security and home ownership. While not generally associated with ontological security in the housing literature, real or perceived financial gain via housing can relate to a sense of wealth building and financial security, likely to increase an overall sense of ontological security. As mentioned, financial gain is
one of the factors Australians consistently cite as underlying their preferences for private home ownership (Baum and Wulff: 2003), in addition to factors such as control. It is likely that the experience of building household wealth via housing consumption contributes to a heightened sense of psychological security for households who hold housing equity relative to those with little or no housing based wealth. Certainly, low levels of financial wealth are associated with heightened insecurity, at least for some households (Burke and Pinnegar 2007; Hulse and Saugeres 2008).

In a recent and direct exploration of this relationship in a study of expectations of self-provisioning in retirement, Ong (2009: 26) concludes that ‘an increase in housing equity has a significant impact on expectations of being primarily self-funded in retirement’ and that this finding ‘provides some support for the argument that home ownership, though a form of illiquid wealth, leads to ontological security and a general sense of well-being’. Given their voluntary reduction of income and reduced emphasis upon consumerism, just how important financial aspects of housing are for downshifter families is unknown and is to be explored within the present study.

It is, however, anticipated that downshifter families’ capacity to control the extent to which their housing and home relationships reflect lifestyle preferences will be of significance for them, potentially contributing to an overall sense of ontological security. Burke and Hulse (2009: 8) make an important point about the way Australian lifestyle preferences and preferences for home ownership intersect: Australians ‘have not aspired to ownership per se, but to ownership of a detached dwelling in suburbia with all its ability to wrap around it a specific and highly seductive lifestyle’. These or alternative aspirations are likely to influence downshifters’ housing decisions and experiences. These lifestyle preferences and associated ways in which leisure time is experienced are likely to affect the way ‘home’ is made and experienced among downshifter families, discussed below.

For downshifter families, housing and location may be important. As set out at Chapter 2, many hold strong environmental values, for example. It may be that the capacity of this group to live in a house of a particular environmentally sustainable style or type as well
as in a particular type of location (for example, in rural areas, associated with sea change or tree change) may contribute to their sense of control over their housing and hence to the degree of ontological security they feel. Following Bourdieu’s (1984) influential work on distinction, the housing and housing locations downshifiers occupy may also denote – to themselves and others – the lifestyle choices they have made, including the display of difference and/or personal resistance to normative cultural understandings (Williams 1984, 1987; Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen 2004). Such expression may be conspicuous or routine (Shove and Warde 1998; Gronow and Warde 2001; Shove 2003).

The perceived benefits of housing – security, control, financial wealth, lifestyle – are generally most strongly associated with home ownership in Australia as well in the UK context where Giddens and Saunders were writing, and in the New Zealand context in which Dupuis and Thorns are situated. Hence, home ownership has become synonymous with these aspects of the experience of home within housing research as well as, arguably, within the cultural norms related to housing systems in each of these sites.

Recent research, however, raises questions about whether the factors underpinning ontological security necessarily relate to tenure (particularly home ownership) and whether the same types of perceived benefits can be achieved via alternate means within the housing system (Mee 2007; Hulse 2008). Hulse (2008) argues that tenure is a ‘taken for granted’ category whose meaning to households and the way they occupy, buy and sell their properties is questionable, given a highly differentiated housing market and an accompanying diversity of lived experiences. In a large-scale qualitative study of housing insecurity among lower income households in public housing, or renting privately and in receipt of housing assistance, conducted by Hulse and Saugeres (2008), this point is explored further. Results indicate that, for this group at least, it is security rather than ownership per se which is significant in terms of housing choices and preferences. Related to security are housing quality, comfort, privacy and safety (Hulse and Saugeres 2008: 13).
The important point for the present study is that it may be that downshifter households are able to develop a sense of housing based ontological security, even where traditional choices about housing and home may be questioned.

In sum, ontological security has been identified as a central, umbrella concept to understanding households’ experiences of housing. It has been closely linked to preferences in the UK and New Zealand for home ownership and is arguably equally applicable in the Australian context. Of relevance for the present study, control of housing is identified as one of the key factors contributing to a sense of householders’ security. As discussed above, control, for downshifter families, is likely to include the capacity to express lifestyle choices through aspects of their housing, including housing type and location. Additionally, ontological security may relate to housing based financial gain. How important this aspect is for downshifter families remains unknown. Finally, recent research raises questions about the capacity for households to achieve ontological security via non-ownership based forms of housing. This, also, may be relevant to understanding the housing experiences of downshifter families where alternatives to home ownership are chosen.

Towards an understanding of downshifters’ experiences of home

The second key aspect of downshifter families’ housing experience being explored in this research concerns home. In contrast with the discussion above of housing pathways and the example of ontological security, there is a well-established multidisciplinary field of research which can inform upon the way the relationship between downshifters and the way they live at home might be researched and understood.

In recent years, questions of the meaning of home have attracted much interest across a range of disciplines. Mallett (2004) provides a critical overview of these, including sociological, historical and architectural approaches among many others, and incorporating a wide array of methodologies. As Mallett (2004: 62) indicates, it is now generally agreed that ‘home’ is a multidimensional concept, the understanding of which
can benefit from multidisciplinary research. The various approaches from within and between disciplines present myriad understandings:

[T]he term home functions as a repository for complex, inter-related and at times contradictory socio-cultural ideas about people’s relationship with one another, especially family, and with places, spaces, and things. It can be a dwelling place or a lived space of interaction between people, places, things; or perhaps both. The boundaries of home can be permeable and/or impermeable. Home can be singular and/or plural, alienable and/or inalienable, fixed and stable and/or mobile and changing. It can be associated with feelings of comfort, ease intimacy, relaxation and security and/or oppression, tyranny and persecution. It can or can not be associated with family. Home can be an expression of one’s (possibly fluid) identity and sense of self and/or one’s body might be home to the self. It can constitute belonging and/or create a sense of marginalisation and estrangement. Home can be given and/or made familiar and/or strange, an atmosphere and/or an activity, a relevant and/or an irrelevant concept. It can be fundamental and/or extraneous to existence. Home can be an ideological construct and/or an experience of being in the world. It can be a crucial site for examining relations of production and consumption, globalisation and nationalism, citizenship and human rights, and the role of government and governmentality. Equally it can provide a context for analysing ideas and practices about intimacy, family, kinship, gender, ethnicity, class, age and sexuality. (Mallett 2004: 84)

Perkins et al. (2008) suggest that it is precisely because of these multiple perspectives, as well as the role that home plays in the construction of identity and meaning (Perkins et al. 2002), that qualitative methods are required to explore and interpret the meaning of home. This is consistent with the argument above for the need for interpretivist housing research to explore the relationships between downshifters, housing and home:

Home-related research therefore requires an understanding of the subjective experiences of housing and neighbourhood and the social, economic and regulatory forces that influence those experiences. A qualitative methodology is very appropriate for such research because it allows researchers to capture and
combine elements of subjective everyday experience with wider structural considerations. (Perkins et al. 2008: 36, original emphasis)

It is not the aim of this section to explore these extensive ways home can be conceptualised. Rather, it discusses select examples of (primarily) qualitative research which offer insights into how the relationship between downshifters and their homes might be understood and explored. Unlike in the two previous sections, there is a rich and growing literature about the meaning of home which provides examples of the types of factors associated with meanings relating to the concept and how these can be explored.

**Factors affecting the meaning of home**

Existing, subjectively grounded research has identified, both theoretically and empirically, various ways in which homes hold meaning for households. Ontological security, discussed above, is closely associated with a ‘sense of home’ as well as with the aspirations and motivations regarding housing, discussed above. It is anticipated, that for downshifters in this study, a sense of security will relate to family relationships as well as housing, and the way these relationships are played out within particular dwellings will be important to the ways in which home life meaning is constructed and experienced.

In their empirical exploration of the links between ontological security and housing, Dupuis and Thorns (1998) draw these factors together: ontological security, family life and home. They investigate how a subjective, qualitative approach can be used to explore the meanings held by a particular sub-group with regard to their homes, as well as to inform upon the domestic practices relating to these. Findings of their research identify ontological security as integral to the meaning of home. One of the factors found to contribute to this sense of security is family life. Here, the ordinary routines and rituals associated with family living contribute to the notion of ‘making a house a home’. Time is also emphasised in these findings. Households bond, in various ways, through routines and rituals with their dwellings, over periods of time. As described by one respondent to their study: ‘When you move into a house a home grows as the family grows and it grows
with you because you own it’ (Dupuis and Thorns 1998: 31). Linking family life closely
with home ownership in their findings, the authors sum up its importance as follows:

The two factors most commonly cited as part of the process of home creation
were home ownership and family. In fact for almost all our respondents the
connections between ownership, family and home were so deep that they went
unquestioned. (Dupuis and Thorns 1998: 31)

Dupuis and Thorns’ (1998) findings support Gurney (1996) who emphasises that
‘emotion work’ including family, intimacy and love are the main avenues through which
people make sense of their homes. As argued by Oakley (1976: 65), ‘family’ and ‘home’
are sometimes interchangeable terms. Relatedly, a recent stream of research uses
ethnographic methods and phenomenology to explore the ordinary routines of everyday
life and how these relate to both the physicality of houses or dwellings and to meanings
of home. Gronow and Warde (2001) and Shove (2003) argue that much research about
housing consumption focuses on conspicuous consumption at the expense of the majority
of consumption, which is routine (Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen 2004). Shove et al.
(2007) explore the uses of ordinary household objects and systems in day to day domestic
routines, including the way energy uses features in home life (Shove and Warde 1998).19

Home based production, a corollary to consumption, is another form of regular or routine
social action which ‘makes’ a home. Chevalier (2005) reports on its significance to
domestic life in modern Bulgaria where the production of one’s own food strongly relates
to identity and social standing. In Australia, academic authors such as Ted Trainer (1995)
discuss it as part of a broader environmentally sustainable way of life. However, it is
primarily non-academic literature which provides rich accounts of the way domestic
production of food, clothes, furniture, toys, technology and so on relates to the way
people live and to their relationships to home. Lifestyle magazines such as Grass Roots,
Earth Garden and ReNew enable readers and ‘experts’ to share their experiences of
productive home based living.

19 See also the current (2008-11) research by Elizabeth Shove on climate change and everyday life, at
http://www.lancs.ac.uk/staff/shove/transitionsinpractice/tip.htm.
In addition to the importance of ontological security, family life and family related activities for the meaning of home, other research identifies physical elements of the home, the historical and spatial contexts in which homes are experienced and the locations in which they are situated as influencing the nature of home life. Each of these may be relevant in the meanings surrounding the home lives of downshifter families.

First, the physical aspects of a house, a home, will influence the way households live in a dwelling as well as their responses, both routine and emotional, towards it. Various styles of housing across cultures and history are testament to this (Arias 1993). Again relating to the importance of the home-family relationship, housing styles reflect and in turn influence dominant norms about the way family life and gender roles are conducted (Roberts 1991). At times in Australia and elsewhere, for example, kitchen spaces have been either ‘hidden’ or built as central social spaces within a dwelling (Goffman 1971). Relationships between generations, similarly, are influenced by parenting ‘fashions’ and in turn shape the way children and their parents interact within their own homes, sharing spaces in some eras and deliberately separated by ‘living zones’ in others, for example, the current emphasis upon the ‘parents’ retreat’. Saunders and Williams (1988) describe this socio-spatial relationship in the following terms:

[T]he physical and spatial character of the home is a constitutive element in the reproduction of social action. This is true both in terms of the dwelling itself – whether it is a house or flat – and in respect of its wider environment, for the setting of the home is itself invested with social significance. (Saunders and Williams 1988: 83).

In some cases, research illustrates how households define their own spaces in terms of how they wish to live at home. In her analysis of small homes in Northern America, Solomon (2006) explores the ways small dwellings shape domestic life, concluding that in many cases households are highly conscious of, and active agents in, the ways they use space. As a result, a strong sense of attachment to home can develop. This comes about through actively creating or recreating spaces as well as through negotiating relationships
with family or other household members in small areas. In many of the cases, children happily lived in small, shared spaces while they were young. Some chose to continue to do so during adolescence whereas others sought increased privacy (Solomon 2006: 198).

Similarly, owner building, sometimes referred to as self-provisioning, offers another route through which households can input significantly into the design of their own homes and potentially shape a home to fit a household, rather than fitting a household – and the interactions between its members – into a predetermined physical form. This is a recurring theme throughout articles submitted to Australia’s main owner builder forum, the Owner Builder magazine. As Dingle (1999) concludes, a renewed interest in owner building in Australia during the 1970s and 1980s cannot be explained by cost savings alone. Similar findings are reported elsewhere. In a survey of Scottish owner builders, for example, 40 per cent listed dissatisfaction with the characteristics of the houses available in the market as being important to their decision (Clapham et al. 1993).

Physical elements of home life can extend beyond residences. Perkins et al. (2008) extend the spatial scale of social relationships affecting home life beyond the immediate home dwelling. In their New Zealand research, home is conceptualised as being nested within a series of spatially based relationships, extending outwards from the physical dwelling to the neighbourhood, city and so on, to include both national and global contexts (Perkins et al. 2008: 41). In this way, proximate and broad social structural influences on the processes and practices of ‘home making’ could be considered.

Other research shows how a combination of normative and individual choices can play out within a household-home relationship. Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen (2004: 25) conclude that a house can hold competing meanings simultaneously and that ‘both modern and late-modern structures influence housing consumption’. On the basis of their qualitative analysis of the meaning of home in Scandinavia, they conclude that, in late modern society, social structures still heavily influence the outside of a home in terms of housing style, size and location. A high level of flexibility, identity construction and
individuality are also found in relation to the way the inside of housing is ‘consumed’ and expressed (Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen 2004: 25).

Related to this point, a further important finding arising from Dupuis and Thorns’ (1998) research is that factors contributing to ontological security stemming from housing will be context specific. For example, the security felt by elderly New Zealand home owners with regard to their housing was argued to be, at least in part, amplified in response to hardship and insecurity experienced by this group and/or their parents in the Depression and World War II and to changes to the national psyche resulting from it. Respondents draw a distinction between themselves and younger generations in relation to their sense of home, raising the question of how changed patterns of work and home/non-home world interactions affect the sense of home held by other groups.

Hence, in support of Saunders and Williams (1998), Dupuis and Thorns highlight the need to contextualise research about the meaning of home both spatially and historically. As described above, in Australia, as in New Zealand, home ownership is dominant and is likely to influence perceptions held by householders about their homes, among both those who are owners and those who are not (Baum and Wulff 2003; Wulff 1993).

Also in support of Dupuis and Thorns’ (1998) findings, the large field of research about the meaning of place indicates that the site in which homes are situated also influences the meanings of home. Places can stigmatise or denote affluence (Peel 1995; Saunders 1984). Some places and spaces are associated with ‘lifestyle’ (Salt 2004; Urry 1995). Closely linked to a sense of ‘home’, places can also signify belonging (Easthope 2004). All of these examples concern the relationships of householders to others and to locale (Giddens 1984). As Clapham (2002: 64) argues, the meaning of home can relate to the social meanings and relationships associated with this consumption in different locales. This can include interaction with neighbours and others in the wider geographical area:

Home is a place but it is also a space inhabited by family, people, things and belongings – a familiar, if not comfortable space where particular activities and relationships are lived. (Mallett 2004: 63)
Place may influence meanings of home through the notion of ‘time’. In her ‘timespace’ research, Shaw (2001) investigates the central thesis that changing place can facilitate a change of pace. In keeping with Giddens’ (1991) concept of life planning, referred to above, she asserts that locational shifts can be undertaken as a way of managing the life course, of gaining control over life pressures and of ‘taking responsibility for the self’: ‘Physical moves … ease people in to new identities and stages of life, both practically and imaginatively’ (Shaw 2001: 129). Focusing on family life, Shaw asserts such strategies enable life stages to be undertaken at their ‘appropriate’ pace and that these vary across the life course.

Shaw argues that these types of coping strategies or styles of ‘time management’ stem from ‘the battle for time’: the uneasy coexistence of pre-industrial, task oriented and rhythm based time and inflexible, ordered industrial time. Retracing well-documented histories of the development and dominance of industrial time (for example, Cross 1993 and Chapter 2), Shaw describes the social construction of time and how industrial time now largely determines the nature and quantity of personal, family time or non-work time. This battle, she asserts, has led to a yearning, a longing for ‘more time’, the ‘culture of complaint’ (as the subjective experience of the pace of life and change moving too fast) and to personal searches for coping strategies.

Shaw’s argument is consistent with Harvey (1996) who, with regard to those seeking to establish non-work based time, asserts:

[T]he search for emancipation from social control instills the desire, the longing and in some instances even the practices of searching for a space ‘outside’ of hegemonic social relations and values … Spaces ‘on the margin’ become valued spaces for those who seek to establish differences … That metaphorical longing has been translated into action through the formation of Utopian communities, communes in far-away lands, migration. The search for what Foucault calls ‘heterotopia’ – a space of liberty outside of social control – becomes a living
proof of how vital spatial ordering is to the actual practices and institutions of a power-laden social process. (Harvey 1996: 230)

Influenced by these and similar ideas, notably Giddens’ analysis of time and space, Clapham et al. (1993) distinguish between three types of time in which housing pathways are structured/related to housing: individual time (how old the individual is), family time (the stage of the family life cycle) and historical time (focusing on analysis of prevailing social, political and economic conditions). As discussed above, family life is likely to be influential for the way downshifter families, who form the focus of the present study, live at home. The historical context in which the household-home relationships between downshifters and their homes are taking place, described at Chapter 1, will also affect housing options and home lives. Each of these temporal factors may influence the ways households construct and experience their own home lives. Relatedly, Perkins et al. (2002) suggest the extent and uses of leisure time at home also impact upon how home lives are lived and experienced.

In short, there is a rich and diverse multidisciplinary literature regarding the meaning of home. As the examples indicate, this literature highlights several key aspects of the relationship households have with their houses of potential relevance for the present study, which can contribute to the making and meaning of home. Research which explores the subjective experience of housing highlights the importance of: ontological security and family life, including household routines and rituals; the physical dwelling; the surrounds, including within the property; and context – historical, temporal and spatial.

In sum

This chapter has focused on the ways downshifter families’ experiences of housing and home can best be conceptualised and understood. It has been argued that the questioning and potential diversity associated with downshifting, understood as a lifestyle choice, represents a problem for, or poor fit with, the traditional approaches to understanding
householders’ aspirations and experiences of housing, outlined at the beginning of this chapter. As a consequence, the housing circumstances and experiences of downshifter families cannot necessarily be ‘read’ from usual social science indicators, nor understood using methods based upon assumptions about household motivations. Developments within the field of housing research based on social constructionism, whilst important in their own right, also have limited value for the present study.

The inherent questioning of norms and priorities and diverse ways in which associated preferences may manifest in downshifter families’ housing and home decisions and experiences instead suggest the need for a research approach in which the subjective meanings, views and experiences of households themselves is taken into account.

Focusing on the two aspects of housing experience of interest in the present study – the experience of housing and the meaning of home – a review of select literature in which households’ subjective experience is emphasised has been presented. The housing pathways approach articulated by Clapham (2002, 2004, 2005) has been identified as enabling the kind of insights required to understand the diversity of housing experience, flux within household-housing relationships and divergence from mainstream experience anticipated within the present study. A review of research linking the concept of ontological security to housing experience also indicates this may be a relevant line of inquiry, due to its focus on both control and, relatedly, the capacity of households to express lifestyle choices through numerous aspects of their housing experience.

With regard to the meaning and making of ‘home’, the second aspect of housing experience being explored, there exists a vast, multidisciplinary literature. Due to its intimate nature, home has long been explored using a variety of approaches in which the subjective views of householders themselves are given primacy. The construction of home is also linked to ontological security, as well as to a host of relational, physical and contextual factors able to be explored within the present study. The methods that support the way these and other aspects of downshifter families’ housing and home experiences are explored in this research are outlined at Chapter 4.
Chapter 4
Research methods: ‘Beyond the front door’

In this chapter, the research approach used in the present study and its theoretical underpinnings are described, the research design and fieldwork process outlined and the approach to analysis explained. As in all research, chosen research methods are integrally related to the questions being addressed, their theoretical assumptions, the nature and quality of ‘answers’ illuminated through the research process, as well as the contribution the research makes to its field (Mills 1959; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Merton 1968; Kemeny 1992; de Vaus 2002). In this chapter, the benefits and limitations of the particular application of research methods in the present study, including their implications for interpretation of findings, are discussed.

The research approach

To understand the relationship between downshifting as a lifestyle choice and housing experience, the perspectives and meanings held by downshifters as well as their own interpretation of their experiences are explored. Typically referred to as ‘grounded’ (Glaser and Strauss 1967) or interpretivist qualitative research, this approach to the study of social life is used to understand how downshifter families experience housing and how they go about the making of home. The assumption underlying this research is that the perspectives and meanings held about downshifting and family life shape the housing experiences of downshifter families and are in turn shaped by them.

Interpretivist qualitative research is typically associated with symbolic interactionism. Flick (2002) identifies symbolic interactionism ‘concerned with studying subjective meanings and individual ascriptions of sense’ as one of the three key theoretical traditions within qualitative research, and contrasts it with ethnomethodology ‘interested in routines of everyday life and their production’, and structuralist or psychoanalytic positions ‘starting from processes of psychological or social unconsciousness’ (Flick
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2002: 16). Drawing on Blumer (1969: 2) he describes the basic assumptions underlying symbolic interactionism as, first, that individuals act towards things on the basis of the meanings the things have for them, second, that such meanings arise from social interactions with others and third, that these meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretative process used by individuals in relation to the given thing under investigation (Flick 2002: 17):

The consequence is that the different ways in which individuals invest objects, events, experiences etc. with meaning form the central starting point for research. The reconstruction of such subjective viewpoints becomes the instrument for analysing social worlds. (Flick 2002: 17)

Within this research, an attempt is made to arrive at valid, reliable concepts based upon the information provided by downshifter families about their experiences and meanings, and to develop hypotheses, or theory, about how these concepts interrelate under various circumstances. In this way, the project differs from qualitative research in which data is presented to ‘speak for itself’ only, without researcher interpretation. It also differs from qualitative research in which accurate description alone is presented although it is hoped that, throughout the analyses presented here, the data both speaks for itself and is accurately described as part of the theory building process. Rather, throughout Chapters 5, 6 and 7 analyses contribute to the process of theory building. A grounded theory is one that:

is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. One does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge. (Strauss and Corbin 1990: 23)

The different epistemologies underlying quantitative and qualitative research methodologies are well documented (for example, de Vaus 2002; Flick 2005; Rubin and
Rubin 2005). To summarise, quantitative research is widely regarded as being positivistic, but well suited to providing certain types of factual, descriptive information. It is often contrasted with qualitative methods that are perceived to provide ‘rich data about real life people and situations and being more able to make sense of behaviour and to understand behaviour within its wider context’ (de Vaus 2005: 5). Quantitative or positivist research is useful in its ability to explore patterns of characteristics across large population samples, but positivist methods are inherently limited for addressing questions concerned with the construction and experience of meaning, including for housing research, as outlined at Chapter 3. Rubin and Rubin (2005: 30) argue that positivists ‘often ask questions that have complex answers using techniques that allow only simple responses’. In contrast, the strength of qualitative or naturalist research lies in its capacity to gain insights into meaning construction and the factors influencing this.

That the focus of the present research is upon the meanings held by household members and the daily practices related to these, informed by the broader structural and cultural context, is in many ways consistent with Giddens’ structuration theory (1984) where the focus is primarily upon the behavioural or ‘social practices’ in which individuals, as agents, participate. More than other theories related to lifestyle and consumption, for example, Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of distinction, Giddens also includes within structuration theory the capacity of individuals to change their life course, to alter their trajectories through changing their actions. Structuration is a complex theory, but many aspects of it are relevant and consistent with the approach taken in the present research. Its key aspects are recounted succinctly by Spaargaren and Van Vliet (2000):

Individual behaviour and its underlying reasons, interests and motives, is studied in the context of social practices situated in time and space and shared with others. Beliefs, norms and values regarding … action are therefore not assumed to exist in a ‘social vacuum’ … but in a context. They are analysed as the rules which ‘belong to’ a specific social practice that is shared with others. The (relative) power of the actor to change the course of action is specific for a certain context too, depending on the resources that are implied in the reproduction of social practices. Within structuration theory, rules and resources together
constitute the structures that are involved in the reproduction of social practices.

(Spaargaren and Van Vliet 2000: 53, original emphases)

Famously, within structuration theory Giddens attempts to do away with the hard distinction traditionally drawn in sociology between agency and structure or ‘micro’ and ‘macro’. Instead, he introduces what is termed the ‘duality of social structure’ which asserts that ‘on the one hand actors are “forced” in their actions to draw on existing rules and resources. In such cases, structures are “media” in the sense that they enable a human actor to act. On the other hand these structures are in turn confirmed and reinforced by the actors’ very actions. In this sense, structures are both media and outcomes of human action’ (Spaargaren and Van Vliet 2000: 54). Rather than focusing on either agency or structure within research, an ‘institutional’ analysis emphasises reproduced rules and resources in individual behaviour. In an analysis of what is termed ‘strategic conduct’, as in the present study, emphasis is upon settings of interactions and of practices. Described again by Spaargaren and Van Vliet (2000: 54), the ‘focus turns to actors’ use of structures, the knowledge they use to monitor their actions and to the resources they can mobilise to do so’.

This focus on daily practices is also to some degree compatible with Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of ‘habitus’. Habitus is complex but, put very simply, is concerned with the inculcation of structures and experiences into ‘natural’ daily practices and beliefs held by individuals. While the present study focuses on daily practices and subjective meaning, greater attention is given to individual agency than typically attributed to Bourdieu. Both structuration and habitus offer ways of understanding the daily practices, subjective meanings and lived experiences of individuals, with reference, in varying ways, to societal structures which shape them and, particularly in Giddens’ work, are shaped by them.
Interpretivist housing research

The sub-title of this chapter, ‘Beyond the front door’, highlights the methodological underpinnings of this research. As discussed at Chapter 3, within the field of housing studies a perceived over-reliance upon quantitative methods and government sponsored research has been heavily criticised in recent years as leading to an under-theorised interpretation of housing systems and the meanings attached to housing by those residing within it (for example, Kemeny 1992; Jacobs and Manzi 2000; Clapham 2005; Fopp 2008). In response there has been a shift towards approaches exploring changed societal conditions associated with late modernity, which place greater focus on subjective meaning:

One criticism of much housing research (and policy) is that it has stopped at the front door, treating the household like a black box that responds in predictable ways to external stimuli. The difficulty is that, in practice, the responses are not always predictable and vary considerably between households. Therefore, it is necessary to go beyond the front door and attempt to understand how different households understand the world and why they act as they do. (Clapham 2005: 37)

To understand the relationships between downshifting, housing and home, the analytic approach taken in the present study positions at its centre the meanings held by households about their housing. This interpretivist approach marks a sharp departure from traditional approaches to the study of housing occupancy and contributes to a growing body of research which seeks to understand patterns of housing consumption and change through the insights of household members. Informed by critiques of traditional approaches and development of new approaches discussed at Chapter 3, the approach taken in this research is interpretivist, informed by symbolic interactionism, and is broadly consistent with the approach taken to understanding housing experience elaborated within the housing pathways approach (Clapham 2005).
The approach taken in this research also differs from Clapham’s (2005) articulation of the pathways approach, at least in so far as he aligns it to the social constructionist tradition, and much other research undertaken in the growing field of social constructionist informed housing research.

The key difference between the approach taken in this study and one informed by social constructionism is that it is the meanings held by households in relation to their housing and homes which are the focus of investigation. While linguistic systems and shared understandings through language which contribute to these meanings (the terrain of social constructionism) form part of this picture, it is not these systems per se which are the central point of analysis here. Rather, the present research contributes to the newly emerging field of interpretivist housing research which has thus far simply been ‘missed’ in housing studies:

Today, 30 years after the first flowering of the constructionist social problems perspective, now that at last constructionist research is being carried out on housing problems its trajectory has so far been the opposite to that of constructionist social problems. That is, it began its career with post-Foucauldian discourse analysis and only recently has begun to show signs of being influenced by symbolic interactionism ... The theoretical awakening of housing research which began with the new urban sociology and has exploded in the last decade or so has so far quite simply missed the influence of constructionist social problems based on the study of interpersonal – and indeed intrapersonal (reflective, self-examining) – interaction, a grounded theory approach and the use of in situ contextualised data collection and analysis. (Kemeny 2004: 63, original emphases)

Research design

To a large degree, the exploratory nature of this research defines the research methods used to undertake it. As set out at Chapter 1, the research questions aim to provide new insights into a series of relationships not previously studied in depth. As discussed above,
the nature of these questions lend themselves to subjective, interpretivist qualitative research, informed by symbolic interactionism. That little is known about the relationships being studied also has practical implications for the design of the research and the way respondents are sampled, as well as the way data is collected, analysed and presented in the form of findings. No data bases within Australia exist which could inform upon these relationships nor about how best to sample respondents from the downshifter population.20 As a result, the sampling strategy is broad and diverse, seeking to recruit a meaningful number of downshifter families within the parameters of the present study. These parameters, along with the characteristics of the sample upon which this study is based, are discussed below.

**Family households**

The present study is based upon the exploration and analysis of meanings held by adult members of downshifter families, or households, about their downshifting experience, and how it relates to family life and housing. As discussed elsewhere, ‘family’ and ‘household’ are conceptually distinct though inextricably linked in practice (Clapham 2005). Families are generally understood as involving blood, marriage or emotional ties, whereas a household unit is a descriptive term for patterns of dwelling consumption (Clapham 2005: 39). Difficulties in implementing these definitions in a research context arise due to the complexities of how family life and households manifest in reality, including how the concepts do and do not overlap temporally and spatially.

The concept of ‘family’ has been heavily contested during recent decades. Family life, its role in the socialisation of children and maintenance of a moral basis of society as well as a working culture has been championed by ‘traditionalists’ on the Right side of politics (Murray 1984; Saunders 2000), spurred on by its apparent decline (Fukuyama 1999).

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20 The TAI generously made available to the present study unpublished results of its ‘Downshifting Study’ conducted in December 2002 by Newspoll. Many of the results of this survey are published in Hamilton and Mail (2003). Unfortunately, the survey excluded many families with young children and did not include housing or residential mobility variables. The data does, however, provide an indication of metropolitan and non-metropolitan rates of downshifting, as well as rates in Victoria vis-à-vis other states and territories, discussed below.
From another viewpoint, there has been no family decline. Rather, family diversity and its recognition within legal and welfare systems has increased (Smart 1997). From this politically Left stance, divorce, for example, concerns the construction of two households and negotiations between these where children are concerned, rather than being an indicator of a decline in the importance of family life within society (for discussion of competing views, see Hughes and Stone 2003, Clapham 2005).

The importance of these debates for the present research and for housing studies more broadly lies in understanding the implications of changing patterns of family life for patterns of housing consumption. Clearly, not all households are ‘families’ comprising adults and dependents, and not all include people related to one another through blood, marriage or emotional ties. Nor can any given household include all members of a family, when definitions of family are broadened to include de facto relationships, extended families, families-in-law, families of choice and so on. The specific research questions addressed here are not concerned primarily with the ways in which definitions of family align with and diverge from those of the household. While this would be a worthwhile, though difficult, exercise, it is beyond the bounds of this study.

Throughout this study, ‘family’ and ‘household’ are used interchangeably unless otherwise indicated. Respondents have been chosen where they are members of a specific type of family with a shared housing experience. A mix of traditionalist and diversity approaches is adopted. The study is traditionalist in that all participating family households include at least one parent and at least one dependent child under 18 years of age, who together form a household. Hence, families with no children (single or coupled) are excluded from the study. It is also diverse in that no other family parameters were specified in the sampling frame. Participating families include: households in which two parents are present, some of whom are married, some of whom are not; sole parent headed families; ‘blended’ or reconstituted families; as well as families in which ‘shared care’ parenting arrangements are in place (in which children do not reside in the household 100 per cent of the time).
While the housing experiences of other downshifters such as single persons, couples with no children, groups of unrelated adults or families with older children each represent valid and interesting topics for future research, it is beyond the bounds of this research to explore them here.

The rationale for this family focus is twofold. The first relates to the apparent importance of family life for downshifting found in previous research, and the lack of research investigating why and how this is so. As shown at Chapter 2, family life has been identified as the primary reason for downshifting among most Australian downshifters (Hamilton and Mail 2003). It has been found to affect the ways they make changes to their lives (for example, those with dependents adopt different patterns of labour market engagement than non-parents) (Tan 2000; Hamilton and Mail 2003) and yet there has been no direct exploration of the meaning of family life for downshifting, nor how it manifests and is played out in the downshifting experience either in Australia or elsewhere, with some important though small exceptions (for example, Donahoo 2005). 21

The second rationale for the family focus of this research relates to life stage and the patterns of engagement families have within labour and housing market systems related to this. While the loosening of traditional structures associated with risk society, discussed above, has meant the ordering of key life events, such as partnering, entry to home purchase and child bearing, has changed (Winter and Stone 1999), life stage remains a strong predictor of housing aspirations and experience (Wulff and Baum 2003). During child rearing years, many Australian families are purchaser owners of their properties, with some living in the private rental market and a small proportion living in public housing or in other circumstances. As discussed above, intense working patterns are increasingly required to support these housing preferences. How downshifter families who reduce their engagement in the labour market negotiate their housing circumstances remains unknown.

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21 Other research provides insights into the types of ways family life can affect work and lifestyle choices (e.g. Probert and Murphy 2001; Hakim 2003).
Sampling strategy

Informed by the review of literature at Chapter 2, the aim of this study was to sample up to 50 members of downshifter families from whom to gather detailed information via qualitative interviews, to address the research questions set out at Chapter 1. Within the sample, several restrictions were imposed and sampling was undertaken purposively to ensure coverage of key characteristics of interest:

- All respondents fit within the inclusive working definition of downshifting adopted in this research, agreeing that they had ‘voluntarily reduced their income or chosen to live simply to pursue a better quality of life’. ‘Voluntariness’ is used broadly here, to include downshifters who made life changes in response to former life stress, as well as those who made life changes more ‘freely’.

- All downshifter families in this study include at least one dependent child aged under 18 living together with respondent (a parent or parents). No other restrictions about family characteristics such as the ages of children (or parents) or relationship status of parent(s) were imposed (see Chapter 1).

- All families reside in Victoria, Australia. The sample was restricted in this way first, to ensure as far as possible that all respondents were part of the same state or territory based culture and, second, to accommodate face to face interviewing within the resource constraints of the research.\(^{22}\)

- Finally, respondents were sampled purposively, to include family households living in each of metropolitan, rural and commuter areas.\(^{23}\) The rationale was to enable exploration of the potentially diverse experiences of these three groups, who may or

\(^{22}\) As a result of the call for participants being published nationally in some media, numerous downshifters from interstate contacted the researcher indicating their willingness to take part in the research. In response, an electronic version of the interview schedule was modified into open ended questionnaire format and sent to potential participants. A total of 12 responses were received. In all cases, these supported the patterns and themes that had been found in the experiences of downshifter families who had been interviewed. To minimise any differences arising from either state and territory residential locations and/or data collection method, these cases are excluded from the present analysis despite providing similar insights into the relationships between downshifting, family life and housing as those based on interview data.

\(^{23}\) These are defined as (i) within metropolitan area boundaries, (ii) outside metropolitan area boundaries but within one hour travel time to the CBD and (iii) more than one hour travel time from the CBD.
may not fall into the tree change or sea change categories discussed at Chapter 2 (Burnley and Murphy 2004; Gurran et al. 2005; Saltzman 1991).

The TAI survey conducted by Newspoll in December 2002 is the only large-scale survey of Australian downshifters (Hamilton and Mail 2003). Unpublished results suggest that (based on the broad definition of downshifting in this survey, see Chapter 2 for discussion) marginally more downshifters reside in capital cities than in rest-of-state areas (41.1 per cent of all respondents in capital cities indicated they had downshifted in the last 10 years, compared with 34.4 per cent in other areas). Unfortunately, commuter and other rural areas were not identified in the survey, so it was not possible to structure this sample to include representative numbers of families living in each of these types of locations. Nor could the sample include representative numbers of downshifters who do or do not move geographically, as rates of geographic mobility remain unknown. However, it was expected that the inclusion of downshifter families in each of these three types of location would enable analysis of how downshifting is experienced in cases where it does involve geographic mobility as well as in those where it does not, in addition to understanding the relationships between downshifting, family life and housing in each setting.

While housing circumstances of downshifter families are a key focus of the research, sampling parameters did not include dimensions of housing per se. Given the exploratory nature of the study, it did not make intellectual sense to do so. For example, could it be expected that downshifter families had similar or different housing aspirations and capacities than other Victorian families? Would a sampling classification based upon categories typically used in housing research such as tenurial rights be meaningful? If not, what would be? Instead, it was anticipated that by adopting a broad sampling approach, as well as targeting respondents in a mix of residential locations (which did make conceptual sense in relation to downshifting), a range of housing circumstances and experiences would be included in the study. The strategy proved successful, with the 25 respondent families representing a wide diversity of housing experience. Clearly, however, the extent to which these statistically reflect the diversity of housing experience
in the broader downshifter community remains unknown. Information about the housing characteristics of families in this study is presented below.

A broad, multi-pronged approach to sample recruitment was taken. In the first instance, a brief outline of the study and call for participants was published in a lifestyle magazine which it was thought may interest some downshifters as well as in a dedicated magazine about owner building. People known to the researcher, directly or via others, who it was thought might fit the study scope were also approached. A notice was placed on a policy research website which posts weekly updates to a large number of subscribers. From this, the flyer was ‘picked up’ by a nationwide local government e-newsletter. A notice about the study was also placed on an information page within the university where the study was being conducted. Finally, information was included in the newsletter of a Steiner school in a commuter area outside Melbourne, at the suggestion of one of the respondents. In all cases, attempts were made to snowball additional respondents from those who had participated in the study, though without success. Flyers and related material are shown at Appendix I.

Potential participants who contacted the researcher were given further, more detailed information as well as a consent form to consider (which was completed and collected where respondents were included in the study), each shown at Appendix II. An important aspect of the qualitative approach taken here is the respect attributed to the research participants. In keeping with what Rubin and Rubin (2005) call ‘responsive interviewing’, the aim in each interview was to establish a conversational partnership in which respondents were empowered as active participants in the research process (Rubin and Rubin 2005: 108). To facilitate a sense of trust and reciprocity, a brief summary about the researcher’s own professional and personal experience of relevance to the study was also included in the materials provided to potential participants, also shown at Appendix II.

The highly respectful approach taken throughout this research is reflected in the university ethics requirements and approval granted for this research (see Appendix III).
Consistent with, and in addition, to ethics requirements this includes: voluntary participation only; ensuring respondent confidentiality, anonymity and comfort; encouraging respondents to become ‘interview partners’ (see below) in the research process; and informing them of research outputs. The nature of material discussed during interviews was deemed ‘low risk’ in terms of adverse effects to respondents. It was nonetheless treated carefully by the researcher who appreciated that they were sharing information which can be considered highly personal: intimate details of personal philosophies and their relationship to the workings of family lives.

A total of 25 family households is included in the final sample upon which this research is based. As discussed below, in some cases one adult family member was interviewed and in other cases interviews were conducted, jointly, with more than one family member. As a result, the research is based on the views and experiences of 37 members of downshifter families. This sample size is smaller than the original aim, which was to interview up to 50 downshifters. Despite all families being unique in some ways, at this point, several clear patterns and themes within the data had emerged, with successive interviews adding little variation to understandings of key research questions and supporting and validating data already gathered. Referred to in qualitative research as ‘saturation’ (Holloway 1997; Bowen 2008), data collection was stopped at this point, and attention turned to analysis. This is outlined following the discussion of sample characteristics, below.

Sample characteristics

The sample of downshifter families upon which this research is based is diverse in many ways, and includes families who are well and poorly resourced financially, those who are more or less alternative in their worldviews, attachment to labour market and patterns of expenditure, as well differing in the places and types of homes in which they reside. Yet all share key characteristics. All have chosen to reduce their income and/or expenditure to pursue a better quality of life, and all live with dependent children or a dependent child. Differences and commonalities through the analyses presented at Chapters 5, 6 and 7, but
some key demographic characteristics are summarised here to provide an overall ‘sketch’ of the sample. The same characteristics and others are presented in detail for each case at Appendix IV. The ways these characteristics may affect the interpretation of findings and generalisability of results are discussed here.

Table 3 sets out some basic ‘family’ characteristics of the sample. As discussed above, apart from including dependent children, no restrictions were imposed on other characteristics such as relationship status of parents. Most families live in couple headed households, many of whom are married but some of whom are not, with four sole parent headed families also included, two headed by men and two by women.

Age parameters were not imposed on parents included in the study, hence a range of generations is included in the final sample. While most respondents are part of Generation X, the study also includes families headed by members of Generation Y and Baby Boomers (Table 3) (see discussion at Chapter 1). Apart from being under 18 years of age, no age parameters were imposed on dependent children, hence the sample includes a mix of families with pre-school, primary and high school aged children and combinations of these. Nor were numbers of children specified, with some families including one dependent child and others including many more.
Table 3. Family characteristics summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family characteristics</th>
<th>Number (N = 25)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family type</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two parent</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sole parent</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Generation (birth years)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation Y (1980-94)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation X (1965-79)</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby Boomer (1946-64)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child ages</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-school</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination of ages</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: 1. Classification of ‘generation’ based on oldest partner in a partnership. In most cases, partners were from the same generation, with the exception of two cases who are classified as Baby Boomers, each of which also included a member of Generation X. 2. Generation classification based on McCrindle (2006).

One consequence of limiting this study to families with dependent children is that the ages of parent respondents are broadly similar (with some variation as many of the dependent children are young, although some are almost adult). Most respondents form part of the same generation and have experienced similar historical and cultural influences throughout their formative years. A generational cohort can be defined as ‘the aggregation of individuals (within some population definition) who experience the same event within the same time interval’ (Ryder 1959). In the social sciences there has been some debate about the precise birth years of recent generations (Strauss and Howe 1992; ABS 2006; McCrindle 2006), although there is much similarity in approaches. Drawing

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24 The young adult child of a family, which included a younger dependent, was included in one interview.
25 ‘Generation’ generally denotes differences between biological generations such as between parents and children, but Mackay (1997) argues that the time period between generations may be decreasing, reflecting the rapidity of social and economic change experienced by those in their formative years.
on ABS Census categories, McCrindle (2006) sets out recent generations and their demographic boundaries as shown at Table 4.

Table 4. Generations, showing years born, age and population estimates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Born</th>
<th>Age (2006)</th>
<th>Pop’n (million)</th>
<th>% of Pop’n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Builders</td>
<td>Before 1946</td>
<td>61+</td>
<td>3.5 m</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boomers</td>
<td>1946-64</td>
<td>42-60</td>
<td>5.3 m</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation X</td>
<td>1965-79</td>
<td>27-41</td>
<td>4.4 m</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation Y</td>
<td>1980-94</td>
<td>12-26</td>
<td>4.2 m</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation Z</td>
<td>1995-2009</td>
<td>Under 12</td>
<td>3.1 m</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Being part of a given generation affects a person’s world view, sense of self and place in society. These generational influences form part of the backdrop to this study. Most research participants are members of Generation X, to use a well known categorisation, with only a small number of Baby Boomers and members of Generation Y included (see Chapter 4). Commentators agree that people who can broadly be described as Generation X share a set of attitudes and experiences that set them apart from the Baby Boomers before them and from Generations Y and Z who follow.

The key historical influence experienced by members of Generation X is the rapid reorganisation of social and economic life which occurred during the cohort’s early years, which resulted in the freeing-up of marital unions, deregulation of financial and labour markets, and privatisation of public assets and institutions. Hugh Mackay (1997) has written about those born in the 1970s as being the ‘Options Generation’, largely because of these influences. Reporting on the views of this group whilst in early adulthood, he sums up their views about the future as follows:

The significant thread running through talk of their future is that the Options Generation will have more flexibility and more freedom in their lives than they believe their parents have experienced – and certainly more than was available to their grandparents. Some of the expectations are rosy and optimistic, some are
dark and despairing, but there is a strong impression that this is a generation
determined to do it their way; to shape whatever opportunities are available to
their own needs and aspirations. (Mackay 1997: 156, original emphases)

It is beyond the bounds of this study to determine the long-term pattern of downshifting
associated with having children. It may be that in some cases families upshift once their
children have become older, returning to more extensive working and spending patterns,
but in other cases downshifting lifestyles are likely to be more permanent ways of family
life. Chapter 5 touches on these issues, exploring the relationship between downshifting
and the arrival of children. As will be seen, in some cases children are coincidental to a
downshifted way of life and, in many others, family members indicate they will never
return to former ways of life.

As well as the ‘longevity’ of downshifting, it is interesting to consider its extent within a
family unit. Prior to data collection, it was decided that if only one partner in a couple
had downshifted, that individual (and his or her family household) was eligible for
inclusion in the study. However, it was found in talking with downshifter families about
family life (see particularly Chapter 5) that in practice the downshifting activities of one
family member greatly affect others, for example, philosophical and lifestyle changes
experienced by one family member typically lead to downshifting related changes being
undertaken by a whole family. Alternatively, analysis also shows how in some cases such
changes can contribute to separation or divorce, where partners feel they have ‘grown
apart’.

Chapter 6 considers in detail the relationship between downshifting and housing
circumstances and experiences. While housing characteristics did not form part of the
sampling strategy, a diversity of housing experiences is included in the sample, as shown
at Table 5. Many families are outright owners or purchaser owners (with a mortgage) of
their properties. Of non-home owners, most reside in private rental, with a small number
living in community based housing arrangements (see Chapters 6 and 7). One major
difference between the housing circumstances of this sample and the general Australian
population is the absence of households in public housing. This is despite the fact that a number of families included in this study are living on very low and sometimes intermittent incomes (see below). This point is touched on again at Chapter 6, but may reflect the relative ‘independence’ of downshifters who may choose to make their ‘own way’ rather than rely on state based housing provision, and perceive that they have ‘choices’ rather than constraints.

Table 5. Housing characteristics summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Housing and locational characteristics</th>
<th>Number (N = 25)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Housing tenure</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outright owner</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchaser owner</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private renter</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal housing</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dwelling type</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free standing house</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attached unit</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint living</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Housing quality</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unrenovated</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renovated/modern</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner built (recent)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As described above, all families included in the study live in Victoria, Australia. Arguably, state and territory influences are not as distinct from one another as regional differences are in many other nations (such as the US) and it can be anticipated that results of this study reflect the Australian experience more broadly. Patterns of population change relating to sea change, for example, are evident in Victoria in similar ways to other states, with Victoria well represented among the 50 local governments who have joined to form the National Sea Change Task Force (Gurran et al. 2005). Similarly,
results of survey based responses not included in this analysis indicate that experiences of downshifter families in other states and territories closely mirror the Victorian sample.

However, some differences between Victoria and other states and territories are interesting to note. Traditionally, it is New South Wales rather than any other state that is associated with housing cooperatives, for example. If this study were undertaken in that state, it is likely that more of the downshifters interviewed may live in cooperative housing arrangements. Lifestyle magazines associated with downshifting (for example, *Grass Roots* and *Earth Garden*) also indicate a recent influx of tree change and sea change downshifters to Tasmania where high levels of mobility may have affected results. Unpublished TAI survey data also suggests rates of downshifting may be slightly higher in Victoria than the national average (40.8 per cent of Victorians indicated in the 2002 Newspoll survey that they had downshifted in the previous 10 years, compared with the national rate of 38.5 per cent).26

As described above, within Victoria sampling was undertaken purposively to ensure that families living in each of metropolitan, commuter and rural areas were included as it is expected that living in different types of locations will impact upon the relationships of downshifter families to their housing, including in their daily practices and lived experiences. These relationships are explored at Chapters 6 and 7. Precise numbers of families living in each area were not specified in the sampling strategy, and among the final sample 12 families live in metropolitan areas, with 13 living in non-metropolitan areas as shown at Table 6. While these final accounts slightly under-represent families living in capital cities and over-represent those living outside these areas, according to estimates based on unpublished TAI survey data (see above), this spread of cases across each type of area ensures detailed analysis of metropolitan and rural family downshifting can be undertaken.

26 Queensland and Western Australia also recorded marginally higher than average results, New South Wales was around average, and Tasmania and South Australia below average (Northern Territory was excluded and ACT not reported separately).
Table 6. Locational characteristics summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Residential location</th>
<th>Number (N = 25)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commuter area (commutes)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commuter area (does not commute)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Residential location is one of the key respondent characteristics used throughout the analysis. In most cases, analysis distinguishes between metropolitan (n = 12) and non-metropolitan (n = 13) residing households. In some instances, where specified in the text, a further distinction is made between non-metropolitan households living in commuter areas, or what Burnley and Murphy (2004) refer to as living within ‘striking distance of the city’ (n = 10). When respondents’ employment circumstances are taken into account, it becomes clear that living in a ‘commuter area’ does not mean a member of the household necessarily commutes to work. Six of the 10 families living in commuter towns included at least one family member who did commute outside of the immediate locality to work, whereas four did not.

A second key characteristic used in analysis is a composite measure of householders’ financial resources. As set out at Chapters 1 and 2, previous research indicates that the financial wherewithal of downshifter households varies considerably and to a large extent reflects the income spectrum of the Australian population (Hamilton and Mail 2003). For the purposes of analysis presented in this study, respondents are grouped into three categories, reflecting their incomes, degree of financial comfort, as well as housing based wealth. As expected, a number who held mortgages on their homes reported low incomes and high financial strain (these were classified as ‘low’). Others reported medium incomes and a high degree of financial comfort (across housing tenures) (classified as ‘medium’). In no cases did households with a high degree of housing based wealth (outright owners) report low income or financial strain. In these cases at least one member of each family earned at least a medium income (these families were classified as having high financial resources). A summary of the ‘financial resources’ composite

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variable as well as other ‘resources’ variables is shown at Table 7 (individual ‘resources’ variables for each case are shown at Appendix IV).

Table 7. Household resources summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household resources</th>
<th>Number (N = 25)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Income level</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Debt</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No debt</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debt</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Financial comfort</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting by</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very comfortable</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Financial resources</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade qualification</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: 1. ‘Financial resources’ is a composite measure taking account of income, financial comfort and housing based wealth, at time of interview. 2. ‘Combination’ is a mix of tertiary and non-tertiary educational levels among partners in family household.

Overall, as shown at Table 7, the families in this study include those with low, medium and high levels of financial resources and wealth, some with debt and others with no debt (see Chapter 6 for discussion). The housing experiences of these families with varied
access to financial resources, as well as with varied degrees of housing wealth, are explored throughout the analyses presented at Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

An important point to note from Table 7, also, is that in 24 of the 25 families, at least one parent has a tertiary level education. In some cases ($n = 8$) a tertiary level of education for one parent was combined with a non-tertiary level for the other partner in couple headed families. In only one case did neither parent have a tertiary education. These high levels of education indicate high levels of what are sometimes called ‘human capital’ and, relatedly, ‘cultural capital’. This are in keeping with findings of other downshifting studies in Australia (Tan 2004) and the US (Etzioni 1998; Saltzman 1991), and similar research (Elgin and Mitchell 1977; Florida 2002; Ray and Anderson 2000).

These educational levels set the downshifter families in this study, and downshifters more generally, apart from non-downshifters in a very important way relating to the interaction of financial resources and education. On average, for most of the population, there is a positive relationship between education and income, such that the more highly educated a person is, the higher their earnings (or earnings potential) are. Conversely, those with lower levels of qualification are likely to earn lower wages. In contrast, the sample on which this study is based includes families in which parents with high skill and qualification levels appear to have chosen not to pursue the high earnings (and spending) potential typically associated with their levels of education. Some families have relatively high levels of financial resources and accumulated wealth, but others, as shown above and explored throughout this research, have opted to live with low and very low levels of financial resources and security. Some downshifters in this study reflect on their own experiences in relation to ‘poverty’ (see Chapter 5).

A third key characteristic (alongside ‘location’ and the composite variable ‘financial resources’) used throughout the analysis relates to the nature of downshifting itself. As discussed at Chapter 2, much existing downshifting and related research draws a distinction between downshifters who modify some aspects of their income, expenditure and priorities and those who live a holistic downshifting (or voluntary simplicity)
lifestyle, involving a greater degree of rejection of conventional earnings, consumption and lifestyle norms. No existing studies provide a precise definition of factors, or measured degrees or levels of intensity of these, as the range of lifestyle and values based factors is complex, can vary between individuals and is conceptualised differently cross-nationally and by different authors. However, there is a consensus that different levels or degrees of downshifting (and like behaviours) exist. As well as degrees of downshifting (for example, Etzioni 1998; Saltzman 1991), these include Burnley and Murphy’s (2004) account of ‘A’ and ‘a’ alternative sea changers, full and partial voluntary simplifiers (Elgin and Mitchell 1977) and core and green cultural creatives (Ray and Anderson 2000) (see Chapter 2).

Similarly, for the purposes of this study, respondents are classified as best fitting either a ‘conventional’ (low) or ‘alternative’ (high) degree of downshifting on a continuum, taking account of: work practices and priorities around labour market engagement; consumption practices; identity and sense of self with regard to being similar or different to the mainstream population; trade-offs made to pursue a downshifting lifestyle; extent of environmentalism; and extent of self-provisioning and household production. The types of factors taken into account to group downshifter families in this study, and their placement on a continuum of downshifting, are shown at Figure 1. In some cases, respondents may be considered alternative on one factor and middling on another, or conventional on another factor, with cases being classified according to which end of the continuum they best fit overall, taking all factors into account.
Figure 1. Classification schema showing characteristics of conventional and alternative downshifters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Low</strong></th>
<th><strong>Degree of downshifting</strong></th>
<th><strong>High</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highly attached; usual hours; slight reduction; high priority</td>
<td><strong>Work</strong></td>
<td>Highly reduced or ceased; flexible; low priority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced but similar to general population</td>
<td><strong>Consumption</strong></td>
<td>Re-use, trade, recycle; minimise consumption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify as similar to mainstream population</td>
<td><strong>Identity</strong></td>
<td>Distinguish self from mainstream population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few trade-offs made to downshift</td>
<td><strong>Trade-offs</strong></td>
<td>Many or extensive trade-offs made</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-green or moderately green awareness</td>
<td><strong>Environmentalism</strong></td>
<td>Environmental concerns integral to daily practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not engage in self-provisioning or household production</td>
<td><strong>Self-provisioning</strong></td>
<td>Engage in self-provisioning and household production</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Stone 2010, original typology.
Using this framework, 10 respondent households are classified as conventional downshifters who can be thought of as living largely within mainstream norms and conventions but sharing some behaviours and values of alternative downshifters (see Table 8). The sample also includes 15 respondents classified as alternative downshifters, who are more different in behaviour and values than low degree downshifters, from mainstream conventions around earnings and expenditure, and who present a vastly different set of life philosophies. The way each individual case has been classified is set out in the summary demographic table at Appendix IV.

Table 8. Classification of respondents according to low and high degrees of downshifting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of downshifting</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>conventional (low degree) downshifters</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alternative (high degree) downshifters</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1. Degree of downshifting as measured at the time of interview.

A small number who have lived very conventional, work oriented lives are classified as low degree downshifters, as these have recently begun the process. Given downshifting is typically a process involving sometimes years of change (Tan 2000, 2004), it is possible they may be considered alternative downshifters if interviewed in the future (for example, Cases 16 and 18).

I don’t think I look alternative. I just look like an ordinary Joe in the street. You just take one step at a time. Then you look back and think ‘Hell, I’ve come a long way!’ [Kylie: female, mid-30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, pregnant, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 16)]

As will be seen throughout the analyses presented at Chapters 5, 6 and 7, there is a clear correlation but not a complete overlap between the extent to which downshifter families are resourced financially and the extent to which they are conventional or alternative. In many cases, those with lowest incomes and least financial resources can be described as
alternative. Some have always lived modestly (see discussion of plateauxers at Chapter 2), others have been downshifters for many years, with cumulative decisions and life choices moving them further and further away from mainstream patterns of earnings, consumption and identities. Not all families with limited financial resources are alternative downshifters, with some conforming to a higher degree with mainstream values and patterns of behaviour. None of the families, however, with high levels of financial resources are classified as alternative downshifters. In all of these cases, respondents indicate patterns of labour market attachment, worldview and identity which are more similar to the general population.

As will be seen at Chapters 6 and 7, the interaction of the degree of financial resources within a family and their degree of downshifting is also a relationship which is played out geographically. In many cases, although not exclusively, families with least financial resources and who are classified as high degree downshifters opt to live in non-metropolitan areas.

In sum, despite its relatively small size, the sample of family downshifters on which this study is based reflects the diversity of demographic characteristics of downshifters found in previous research in reassuring ways, where these characteristics are known (see Chapter 2). For example, there is a diversity of income levels, degrees of stated financial comfort, as well as occupational categories. The demographics of respondents are different in expected ways due to sampling frame limitations: most are members of Generation X, and all are parents of dependent children. As little information currently exists about how downshifting relates to either family life or housing, location or mobility experiences, it is unclear precisely how well the sample represents the broader population of downshifters or family downshifters on these characteristics. However, as evidenced by analyses presented at Chapters 5, 6 and 7, the diversity of circumstances and experiences within the sample does enable the exploration of the range of key relationships of interest in this research to be undertaken in detail.
Interviews with downshifter families

A single interview was conducted with each family. In many cases this involved talking jointly with each partner in a partner headed family. In other cases only one partner was available to participate (or interested in doing so). In sole parent families the interview was undertaken with that parent. In one case the adult child of a family in which there was a younger child also contributed to the interview. One development within family research methods in recent years has been the adoption of multiple viewpoint methodologies, in which views from many (or all) members unit are elicited and analysed to determine points of similarity and difference in order to construct a ‘family story’ (for example, McCarthy et al. 2003; Carter 2007). This is most fruitful where there are anticipated differences (such as those based on gender, generation or other relationships involving a power differential). It is also appropriate where the focal point for analysis is interpretation of these intra-family viewpoints. The present study does not fall into this category of research and hence interview methods aimed at discerning difference between family members were not adopted.

It is possible that variations in the accounts of downshifting given by respondents may result from conducting interviews singly or jointly. However, within the resource constraints of the study, it was deemed more important to gather data from as many family respondents as possible, at the expense of exploring what the differences in these dynamics might be. This method had advantages and some potential disadvantages. The principal advantage is that joint interviews enabled a family downshifting story to be told easily, with each respondent contributing to fill in details, remember time frames and other important aspects, and in doing so provide a full account of the story and how it was experienced by multiple parties, in the first person. As is detailed at Chapter 5, families indicated a strong sense of gender equity, perhaps minimising the extent to which respondents in a couple interview censored or altered their responses. In several cases respondents adopted an ‘I’ll tell my story then you tell yours’ approach. Clearly, the disadvantage of the method adopted here is that some respondents may have provided
different responses if interviewed singly, and how different these stories, told jointly, are compared with the accounts given in interviews conducted singly is unknown.

With its family focus, the present study marks a departure from existing downshifting research in which the unit of analysis is individuals (see Chapter 2) and where other relationships, particularly the reactions of others to individuals’ downshifting decisions, are reported but are not the primary research focus. In contrast, in the present study, processes and experiences relating to downshifting are considered in the light of family relationships and commitments. Research participants are recognised as members of household family units in which negotiations take place and preferences and decisions are formed. As will be seen at Chapter 5, the centrality of family life for many downshifter families underpins all judgements and decisions made regarding the ways in which family members interact with broader institutions and systems, such as time spent and the nature of work performed within the labour market.

Interviews were conducted with the 25 downshifter families who form the basis of this study over 10 months between mid-2006 and 2007. Time between interviews enabled reflection, early insights to be formed and additional avenues of inquiry to be included in successive interviews, to explore these insights further. Rubin and Rubin (2005: 39) note ‘time’ as one of the key design features of qualitative research. In keeping with original grounded theorists (Strauss and Corbin 1990), they describe how the process of theory building begins during the data collection phase, where concepts and themes central to the research determined ahead of the interview process are clarified, and the relationships between them explored (Rubin and Rubin 2005).

In keeping with the responsive interview approach (Rubin and Rubin 2005), mentioned above, interviews were conducted in a careful manner in which respondents were encouraged to lead aspects of the conversation, contribute ideas, values and meanings important to their own experiences, and control the flow of the conversation to a large degree:
Central to the responsive interviewing model is the understanding that the interviewer and interviewee are in a relationship in which there is mutual influence, yet in which individuality needs to be recognized. Though the researcher initially establishes the general direction of the project, the conversational partners set the more specific path. (Rubin and Rubin 2005: 33)

Consequently, the interview style varied slightly from one interview to the next according to the specific circumstances and personalities of respondent families. However, all were conducted using an interview schedule to ensure full coverage of key research themes. Interview prompts became well-rehearsed and were used with a high degree of consistency. The key themes explored within each interview include downshifting and simple living, housing and downshifting, housing and home, housing pathways, place, mobility and stability, family life, risk and priorities, and life planning. Topics felt to be significant by respondent families were also discussed, for example, gender roles, fathering and the role of employers. Basic demographic information was collected, including tactful questioning about income change and financial strain related to downshifting. The interview schedule is attached at Appendix V.

Wherever possible, interviews were conducted in respondents’ own homes. This provided a rich opportunity to see respondents in their own environments (often including tours of homes, land and gardens and samples of home produce). Often it also seemed to frame the interview, providing a constant reminder that this – the site of home and family life – was the focus of conversation. In cases where it was not possible to interview respondents at home, interviews were conducted in other agreed, private spaces where researcher and respondents could feel comfortable.\textsuperscript{27} In all cases, regardless of where interviews were conducted, respondents were asked to tell the researcher about their home in their own words, as well as recounting many aspects of their experiences of it.

\textsuperscript{27} One was at an open air café in an environment park, and another in a quiet workplace meeting room. In two cases, interviews needed to be conducted by telephone. Here, respondents were at home despite the researcher not being present physically. Interviews were tape recorded with consent, and later transcribed and analysed in the same way as for all other interviews.
Given the family focus of the research, many interviews were conducted while small children were present in the home, providing a natural environment in which to discuss family life. It was sometimes helpful for respondents to know about the parent status of the researcher, with sympathetic comments and comparative stories putting them at ease and contributing to the sense of trust underlining the interviewer-interviewee relationship. At respondents’ invitation, the baby of the researcher was also present during a small number of interviews, further contributing to the informal, comfortable style in which interviews were conducted.

Above all, respondents were keen to tell their stories. For most, downshifting had involved a deliberate series of choices and decisions over a period of time, often, though not always, a substantial period of years. The changes they had experienced were often profound, involving value shifts, reassessment of life meaning and restructuring of circumstances in and around the home to better reflect these. Some respondents were well read in downshifting related material (such as that promoted within the voluntary simplicity movement) and environmental reports they perceived to be highly relevant to their experience. Interviews generally flowed easily (often running over time where respondents wished them to do so) precisely because the process for most people is highly self-reflexive and the ideas surrounding it well developed. Yet, stories about downshifting were often private. Many respondents indicated they enjoyed the interview conversation and welcomed the opportunity to tell their story. Several were grateful for the opportunity to ‘revisit’ their experiences. Another couple agreed that through telling their story they were reminded of why they were living as they were. As one dad put it:

> These things I don’t really talk about to anyone because nobody’s really interested in it! So many times I’ve written and put stuff down in books and diaries and gone ‘I should write a book out of this’ and then I go ‘Who’d want to know about this shit anyway?’ [laughing] [Rohan: male, late 30s, unpartnered, two school aged children, renter, rural Victoria (Case 23)]
Data analysis and presentation of findings

Interviews ranged from between one hour and two hours in duration (averaging 1:15 hours). Interviews were transcribed by the researcher. This process ensured accuracy and reliability of data and provided an additional opportunity to ‘re-live’ each interview, this time focusing upon responses and meaning without the distraction of negotiating researcher-respondent relationships, achieving full coverage of the interview schedule, being mindful of respondents’ comfort, and other aspects inherent in the interview setting. Transcription formed an important stage in the process of data analysis, enabling refamiliarisation with interview material and early coding and classification of cases (as noted also by Richards 2005; Rubin and Rubin 2005).

Detailed analysis of interview transcripts was conducted using NVivo software. While some qualitative researchers remain sceptical about the use of computers to assist analysis, the popularity and legitimacy of this method (known as CAQDAS) has grown rapidly, alongside technological developments to support it (Fielding and Lee 1998). This is particularly so in relation to analysing texts (Flick 2005). Numerous software packages enable easy handling of text such as interview transcripts. NVivo is a leading package in the field which enables transcripts to be organised according to codes and classifications constructed by the researcher both prior to utilising the software, as well as throughout the process of detailed analysis (Richards 2005).

For this research, all cases were coded within NVivo according to a set of characteristics (such as housing or family types), and text within each transcript was coded according to meaning (for example, ‘housing security’ or ‘family time’). Some of these characteristics and themes were determined prior to interview and many were formed on the bases of analysis of meaning within interview text, during the iterative process of coding and analysis, characteristic of grounded, interpretivist research. NVivo enabled analysis of aspects of key themes to readily be compared with or ordered by case characteristics (for example, degree of downshifting or residential location) or other themes using a grid or matrix in which data was sorted and could be compared, contributing to a highly detailed
and thorough analysis of interview data. An example of the ‘top layer’ of a matrix is shown at Appendix VI. During analysis, each matrix cell could be accessed and all cases and coded text at that cell compared.

The detailed analysis that NVivo enabled contributes to the validity and generalisability of findings from this study. This, coupled with comparison of sample characteristics (in so far as was possible) with existing data sources, and a focus upon research setting (discussed above), provides the study with credibility (Green 1999). ‘Deviant’ or unusual cases could be explored fully and contrasted with others. All instances of text relating to a particular subject or theme could be seen together, and quotations chosen on the basis of representativeness, eliminating the risk of over-reliance upon particular cases and under-reporting of others (Green 1999). All analysis using NVivo remains linked to the original text source, ensuring that the full context of interview data provided by downshifter families participating in this study could be maintained.

As in much qualitative research, generalisability of findings from the present study is theoretical rather than statistically representative, and is not threatened by a relatively small sample size (Green 1999). The generalisability derives from the identification of concepts and the relationships between them, and their relevance to other settings.

In the three chapters that follow (Chapters 5, 6 and 7), text is presented from this process of analysis in order to identify common themes and experiences, compare and contrast case differences, and ultimately to address the research questions outlined at Chapter 1. At times, the presentation of interview text in this study differs from much qualitative research, where lengthy quotations rather than a selection of brief text are presented. This is due to the highly articulate and reflexive nature of the downshifter sample, as well as the interpretive focus upon meaning in this research. As will be seen, in many instances respondents describe in detail the way they have reflected upon an aspect of their world view, the factors contributing to their particular approach and how these reflections relate to their family, housing and/or related experiences. These descriptions of reflexivity and circumstance, and the relationship of them to lived experiences, together form the focal
point for analysis. At times, detailed reflexive descriptions are therefore presented as complete stories or narrative, rather than being ‘broken down’ and decontextualised in a process through which meaning, in this case, would be lost.

Throughout Chapters 5, 6 and 7, brief details of each case – each family household – are provided as identifiers and context with each text quotation, using pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. To enable the reader to consider analysed text in the context of the downshifter family it ‘belongs to’, case summaries are presented in the form of short family ‘stories’ at Appendix VII. These summaries, it is hoped, will also provide the reader with a sense of the rich detail, diversity and commonality of family experiences and circumstances upon which this research is based.
Chapter 5
Downshifting and family life: The parameters

The focus of this research is not upon family life per se. Yet family life, the values and priorities underpinning it, and the daily practices which support it are integrally related to the experience of downshifter families, and of their relationship to housing and home. As this research argues, understanding the significance of the values underpinning both downshifting and family life to downshifter families is critical to understanding their housing and home experiences. In this chapter, core downshifting values as well as the centrality of family life are examined. The voices and views of respondents are introduced, and analysis of them is presented, in three main parts. The first explores downshifting pathways and experiences and the values and motivations underpinning them. The second examines family values and priorities and explores how these relate to the motivations and experience of downshifting. Finally, links drawn by downshifters between their family lives, values and priorities and attitudes to housing are examined. The way these relationships manifest in housing pathways and experience of home are explored in depth at Chapters 6 and 7, respectively.

In doing so, this chapter makes explicit, through the voices, views and experiences of downshifter families themselves, the parameters within which housing pathways and home life take place. The term ‘parameters’ is used because, as will be shown below, housing and home life choices among downshifter families appear to be made, without exception, with conscious, clearly articulated and highly self-reflexive reference to priorities and values directly related to downshifting and family life. The explication of these parameters lays the foundation for the analysis of housing pathways and the making of home, to follow.

Throughout this analysis, as well as that presented at Chapters 6 and 7, comparison is drawn between downshifter families who are more and less alternative, those who are
more and less well resourced financially, as well as those who live in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas (see Chapter 4).

Downshifting experiences and values

With a focus on life quality over materialism, as outlined at Chapter 2, the experience of downshifting and the values underpinning it set downshifters, and downshifter families, apart from much of mainstream Australian society. In order to understand family downshifting and its relationship to housing and home, it is necessary to first understand these experiences and values: downshifting itself. Chapter 2 has provided insights into the phenomenon internationally and in Australia. In this section, narratives about the lived experiences of downshifting and the expression of its underpinning values among the families in this study are explored.

While the analysis below attempts to explore some aspects of downshifting and family life separately from others in order to gain a deeper understanding of each, it is immediately apparent that spheres of life and lifestyle are highly integrated. The experience of downshifting and its underpinning values, the values and priorities relating to family life, and the way these in turn relate to downshifting are in many cases difficult to disentangle. As will be seen at Chapters 6 and 7, the way these relationships in turn can relate to both housing pathways and the meaning of home can also be highly intertwined. Changes to numerous spheres of life occur concurrently or in close succession in the lives of many downshifter families.

Pathways and experiences

As seen at Chapter 4, downshifter families are diverse in terms of their world views (with some more alternative than others), their levels of financial wealth (including families with high, medium and low/very low financial resources to draw upon) and the areas in which they live (both metropolitan and non-metropolitan). As was also seen, while all families in this study have dependent children aged 18 or under, most parents belong to
Generation X, yet a small handful are older (Baby Boomers) or younger (Generation Y). In addition, while all are downshifters, the ‘group’ of family downshifters in this sample comprises individuals, each with their own traits, histories and temperaments. Moreover, as argued at Chapters 1 and 2, downshifting is a lifestyle choice within late modernity likely to enable and facilitate the expression of individual interests, ideals and priorities.

Given this diversity, it is not surprising that there is a high degree of diversity found among this sample of pathways to downshifting and experiences of downshifted lifestyles. In many ways, the pathways here are consistent with those found in existing studies (for example, Hamilton and Mail 2003; Breakspear and Hamilton 2004; Chhetri, Stimson et al. 2009; and discussion at Chapter 2). While varied, they can be broadly classified as being strongly influenced by work burn-out, a sense of a growing ‘gap’ between values and behaviour and/or environmentalism. As will be seen below, these pathways and motivations are highly integrated with the experience of family life and values underpinning it. Also consistent with existing research, findings in this study indicate that the nature and experience of downshifting can also vary, including experiences which are joyous and comfortable, to those which for various reasons are challenging and stressful. Changes associated with downshifting can range from virtually non-existent (such as for plateauers in Saltzman’s (1991) terms – downshifters who never upshifted) to extreme.

Work dissatisfaction, and changes to working arrangements, feature prominently in the experiences of downshifters, including family downshifters. Work burn-out can occur among even relatively young adults as in the following cases. As well, as other studies show (Harwood Group 1995), dissatisfaction with work can occur regardless of apparent saleability in the labour market. In this study, men more so than women identified dissatisfaction with work as one of the triggers leading to changed working patterns through the process of downshifting, but extensive changes to work are also made by women who downshift. The types of work changes are similar to those described in Hamilton and Mail (2003), Tan (2000, 2004) and Chhetri, Stimson et al. (2009). They include changing from full-time to part-time work, as well as undertaking more
‘meaningful’ work such as teaching rather than ‘selling booze’ (Case 20) and moving from the world of corporate law to a community legal centre (Case 6) (see Appendix VII). Experiences are varied, as the following examples show.

It was nice getting a regular income, you know, just money put in the bank every week. But it wasn’t nice driving to work and spending all day at the computer and driving home. [Sean: male, mid-30s, partnered, one school aged child, renter and land owner, rural Victoria (Case 9)]

I’d done flat-out welfare work, really high crisis management work with young people, mainly young women in detention, so it was really full-on … I got major burn-out and it had to stop … It was too heavy and too sad. Yeah, really, really sad. [David: male, mid-30s, partnered, five school aged children, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 4)]

It’s that balance. You think ‘There’s no way I’d go and work in a commercial law firm if I was going to have to be doing share agreements and all that crap’. I’d get paid twice as much but I really wouldn’t be happy. [Nick: male, mid-30s, partnered, two young children (one pre-school, one school), purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 6)]

Typical work demands are ‘out of whack’ with the way some downshifters perceive they need to live. In the following case a mother of a baby describes the mismatch between typical working time and constraints and the way she feels she needs to work.

I think it’ll keep us poor. [laughing] I mean, I do have a work ethic, it’s just a different kind of work ethic, but no, I wouldn’t want to upshift if that meant moving away and moving into the city and working 9 to 5 in an office in the city, no. I just love to have control over my time. Probably because of my personality, I think, I need time out away from people. Just working on my own stuff. Yeah, I like to be able to manage my own time, so if I was working 9 to 5 I wouldn’t be
able to do that so much. I like to set my own deadlines. [Jane: female, mid-30s, partnered, one baby, purchaser owner, rural Victoria (Case 8)]

This also highlights differences many downshifters feel between what they see as the way they need to live in order to ‘fit’ usual patterns of work, consumption and home lives and the way they wish to live. This is symptomatic of a gap between the way they wish to live and how they had been living, with downshifting seen as a means of reaching a better fit or balance between beliefs and behaviours.

Environmental concerns underpinned the decisions to downshift and live more simply for a number of families. In all such cases, families can be described as more alternative than conventional in their values and behaviours. This is almost by definition, with those whose environmental concerns were most integrally related to life choices also expressing attitudes and having made life choices most different from mainstream and identifying themselves as being distinctly different from it on these grounds. The interaction between housing and the environment is explored at Chapter 7. Here, one respondent describes how environmental awareness underpins the way all aspects of daily life are conducted.

We are in that small percentage of the world’s people who live way beyond their means and consume far more and use up far more of the world’s resources than is our fair share. And so that needs to change, it’s not fair on other people. We’ve tried to live in a way that reflects how we feel about that. The kids know very much what we stand for. Local versus global, living organic, getting away from chemicals, using the car less and all those ways of living your life without having to make a fuss. And living on less money. You have less money but you still enjoy your life, and in some ways even more so. [David: male, mid-30s, partnered, five school aged children, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 4)]

Previous Australian research has found that environmental concerns are not the main reason for downshifting among most downshifters (Hamilton and Mail 2003; Chhetri,
This study indicates that even where environmental concerns are not initially integral to downshifting, becoming more environmentally conscious consumers forms part of the experience for many families, including many who are more conventional than alternative in their attitudes and behaviours. Such changes in patterns of consumption often relate to newly found concerns for the environment. This is consistent with Schor (1998) who reported that in the US changes to consumer behaviour most often follow reduced income among downshifter families.

I suppose because at heart I am a green and I just, I don’t know, something just twigged that there was a gap there between what I was doing and what I claimed to believe. Somehow there was this really big gap between what was going on in my mind and what I was actually doing. [Kylie: female, mid-30s, partnered, one preschool aged child, pregnant, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 16)]

The extent of changes associated with downshifting also varies markedly among family downshifters. While some experienced relatively minor changes such as changing their paid work, downshifting for others included more major changes such as work reduction, geographic mobility and/or a ‘reinvention’ of the self – sometimes simultaneously. For one young woman, the pursuit of a simpler life meant shedding what she describes as her previously ‘shallow lifestyle’ which involved ‘lots of hair dying and lots of going out and lots of alcohol’.

The trigger was actually No Logo. The trigger was happening before I got pregnant. It was like an epiphany, realising how much influence the mass media has on the way that people think and feel about themselves and then the choices that they make in their lives based on those feelings. And so it was wider and it coincided with the S11 stuff, the demonstration against the World Economic Forum in Melbourne in 2000. It was a really big time. And I attended the big demonstrations that took place there. And kind of realising that there was real discontent and exploring that discontent and asking questions, you know, ‘Why? What’s going on here?’ Just getting a better understanding of global economic
issues and the kind of authenticity and identity that is promoted through advertising and through media which doesn’t really meet anyone’s intrinsic needs. So it was part of a step back from that and asking ourselves whether things could be different and how they could be different and then trying to pursue that. [Leah: female, late 20s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, purchaser and owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 25)]

Not all downshifter families experience high levels of change. Some fall within the plateauer category whose aims have always included a balanced life, rather than shifting down a gear from a more pressured one (Saltzman 1991) (see Chapter 2). Indeed, this is an important group within the present study, excluded from a number of other downshifting studies due to the emphasis in the existing literature upon change (for example, Schor 1998; Hamilton and Mail 2003; Hamilton 2003a). In all cases, families in this study who indicated that they had always lived in ways consistent with downshifting (or similar) can be described as more alternative than conventional in their attitudes and behaviours. Many had therefore made choices and decisions which set them apart from mainstream society, often over long periods of time. Their characteristics and experiences are highly varied.

I think, yes, we’ve always both studied probably for too long. And in some respects that is a kind of downshifting kind of choice in some ways, because you know, you’re not earning big bucks, and we’ve never studied anything that’s going to earn us big bucks. So that’s a choice in itself. [Robert: male, mid-30s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, renter in intentional community, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 11)]

Yeah, so I guess I was interested in downshifting because it was my decision, before even climbing onto rungs of success or anything, just to keep things very simple and only do very part-time uni and only work, you know, five to 10 hours a week while my child’s at this age anyway. [Sally: female, mid-20s, unpartnered, one school aged child, renter, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 24)]
Our experience has more been one of deciding not to pursue an increasing career and income path and stay at a modest level. [Helen: female, late 40s, partnered, two teenage children, outright owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 3)]

I suppose I’d sort of class myself as a second generation downshifter because my parents moved to the country and wanted a simpler non-consumerist lifestyle as well. So it’s kind of a normal lifestyle for me. [Jane: female, mid-30s, partnered, one baby, purchaser owner, rural Victoria (Case 8)]

In addition to the extent of change experienced by family downshifters, the context in which downshifting takes place appears highly significant to the way it is experienced. An important aspect for the large majority of family downshifters in this study is that downshifting is generally experienced as an individual, household pursuit, rather than a change associated with group membership or support structures (this is an important difference between the Australian and US downshifting phenomena, as discussed at Chapter 2). Over time, downshifter families can develop supportive networks, but many who experience extensive change or changes comment that the processes involved can be experienced in extremely individual and solitary ways.

I did some reading of Ted Trainer actually, that lecturer from the University of New South Wales up at Western Sydney, that book Conserver Society, and I read that a few years ago when we were actually in the process of doing exactly that, of downshifting, when we first made that kind of big major change. And we’d read a lot of literature around that. He was the first Australian I’d read and we thought ‘OK, great, we’re on the right kind of line’. [laughing] [David: male, mid-30s, partnered, five school aged children, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 4)]

As in the previous case, several families who heard the term ‘downshifting’ recognised themselves in the category, having already made lifestyle changes. This seemed to
provide a sense of legitimacy to life choices made in what had appeared to them to be relative isolation.

I’d already sort of come up with the concept before it became fashionable on talkback radio and everything, if you know what I mean … Yeah, before this sea change and tree change had already come on, I’d already made my mind up to go down that path. I didn’t sort of hear it on the radio or tele and think ‘Oh, that’s a good idea’. [Rohan: male, late 30s, unpartnered, two school aged children, renter, rural Victoria (Case 23)]

When I heard it, I thought ‘We’ve done that for years’. [Tori: female, late 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 21)]

I suppose it was more the sea change and tree change words that we’d heard before, and we actually realised it when the downsizing or downshifting thing came along. It was exactly what we’d done. Unbeknownst to us, it was actually a thing! [Eric: male, late 30s, partnered, four children (two pre-school, two school aged), renter, rural Victoria (Case 18)]

As in existing research, the experiences of downshifters in this study show that downshifting is not always easy. The associated transitions are difficult in many, although not all, cases as family members adjust the way they engage in paid work, patterns of consumption and the ways they live domestically. Findings indicate three main types of difficulties, sometimes in combination: social isolation and changes to existing relationships; changes at the level of the self, including loss of status and loss of identity; and for some families, financial strain associated with loss of income. Some of these are compounded by the individual rather than group nature of ‘new’ downshifter families, described above.

Numerous respondents mentioned an unexpected difficulty: changed relationships and social isolation. Again, this finding is consistent with previous research (Hamilton and
Mail 2003). The analysis here shows isolation affects downshifters from across the financial spectrum, but appears more pronounced where many changes associated with downshifting are made and most disruption is made to former ways of living (many, although not all, of whom are alternative with low or medium levels of financial resources).

So much change can come along with downshifting that it can leave you feeling really quite isolated, particularly in an economy and a society and a culture that on the surface at least doesn’t share your value set. [Leah: female, late 20s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, purchaser and owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 25)]

That was very, very lonely. Because when I stopped being an architect I suddenly realised that all these lovely acquaintances who I thought were my friends were just part of that middle-class networking thing. People only talk to you, and it’s all very lovely, and it’s lovely dinner parties and it’s lovely food and it’s lovely openings, but all they’re doing is actually sizing up where you are. And suddenly, when you’re nowhere, well, there’s not very much reason to talk to you. Do you know what I mean? So those were very lonely times. [Tori: female, late 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 21)]

For some, family life – particularly becoming a parent – can also contribute to social isolation where it is perceived (by downshifters and/or others) as incompatible with previous work-oriented lifestyles. In the following case a young couple became pregnant at the same time as they began questioning their lifestyle, values and priorities. Here the young mother describes her isolation, despite the support of family.

I have no friends left from that period of my life, though. That all happened within about a month of finding out that I was pregnant. It was just so totally incongruous with the life that I’d been leading, I found that there was no-one left from my friendship group that I was friends with. Yeah, I was very, very, very
Several respondents spoke of the loss of status, changed identity and altered sense of self that can accompany downshifting, which can be experienced as difficult, even where these changes have been voluntary. These difficulties can also be compounded by parenthood. In the case below, one parent describes the personal difficulties associated with what she perceives as making a series of moves progressively downward along a ‘status’ ladder, from her previous high professional role, until she reached the lowest rung.

And when I met Greg I was still a little bit tortured by it, but I then swapped my status hat of an architect with my status hat of a designer-maker. Hideously poor, but I got into enough magazines that I could sort of swap one status for another. It’s like stepping down. And when Saskia came along, well then I had to swap designer status for mother status, which is absolutely no status. But at least I’d got a bit of practice in stepping down so it wasn’t so bad. [laughing] Do you know what I mean? Like zero, then you’re the bottom of the pile. Zip. Nothing. [laughing] [Tori: female, late 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 21)]

Finally, experiences of downshifting are clearly multifaceted. Financial strain and trade-offs in relation to loss of income are explored in relation to housing at Chapter 6. These are not experienced in isolation from other aspects of the downshifting experience. In the following case a father living with very low levels of financial resources describes the sense of living in ‘the right way’ his family feels, but also outlines how, at the same time, the strains inherent in ‘swimming against the tide’ and material constraints of living with low income as a result of downshifting are experienced.

We might have turned our heads in the right direction but we’re not really finding it easy to walk that way, because it’s walking against the current. I wouldn’t say
what we’ve done has been radical but it certainly has been sort of moving away from that comfortable numbness … So we’re happy to be, very happy to be out of it. But I’d rather be well off and moderately happy than poor and moderately happy … What we’re doing is in the right direction but it could be a lot more enjoyable. [Sean: male, mid-30s, partnered, one school aged child, renter and land owner, rural Victoria (Case 9)]

Values and motivations

Throughout all of the various pathways to downshifting and diverse experiences of it described by family downshifters in this study are strong and consistent common values and priorities underpinning it. Overwhelmingly, downshifting is underpinned by the importance of individuals, households and families being able to ‘shape’ their own lives, to take charge of the way many aspects of day to day life are lived and, to a large degree, to determine the nature of their own life experiences. This fundamental value is summed up here using the concept of ‘control’. The importance of control, as will be seen, features centrally in all aspects of downshifters’ lives and is apparent throughout the analyses presented in this research. This includes in relation to family life, explored below, as well as in housing and home experiences, explored at Chapters 6 and 7, respectively.

Having a sense of control over the way life is lived, how day to day life is organised and – as will be seen – how family life is experienced is central to the downshifting experience among all downshifter families in this study. This is the case regardless of personal characteristics, the extent to which downshifters are more alternative or mainstream in their values and behaviours, how well resourced they are financially, and whether they live in metropolitan or non-metropolitan locations. The capacity to gain a sense of control over the way their lives are lived is summed up succinctly as follows.

Downshifting is making conscious decisions about which areas of your life you’re going to place emphasis on and then adjusting the way that you structure your life
Closely related to this sense of control is another value fundamental to the downshifting process and experience. It is the capacity of downshifters, in this case members of downshifter families, to prioritise and manage the way they spend time. This concerns what downshifters do, as well as how and when they do it. The control of time typically takes the form of a valuing of time over material goods or financial wealth, and can be summed up as the valuing of time over money.

The importance and impact of these values are summed up here by a father of school aged children as he describes what taking control of his life meant for him. In addition to changing and reducing his working hours, no longer watching television and modifying family consumption practices are the following changes.

I guess for me it was a stage in my life when I was thinking about all sorts of different priorities in life. Like an early mid-life crisis or whatever. And wondering how I’d got to where I was and what I wanted to do and I’d sort of floated along for a while, just going with the flow. And then I got to the point where I just had to not do that anymore … And so there was a whole bunch of things I did and started doing around that time. I gave up smoking and I learned how to play guitar, it was one thing I’d never done as a kid and always wanted to do, so I did that. And I was overweight then, I’ve lost about 40 kilos in the last few years. I took up running and, it’s part of the whole thing, you know, I wanted to be fit for playing with the kids … It was part of that progression of things, of just deciding what’s important in life and doing it … I guess other sort of things have changed. I’ve become a vegetarian as well … It’s that priority thing of what you are doing with your time … I think the issue of control over your own life is an important one. [Mike: male, late 30s, partnered, two school aged children, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 12)]
Also related to control is the sense, as will be seen throughout the analysis to follow, that downshifter families have of having ‘choice’ about their lifestyle options and the decisions they have made to support these.

Robert: Yeah, so there’s a difference between downshifting and just living in abject poverty [laughing] …

Eliza: We’ve got an education. So yes, we were broke but poor is a different thing. [Eliza and Robert: mid-30s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, renters in intentional community, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 11)]

The importance of personal freedoms and individual choice found in this study is consistent with existing research (e.g. Hamilton and Mail 2003; Chhetri, Stimson et al. 2009). What this analysis shows is that these sentiments are important to downshifters regardless of the degree to which they are alternative or conventional, well or poorly resourced financially or to whether they reside in metropolitan or non-metropolitan areas.

Control, choice and ‘time over money’ values are important for all downshifters in the sample and appear to alleviate some of the considerable financial strain that downshifting results in for at least some families. Despite the strains of living with very limited resources, even those living most modestly in the sample (in some cases significantly below the objectively measured poverty line) draw a distinction between chosen low income lifestyles and poverty.

I do see the decision, the choices we’ve made, are almost counter to mainstream ideology and more value based. I’m just really saying if you actually have a choice you’re way ahead anyway, aren’t you? … I guess people that have downshifted actually are quite different to people who are living in poverty. In money terms we’re living way below the poverty line but you can see we’re not at all [looking around], by our physical environment we’re living really comfortably. [Sarah: female, late 30s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, purchaser owner, rural Victoria (Case 5)]
In short, the underpinning values for all downshifter families in this study are strong and consistent. The capacity to control the way life is lived, coupled with ‘time over money’ values and an associated sense of having life choices feature prominently in their lives. The way these values manifest can be highly varied, as explored above. Pathways to downshifting involve reassessments of working lives, pursuit of greater life balance and better fit between values and behaviours, as well as environmental and other ideals. As will be seen next, the values underpinning downshifting and the varied experiences of it intersect in significant ways with family life, values and priorities.

Family values and priorities

Family life and the values and priorities underpinning it feature integrally in the downshifting experiences of all downshifter families in this study. Given that all families in the study have dependent children it is perhaps not surprising that family life is found to be important. However, what is striking is the extent to which family priorities shape the way other aspects of downshifter’s lives are lived.

That family life is significant to downshifting is consistent with the findings of the TAI survey discussed at Chapter 2 (Hamilton and Mail 2003; Breakspear and Hamilton 2004) and recent replication of the same survey items in South East Queensland (Chhetri, Khan et al. 2009; Chhetri, Stimson et al. 2009), each of which identified ‘time for family life’ and ‘control and personal fulfillment’ as two key motivators. As also discussed at Chapter 2, exactly which aspects of family life are important for downshifters, as well as the ways family life features within the downshifting experience, remain almost completely unexplored, with the small but significant contribution of Donahoo (2005).

In this section, four key aspects of the downshifting-family life experience are examined: first, the extent to which family life contributes to the process; second, the types of family values and priorities important to family downshifters; third, how these are pursued and achieved; and finally, how the pursuit of these values and priorities is experienced. As
will be seen, there are important and significant ways in which the core values underpinning downshifting, outlined above, intersect with values and priorities related to family life.

*Family life as contributor to downshifting*

Typically, although not universally, family life is the trigger to downshifting among family downshifters. This is often in combination with other factors explored above such as work burn-out, pursuit of life balance or environmental ideals. However, family life, as will be seen, is the most significant motivator among most downshifter families. Two aspects of family life motivate downshifting. One concerns overall family harmony, including the sustainability of intimate adult relationships. The second, and more significant, concerns children and, specifically, the care of children in the family context. As will be seen, even in cases where partnering and child bearing occur after downshifting behaviours and processes are in train, family life becomes a priority, and one that is generally readily accommodated within a downshifting lifestyle.

The wellbeing of partnerships and family units acts to trigger downshifting in some cases. The experiences described by the following families indicate how integral downshifting, involving a shared set of values within a family unit, can be to family harmony and sustainability.

We downshifted because it’s made our relationship more sustainable. Just the experience of children and two parents working full-time is not sustainable, and it’s probably something that contributes to the breakdown of many relationships. That’s another motivator for downshifting. When we had the business I was working 100 hours a week and we had a little child, I think our relationship was at its lowest. *[Louis: male, early 40s, partnered, one school aged child, outright owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 17)]*
We would have also been unhappy with each other. And I think our relationship would have suffered, I reckon. I mean it probably… I’m sure it did. In that really full-on working time. So that’s another benefit is that our relationship’s got stronger. Our marriage and everything. [David: male, mid-30s, partnered, five school aged children, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 4)]

These cases contrast starkly with the experience of the father in the following case, where the potential impact of divergent attitudes to work and family life among partners is highlighted.

For 20 years I was a chiropractor, making lots of money. I was in a previous relationship and I couldn’t stop, have time off. It was ‘Oh, go, go, you’ve got to pay for the renovations and the tennis court and the new horse and the overseas trips and holidays’. It wasn’t possible to stop while that relationship continued. And then that relationship broke down for precisely that reason. And then after a time Rebecca and I got together and Rebecca, God bless her, said ‘I don’t care if we live in the back of a car! If you want to stop and slow down and have a better life then do so’. It was a precious change from the previous relationship. I quit and became a house husband. [Ian: male, early 50s, partnered, six school aged children, purchaser owner, rural Victoria (Case 15)]

Overwhelmingly, however, while overall family wellbeing is important, it is children, and the care of children, which act as the key motivators for downshifting among the majority. The care of children and prioritisation of what parents in this study perceived their children’s needs to be are central to the rationale for downshifting and the experience of it.

Many parents described the profound impact that having children had on the way they and their partners viewed the world, and consequently the way they now choose to live. This is the case among families who are more and less alternative, more and less wealthy financially as well as among those living in metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations.
The importance of children is summarised here by a father of two, reflecting on the process of becoming a parent.

It comes down to the kids, ’cause once you have kids you know they’re actually so much more important than anything else about your life. It’s interesting. I had a very strong experience when we discovered that Eleanor was pregnant the first time. I had a really strong sense that suddenly there was going to be something in my life that was so much more important than anything else, that I’d never had anything that was that important in my life ever before, and I knew it was going to be more important than absolutely anything else. [Nick: male, mid-30s, partnered, two young children (one pre-school, one school), purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 6)]

Given the profound impact of having children for many of the parents interviewed, in many cases the care of children acted as the trigger, sometimes among other causes, to begin the downshifting process.

For me, I think having a family encourages you to consider making that decision. I think if we were ‘double income, no kids’ our incentive to make those decisions wouldn’t be so great. [Louis: male, early 40s, partnered, one school aged child, outright owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 17)]

I think children just change all your priorities and nothing else matters. [Tracy: female, early 40s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 13)]

The children for us is the key, it was probably the key to it all. It’s the lynchpin as to why everything has changed around. Yes, we want to do this because the kids have come along. In the end, they justify the decision. [Doug: male, early 40s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 13)]
I think having children has given me a totally new drive … I think when you have children, well, for me anyway, it’s, you suddenly see the trajectory of your life in a way that you didn’t before. I mean, you see the world differently. You could still be in that early stage and you don’t think there’s a time limit on anything. And for me, having children made me realise that there is a time limit. Unfortunately that’s the reality of things and it forces you to reduce your life to the things that are most meaningful. [Eliza: female, mid-30s, partnered, two preschool aged children, renter in intentional community, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 11)]

While most downshifter parents talk about their decisions to change their working arrangements in favour of a focus on family life and children in strongly emotional terms, a smaller number weigh up the costs of working against time away from children in more pragmatic ways. In the following case, for example, time for children remains important, but is considered in relation to the potential pecuniary benefits of paid work.

If I hadn’t had Ari I’d probably still be working but the work I was doing was never, like, it wasn’t well-paid work so, you know, I’d probably, it would have only been part-time and I suppose the Parenting Payment would probably work out to be about as much as I would have got for my job. So it just, you know, I didn’t feel like the benefits for me of going and doing that, you know, $12 an hour job were worth it to put Ari in care. [Annette: female, mid-30s, partnered, one school aged child, renter and land owner, rural Victoria (Case 9)]

In a small number of cases, the arrival of children – and partners – is coincidental to the life choices already made by (now) parents, in relation to downshifting. This minority group can all be classed as more alternative than conventional in their world views and behaviours, have low or medium levels of financial wealth (associated with decreased attachment to the labour force), and live in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations. In these cases, too, however, life choices enabling flexibility and a focus on
aspects of life other than paid work enable parenting to be undertaken in ways consistent with parenting priorities.

It coincided with me getting pregnant for the first time. So it was kind of a magic opportunity for me because I was in a position where I didn’t have to pursue paid work because I was having a baby. It worked really well for me. And it has worked really well for me because I haven’t, because of the changes that we’ve made to our lifestyle, I haven’t had to return to paid work per se. I’m still working, but freelance and from home. It means that we can devote the amount of attention and time and just being around for our kids in a much better way than we could have if we hadn’t made those changes. [Leah: female, late 20s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, purchaser and owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 25)]

The care of children

Consistent with the impact of child bearing on their decisions to downshift, the most striking priority among downshifter families in terms of family life also concerns children, specifically, the provision of what parents perceive as good parenting. Included within this concept are broad factors such as a harmonious family and home environment in which to raise children, as well as the more specific priority of what families perceive as adequate parental time at home for the provision of family based care of children. These values are consistent across all downshifter families in the study, including those with high and low levels of financial resources, those living in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas as well as families who are more and less alternative – although it is often those families who are more alternative who opt to spend most time away from the labour market in favour of family time.

Good parenting is defined here by one father in terms of time. This view is typical across families interviewed, despite a diverse variety of backgrounds and circumstances.
By being a good parent I think for us is a conscious decision and it means time and it means accessibility and it means, which means them having access to us. I mean, when we first, I suppose we knew all about parenting when we didn’t have children, but if you have children you realise that you know very little if not nothing … So I guess good parenting for us means spending time with our children. [Eric: male, late 30s, partnered, four children (two pre-school, two school aged), renter, rural Victoria (Case 18)]

Examples of values relating to parenting are experienced and implemented within the day to lives of downshifter families are illustrated here. These include a strong focus on intensive parenting during children’s youngest years, and a view of the importance of parenting extended through the teenage years, as well as general parental proximity and availability.

I think the hours you put in now will benefit later when they’re teenagers. [Eliza: female, early 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 2)]

I had a period of long service leave. It was having that dedicated time here that really convinced me that I wanted more time. My son said to me ‘While you were on long service leave it made you a really happy person, Mum. I used to come home to you every day and you were always happy’ … Something I’ve thought about a lot in terms of my relationship to work and what sort of balance I have is that when Oliver was a baby I thought ‘Well, when he goes to school it will be easier’, and of course it’s not … They still need you as they get older. Someone to be with or talk to … It strikes me that it’s really important to be available both emotionally and physically. [Christine: female, late 40s, living apart from partner, one high school aged child, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 10)]

Tracy: I waited so long to have children and I want to be there when they get home from school, I want to hear about their day, I treasure every moment. My
mum had me late in life as well, she’s passed away, but I remember my mum always being there and I don’t want my kids to …

_Doug:_ … become latchkey kids.

_Tracy:_ Yeah, and not have me. They’re the sort of qualities and values that we want, and even when they go to high school. [Tracy and Doug: early 40s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, purchaser owners, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 13)]

Finally, consistent with Donahoo (2005), more time parenting, including shared parenting, enabled families to minimise the hours per week spent by children in child care away from the home.

I don’t particularly criticise other people for choosing child care but I suppose, I guess I think that having children means that you’re choosing to bring children into your life, and therefore they are part of your life … So, you know, if you think bringing up children is really important, then why would you get somebody else to do it? [Sarah: female, late 30s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, purchaser owner, rural Victoria (Case 5)]

_The nexus between downshifting and family life_

Although the actual experience of living a downshifted family life can be complex, put very simply, the prioritisation of children’s needs among this sample involves a focus on time rather than money, even among those with very limited financial resources. In this way, the core values and priorities relating to family life are highly compatible with downshifting values more generally. Each involve the capacity to control the way day to day life is organised and, in particular, the way time is prioritised and spent.

As many parents describe, the processes of questioning associated with downshifting, as well as the associated flexibility as a result of reduced hours spent in paid work, are a neat fit with the process of change and questioning that can come from becoming a parent.
We’re just sorting out life balance now, with the baby, and the new stress on your lifestyle and what have you … But it’s definitely more of a choice now to focus on quality of life for us, quality of life for our child. [Marcus: male, mid-30s, partnered, one baby, renter and land owner, rural Victoria (Case 7)]

I do somehow think it’s easier to make those choices when you’ve got young children because you’ve got a really good reason to step outside a career path … Certainly when you have children, well, I certainly felt profoundly the need to examine the world I was living in. [Sarah: female, late 30s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, purchaser owner, rural Victoria (Case 5)]

Parenting is constantly forcing one to reflect on choices. [Leah: female, late 20s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, purchaser and owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 25)]

For one young mother, having control over her family life through careful consideration of the impact of paid work is critical to her achievement of what she considers to be a healthy and happy home and family life. The achievement of these goals involves considerable financial frugality.

So working more, I have a real fear that I’d be just beholden to the employer and wouldn’t be able to choose the hours with him as much and just be more tired when I’ve got him with me. So, it’s a tricky one. Yeah, it’s been an influence for me, spending quality time or whatever with him, yeah … You know, I don’t know what I’m on at the moment, $16,000 or something crazy below the poverty line, whatever it is … I just want something really balanced. It’s hard to put a number on it as well, you know, the time just to know who my son really is and where he’s at with the day and school. [Sally: female, mid-20s, unpartnered, one school aged child, renter, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 24)]
The following families describe the importance of family time, with the implication in each case being decreased hours spent in paid work and away from children. These priorities closely relate to the concept of control identified above, as well as the notion of control over time and the way it is organised.

You can take the money later but you can’t get the time back with the kids when they’re little, you know. There’s a lot more to life than just dollars and just working for the dollars. [David: male, mid-30s, partnered, five school aged children, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 4)]

Lucy: Yeah when I was pregnant we sat down and said we … I remember sitting down with you at the table and looking each other in the eye …

Stuart: Yep.

Lucy: … and saying neither of us is going to put our career before being able to parent our child. [Lucy and Stuart: partnered, early 30s, one pre-school aged child, residents of intentional community, rural Victoria (Case 1)]

Time for children and parenting is described in numerous cases as important not only on a daily and weekly basis (such as the typically increased time with family due to decreased time at work), but as also important over extended periods.

Oh look, I suppose when all’s said and done, if you’re no good to yourself, you’re no good to your children. So if the stresses of life, if the stresses of your work and career and all the rest of it are taking over to the point where you’re not giving the most to your children, change, because you’re no good to them if you’re no good to yourself. And if being good to yourself is to drop out of mainstream society for a few years and just enjoy your kids for being kids, you can pick up the pieces later. You can go back to work later. I’d be a strong advocate. It’s my family, my little family, it’s done a world of good for us. [Rohan: male, late 30s, unpartnered, two school aged children, renter, rural Victoria (Case 23)]
In significant contrast to other cases, for one family interviewed, the parenting of very young children was seen as a hindrance to the creativity and productivity that can form part of a downshifting experience. In this case much time was also given to parenting, but this was experienced as a compromise to the relative freedom of time associated with non-family downshifting the family had known prior to becoming parents.

So my grating with it was sort of after the baby bit’s over then the long, boring toddler years. Your hands are on deck and by then I was bored shitless. [Tori: female, late 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 21)]

Even in this case, parenting ‘well’ was important. Comparing herself with other professional women who become mothers, the flexibility associated with downshifting and only working a small number of part-time hours enabled this woman to feel both work and parenting satisfaction.

The most unhappy creatures of all are the architects who become mothers and they just hate it because it’s over. All of a sudden that’s it, it’s over red rover. So either their kids are crèche kids to the power of hundreds, and they feel like they’re doing two jobs badly. All of them. Two jobs very, very badly. Whereas I felt like I was doing a very good job at [university] and a very good job as a mother. Although it had very little status, it didn’t matter. For me at least I had my satisfaction of knowing ‘No, I’m doing this well and I’m doing this well’. [Tori: female, late 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 21)]

Wanting to parent differently from their own parents was indicated as a motivator for wanting to spend more time with their children by a number of respondents, both male and female.
My parents got divorced when I was seven and so I didn’t really spend a lot of
time with my father and it was always important for me to be involved with my
kids. It’s quite a factor. [Mike: male, late 30s, partnered, two school aged children,
purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 12)]

I’m pretty determined that I’m not going to be the absentee father. [Marcus: male,
mid-30s, partnered, one baby, renter and land owner, rural Victoria (Case 7)]

My family being important to me is more real now than it was. I didn’t really
understand what it was about my family that was important. I don’t know, I feel
more protective of my son now, perhaps, than I did before, but what I feel
protective about has changed. It’s not about being protective of some foreign
nasty out there that’s going to get him, it’s very much about the negatives in our
society that are all around. It’s wanting to protect him and let him develop his
own ideas, because there’s very much a thing in our society that you have to
follow the leader and you have to fit in, and my parents were a classic example of
that. They’re very much keep up with what the neighbours do, and keeping up
appearances from all sides. They’re very, very concerned with what other people
think of them. [Kylie: female, mid-30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, pregnant,
purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 16)]

Finally, a number of respondents compared their approaches to those of ‘non-
downshifting’. Some could not understand why other people did not see spending more
time with their children as a possibility, or failed to understand the reasoning behind what
they perceived as more of a ‘money over time’ approach to family life.

The other side of the coin is that when you explain yourself and when you say
‘Look, I’m quite happy to just work three days a week and spend the other four
with the kids’, people go ‘Oh, that’d be great, I’d really love to do that’. And yet,
I don’t understand why it’s not an option for everyone, why people don’t see it as
an option. [Cassandra: female, early 30s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, one
I see so many of my friends and other families that are that oriented to when … everyone seems so orientated that their life’s going to begin when either they retire or they’ve got X amount of assets. And that’s when they can put a bit back into the family. Whereas this has certainly brought it home to me that as far as I’m concerned that’s a sort of, it’s a bit of a daft philosophy because 10 or 15 years will zip by and your kids will have grown up and you won’t even know ’em. And yes, they might be going to a private school and yes, they might have been to Disneyland or whatever, but they haven’t had that one on one upbringing, that closeness. And I don’t think you can really put a price on that. I really don’t. [Rohan: male, late 30s, unpartnered, two school aged children, renter, rural Victoria (Case 23)]

I had other friends and acquaintances in the industry who just sort of worked long hours and never saw their kids and all that sort of stuff. And I thought, well, we only get the chance once … Once it’s gone, it’s gone. You can’t make extra time in your life. [Mike: male, late 30s, partnered, two school aged children, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 12)]

The reactions of others to downshifters and their life choices vary markedly, with both strongly positive and negative responses from family, friends and peers. This finding is consistent with responses to the TAI downshifting survey, discussed at Chapter 2. The following passage gives insight into just how different ‘time over money’ values can be from norms within downshifter families’ own social networks about family life, values and priorities. In this case, a father describes the reactions of his parents to his own downshifting behaviours.

Even to this day my parents are still very funny around me because as far as they’re concerned I’ve thrown away two university degrees and a great career just to bring up the kids. They still can’t fathom it. They don’t have a lot to do with
me and the boys based on that. It used to upset me but that’s their loss, not mine, there’s not much I can do about that … I’ve been pretty much blacklisted. My mum’s getting better over time but my father, yeah, he has nothing to do with me, as far as he’s concerned I’m just a bludger. [Rohan: male, late 30s, unpartnered, two school aged children, renter, rural Victoria (Case 23)]

The pursuit of family life via downshifting

The fundamental values underpinning downshifting and its key characteristics can thus facilitate family life. In practical terms, downshifting gives many the opportunity to pursue their family values and priorities. This includes an increased capacity to spend time with family and away from income generation, as well as through the resultant increased flexibility and fluidity of time.

Among many of the families in this study, the way time for children is achieved is via a sharing of traditional gender roles between mothers and fathers (where two parents are present in the household) around time spent in paid work and domestic life. Indeed, many are conscious of being informed by feminism, as set out by each of the male partners in the following two cases.

We’re both sort of the generation which is heavily influenced by feminism and by rethinking the role of mothers and fathers in the workplace and at home. It seemed to us really unnatural, the idea of one parent being a full-time breadwinner and the other parent being a full-time carer. And particularly Lucy has got pretty good employment prospects, she’s highly educated and it seemed silly to park her in the market place at home. [Stuart: male, early 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, resident of intentional community, rural Victoria (Case 1)]

I suppose we’ve got more of an attitude of it being a shared responsibility. [Mike: male, late 30s, partnered, two school aged children, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 12)]
In addition to shared roles, a shared perspective among family members, notably parents, appears necessary for family downshifting to succeed happily.

Probably the thing that makes it work is having two people who are partners who have quite similar values in so far as respecting our children and all that and a willingness to sacrifice space and cleanliness and comfort for the sake of their growth and needs. [Ian: male, early 50s, partnered, six school aged children, purchaser owner, rural Victoria (Case 15)]

Role sharing can involve great flexibility. The arrangements made among many families, including the following, clearly illustrate this. In the case of the first family, the importance of daily flexibility in their capacity to respond to the needs of children is described. In the case of the second family, the significance of flexibility over extended periods of time is highlighted.

Well, we had the kids in before and after school care and I wouldn’t want to do that, it’s such a lot, especially while they’re this young. So the fact that Mike is working four days a week and his job is not too demanding meant that I could take on that commitment to do study full-time which has been really good. And it also means that if one of the kids is sick and I’ve got an interview scheduled or a conference or, you know, a presentation or something like that and one of the kids is sick or there’s a curriculum day, you know, he can take care of it. We share the time off with all the holidays and that sort of thing. So it’s not just the fact that he works four days a week, it’s also the flexibility at his work. [Elaine: female, late 30s, partnered, two school aged children, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 12)]

So over time we’ve done things … ahh … before we had kids we both worked full-time then when the kids were born I stayed home and he worked full-time and then you got your over-use injury and you stayed home and I worked full-time.
Then I had my breakdown as a result of work stuff, that was 10 years ago, and since then we’ve both worked full-time except for the last couple of years and we’ve both worked part-time. [Helen: female, late 40s, partnered, two teenage children, outright owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 3)]

Shared, negotiated and flexible gender roles around work and domestic life appear significant among downshifter families even where, objectively, they appear very traditional in their home-work arrangements. For example, when questioned about how her life as a ‘stay at home’ mum differed from that of a ‘traditional’ 1950s style housewife, one respondent observed:

So I guess the difference is that he goes out of his way to support me and make sure that even though I’m home with the kids, that I get the time on the weekends or at night or whenever to do my own stuff. And I also know that if I don’t clean for two weeks, that’s fine. If I don’t cook during the week, it’s fine. He’ll make three or four dishes on the weekend to set me up for the week. So it’s kind of like there’s a great amount of trust there. But yes, I’m at home, and I’m with the kids and I’m the primary caregiver, and that’s the way it’s worked out. It was never intended to be like that. But I know that fundamentally our roles are equal. I edit his work, his writing work. He helps me with my writing. It’s a real partnership. So in a way it is very similar structurally. If you looked at it from the outside and said ‘Well, she stays home and looks after the kids, he goes off to work’ it would seem to be really quite similar. But if you kind of dug in a little bit you’d see that there’s a partnership and a mutual respect that was never there, I don’t think, in the 1950s. I’ve often thought of it and thought ‘Well, what am I doing, have I changed anything?’ And I think I have! I think it’s very different. [Leah: female, late 20s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, purchaser and owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 25)]

Ultimately, for the large majority of families interviewed, downshifting is considered to be a successful solution to the problems of balancing work and family life. This is despite
difficulties associated with the extent, rapidity and nature of downshifting changes for some families, as well as ongoing financial difficulties experienced by those living with very limited financial resources. Here, comparing herself with other parents, a young mother of two small children describes the comfortable balance she and her family have achieved via family downshifting.

You know, there’s all those, a lot of people will talk about the guilt they feel about their children in child care five days a week and then having to make up for that on the weekends. Well, I’ve got enough to do on the weekends without feeling guilty about, you know, making sure I spend quality time with the child. So, having those four days is much better. I’m a lot more relaxed about it.

[Cassandra: female, early 30s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, one high school aged, renter Metropolitan Melbourne and land purchaser rural Victoria (Case 19)]

Finally, the ability to prioritise the needs of children and involvement in children’s lives were seen as the ‘rewards’ of downshifting by many respondents, regardless of degree of downshifting, financial resources or residential location. This was so for mothers as well as for fathers, as in the following cases.

I help out at the school and guide reading activities in the mornings and help with excursions and stuff and it’s just fantastic. There’s always stuff that needs doing. But having the involvement with the kids’ school keeps me happy. It’s sort of everything I thought, you know, when I planned that I want to spend more time with the kids, I didn’t think I’d be able to do all these things, and it’s just been much more rewarding than I actually thought of. [Mike: male, late 30s, partnered, two school aged children, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 12)]

Well, it’s nice. It’s a nice thing to do, and something you don’t necessarily get the opportunity to do as a male, an adult male. It certainly makes you think a bit differently about your life and it changes your values and how you do things. You have to be a lot gentler and take time with babies and you can’t be out there in the
world with the big heavy boots on. You actually have to stop. I think that’s really, really healthy and a very good thing. [David: male, mid-30s, partnered, five school aged children, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 4)]

In sum, family life and the values and priorities underpinning it are integrally related to the experience of downshifting among all family downshifters in this study. This is so whether partnering and child rearing act as triggers for downshifting, as in most cases, or are consequential to downshifting lifestyles and changes already made. Either way, the core downshifting values of control and the valuing of time over money and material rewards are highly compatible with the time required to pursue family ideals such as good parenting. As seen next, the combination of downshifting and family values and priorities has significant implications for the way downshifter families interact with the housing system and hence their experiences of it.

Housing or family life: Tensions and trade-offs

The downshifting values identified above – a heightened sense of control over one’s life, and the valuing of time over money – coupled with the prioritisation of family life, in particular, time for children, have significant implications for the way downshifter families engage with the housing system, their housing pathways and experiences as well as the way they ‘make’ and experience home (see Chapters 6 and 7). Before examining these relationships, it is important to understand the way downshifter families themselves perceive of their housing decisions and ‘choices’ and how they believe their lifestyle and family priorities impact upon the decisions they make and actions they take, with specific regard to housing.

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28 While choices about lifestyle feature integrally in this research, ‘choice’ in relation to housing is a complex issue, particularly for households with limited resources such as some of the downshifters studied here. Burke and Pinnegar (2007: 12), for example, suggest that: ‘while the concept of exercising choice is useful in terms of understanding some people’s housing pathways, for those under considerable strain it fails to capture either the lack of ability to manoeuvre or the ongoing feeling of insecurity. “Choice” implies the opportunity to shape outcomes that for some is simply not there.’
Overwhelmingly, interviews illustrate a high level of awareness among all downshifter families in this study of the relationship between housing costs, the generation of income to meet housing (and other) costs, and the impact of the need to generate income to meet housing (and other) costs on the capacity to prioritise time and manage their day to day lives in the way they wish to. This high level of awareness is found across downshifter families in all housing circumstances, including renters, home purchasers and owners and families living in other housing arrangements (see Chapter 6) as well as those with more and less alternative views, with greater and lesser degrees of financial wealth, and those living in metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations.

This awareness of the impact of housing costs on the capacity to control daily life is illustrated here by a young mother living in an intentional community based housing cooperative.

> I think that housing is dominating the way that we are living, housing prices. It is going to change families fundamentally for quite a while because anyone who tries to enter the market in the last two years from now on is facing an enormous mortgage and therefore an enormous lifestyle change. People talk about flexibility but you can’t have flexibility if you have that sort of a debt. I just look at how it shapes everyone’s lives and I think this is a really big thing, and think, I wonder who’s buying all these houses? And how? [Lucy: female, early 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, resident of intentional community, rural Victoria (Case 1)]

The recognition of the impact of housing costs on their capacity to live in accordance with both lifestyle and family values clearly impacts the nature of the downshifting process for many families in this study, and can lead to extensive housing and home changes, as explored in the chapters to follow. Here, a single parent father explicitly identifies the high costs of a house mortgage as negatively impacting on his family life and as contributing to the downshifting changes he subsequently undertook.
I’d drop them off at 7, 7:30 and pick them up at 5:30, 6 every day … I just got exhausted trying to work, feed the kids, and I got sick of paying someone to bring the kids up. Not that I didn’t think that the money was good value, I just thought that it was that moral dilemma of ‘Shit, you know, they’re my kids’. And that’s where I thought ‘Well, I’ve got to live and I’ve got to be good for them’ and working full-time and paying off the mortgage was just getting in the road.

[Rohan: male, late 30s, unpartnered, two school aged children, renter, rural Victoria (Case 23)]

The potential impacts of housing costs are consciously taken into account among all families in the sample in relation to their decisions to downshift, as well as their priorities relating to time for family life. In the following case, for example, a mother describes how she and her partner factored such costs into their housing choices in order to accommodate their downshifting choices once they had made the decision, as well as the prioritisation of family life, most notably, time for children and parenting.

At the time, well, he was on Newstart and I was on Parenting Payment and so on. We wanted to have a mortgage that we could maintain under those circumstances, ’cause I didn’t know whether he was going to go on and do a PhD or whatever and I certainly didn’t want to be going down the whole child care path. So we bought this house. [Sarah: female, late 30s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, purchaser owner, rural Victoria (Case 5)]

As described above, many families in this study avoid or minimise the extent to which their children are cared for by others, particularly via formal child care centres and market based care providers. In the following case, the need to use child care for small children is identified as one direct result of the need to meet high housing costs, something this family, along with many others, have actively avoided.

That’s really where it’s at with us. We want to be able to have that engagement with her and any others that come along. And you just can’t do that owning a
house at the sort of prices that they are. [Lucy: female, early 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, resident of intentional community, rural Victoria (Case 1)]

There are virtually no instances reported by in this study where compromises to either lifestyle values or family priorities are made in favour of housing. That is, where compromises or trade-offs are necessary, these are made to various aspects of housing and other material spheres of life, as will be seen at Chapter 6, rather than to lifestyle values and family priorities. The sole exception is the following case, in which a family had hoped to minimise their housing costs sufficiently for both parents to work part-time. Here, for at least the immediate future, the family require one full-time and one part-time income to meet housing costs. However, even in this circumstance, they have been able to achieve a situation in which they can comfortably meet their small mortgage payments with a high level of family based care, as one parent works from home with a high degree of flexibility.

Along the way we’ve had to compromise in terms of, I guess we always wanted Ben to be able to work part-time rather than full-time to support the mortgage and to keep the costs really low. But in the end, to get the kind of house that we wanted was going to cost more than we anticipated. [Leah: female, late 20s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, purchaser and owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 25)]

The tensions between lifestyle and family values and priorities and material comfort and/or housing preferences can be highly stressful, difficult and complex. The potential difficulties involved in these tensions are illustrated in the following situation. For one family living cooperatively, the option of purchasing or vacating their rental home, one of the houses that makes up a small intentional community in an inner urban setting, was causing a great deal of anxiety. Given the community’s location and the nature of the housing arrangement (a small cluster of freehold titles purchased by like-minded family and friends in close proximity to one another), housing prices within the cooperative
reflected the high prices of the local area. At the time of interview, the respondents needed to choose between their family and lifestyle priorities and their housing.

It’s an absurd situation in some ways because so much of what this community is about is the opposite of two parents, mortgaged up to the hilt, working their arses off to make ends meet, with their kids in full-time child care. I mean, it’s just not what this whole lifestyle is meant to be about. But unfortunately this is a problem that [housing cooperative] is in an inner suburb where this is what houses fetch. And you can’t really expect … the landlord here is willing to reduce … he’s offered the house to us at less than market value but he can’t, you know, subsidise … it’s got to be in the ball park. He can’t subsidise our lifestyle, so he needs to have a decent price for the house. And at this stage I think it’s a choice for us. In preparing to possibly buy this house I decided to take on more work. So I’ve gone back to work three days a week. And in just doing that it’s forced me to – and in fact I’m working four days because I already had one day a week – in just doing that I’ve recognised that that is not how I want to live and that it takes too much time away from the kids. And to justify time away from the kids something needs to be really important. And buying a house just isn’t important enough at this stage to justify sacrificing my time with the kids while they’re small. [Eliza: female, mid-30s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, renter in intentional community, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 11)]

Links drawn by downshifters between the cost of housing, and their family and downshifting values and priorities illuminate housing costs and, for families with low to medium levels of financial resources, the housing affordability problem in a new light. The experiences of all downshifter families in this study, regardless of level of financial resources, indicate that, for them, the key question regarding housing affordability is not only how much housing costs in terms of finances, but rather what the cost of any given housing outcome is to family life.
Clearly, for those with high levels of financial resources, the trade-offs made to housing or lifestyle are reduced, relative to families with lower levels of financial resources.

I suppose there might be a lot of people out there who would want to do something like this but maybe housing affordability is stopping them from doing it. It’s a very easy trap to get into for a lot of people, I think, if they want to follow the great Australian dream of owning your own home, and if you want to do that now then you’ve got to get a high paying job or two and the choices are just narrowed right down. [Mike: male, late 30s, partnered, two school aged children, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 12)]

However, even among downshifter families who are well resourced financially there is a high degree of awareness of the impact of housing costs on lifestyle choice. Among all such families in the sample, conscious and deliberate decisions are also made to limit the extent of housing and other costs in order to be able to continue to pursue lifestyle and family priorities in relative financial and material comfort. This also involves a high level of commitment and decision not to pursue increased wealth via increased housing consumption, the norm among many of their families, friends and peers.

It can be a cycle, to reduce your debt to take on more to leap to the next level in your lifestyle. We have chosen not to do that and we know a lot of other people for whom it seems, not an addictive thing, but it seems like a progression. ‘Now we’ll go for a house this size, let’s pay that off and we’ll go and take on more debt to buy another bigger house.’ And a bigger car and so on. And I think we’ve made a conscious decision to say ‘This is fine’. [Louis: male, early 40s, partnered, one school aged child, outright owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 17)]

Ultimately, what the analysis indicates are the clear choices downshiffer families make in a large majority of cases to limit their housing costs in order to facilitate other aspects of their lives, most notably, time for family life. In numerous cases, as will be explored at Chapter 6, substantial trade-offs are made to housing circumstances in order to protect
lifestyle choices and family values and priorities. This can involve significant strain and material sacrifice, felt most acutely among families whose levels of financial resources are low. The values and priorities underpinning such trade-offs are described succinctly here by a mother who has opted for extensive material sacrifices in order to pursue her family and parenting priorities. Here, she reflects upon the ‘cost’ of material comforts and a comfortable income.

But when you start to actually work out what the cost of having those things might be to your relationship, to your family, to your children, in that you would have to go out to earn more … then the costs are too great. And while it would be nice to have all those things, living with a little bit less you can have the things that are important. Family. Happy children. Having their education. So, yeah, I guess it’s never been terribly important. It’d be nice. In an ideal world it’d be nice. But it’s not an ideal world. We don’t all have as much money as we’d like. In the scheme of things we’re fine. [Rebecca: female, late 30s, partnered, six school aged children, purchaser owner, rural Victoria (Case 15)]

In sum

Throughout this chapter it has been argued that understanding the fundamental values underpinning downshifting as a lifestyle choice, and their relationship to family values and priorities among downshifter families, is central to understanding their housing and home experiences. The values underpinning both downshifting and family life have been identified, and the relationship between them explored. To end, the chapter has drawn heavily upon the observations of downshifter families themselves to illustrate that, combined, these downshifting and family values and priorities act as the parameters within which decisions and choices about housing and home are made.

The analysis above identifies a diversity of motivations and experiences among the sub-sample of downshifter families, including dissatisfaction with paid work as well as environmental and other ethical concerns. Despite this diversity, common values were
found to underpin the downshifting experience for all families in this study. Control is the foremost of these, and is found in all aspects of downshifters’ lives. A sense of, and desire for, a generally high level of control over life is closely coupled with the desire for control over time: how it is spent and how it is organised. These priorities are underpinned by ‘time over money’ values – the valuing of quality of life over materialism – and an overall perception of choice among downshifter families about how they live.

The analysis in this chapter also demonstrates that for this group, at least, family values and priorities are central to the motivations for downshifting among most families, and are integral to all downshifter families in the study. This finding is consistent with previous research, although previous studies have failed to ‘unpack’ why this is so.

Overwhelmingly, the analysis indicates that the care of children within the family context is a priority for downshifter families, often representing a primary or contributing trigger to downshifting. The time required to care for children at home is highly compatible with downshifting values, where good parenting involves parental accessibility, often instead of material goods or even comfort. Shared gender roles can support the provision of time to children by enabling flexible engagement in both paid and domestic work. Despite the varying circumstances and outlooks of alternative and conventional downshifters, those with high, medium and low levels of financial resources, and those living in metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations, a high degree of consistency in adherence to this philosophy is found among all downshifter families.

Combined, the core values underpinning both downshifting and family life set the parameters within which housing decisions are made and home lives are lived. The many and varied ways in which downshifting values and family priorities shape the housing pathways and the ‘making of home’ of downshifter families form the foci of Chapters 6 and 7.
Chapter 6
Downshifting and housing pathways

Chapter 5 identified the downshifting and family values and priorities which, combined, act as the parameters within which decisions about housing aspirations and strategies are made. In this chapter, the housing circumstances resulting from these decisions made by downshifter families, and the pathways to these circumstances, are explored. Consistent with Clapham (2002, 2004, 2005), the term ‘housing pathway’ is used to highlight the broad approach taken in which analysis is based on householders’ experiences and meaning, via an interpretivist, grounded approach (see Chapters 3 and 4). Housing pathways are explored in two ways concurrently. The first examines the current housing circumstances of downshifter families, taking account of tenure and perceived security and control with regard to their housing, as well as other aspects including financial arrangements, location, housing quality and housing type. The second way in which downshifter families’ housing pathways are explored is dynamic, focusing on the processes, strategies, changes, degrees of mobility and stability in housing histories, circumstances and choices.

A typology of current housing circumstances, described next, is used as the organising framework for this chapter, within which the underlying housing dynamics are explored. Following exploration of the circumstances and dynamics for families in each housing type, the chapter concludes with an analysis of common strategies employed within and across the highly varied housing pathways of downshifter family households found here.

Downshifting the ‘great Australian dream’: A typology

This chapter takes as its starting point the current housing circumstances of downshifter families. Home ownership, pathways to ownership and deliberate or conscious alternatives to ownership in many ways dominate the ways downshifter families describe their housing circumstances, experiences, histories and futures. The concept of housing
tenure is therefore used to describe the current housing circumstances of downshifter families.

A usual classification of housing circumstances based on housing tenure shows that, of the downshifter families in this study, four are outright home owners (no mortgage), 11 are purchaser owners (with mortgage/debt), seven are private renters, three are in ‘other’ housing circumstances and none live in public rental housing. On the basis of this classification, we can assume that some have greater levels of control and security (legal and perceived) than others, since home ownership is generally associated with higher levels of security and rights to change one’s housing than non-ownership tenures in Australia, as discussed at Chapter 3.

However, as also discussed at Chapter 3, a typology based solely upon tenure tells us little more than this: it is a partial story only. In contrast, in this study an alternative typology of housing circumstances, based on the voices and experiences of downshifter families about their housing tenure and experiences, emerges. This incorporates tenure as well other factors including the ways housing security and control can operate across tenures. The typology used here differentiates between the circumstances of families within the same housing tenure, illustrates how ‘other’ housing tenures relate to levels of housing security and control typically associated with ownership, and includes some of the transitional stages between tenures. The typology is illustrated at Figure 2, with reference to the degree of security and control associated with each type of housing circumstance.
Figure 2. Typology of current housing circumstances of downshifter families, showing notions of security and control

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low</th>
<th>High</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Degree of security and control</strong></td>
<td><strong>Degree of security and control</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-provisioners (n=3)</strong></td>
<td><strong>The lucky ones (n=7)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| high level of control over design, location, costs;  
  high level of security through tenure | able to readily meet current housing costs;  
  high level of security through tenure |
| **Comfort traders (n=5)**                | **Alternative dreamers (n=3)**            |
| able to meet housing costs via significant trade-offs in housing quality;  
  high level of security through tenure | able to meet housing costs via communal action/economies of scale;  
  level of security dependent upon community relations |
| **Alternative realities (n=7)**           |                                           |
| able to meet housing costs via tenure change;  
  low level of security dependent upon private landlords |                                           |

Source: Stone 2010, original typology.

Self-provisioners or owner builders are identified as having most control over their housing type, location and cost. This group also enjoys the high level of security.
associated with home ownership, particularly where this is mortgage-free. Also enjoying a high level of control and security are the lucky ones who can comfortably afford home ownership and hence enjoy the levels of security and control typically associated with this tenure. Comfort traders who make significant trade-offs to housing quality to access the perceived security, control and other benefits associated with home ownership are also identified. Alternative dreamers include families who achieve a relatively high degree of security and varied levels of control, via relationships with others rather than via tenure rights. The final type, alternative realities, is made up of private renters, some of whom are relatively ‘fixed’ and some of whom have exit plans they aim to use to leverage themselves into home ownership.

In the analysis that follows, each type of housing circumstance is detailed in turn, and the housing strategies and experiences of family downshifting within each type explored.

**Self-provisioners**

The term ‘self-provisioners’ refers to family households who are owner builders: households who, to varying degrees, play a very large part in the design and construction of their own homes. Owner builders in this study are all alternative, following the classification developed at Chapter 4, and include a mix of families with low and medium financial resources. In all cases, owner builder and would-be owner builder families lived in non-metropolitan areas at the time of interview (with the exception of a family who recently vacated their rural property to rent in the city (Case 19), discussed below). Living away from metropolitan areas enabled owner building to occur according to family budgets (often very low) and timelines (often lengthy due to low budgets). The experience of living in rural areas, closer to nature and within smaller communities is also highly valued among this group (see also Chapter 7).

The housing experiences and circumstances of the owner builder families are characterised by high levels of input and involvement in their housing strategies, relative to other family households. These high levels of engagement are strongly associated with
a heightened sense of control over housing choices and experiences, relative to families in other housing circumstance types.

For each owner builder family, high levels of involvement in the process began through securing the ‘right’ land. The experiences of the following family are typical and include a complex interaction of economics, environmental and community concerns and some degree of perceived luck.

Well, it was part economic and part philosophical, you know, because we couldn’t afford … We met and I was pregnant within four months and so it was huge, and I hadn’t prepared for it. I had financial debts from travelling overseas and also from not learning how to manage money properly, and so did Ben. So we found ourselves in a position where we had very large debt and no assets to show for it and impending parenthood [laughing] … And we had to start looking for a place we could afford to buy land. And I guess because voluntary simplicity ties in with self-sufficiency ties in with permaculture and all of those sorts of ideas, we started looking around. We were really interested in ideas. And we focused our search on rural Victoria because we thought we’d be better able to afford something out here than in metropolitan Melbourne … So we kind of just set out a little triangle on the map and decided we’d look out here. And that’s how we made the decision about out here. And so, but by the time we got here it turned out that we actually couldn’t afford land. And it was really just luck that we ended up finding this. One of the women that Ben worked with at the time said ‘Oh, now, you’re looking for some land, oh, we’ve got a block out that way that we’re looking at selling. Do you want to go and have a look at it?’ And so we did and we loved it. And we came back to her and said we love it and she said ‘Well, name a price’. And so we offered her $30,000 which was about what we could afford for eight acres of bush out here. The going rate would have been about $70,000. And she said, ‘Oh, I couldn’t possibly accept that much!’’. So we got it for a little bit less than that. So that’s the kind of story about how we ended up out
High levels of control in each case continued through both the design and building stages in which values about environmental sustainability and family life were incorporated within house designs in ways determined by the families themselves (see also Chapter 7). Each house adhered strongly to environmental principles, and two out of three included many renewable and sustainable power and water systems. The third family opted to live without a continuous power source, living without electricity almost entirely. In this case, processes of questioning the ‘usual’ and desired aspects of housing led this family to build the house they wanted, to reflect the way they wished to live, within their budget and capabilities.

We designed it. We had many designs. We had some great designs with towers and all sorts of things but the financial budget was a constraint … But I do love it and enjoy it and I can see what doesn’t work and what does work and I love architecture and I’m always designing houses … And I like, I just love being practical, I suppose, not wasting space. And how can you use space and have multi-functional space. I like changing furniture ’round, so how to make it so you can do that, that it’s not set. And questioning what – the traditional things about a house, like a bedroom and all that. Like why does it have to be separate and why does it have to be a certain size, and the thing about a bedroom is it’s just basically where the bed is and so why not make the room as big as your bed? Just stuff like that. [Eliza: female, early 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 2)]

High levels of involvement continued through the construction stage. In one case, qualified builders within the extended family were used, with considerable assistance from the downshifter family. In the remaining cases, family members were directly involved in all aspects of the process, involving building professionals only where required for technical skill or by legislation (such as wiring and certification of
plumbing). Typical of this process, in the following case, almost all work was undertaken by family members themselves.

It was good, and we built it ourselves, designed it ourselves and our next-door neighbour, he’s a builder, so we’d just go and check in with him and he’d come over and give the place an eye over and say, ‘Nuh, you’re doing really well’. Then the council came, did all the approvals and everything. [Martin: male, early 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 2)]

To enable owner building to proceed, highly deliberate and conscious financial strategies were employed. ‘Drip feeding’ the process over a lengthy period of many years was a strategy used by one family, a modest mortgage was used by another, and the opportunity of government assistance was seized in a third case. Here, the family built within its means, using principles of minimalism, functionality and sustainability, supported by the introduction of the First Home Owner Grant, a scheme involving cash assistance to would-be first home owners to build their dwelling.

Yeah, so we were both living just down in that little hut for a while. Then the First Home Owner Grant came and we thought ‘Hmmmm, $14,000’, and we fitted the category. It was a little bit earlier than we thought we’d build, but for that amount of money we thought we’d do it. So the house cost $30,000, so it paid for half the house. [Martin: male, early 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 2)]

Despite the high degree of control afforded by owner building, in at least some cases, some compromises and trade-offs are made. In the previous case, for example, a limited budget meant building a small house for family living. For the family who had built on a limited mortgage, their aim of having two parents working part-time had given way to pursuing the right housing for them, resulting in the compromise of one parent working full-time and one working part-time from home, rather than reaching a greater shared care arrangement. In the case of the family building on a trickle of income, despite now
being comfortable in their own home, building had been a long, arduous process which impacted significantly on the comfort of all family members for a considerable period of time.

Anyway, so there was a real cost to it … That’s why dummies have mortgages, you get it all now and you can raise your kids in that plastic dummy environment that’s very easy for children. Whereas this was impossible. We lived in a 2.7 by 5.5 metre shack. So, does a child get bored in something that size? Yes. They go outside. Are there fences? No. So by now we’re on the land. What we did was, we built, started building illegally just so that we didn’t have to pay rent … So we did that, and because it was so small we were able to afford. That’s the no mortgage stuff. We were able to do that because Greg would work a bit then build a bit, he’d work a bit then build a bit. He’s a carpenter … That’s why it’s taken us eight years to build, just because of the time and the stop-start, stop-start and the money flow. That’s what was stressful … After a while, a few times Greg weakened and he went ‘Oh, can’t we get a mortgage?’ because it was really grinding. I wouldn’t recommend it, just because I think in hindsight what we did was too much for the fact that we had a child at the same time. In some ways I would almost say that, perhaps, because it was so grinding, and the poverty was so grim. [Tori: female, late 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 21)]

Once completed, however, the houses provided a great deal of satisfaction and security to the owner builder families, including, importantly, financial security. Indeed, for two of the three families, high levels of financial security were achieved as they had built without mortgages and, upon completion of their homes, immediately owned their housing outright. In the third case a modest mortgage resulted.

Until you do it. Until you go ‘Here is my house, we own our house, there is no mortgage’. That asset gives you that feeling of security. I would not say that assets aren’t important. I’m not a hippy where ‘Oh, assets aren’t important’. They are important. We will all grow old. What’s going to happen to us? And just
having one big primary asset, I think it does matter. [Tori: female, late 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 21)]

In short, for these families, owner building provided an alternative to the high upfront cost and relative lack of design choice offered within the mainstream housing market. It enabled the input of individuality, environmentally sound building principles, cost effective measures and a great degree of control over which aspects of housing would be and would not be afforded within any given budget. It required a great deal of involvement and reflection on housing, home and lifestyle. Relative to lucky downshifter families, described next, self-provisioning of housing enabled high levels of control, ontological and financial security to be achieved despite living with medium to high levels of financial constraint.

*The lucky ones*

A second group of home owners in the sample also enjoyed a relatively high degree of control over their housing and security from it, in addition to other benefits, due to their particular circumstances, resources and, in some cases, histories. This group had achieved home ownership relatively comfortably, without the kind of personal costs experienced by some owner builder families, above, nor the trade-offs experienced by other owners, explored below. Using their own terminology, these families are referred to here as the lucky ones. They include a combination of outright and purchaser owners. All are more conventional than alternative in terms of their relationship to work and consumption, and all have high or medium levels of financial resources, in some cases due to housing wealth they have amassed. All but one of these families, in which each parent in the family household grew up in a rural area, live in the city.

Families who owned or were purchasing their housing relatively comfortably were aware of the difference in their housing circumstance, relative to many others. The following comments are typical, and show not only an understanding of housing affordability, but
also of how their own decisions and choices to downshift relate to their housing circumstances.

I really feel for people who aren’t in the housing market at all because I feel I don’t make as much money, working the way I am now, I couldn’t save a deposit on a house. I can save for a holiday and I can budget so that I’ve got enough money to pay all the bills, pay the rates on time, that sort of thing. But no, I couldn’t get a whole lot of money together for a deposit so I’d probably be renting … but being a renter for so long I was determined to make sure I had a permanent roof over my head. It must be really hard and disheartening I think for people who are stuck renting and paying probably a lot more money in rent than they would need to pay as repayments for a house. Paying so much rent they couldn’t save for a deposit. It’s awful. [Christine: female, late 40s, living apart from partner, one high school aged child, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 10)]

The luck or good fortune of this group was dependent upon circumstances as well as strategy. Circumstances enabling the aspiration of home ownership to be achieved with a relatively high level of financial comfort include relatively strong and fixed attachment to the labour market (even if this had reduced through downshifting), relatively high levels of financial wealth and, in some cases, historical factors such as timing. The following case demonstrates the combination of these factors. Both parents held stable and well-paid jobs, albeit reduced from two full-time wage earners per household, and entered the property market prior to Victoria’s recent housing price rises.29

We were so lucky, we were soooo lucky. In the last five or six years [town] house prices have doubled and we bought before that, just before. I just don’t know how people manage it … Housing affordability I think is such a big pressure because it was hard enough when we got into the housing market. These days I don’t know how people are actually doing it except by having huge mortgages. That’s frightening. The economy’s built on debt, it’s all gonna come a-tumbling.

Many in this group describe owning their own homes in terms of security. This is entirely consistent with the strong association in Australia between home ownership and ontological security (and the factors contributing to it) discussed at Chapter 3. As seen throughout this chapter, these views are shared by many – although not all – families in other housing circumstances, some of whom have experienced home ownership previously and others who aspire to own their own homes. In the case of the following family, a modest house had been purchased after they had been given notice to vacate two privately rented homes in short succession, around the time their first child was born.

I suppose for the security and, yeah, just that sense of actually having something you’re building on. I sometimes don’t know about the choice we made in terms of the actual house we bought but I think we did the right thing to buy a house.

Also in keeping with existing understandings of ontological security in relation to housing (Saunders and Williams 1988; Dupuis and Thorns 1998), respondents indicate that ‘security’ has a broader meaning than financial security alone, although the financial security perceived to be afforded by home ownership is clearly acknowledged. In the following case, an earlier purchase is seen as valuable in multiple ways in its own right but also as enabling future housing choices due to capital gains.

Four, five – four and a half years ago. It’s recent. Quite recent. By doing that it’s given me a base. That was another thing, too. You know, renting for a while is OK but being able to buy a house, it was an investment, it was a base, it enabled me to live with a sense of security. And it’s paying off now in terms of if we do sell it, it will contribute to the progress of our home and let us live the way we want to live.
‘Stability’ and the ability to ‘put down roots’, related to the security provided by home ownership, were mentioned by a number of families.

You know, I’m very attached to the house here and to the neighbourhood and to the connections I’ve got and my friends here. So it would be quite a different life moving to the inner city. But now that Oliver is at [high school] and he’s really happy here, doing lots of things that he really enjoys, I can see that I won’t be able to move for another five years until he’s finished Year 12. I won’t even consider it. [Christine: female, late 40s, living apart from partner, one high school aged child, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 10)]

We think it’s important for Anastasia to have a solid base, a house that’s she’s lived in for her formative years of primary school, rather than having to move. Living in one place gives us that stability. In the absence of that we may not feel as secure as we do. Or as connected as we do. [Catherine: female, late 30s, partnered, one school aged child, outright owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 17)]

In addition to circumstances and perceived good fortune, the strategies of lucky home owners also appears to play a role in the current, comfortable housing circumstances they enjoy. For most, stability itself had resulted in the capacity to afford home ownership comfortably and had become part of a financial strategy enabling downshifting to occur, with many families purchasing their homes many years earlier.

Yeah, so we bought the house about six months before [son] was born. And then we renovated it four years ago. We put on an extra room, this room here, and so we borrowed a lot of money and we did that, but Mike was earning a lot of money and working full-time and we kind of realised what we were taking on. We probably wouldn’t have done that had we known that things were going to change for us financially quite a bit. But, you know, it’s OK, but we probably would have made different choices if we’d foreseen the future, that Mike would downshift
and I’d be studying. [Elaine: female, late 30s, partnered, two school aged children, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 12)]

Even among this group who own or who are purchasing their homes relatively comfortably, decisions often appear to be made to limit expenditure on housing by, for example, renovating and improving homes slowly over time, rather than purchasing immediate renovation, repair or upgrades, as illustrated in the following passage. In this case, a family began by making many of the material trade-offs discussed next, as a way to reduce costs and maintain stability as they worked towards a more comfortable financial and material home life over a period of years.

_Interviewer:_ Your house is absolutely lovely. Have you modified it?
_Catherine:_ Oh yes! Big time.
_Louis:_ It was going to be demolished. We lived here for two winters without heating, in one room
_Catherine:_ No window panes, it was tragic.
_Louis:_ You didn’t need a key to get in, you could just enter.
_Catherine:_ Yeah, and that’s how we could afford to buy in this area.
_Louis:_ What we did was in accordance with our budget rather than in accordance with what we would have liked. But also timing was of great importance. In the mid-90s we were able to do that. If we tried to do the same thing now I think it would be beyond our means.
_Catherine:_ Yes, beyond our means … This was a late 50s cream brick. Not a classic [area] design but typical of houses in Melbourne. We changed it to a gabled roof, and the ceiling was skillion as well, very, very slight angle. It had louvre windows. It’s completely different now, but done in a very cost effective way. We have an all-new kitchen and laundry and bathroom. All the glazing is new, the floor to ceiling glazing, but it’s very inexpensive glazing. That’s where we saved money. New deck, the house is rendered, it’s changed the whole look and character, it flows and is light. And then a couple of years later we did the garden, but we certainly didn’t do it in one fell swoop … We’re still painting!
Louis: You look up there, I’m still painting. *(pointing to unpainted patch on ceiling)*

Catherine: That stopped the day Anastasia was born, and she’s nearly eight and we have not returned to it. The painting’s not a priority for us. *[Catherine and Louis: late 30s, partnered, one school aged child, outright owners, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 17)]*

This illustrates how, for family households described here as the lucky ones, a combination of circumstances, including good earnings and high levels of wealth, coupled with typically long-term strategies to reduce housing expenditure, including relative frugality, result in relatively comfortable home ownership. For these families, as in the case those discussed next, the perceived benefits of home ownership relating to both emotional and financial security underlie the housing choices they have made and their ongoing housing strategies.

*Comfort traders*

Compared with the previous group who own or are purchasing their homes with relatively high degrees of comfort is another group who make significant trade-offs and compromises in order to secure home ownership. As in the previous section, they include a combination of outright and purchaser owners. However, unlike lucky owners, all can be considered more alternative than conventional, having significantly different views and relationships to work and consumption patterns than associated with mainstream society. Also in contrast with the previous group, most – although not all – live in non-metropolitan areas. As a whole, they are is also less financially well resourced than families discussed above, with a mix of low and medium levels of financial resources.

Despite the differences between this group and lucky owners, downshifter families in this group again stress the sense of security – physical, emotional and financial – that comes from owning or purchasing their own homes, describing some implications for their lives, even where income levels are low.
I really wanted a garden that I’d be able to keep, instead of being in rental houses and getting a garden nice and then moving. Again and again and again and again. And just the security of owning my own house and, I don’t know, just all those things. Owning my own house, and just the security and not having to move when the landlord wanted to sell the house and being able to do what I wanted to it … The mortgage certainly takes a large part of our income but it’s important, I feel a lot more secure owning my own house than having the same income and then renting a house, even though we might have more disposable income. [Jane: female, mid-30s, partnered, one baby, purchaser owner, rural Victoria (Case 8)]

Among this group, it is these perceived benefits of home ownership which drive housing choices and strategies. Framed in terms of trade-offs – aspects of their housing which respondents would change if they had greater financial wherewithal – their housing pathways and circumstances illustrate the diversity of ways in which families have gained home ownership, and what their experiences of a downshifted form of home ownership is. Various trade-offs are made, including compromises in housing quality and, in some cases, location.

In the following two cases, trade-offs in the quality and size of family housing were made in order to purchase housing in metropolitan centres. In the first case, housing had been purchased many years earlier and the family now owned their home outright, choosing not to upgrade but to live within modest housing and their means, rather than taking on more debt. This family describes ‘making do’ in their ‘pretty humble’, ‘quite original’, ‘unrenovated 1950s home’, to accommodate the needs of family members.

This house is unusual in that there’s two parents, two teenage kids, three bedrooms, one living area. So there’s no extra living area, there’s no extra space. We’ve got a single sink, one bathroom. These things are quite unusual. When I first went back to uni and when I did my honours year I had that little children’s table and that was my desk and it’s now Timothy’s desk, and that was in the
bedroom. And when I got a PhD I thought, well, I deserve my own desk now, so I went up to the Salvos and got an ex-public service desk. And we just had to make a decision because I couldn’t fit a desk and a bed in the bedroom so the solution we eventually came to was two single mattresses which at night time we put down and that’s our bed and at day time we put up and put it away. That way there’s room for all sorts of stupid things in the bedroom like a piano, you know, various instruments and a desk. But it works really well. [Helen: female, late 40s, partnered, two teenage children, outright owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 3)]

In the second case, an inner city family home had been purchased more recently, partly with equity from a former home, partly by purchasing immediately prior to the most significant housing price hikes, and partly by compromising on size and quality, with renovations needing to be undertaken in the near future, somehow.

We’ve got the oldest house on the street. [laughing] We’ve got the oldest. It’s what we could afford … We’re just trying to work out how the heck we can do it up. We don’t have a lot of savings to do anything with. I don’t quite know how, we haven’t got a solution yet… We’ll have to take the kitchen out pretty soon. It leaks like a sieve. It’s very rickety. It’s one of those progressive kind of add-on things. [David: male, mid-30s, partnered, five school aged children, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 4)]

In each of these cases, strategies of debt minimisation have been integral to achieving the kind of metropolitan based lifestyles each family desired. The long-term reduction and/or avoidance of debt, and its relationship to both housing choices and lifestyle, is described by the first of these families.

I hate having debt … With the avoidance of debt thing, if you’ve got debt you’ve got to have an income to pay it off and I don’t, I didn’t want to commit myself to having an income and so that’s why, you know, instead of making the house big enough for the four of us or getting another house we decided to just make do.
In contrast with the two cases described above, many downshifter families who owned or were purchasing their homes with trade-offs live in non-metropolitan areas. Mobility studies frequently refer to ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors when describing householders’ decisions to leave a given place and locate to another (for example, Gurr et al. 2005 and Burnley and Murphy 2004, discussed at Chapter 2). The housing pathways of comfort traders illustrate the complexity and interrelationship of factors involved in mobility decisions: living in non-metropolitan areas enables home ownership as a housing option and also fulfils other needs and desires associated with lifestyle priorities.

Moving to non-metropolitan areas can be seen as part of a financial strategy enabling increased affordability and, ultimately, home purchase. In the following case, it enabled a very low income family to afford to purchase their own home.

The other part of our choice to come here was knowing that we might have the opportunity to buy a house if we moved here because at that stage housing was far more accessible than it is now. We bought this house in 2000 for $75,000. So we made that choice. We’d actually been looking for land or a house here for about three years before we moved here … While we were here we could just see the houses going up and up and up so we bought this house … It was affordable and we didn’t want to have a big mortgage. [Sarah: female, late 30s, partnered, two preschool aged children, purchaser owner, rural Victoria (Case 5)]

However, even with the potential savings involved in living away from major metropolitan centres, many downshifter families living in rural areas clearly make significant housing trade-offs in quality and/or housing size in order to pursue their downshifting and family priorities. Here, for example, a mother within a large family describes some practical implications of living in what one respondent calls ‘imperfect housing’, referring to compromises to desired style, size and condition.
Interestingly enough, the first moment we walked, I walked in here, I just absolutely loved the house. It was different then. There was no kitchen then and there was a big chimney and whatever … But I could see, I could still see it for its charm. And I always want to have a house that’s charming. But the realities of living in it are not ideal in the sense that it’s not clean, there’s cracks in the floor, there’s wind that whistles up through the cracks, there’s spiders getting in all the cracks and putting cobwebs up all over the place. It often feels dirty and untidy just by being old. It’s a barn … I love the old doors and the floors, wooden floors, I’ve always liked wooden floors but they’re meant to be finished, you know. It’s like, it’s livable but the realities of cleaning a kitchen and having seven children, the gaps need to be sanded so I can actually clean it. But it hasn’t happened … It will one day. When we’d clean the benchtops around the sink, the wood was unfinished so when you wiped it, it actually had wood grains in it and it was actually furry and I sanded that off but, you know, the water gets in the cracks and you can see all the dust which gets under the bench there because there’s no cupboard doors. That bench there is actually an old altar from the church that was left here that the lady had. It’s high, it’s not a workable benchtop. You know, all of these things drive you insane, and they don’t until you live in it. They look charming to the outsider. [Rebecca: female, late 30s, partnered, six school aged children, purchaser owner, rural Victoria (Case 15)]

In some cases the trade-offs made by families living in non-metropolitan areas are partly offset by the perceived advantages, desired aesthetics and natural amenity of living closer to nature. The enjoyment of living away from metropolitan areas and the benefits of living in rural environments is described here by a family with a young baby, and is a theme explored further at Chapter 7.

We wanted Zach to have more space and it’s kind of like where I grew up in [outer suburb], lots of bush and not having neighbours close … just to have the freedom to go off and play and so living here is really important for Zach. So
Zach has freedom, and to be close to animals and plants and the things that I really liked about my childhood. [Jane: female, mid-30s, partnered, one baby, purchaser owner, rural Victoria (Case 8)]

Finally, for families with limited financial resources, downshifting can enforce compromises to current as well as future or desired housing pathways, as in the case of one family wishing to move from the home they are currently purchasing to a community eco-village that they perceive is more reflective of their lifestyle values and priorities. Here they explain their limitations, choices and strategies.

Our choices were restricted recently. We’ve got friends who’ve started a communal title type of thing … It was 10 acres of communal property and then four freehold four-acre titles as well. And it’s in the bush and it’s like an environmental, eco-housing development so there’ll be shared water resources and the houses you build need to have minimal footprint and consume as least resources as possible and that sort of thing. And we were really, really keen. It’s also run by a body corporate and consensus decision making model and stuff that I think is really valuable. And we really, really wanted to do that but we couldn’t … We tried to get loans and our income’s just not high enough … But that’s where the choices we have made certainly do limit the things that we can do even if they’re things along the same lines. We’re not wanting to do anything particularly outrageous. [Sarah: female, late 30s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, purchaser owner, rural Victoria (Case 5)]

In sum, achieving security, including financial security, via home ownership is the key driver for the housing pathways of comfort traders, mirroring the aspirations and preferences driving much home ownership in Australia (discussed at Chapter 3). In some ways this finding is surprising, given the relatively high degree of questioning that alternative downshifter families undertake in other aspects of their lives. It appears that for many families in this housing circumstance type, the apparent security that home
ownership affords acts to offset relative insecurity in other life spheres, notably reduced earnings and wealth holdings related to downshifting.

Limited resources mean that, for this group, home ownership is achieved with significant trade-offs to housing quality and comfort, and is done in sometimes creative ways. Strategies include debt minimalisation and avoidance, as well moving to more affordable non-metropolitan locations. Where families relocate, significant housing trade-offs may still be made, despite lower housing costs, offset in some cases by a desire to live in rural communities and environments which facilitate lifestyle preferences.

*Alternative dreamers*

In contrast with all of the downshifter families described above who own or are purchasing their own homes are those living in housing circumstances other than home purchase or ownership. In contrast also with much existing literature linking security and control to home ownership (see Chapter 3), families referred to here as alternative dreamers achieve relatively high levels of housing security, in particular, with varying levels of control over aspects of their housing, via non-ownership based pathways. Their housing circumstances and strategies are explored here.

A small handful of family downshifters in this study were living in homes supported by community relationships, two within intentional community based housing cooperatives, and one in an arrangement in which the family, their parents and grandparent, as well as a sibling and her partner, were all housed on the same suburban block. In each of these cases families lived with a relatively low level of financial resources. The two families living in community based housing cooperatives can be described as more alternative, and the one living in family supported accommodation as more conventional in approach. These families live in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations.

Key drivers of communal based housing for all alternative dreamer families in this study include a combination of wishing to live in company with others (and gain the benefits of
doing so) as well as a desire to gain an increased sense of both financial and non-financial based housing security through reduced housing costs and the sharing of management and maintenance tasks.

Clearly, one of the most significant benefits of living in any kind of communal housing arrangement in which costs of land, buildings and household infrastructure can to a large or small extent be shared is the reduced cost of housing:

Housing prices what they are, how many options do people have? I guess shacking up with another family might seem really daunting, but amongst your other set of options, it’s pretty good. [Stuart: male, early 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, resident of intentional community, rural Victoria (Case 1)]

By reducing the weekly cost of housing, as well as through other benefits, cooperative housing communities can support the types of family priorities expressed by the large majority of downshifters in this study (see Chapter 5). This is evidenced by the impact that living cooperatively can have on required family working arrangements in each housing option. Regular costs associated with housing were also able to be ‘paid’ in a variety of ways for some families living communally, again reducing their dependence upon income derived from paid work.

The deal was I would work here 20 hours a week which would pay our rent and board … And there’s an enormous amount of labour that goes into keeping this place as it is and I was doing a lot of management stuff in the office, because it’s a venue for conferences, lots of bookings and booking staff and just office management, and also the physical maintenance of the physical systems. And so there was a lot of work and I was doing that whilst looking after Ava, so luckily she slept during the day. [Stuart: male, early 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, residents of intentional community, rural Victoria (Case 1)]
In addition to economic advantages, the benefits of living communally, according to downshifter families in this study, are numerous, including inbuilt company, support with domestic tasks and child care in particular, as well as offering a lifestyle which places reduced pressure on couple relationships and nuclear family units. Here, fathers from two separate households living in different types of communal arrangements describe some of these advantages.

So from my personal point of view I started to really long for that shared house thing where the cost structure was different and where the resources could be employed with child care and with help with domestic things and just be a support, and this place came up because it was the only kind of place that I knew about. [Stuart: male, early 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, resident of intentional community, rural Victoria (Case 1)]

And so although there are pros and cons to living in this particular way, we certainly forged some strong friendships, and in terms of organising child care and lifestyle more generally it’s been really good to have people to support you and offer child care here and there. [Robert: male, mid-30s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, renter in intentional community, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 11)]

A clear point of contrast between families living in housing cooperatives of various kinds and those living in housing they either own or are purchasing is the apparent degree and kind of security afforded. Financial security for families living communally appears to be achieved via a daily reduction in housing costs, rather than through anticipated capital gains or similar, associated with private ownership, as described above. However, cooperative arrangements do appear to provide other forms of housing related security, such as physical security and psychological security described by the concept of ontological security outlined at Chapter 3.

As the following young mother describes, a high level of emotional security and stability related to housing was gained through the network of personal relationships involved in
the provision of housing, despite the lack of direct ownership and the rent-like arrangement that formed the basis of her family’s tenancy.

I feel that this place is always going to be welcoming to us. So I really feel like this is very much a secure home. And so many people do. We could turn up here with a van and we’d be welcomed, because we have a relationship with the place now. And people have come and gone from here in that very situation. They built a relationship with the place and then they moved in for a while and left when they needed to. Yeah, so, to me, I don’t really worry about the economics of it so much. For me, the economics is all about stability. But because I have a community that I know is one that will care for us and look after us I don’t have that worry about not having a house because I have a home. [Lucy: female, early 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, residents of intentional community, rural Victoria (Case 1)]

In short, living communally with others in various types of arrangements provides some downshifter families with a great deal of flexibility regarding how they live, due to reduced financial costs associated with housing. Clearly, they opt to forego some perceived benefits associated with private ownership, such as financial gain and a sense of individualised control. However, as illustrated in all cases, a high level of emotional security was nonetheless felt by family members living in cooperative arrangements where immediate personal relationships with others replaced impersonal contractual arrangements, such as experienced in the private rental market, explored next.

Alternative realities

Most downshifter families in this study who neither owned their homes outright or with a mortgage were renting in the private rental sector. All but one had either low or medium levels of financial resources and most, although not all, were more alternative than conventional in their views and behaviours. Among downshifter families are two distinct types of private renters: those whose living circumstances are relatively fixed and who
are relatively comfortable with their current and medium-term (at least) position living with what one respondent described as ‘the basic level of security’; and those who are actively pursuing exit strategies from private rental, towards their goal of home ownership.

*The basic level of security*

Two of the downshifter families for whom private rental was likely to be a medium- to long-term arrangement were single parents at the time of interview and each had formerly been home purchasers. In both cases, private rental facilitated the decisions to downshift in order to spend more time with children, as compared with working to meet the weekly costs and ongoing responsibilities of a mortgage. In the following case, a single father describes the relative freedom of not owning a home, following a difficult relationship breakdown and property settlement. Living away from a metropolitan area meant the family has enjoyed a relatively high degree of housing stability at low cost in the private rental sector.

My decision was conscious, I didn’t want to have the hassles of one, dealing with solicitors and two, I just didn’t want that responsibility. I wanted all that wiped. It was a big change in life. When my kids were born I was on three figures and had a pretty good career and then to go from that to being a single dad with two young babies, it was a bit of a shock. So I wanted all responsibilities away so I could totally put my effort into me and the kids. It’s only now that everything’s settled and life’s gone on and they’re getting older that I’m thinking ‘Oh, geez, I wish I had a house’. [Rohan: male, late 30s, unpartnered, two school aged children, renter, rural Victoria (Case 23)]

Due to their choices about paid work and family time, each of these parents believed they were likely to continue to rent their homes privately in the medium to long term, at least.
One of my closest friends is about 50 and she doesn’t own a place either, she’s rented by the beach, and I guess I can see that both of us don’t quite fit into the mainstream. We don’t want to just work, and yeah, freedom’s quite important and the notion of being very financially strong isn’t as important as other things. The basic level of security is enough. [Sally: female, mid-20s, unpartnered, one school aged child, renter, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 24)]

Reflecting on their former experiences, each of these parents recognised the security as well as additional benefits of owning a home of one’s own, particularly in relation to the degree of control it afforded over one’s immediate living space.

It’s just the sense of pride and the fact that you can work on your own place and landscape it the way you want to, and the security factor. The security that it’s yours and then it’s the kids’. [Rohan: male, late 30s, unpartnered, two school aged children, renter, rural Victoria (Case 23)]

The security of home ownership was contrasted with the perceived insecurity and uncertainty of the private rental market.

It’s never fun moving house and you don’t have much security when you’re renting. I’ve been really fortunate with this place because the rent is a lot lower than around in this area and it hasn’t happened in the last two years. I think something happened with the landlord, who passed away or something, and nothing’s really changed. So the rent stayed the same and there’s been a bit of security. [Sally: female, mid-20s, unpartnered, one school aged child, renter, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 24)]

In addition to these two single parent headed families is another family who, at the time of interview, were in the early and transitional stages of downshifting. Well resourced, they had sold their home in the city to rent in a non-metropolitan location as part of a
deliberate strategy to simplify life. Here they describe their newly found ‘freedom’ from the need to own their housing.

Look, for us, that housing requirement didn’t change. What’s changed is the fundamental change that we rent it, we don’t own it. What we require is a reality, we need X amount of bedrooms because we have little children who can’t share bedrooms. All of our three year old, our five year old and our seven year old sleep in the same room together, that’s by their choice, and they have a wonderful time doing that. We still need our baby to have a room by herself, so we’ve always needed a three to four bedroom home. We needed an office for me, so there are those requirements. We needed a studio for Lisa. I mean, that’s what our family requires, that hasn’t changed. What’s changed is our mentality of not needing to own the place we’re living in. [Eric: male, late 30s, partnered, four children (two preschool, two school aged), renter, rural Victoria (Case 18)]

Likewise, in the following case a family currently purchasing their inner city townhouse are considering renting as a permanent way of living. Here, the strategy is both financial as well as part of a larger project of ‘de-cluttering’ their lives.

We’re going to sell our house and go back to renting, which is a bit of a weird way of doing it. We just think ‘What’s the great Australian dream anyway? Is it our dream?’ We looked at it financially and decided that it’s not a good investment. Also the flexibility of being able to up and move if we want to … I think a lot of people try too much and put too much into their home, I’m over it! But it does seem like a weird thing to do because everyone that we know seems to try to own their own property and they never have investments on the side, they don’t think about alternatives. [Kylie: female, mid-30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, pregnant, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 16)]
Exit strategists

In contrast with these families are a number who perceived their current private rental as temporary only. This group, referred to in this study as exit strategists, were either actively pursuing exit plans at the time of interview or were planning future exit strategies, all of which involved the end goal of home ownership. All already owned or were purchasing land they intended to build upon in the near future. Many were actively engaged in the design phase of building their homes.

In all cases, exit strategists were alternative, with low or medium levels of financial resources. In contrast with the pool of Australians who own a second property either as a financial investment or holiday destination (Wood and Ong 2010), most downshifters who were purchasing a property other than their primary dwelling were renting privately, with a view to one day establishing a home which they owned, as shown at Table 9.

Table 9. Downshifter families purchasing other property, showing housing tenure of primary dwelling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purchasing other property</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Case IDs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outright owner</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchaser owner</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private rental</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7*, 9, 14, 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public rental</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal housing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. * Indicates a case in which two properties were being purchased other than the primary residence of the family. One of these is vacant land on which to build, the other is a rural house being prepared for sale to fund the building project (see Appendix VII, Case 7).

The views expressed by exit strategists about their housing preferences and circumstances closely match those expressed by self-provisioning owner builders, discussed above, who had already built their homes and were enjoying the benefits (including emphasis upon control, cost minimisation and environmental sustainability).
They also reflected the views of other renters, with families well aware of the flexibility afforded by private rental as well as its potential insecurity. Once again, like those who owned or were purchasing their own homes, financial security is one of the principal perceived benefits of ownership in addition to a sense of control, stability and emotional or ontological security.

I sometimes think we don’t have health insurance and we don’t have retirement superannuation or anything like that, but yet if I can own my own home and not be paying rent and have an asset then I’ll be a lot happier. [Sean: male, mid-30s, partnered, one school aged child, renter and land owner, rural Victoria (Case 9)]

Finally, the recent experiences of one downshifter family with a relatively low level of financial resources illustrates that being an exit strategist is not without risk. Cassandra and Rob had purchased a parcel of land with a view to one day building a house when they could afford to, while they lived in rental housing with their children, in the inner city. The family enjoyed the land recreationally, including tinkering with small building structures related to their interests in sustainable, energy efficient building. When the family received notice to vacate their rental property (as they had done several times at other rented properties), their land appeared to provide a housing alternative. Rob undertook an intensive, difficult building period with limited resources and supports. Whilst busy producing their house, the family failed to pay due attention to local regulatory systems. Despite adhering to building codes, the couple did not consult the local council about their dwelling nor prior to moving to their land.

So when the council came around and said, you know, ‘You guys really shouldn’t be staying in this place’ and we said ‘Oh, we’re not living here’ and they said ‘Yeah, right’. They said we really should have got council permission for the structure. I think there’s something about new planning laws which came in in 2005 which say you don’t have to go through council for so many things, like if you want to build a shed on a farm or whatever within a certain size and price range. We thought if we built a house we’d have to do it but we probably should
have made time to speak with council about it. So, yeah, they came and visited. And so we just went ‘Oh, fuck it, we’ll just get something back in Melbourne and near [son’s] school’. So we found a place in [inner city suburb], near the St Georges Road tram which is really good for [son]. So we’re renting again. But we’ve still got the land. [Cassandra: female, early 30s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, one high school aged, renter Metropolitan Melbourne and land purchaser rural Victoria (Case 19)]

Whilst the housing circumstances in this case enabled the family to continue to minimise their time spent in paid work in favour of family time, limited resources and a high degree of self-provisioning meant that these circumstances were experienced as highly precarious. Consistent with much homelessness literature which illustrates how the unravelling of one or more spheres of life, such as through job loss or relationship breakdown, can quickly escalate into the loss of a family home, particularly where resources are limited (MacKenzie and Chamberlain 2003; Kolar 2004; Hulse and Kolar 2009), the experiences of this family illustrate how precarious perceived security within the housing system can be, particularly for those with low levels of financial resources.

In sum, downshifter families living in private rental housing are referred to here as having alternative realities, to highlight differences between these families and those in other housing circumstance types. Downshifter families living in private rental comprise two, or perhaps three, clear groups. The first have no immediate plans to leave private rental, and include those with limited choice who are resigned to a basic level of security and control, as well as a small number who have far greater levels of financial resources and who clearly have other housing choices available to them. A final group comprise those renters who, driven by a desire to achieve greater levels of security and control over their housing, are actively engaged in processes geared at leveraging themselves into home ownership, which they perceive to be associated with substantially greater degrees of both security and control, via owner building. As shown, however, these exit strategies are not without risk and are in many cases borne by those with limited financial capacity to do so.
Commonalities in housing experience and strategy

As seen above, the housing circumstances and experiences of downshifter families vary significantly, with some housing pathways enabling higher levels of legal and perceived control and security than others, and some more integrally related to the process of downshifting and establishing family life, resulting in varying degrees of transition and change. Pathways are significantly affected by the levels of financial resources available as well as by the extent to which families hold values and engage in practices which are alternative or similar to the mainstream Australian population. As discussed at Chapter 4, these factors are themselves not unrelated, with family households who are more conventional in their views and practices more likely to also hold higher levels of household wealth than those who are more alternative.

Despite this diversity, several key commonalities in the housing pathways of downshifter families are apparent which appear to transcend tenure circumstance, levels of household resources, degrees of downshifting, residential location or other factors. Some apply to many but not all cases, where exceptions to the general trend are found. They nonetheless apply in most cases, are fundamental to the capacity of many downshifters to pursue their lifestyle priorities and maintain a roof over their heads, and are described here.

Aspirations

By definition, downshifters question many of the norms and practices relating to the structuring of modern life, including around work, consumption and the use of time, as seen at Chapter 2. It is thus striking how similar the housing aspirations of most downshifter families in this study are to those of households in the general population. As seen, most own their homes, sometimes with a mortgage, and others are actively pursuing strategies to achieve home ownership in the short- to medium-term future. The dominance of home ownership as the housing norm in Australia, even among highly
questioning population groups such as downshifters, appears to support the Foucauldian idea that discourse shapes behaviour (see Gurney 1999).

However, as also shown, the apparent similarity in aspirations is perhaps partial, with many downshifters perhaps more willing or inclined to make modifications to the great Australian dream to suite their particular lifestyle preferences than households in the general population. This includes through owner building, as well as making significant trade-offs in housing quality and comfort to achieve owner occupier status. Nonetheless, despite questioning many aspects of the way their lives are lived, ownership remains dominant in the housing pathways for this group.

The analysis illuminates why this is so. Once again, the logics of downshifters are in many ways similar to documented preferences and aspirations of the general community (Saunders and Williams 1988; Dupuis and Thorns 1998; Baum and Wulff 2003). Feelings of security and of control over one’s domestic space are strongly associated with home ownership among the downshifter families studied. It is also interesting that housing is considered an important aspect of financial security by many. In some ways this appears counter-intuitive, as decreased emphasis upon income is related to the downshifting process. However, as a number of the families explained, it is precisely for this reason that housing, as a financial asset, takes on increased importance: in many cases it is the only notable financial asset families are likely to have.

As has also been shown, a small number of families in this study achieve relatively high levels of security and control in relation to their housing via non-ownership based routes. Their circumstances lend some support to recent research which questions the inherent need for ownership to achieve housing security where alternatives are available (for example, Hulse 2008). Among this highly articulate and relatively well-educated sample, this is certainly the case.
Reflexivity and control

A strong, recurring theme throughout the analysis is the high degree of reflexivity downshifter families have in relation to their housing histories, current housing circumstances and planning for future changes to housing pathways. This is regardless of the type of housing circumstance downshifters are living in and of whether family members perceive themselves following opportunities as they arise or navigating their way through life according to a detailed map. Consistently, families readily describe in highly detailed ways how their housing choices regarding tenure, costs, style and location relate to broader aspects of their lives. This high level of reflexivity is in keeping with Giddens’ (1991) notion of life planning, which is drawn upon by Clapham (2005) who suggests reflexivity, or life planning, forms an important aspect of housing pathways in late modernity.

Closely related to a high level of reflexivity is a sense of control found in many of the ways downshifter families talk about their housing choices, in particular with regard to managing their housing costs to accommodate other aspects of their lives beyond work, including family time. A high level of perceived control is associated with ontological security, as discussed at Chapter 3. Downshifter families in this sample appear universally aware of the relationships of income, expenditure and other lifestyle choices to home and its impact on family life and lifestyle. Strategies for increasing the levels of control downshifters perceived about their life choices include minimising housing costs, self-provisioning housing modification or production, seeking the most secure rental possible and, overall, the freeing-up of time from income generating activities required to meet higher housing costs.

Manoeuverability

Closely related to reflexivity and control is downshifter families’ capacity to ‘manoeuvre’. ‘Manoeuverability’ is used here not in relation to housing mobility or freedom to relocate, but in relation to the capacity of households to structure and
restructure their lives according to their own priorities, and to continue to rearrange the ordering of their lives as necessary in response to opportunity and change. It is the term used by one downshifter to describe how she and her family negotiated their way through both housing pathways and work choices, with an emphasis upon capacity to respond to circumstances as they arose and to make informed, relatively unpressured choices due to their low overheads.

Manoeuverability, summarised here by a seasoned, non-metropolitan downshifter, is perceived as relating to all facets of life: engagement with the labour market, social interactions and supports, patterns of consumption, decisions regarding time use, as well as housing choices and possibilities.

The thing with downshifting is that because you have time and manoeuverability, your options of what’s available to you exponentially increase. [Tori: female, late 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 21)]

Housing strategies relating to manoeuverability are apparent across all housing circumstance types, and include debt avoidance and minimisation, and increased flexibility and time. In many cases, these strategies are interrelated. Debt avoidance is evidenced in the cases of self-provisioner owner builders who draw only upon their current finances to fund their housing. In the case of a family building on a trickle of income over many years, the importance of the capacity to use extended periods of time to achieve their housing is highlighted. Similarly, low levels of debt enable high levels of flexibility and choice regarding how members of downshifter families engage in paid work as well as how they structure other aspects of their lives.

While levels of household resources to a large degree determine the type of housing circumstances downshifter families live in, the strategy of debt minimisation is perceived as integral to the choice to downshift regardless of household wealth, and is relied upon as a conscious strategy by both highly and poorly resourced families. Those with high levels of wealth describe their deliberate choice to avoid the ‘trap’ of endless housing
upgrades, thereby avoiding debt, although they might be able to service such debt relatively comfortably. The same strategy is used by households with lower levels of wealth who choose to live with significant trade-offs to their housing quality, rather than opting to spend more time engaged in paid work to service greater housing costs.

_Housing for lifestyle_

A further common theme found in the housing pathways of downshifter families, and which transcends the type of housing circumstance they currently live in, is the strong preference for housing which facilitates lifestyle choices. As shown at Chapter 5, this includes the capacity to exercise a relatively high degree of control over their housing and to manage time in ways consistent with downshifting and family priorities, including, importantly, the capacity to spend significant time parenting.

As the analysis above shows, the extent to which households are easily able to afford housing of a type, style and in a location which suits them depends upon levels of financial resources. Nonetheless, there are clear ways in which lifestyle values and priorities are apparent in the housing circumstances and experiences of downshifter families, across all housing circumstance types, regardless of levels of resources or the extent to which families are alternative or conventional.

This theme is explored in depth at Chapter 7 in relation to the ways downshifter families live within their housing to ‘make’ their homes meaningful. However, what the analysis above illustrates are the clear choices they make in a large majority of cases to limit their housing costs _in order to_ facilitate other aspects of their lives.

_In sum_

This chapter has introduced the voices and views of downshifter families and examined how housing circumstances and experiences reflect lifestyle choices and priorities. Key questions addressed are, first, how is downshifting as a lifestyle choice reflected in the
housing pathways of downshifter families and, second, how is the relationship between housing and lifestyle choice among downshifter families affected by available levels of financial resources, the degree to which they are alternative or conventional and their residential location, among other factors. Types of housing circumstance have been identified, and the diversity and commonality of experiences within these types has been explored. These findings represent the first detailed account of downshifters’ housing experiences either nationally or internationally.

Three key findings have emerged. The first is that the housing pathways of downshifter families are highly varied, with households living in many types of tenure circumstances, in housing of varying quality and appropriateness, in different types of locations, and with varying degrees of control and security over their housing pathways. Secondly, this variation is significantly related to the levels of financial wealth households have available to them, as well as to the degree to which downshifter families are alternative or conventional. Thirdly, despite highly varied housing pathways, there is extensive commonality within the housing pathways of downshifter families.

Commonalities across housing circumstance types include: a preference for high levels of security and control over housing; a high level of reflexivity involving detailed understandings of the relationship between housing circumstances and choices and other aspects of life; the conscious implementation of housing related strategies and choices which reduce debt, thereby enabling families a relatively high level of flexibility and manoeuvrability in the way they structure their lives; and, finally, a strong emphasis upon not allowing the costs of housing to compromise lifestyle priorities, a finding consistent with the analysis at Chapter 5.

That extensive commonalities are found across downshifter families in a variety of housing circumstance types points to underlying coherence in their strategies and priorities, despite variation in circumstance. It suggests that while the typology of housing circumstance types developed in this analysis is useful for highlighting differences between the types of housing conditions in which downshifters live, and
grouping others, it does not account for all aspects of their housing experiences. As shown, many aspects of their housing pathways transcend variation in material housing circumstances and, to borrow the language of Giddens, relate closely to the way people occupy and ‘write’ their own housing trajectories. The interaction of diversity and commonality found here in relation to housing pathways is further examined at Chapter 7 where the ways downshifter families go about making home, and key influences upon this, are explored.
Chapter 7
Downshifting and the making of home

In the previous chapter, it was found that downshifter families have highly diverse housing pathways and live in a variety of housing circumstance. Despite this variation, there are similarities in the extent to which they employ strategies in their housing pathways to maximise lifestyle choice, including priorities relating to family life. In this chapter, further aspects of the same overarching question – how lifestyle choices associated with family downshifting relate to housing – are explored. Here, the focus turns to the way downshifter families live within their housing and, in particular, how they ‘make’ home.

As in the previous chapter, members of downshifter families are conceptualised as active agents in the extent to which their home lives reflect the family and downshifting life choices they have made. In keeping with this approach, the term ‘making’ of home is used here, rather than ‘meaning’ of home, to emphasise the chapter’s focus on the influences, practices and experiences which together give homes their meaning.

Spheres of influence: A thematic approach

As seen at Chapter 3, many and varied approaches can be taken to understanding householders’ experiences of home, including emotional aspects (Gurney 1996), physical/structural aspects of dwellings (Roberts 1991), socio-spatial analyses (Perkins et al. 2008) and uses over time (Dupuis and Thorns 1998). Many of the factors taken into account in these diverse approaches are found in the accounts of home life among downshifters in this study. Here, however, a different overarching framework is used to structure and interpret downshifters’ accounts of home life, based firmly in downshifter families’ accounts of their daily lived experiences in and around home. It is also founded in a broad definition of the meaning of ‘home’ which incorporates, but is not limited to, the immediate physical dwelling. This definition also accommodates local relationships.
and meaningful influences on the way home life is lived. In this way, the approach shares some, although not all, of the features of Perkins et al.’s (2008) spatial account of home, which recognises multiple socio-spatial influences beyond the physical dwelling.

Consistently, when asked how they went about making their homes and the daily practices which supported home life, three key themes are discussed by members of downshifter families. In some cases, each of the themes dominate the way family members organise themselves in relation to their home lives, whereas in other families only one or two appear important. However, overall, these three themes are identified as central to the way downshifter families go about making their homes. Each can be conceptualised as a relationship: a relationship downshifter families have with three discrete but sometimes related aspects of their lives which, in varying ways and to varying degrees, are reflected in the way they choose to live, at home.

The three themes are family relationships, relationship with the community and relationship with the natural environment. These are represented at Figure 3 as a series of concentric rings around home life which, in practice, are sometimes highly interconnected. These three relationships directly reflect the lifestyle priorities of downshifter families identified at Chapter 5. As seen in that analysis, family life priorities and environmental concerns underpin many aspects of downshifters’ lives. The analysis of home presented in this chapter identifies a third key factor of significance to downshifting lifestyles, yet which is typically absent in accounts of downshifting in existing literature. It is the relationships downshifter families have in and with the community.
Figure 3. Three key spheres of influence on downshifter families’ home lives:
Family, community and environmental relationships

In the analysis that follows, each of these themes is examined in turn, starting with family life, followed by community life, and concluding with the most outer ring, relationship with the environment. Within each theme, household experiences are explored.

The analysis is organised around the three themes of family, community and the environment, rather than the housing circumstance types explored at Chapter 6. This is due to the large extent to which the three spheres of influence of downshifters’ home lives transcend current housing circumstances. As in the previous chapter, however, within the analysis of each theme relating to home, the housing circumstance types developed at Chapter 6, as well as family characteristics relating to levels of household resources, degree of downshifting and type of residential location, among other factors, are drawn upon here to compare and contrast differences and commonalities in the experiences of downshifter families, in the ways they make their homes meaningful.
At home with family life

Previous literature has identified family life as contributing significantly to the sense of home felt by home owners (Gurney 1996; Dupuis and Thorns 1998). Family life and the way it is organised and experienced is also identified here as not only significant to the downshifting experience as a whole (see Chapter 5) but also as a highly significant influence on the home lives of downshifter families and as fundamental to the sense of home they develop.

In an extension of previous research, it is found that family life plays an important role in the ‘making’ of home among downshifter families who own or are purchasing their homes, as well as those who are not: it is important to their sense of home regardless of housing circumstance type. However, in keeping with existing literature, it is found that while family life is an important influence on the sense of home among all downshifter families, some housing circumstance types are more enabling of strong, stable home-family relationships than others (Saunders 1984, 1990; Saunders and Williams 1988; Dupuis and Thorns 1998).

Across these various housing circumstances, family life influences the way home is experienced among downshifter households in several key ways. For all families in this study, downshifting brought with it increased fluidity and flexibility regarding engagement in paid work that resulted in increased and sometimes very high levels of time spent at home, as well as a blurring, in many cases, of the boundaries between work time, work space and domestic life. In all cases these factors play a major role in the way home life is organised, lived and experienced and it is these factors which strongly influence the nature of the family life-home relationship among downshifter families. For some, these are coupled with types of housing circumstances which enable and strengthen these relationships. They are explored here under the broad headings ‘Time and space’, ‘The place of children’ and ‘“Doing home” as family time’.
Time and space

Time is important for the development of home among downshifter families in two distinct ways: high levels of family time at home on a regular, routine, daily basis, as well as family lives lived at home over periods of time.

Time for children and time for parenting are perhaps the most fundamental priorities found among downshifter families for the lifestyle choices they have made, as illustrated at Chapter 5. It is therefore no surprise that these factors strongly influence the way home life is experienced. For all families in the study, downshifting brought with it an increased amount of time spent away from paid work (even if this is averaged across partners in a partner headed household). In all cases this results in a far greater amount of time spent at home on a daily or weekly basis. This is most pronounced among downshifter families who are more alternative than conventional (and hence have lower levels of household finances and are more likely to live in non-metropolitan locations, as set out at Chapter 4), although high levels of time at home and flexibility of time are common to all families studied. The second way time is important concerns home-family lives over extended periods. This was identified as significant among New Zealand home owners by Dupuis and Thorns (1998). Here it is found that high levels of day to day time for family life at home as well as over time relationships are important for the sense of home downshifter families achieve.

Given increased time spent at home and with children as a result of downshifting and often flexible working arrangements, some downshifter families experience highly integrated work and family lives. High levels of integration between family time and space with external obligations such as paid work are most pronounced among those who are able to routinely work at home, such as through telecommuting and other flexible arrangements.
Highly integrated family, home and non-family lives bring with them the opportunity to parent in a way which maximises time for children, as well as challenges relating to space, time and role integration. One father describes the way others may perceive his working arrangements.

I’ve always wanted to be a good father. I’ve always wanted to try my best as a father. But it can be difficult, it can feel difficult. And it’s difficult, I’ve got different priorities. You know, I do a lot of work from home, and sometimes there will be children in background noise, and you know it can be difficult because [clients] may think less of me, they’ll think I’m not as capable or not as committed. We try to work around that … There was one day when I was at school going to pick up my son when they first started coming here and I must have been on the phone to somebody and, I don’t know, had that worried work face. And I hung up the phone and I felt a hand on my shoulder and it was an older man with quite a wise look and he said ‘Just remind yourself you’re doing the most important thing’. And that really made me think. I suppose I have to remind myself constantly of that. [Eric: male, late 30s, partnered, four children (two pre-school, two school aged), renter, rural Victoria (Case 18)]

In the case of the following family, parents who both worked from home attempted to emulate the kind of temporal and spatial divides between work and home typical of modern life by using a working roster, as well as having established work spaces within their home dedicated to each parent. Even here, meeting both work and family needs could be difficult.

You know, we’re in this transition where we’re trying to do what we do and transition ourselves to work less and it’s really, really hard. You know, you think ‘Oh, I work from home now and I’ve got the internet and I can get more done’ but, you know, it’s hard, it’s not an easy thing working from home. And of course in my busy corporate days I did get a lot done but my reality now is that the kids are the most important thing. We divide up our working days and try to make very
clear and distinct boundaries. [Eric: male, late 30s, partnered, four children (two preschool, two school aged), renter, rural Victoria (Case 18)]

A different approach is seen in the following family where the flexibility of family and working lives is embraced. In this case, as in others, the fluidity of parental work time and space is extended into the lives of children, as parents have more time to participate, given reduced time engaging in paid work. This is particularly prevalent among more alternative than conventional downshifter families, as in the following case, but is also apparent among some more conventional families.

And because we’ve both been around quite a bit more, like both of us have brought up the kids and been active in their lives. You know, their lives, their school and play and home and the whole deal, and sport and arts and everything, they’re so integrated. There’s no sort of boxes or anything, like ‘You’re off there and you’re off there’. There’s none of any of those things, it’s not how it works. [David: male, mid-30s, partnered, five school aged children, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 4)]

Furthermore, certain types of housing arrangements appear most likely to be associated with families who are alternative and who have most time at home with their children (see Chapters 4 and 6). One young couple describe the ability to spend a high level of parental time with their daughter as one of the direct benefits of their choice to live in an intentional community housing cooperative.

We have Lily days. Days on and days off. I have four Lily days a week and I have three off at the moment so other days we fill up with work and [housing cooperative] work, and now Lily is starting to enjoy going to child care a couple of half days a week so that’s freed up a little bit more time. So your life, as it is with a kid, it’s always full, you know, chockas, every moment is spoken for. But I think the most significant change from a life experience point of view for us when we came here was that we were able to share parenting. Before that Stuart was
working and I was at home and I see other parents who – like a lot of my other friends now who are having babies – make comments like ‘Finally I got him to take her for a day and now he understands’ and I think, well, you know, Stuart sort of had a pretty thorough course in parenting by being able to share it and so it really connected us on that level, even though it was very stressful, the whole period for various reasons, we were very much better at understanding each others’ life as well. [Lucy: female, early 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, resident of intentional community, rural Victoria (Case 1)]

In the same case, the father describes the experience of highly integrated home-work life arrangements brought about by the type of housing circumstances he and his family have chosen to live in.

Yeah, I mean, working a paid job and showing up at work at 9 o’clock and not leaving until 5 or 6 or 7 is nothing as far as the demand on your lifestyle compared to looking after a child and working where you live. And doing all the domestics and helping run this place. [Stuart: male, early 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, residents of intentional community, rural Victoria (Case 1)]

In keeping with this family’s experience, it is interesting to note that even where reallocation of time is central to the downshifting experience, parental responsibilities meant this did not necessarily provide ‘free’ or ‘leisure’ time. A common experience among most downshifters studied is a sense of busyness as they attempt to balance work and family lives, having increased time spent caring for children following a reduction of hours spent in paid work.

It’s been I think three and a half years there and been working four days a week since then and, well, four days paid work. I tend not to say ‘day off’, because it’s not. [laughing] It’s pretty jam-packed. [Mike: male, late 30s, partnered, two school aged children, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 12)]
In addition to the impact of the increased degree of regular, routine time downshifter families are able to spend at home and involved in family life on their sense and experience of home is time spent at home over periods of time. As mentioned above, this factor is identified in previous research as significantly related to the development of a ‘sense of home’. It is also found that long-term associations between households and their dwellings support a sense of home. As will be seen next, stability over time is another factor which affects aspects of community life.

Stability is important across all housing circumstance types, although to varying degrees for individual families. This is true of home purchasers, such as the lucky family as well as downshifter families in other housing circumstance types such as those living with ‘basic security’. For the following comfort trader, a sense of stability and security leading to ‘home’ took several years.

We’d drive out of the area, to my parents’ place or something, and we’d drive home and I’d think ‘Oh, we’re back here’. And then one day I remember thinking as we were driving into the valley here ‘I’m home’. And I felt as if this great shift had happened in my thinking and all of a sudden I was home. I hadn’t had that for such a long time. [Rebecca: female, late 30s, partnered, six school aged children, purchaser owner, rural Victoria (Case 15)]

Certain types of housing circumstances facilitate stability. Most notably, all involving home ownership – either purchasing or outright – offer a heightened degree of stability and hence the capacity for long-term relationships between households and their homes. The stability associated with long-term residence is strongly identified with a high level of perceived security. This is the case for families living in metropolitan as well as non-metropolitan areas (although many living outside metropolitan areas in this study had moved as part of the downshifting experience, and hence their length of residence was often shorter than among metropolitan families in this sample at the time of interview).
In sum, for all families, to varying degrees, downshifting contributed to increased time spent at home, typically coupled with a higher level of integration and fluidity between working and home lives than previously. The simple act of being at home, the time spent at and around home in daily routines and rituals, plays a major and significant role in the making of downshifter families’ home lives. These findings point to the importance of family life in the making of home for all downshifter families. However, some types of housing circumstances facilitate stable, over time relationships between families and their homes, another important influence. These circumstances include home ownership, the focus of previous literature (Saunders 1990; Saunders and Williams 1988; Dupuis and Thorns 1998), but also include other circumstances which promote control and stability, such as some community based arrangements and long-term private rental.

The place of children

A further way in which the relationship between family life and home features in the lives of downshifter families relates to places: places inside the home, places outside the home and, specifically among downshifter families, places for children at home.

To varying but typically high degrees, children form a central focal point in the lives of downshifter families in philosophical, practical and spatial ways. A high level of proximity between parents and children at home, as well as the relatively high levels of time parents spend with their children, form part of the way home life is lived in a number of families. Again, while increased time spent with children and flexibility for family life are found among all downshifter families, relative to their former working lives, it is typically more alternative families in which parents spend most time with children (and hence where children are most integrated into many aspects of home and work lives).

The following case illustrates how flexibility and fluidity in relation to time and space can affect the way children are raised and included in family and day to day life.
What I see a big difference is that – and don’t let anybody hear this – is that other places there’s this sea of toys, and the television’s on and the kids are chucked into a space and there’s not that much interaction. There is interaction of the children and the adults but it’s very removed in a sense. And I mean with us we’ve chosen, like lots of people choose, like we choose to sleep in the same bed and Sage has his own bed and space so he can choose to go into that space or our bed [Sage’s room is made with dividers, at one side of the small main living area, adjacent to the parents’ room], I can always know where he is but he can have his own private space. And I used to clean and they’d have these really big houses and the baby’s over there and they’ve got these connecting internet things and mum’s over there and energetically it’s a long way. A child feels that, I think. They’ve been in the womb for such a long time and so close, and suddenly they’re so far, so I’m a great believer in listening to the child, and it’s a process of letting go. It’s sort of like when we first had Sage there’s this really big umbilical cord, when he was really little I had to be so visualising and check ‘Are you breathing?’ and as he grows and I get more confident, it starts getting layers off, like snake layers or whatever, and so as he grows older it will just get thinner and thinner and thinner, you know. [Eliza: female, early 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 2)]

The same mother describes not only how the design of a house can affect relationships, but also the importance of the size of a physical dwelling and its impact on children and on child-parent relationships.

If you have a small house you can feel really big in it and if it’s too big you get lost. This way I always have a connection to Martin and Sage. But if you want to you can go outside or they can be in a spot where we can’t see each other, but there’s a connection. Having a young child, especially because there’s snakes and stuff, it’s really good because I’ve always got an ear or eye on him while he has a good time. [Eliza: female, early 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 2)]
Hence, the process of downshifting and its relationship to home life can bring into question some contemporary norms and practices associated with family and domestic life. This is consistent with literature linking domestic architecture to normative family life (for example, Arias 1993; Roberts 1991). Several families, either through changing the way they lived within their dwellings or through wholesale redesign of domestic spaces, had opted to give the children high degrees of proximity and centrality. The place of children is related to the degree of downshifting – the extent to which families are alternative or conventional – rather than to housing circumstances per se. These two aspects of family living are related, as seen above.

‘Doing home’ as family time

‘Doing home’ as family time refers to those cases where, as a result of the increased amounts of time spent at home by downshifter families, aspects of the running of homes become inclusive, family based activities. Within and around their homes, many families – most notably, those who spent large amounts of time together at home – embark on day to day activities which make their homes meaningful, over and above the fluidity and flexibility of time and space surrounding family life, described above.

Doing home can include organisational as well as productive activities. One mother describes the central role her children (in this case, referring to her son) play in the day to day operation of the family home. Here the family perceive this level of child interaction in home life to be unusual, even in comparison to close family friends with similar alternative, anti-consumerist values.

We’ve always had a strong feeling about how kids should participate and not be free-loaders but Jake was finished Year 12 and looked as if he was not going to do anything this year. The deal was that he would do the work in the home, there’s a whole lot of work in the home and a lot of it usually doesn’t have names, but what Jake would do, as well as doing things like the washing, the sweeping, the
cooking, it was his job to be aware of what needed to be done and make sure it happened … This is probably a big way in which we differ from our peers and how he differs from his peers. There were kids who he went to school with who were in the same position and doing nothing and were still being waited on by their parents. [Helen: female, late 40s, partnered, two teenage children, outright owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 3)]

Home based production forms an important part of the way many, although not all, downshifter families live and is in many cases perceived as a counterpoint to their concerns about consumerism (see also the exploration of ‘green living’, below). As seen at Chapter 6, for some families home production has meant quite literally the production of their homes, such as through owner building. To varying degrees, a number also engage in production within and around the home. All those who engage in extensive home based production in the sample are alternative downshifters. They include families with low and medium levels of financial resources and those who live in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas.

The most usual form of home production in the sample is the production of food. A number of families had small vegetable gardens or orchards. In some cases, the growing of food is a central part of family life, virtually replacing the need to purchase fruit and vegetables. In the following case, the way a regular suburban quarter-acre block was turned into a productive garden is described.

And then we covered the whole lawn from the back fence to the front in the no-weed stuff and carpet and all the neighbours were just appalled. Because it used to be roses and oleanders and those ornamental things and I hate that. And then over five years we shoved in 75 fruit trees and bushes and things and then the garden went all year … Two metres apart. And then we just did things in tiers, so you’d have a taller fruit tree and then a shrub and then smaller vegetables and chooks and ducks and then you have vines. It saved us a lot of money in the long run which was quite interesting … It didn’t cost us much to live. [David: male, mid-

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In this example food production is undertaken in a metropolitan area, but home based production appears more common among downshifter families in rural locations.

Another thing that is a benefit of having this place out of town is that … we have a little bit of land around us, enough to do a little bit of growing of your own vegetables and fruit and that sort of thing. We’ve got, you know, this is an established garden which was very attractive to me because it’s got, I don’t know if you noticed, it’s got a whole stack of fruit trees established along the side here. It’s got raspberries, lemons, grapefruit, blackcurrants. It’s got most of the things that you would ever need already established in the garden. And that makes a significant difference, if you’ve got space to do that, to make, to produce your own food. [Rebecca: female, late 30s, partnered, six school aged children, purchaser owner, rural Victoria (Case 15)]

Along with the production of food are other forms of production some family downshifiers engage in. Multiple forms of production are most prevalent when downshifting forms part of an integrated, holistic approach to living and is strongly aligned to environmental principles. In keeping with voluntary simplicity, described at Chapter 2, the downshifting experiences of the following family include a move from city to country and a path towards self-sufficiency.

We wanted to, I guess, we discovered that there was great satisfaction in producing stuff rather than simply consuming it. And we discovered that there were needs that were met through pursuing production on our own terms. So we undertook the whole process of learning to grow our own food and make our own things and learning skills, practical skills, to do with textiles, and making toys and making bread and just pursuing a satisfaction in that. It gave us a much greater sense of control over what we ate and what we wore and what we chose to give. It
turned the value system that I think is promoted in contemporary culture in our society, it kind of turned it on its head. [Leah: female, late 20s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, purchaser and owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 25)]

Not surprisingly, some of the families engaged in the most extensive home based production live in community cooperatives in which home based work is integral to the operation of the community. As well as working to support the ethical business and conference stream of the community, the following family assist in large-scale food production.

Stuart: You don’t really have to go anywhere. The food comes from the garden largely, there’s so much support and companionship from the people around here and our families love coming up to visit us, it’s a beautiful space.
Lucy: Work is here.
Stuart: We are to a much higher extent than any family in the suburbs a very self-sufficient group of people and between us we can do most things that need doing. So the need to go off site is greatly reduced from normal people who are much more interdependent on the physical structures around them. This is self-sufficient here. [Lucy and Stuart: early 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, residents of intentional community, rural Victoria (Case 1)]

Finally, a more alternative than conventional family with relatively low levels of financial resources, living in a non-metropolitan location, describe how important owning their home is for the way family life is undertaken within it and for their capacity to ‘do home’ together as a family unit. The sense of control and ability to change their housing and surrounds as they wish is highly significant for the way family life is lived and ultimately for their sense of home.

Given that we have such a big family and we have limited resources to do things, we can’t take them on family holidays, we can’t just bugger off and have dinner out because that would cost us $200 to go out to dinner, the fact that we have an
interest at home, that we have an interest that is here which is we can renovate and we can get paint out and paint the place, we do the garden, this is our life, doing what we do here at home. If we were just sitting in a house which was somebody else’s for which we had no responsibility and no connection, what would we do with our time? [Rebecca: late 30s, partnered, six school aged children, purchaser owner, rural Victoria (Case 15)]

In sum, the findings of this study support the emphasis found in previous research (most notably Dupuis and Thorns 1998) upon the role family life can play in the making of home. Here it is found that specific characteristics of family downshifting as a lifestyle choice as well as aspects of some housing circumstances facilitate significant home-family relationships. The increased amounts of time spent at home and the flexibility in the ways time and space are organised and experienced are found to be highly influential to the making of home. These factors have daily, routine influence. With regard to housing circumstances, in keeping with existing research, it is those housing circumstances which facilitate stability, control and security which appear to strengthen home-family relationships over time. These factors can extend to non-ownership based housing arrangements in some cases.

At home in the community

Community relationships – the interactions family downshifters have with others – are a second important theme identified through interviews as affecting the way domestic life is lived and sense of home. The importance of community relationships and involvement to downshifters has received virtually no attention in existing studies, yet is found to be highly significant.30 Here, the focus is on how these community interactions affect home. Regardless of housing circumstances, degree of downshifting, levels of financial wealth or, importantly, their residential location, community relationships appear to provide a

30 One exception is found in the work of Saltzman (1991) in the US, whose downshifter type the ‘urban escapee’ is identified as seeking more balance, including through engagement with community life.
sense of belonging within local areas as well as, in some cases, a vibrant sense of community at home.

Community relationships relating to home life are multifaceted, taking two main forms. The first concerns the neighbourhoods and local areas in which families live and is externally focused on the capacity of family members to engage with their local communities. The second is internally focused and concerns the involvement of people from the broader community in the home lives of downshifter families. A third type of community relationship, the interaction of family members with broader society (for example, global political activism via electronic media), was discussed in a small minority of cases but is not explored here.

The local community

All downshifter families in this study are involved in their local communities in ways they describe as being important to them and to their sense of belonging. This appears to be an important aspect of ‘being’ and ‘feeling’ at home, using the broad definition of home, described above. In many cases, time to be involved in local community life is one of the perceived benefits of downshifting, with many downshifters unable to do so prior to reducing their working hours. Varying degrees of downshifting (from alternative to conventional), levels of financial resources and residential location do not appear to affect the extent to which downshifters are engaged in their local areas, although some places are perceived to facilitate community life more than others.

Many cases in this study illustrate the romantic ideal that living within a small community can facilitate involvement in and importance of local community life. This is true of those downshifters who have always lived in rural communities as well as those (the majority of non-metropolitan residents in this study) who moved to non-metropolitan locations through the process of downshifting. Many of these families comment on the ‘sense of community’ within the areas in which they live, regardless of whether they are
more or less alternative, their level of financial resources or the type of housing circumstances in which they live.

And there’s more a sense of community because it’s smaller. There are fewer people so you have to rely on each other whereas in the street we sort of knew our neighbours but no-one really wants to know anybody because they are scattered amongst things. [Eliza: female, early 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 2)]

We get our fruit and vegetables weekly. We do that sort of stuff, we go to the organic shop and basically get a big box of stuff. It’s kind of a bit of a mystery box. We pay a monthly account with them … It’s kind of like having an account with the local grocer like in the olden days. So it’s just lovely that people out here can live like that, and bulk-shop no problem. So that’s all part of it and it’s just lovely. [Eric: male, late 30s, partnered, four children (two pre-school, two school aged), renter, rural Victoria (Case 18)]

Some families moving from metropolitan to non-metropolitan areas as part of their downshifting experience deliberately chose to live in areas they perceived as having existing communities of like-minded people. For example, in searching for the property they wished to build on, the following family’s perception of local communities was paramount to their decision making.

And we focused on where there were lots of really, what we felt were, progressive ideas coming from which was this centre … so really interesting ideas going on about new ways of supporting community and new ways of achieving a work-life balance that was more inclusive of community and more respectful towards the environment … So it was an intentional move based on wanting to live in a community of like-minded people who were also interested in getting to know, you know, who we were. We wanted to put down our roots and raise our kids alongside people who had similar ideas and values. [Leah: female, late 20s,
Living within non-metropolitan locations appears to facilitate greater involvement in community life for some downshifter families. Seeking out local groups and ways of engaging in the local community helped to ‘ground’ them, following the disruption of working life and residential location away from the city that came with downshifting.

Well, there are plenty of opportunities to do things here that are, you know, for the community rather than the individual. It’s sort of an opportunity to meet people doing that, as well. So for example, I’m on the committee of management for the community house and I became involved in that because, you know, I think community houses are important, but I also to be honest became involved in that because I was asked, and the people that asked me I thought ‘Yeah I’d like to spend more time with those people and work together on issues with those people’. [Sarah: female, late 30s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, purchaser owner, rural Victoria (Case 5)]

Many family members are able to actively engage in their children’s school and other activities, such as sport, directly as a result of the increased time they have available due to reduced time spent in paid work.

And I help out with reading class with preps every week. I’ve been doing that since [son] started and he’s in Grade 4 this year. And I love it. It’s my favourite part of the week. It’s so much fun … And it’s a great way to get to know the other kids at the school. I love it … I had a junior football meeting last night and three hours later I was thinking ‘What on earth?’ but I can see a few like-minded parents coming on board and we’re going to sort out the whole structure of the thing. I’m on the school advisory council and I helped out with the Christmas carols fund raising for the needy in the community last Christmas. I do enjoy doing that. My mum was saying ‘Why are you baking 16 cakes for the carols to...
raise money?’ but I really like doing it. So I don’t mind giving of my time when it’s something that I want to do. It might mean that the house doesn’t get cleaned but, you know, whatever! [Margaret: female, late 30s, partnered, three school aged children, purchaser owner, rural Victoria (Case 20)]

In numerous cases families are highly active in local groups, organisations and schools in voluntary capacities, sometimes so much so that this detracts significantly from family priorities and time initially gained via downshifting and reducing hours in paid work.

I do a lot of volunteer work with the CFA. So that keeps me busy, I go around the schools and teach kids about fire safety. I’ve done about 15 courses through the CFA and all these leadership courses and training courses. I’m community safety officer or some bullshit, something like that. So I teach the kids ‘stop, drop, cover and roll’ and bushfire preparedness and I maintain all the extinguishers in a couple of districts. Even though it doesn’t sound like much, it’s a lot of work and it brings in sort of 50 per cent of the brigade’s income. [Rohan: male, late 30s, unpartnered, two school aged children, renter, rural Victoria (Case 23)]

I’ve been involved in a number of activities doing voluntary work, writing submissions or being involved where essentially I’m the community member involved with a whole lot of people being paid lots of money. It’s just sort of wearing me down a little bit. [Sarah: female, late 30s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, purchaser owner, rural Victoria (Case 5)]

Despite stereotypes indicating greater connectedness in local areas among people in rural and regional rather than urban locations, as well as the apparent ease of community interactions reported above, there is little difference found here between the level of community involvement downshifter families have locally, on the basis of where they live. The trend is a high level of community involvement across the board, although it may be that at least for some families community engagement in non-metropolitan areas is more accessible. In this regard, at least, urban downshifters represent a departure from
the stereotypes associated with the anonymity of metropolitan life. In the following exchange, for example, the level of involvement the parents have in the local school community and the benefits of this are discussed, in comparison with families who are less able to commit time to school involvement.

_Catherine:_ In the first year of Anastasia’s school I was very lucky to be a class representative and I put a lot of effort into getting to know all of the parents so we’ve maintained strong relationships, the women particularly who don’t work full-time. So we’re able to commit obviously much more than women who do work full-time who really just seem on the outskirts of it all.

_Louis:_ If we had to generalise, I would say we as a family do a lot more than most families. For example, we had a fete two weeks ago which involved lots of hours of work, and we see that as being important, and the way our lifestyle is structured allows us to do that. A lot of parents aren’t able to do that because they’re both at work. We think it’s important, not just for our sake but for Anastasia’s.

_Catherine:_ It’s a form of acknowledgement and support.

_Louis:_ Yes.

_Catherine:_ It’s interesting because my relationship with a lot of those mums has altered because some of them have gone back to work. We’re physically not in the same place. And what little time they have outside of their work commitments is wholly and solely focused on the logistical business of bringing children up.

[Catherine and Louis: early 40s, partnered, one school aged child, outright owners, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 17)]

For one father living in an inner city location, community involvement is integrally related to the way he and his family lives, and his views about time spent in paid work relative to community life reflect this.

I think we also shouldn’t have kids at school five days a week and not even necessarily work five days a week. We should be working about four days and
you could do one day if you want, one day could be a community service type day
where you do something for your community, be that community gardening or do
some kind of work around the place, some kind of civic work even, that would
change our culture and our society. Far more cooperative, far less competitive,
win-win. Not win-lose. [David: male, mid-30s, partnered, five school aged children,
purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 4)]

While a number of families identify the communities they live in as important to their
own levels and nature of community involvement, others mention stability as important
to developing community ties. In the following two accounts from families living within
metropolitan areas, one in private rental and one purchasing their home, time spent in an
area as well as the stability of other households within the neighbourhood are mentioned
as factors which positively support community life.

When we moved out I moved to [suburb], which was where I could afford a little
flat, and it was close to places, but I found that it was quite transient and I wasn’t
really making many friends with families in the area. And I was looking at
schools for my little boy and knew I’d have to stay in one place for a while, so I
ended up looking at places and schools at the same time and thinking about where
I’d be comfortable staying for a while … It would be good to stay put around here
through the primary school years, and then depending on which high school we
choose, we’ll see. But it’s been a lot easier to make friends here as well. [Sally:
female, mid-20s, unpartnered, one school aged child, renter, metropolitan Melbourne
(Case 24)]

Bringing it back to housing, we think it’s important for Anastasia to have a solid
base, a house that she’s lived in for her formative years of primary school, rather
than having to move. Living in one place gives us that stability. In the absence of
that, we may not feel as secure as we do. Or as connected as we do. [Louis: male,
early 40s, partnered, one school aged child, outright owner, metropolitan Melbourne
(Case 17)]
Hence, while not typically identified as a lifestyle priority in previous downshifting research, the importance of community is found here, particularly as it impacts being and feeling ‘at home’. Community life appears to be an important aspect of the home and day to day lives of downshifter families, regardless of their personal characteristics, housing circumstances or types of areas they live in. Universally, engaging in the local community appears to facilitate a sense of belonging which can have positive spin-offs for family life, such as through involvement in children’s schools and extra-curricular activities.

**People at home**

For a small number of downshifter families in the study, a high level of involvement in community life also characterises day to day life at home, within family dwellings. Within this sample, families who enjoy highest engagement in community life at home all reside in housing cooperatives of various types. In these housing circumstances they experience regular, frequent and daily interactions within their domestic space with other members of the housing based communities with whom they live, and often with people living outside of these communities. The following passage gives an insight into how the boundaries of community and domestic life are blurred in these cases. Hence, a high level of engagement occurs within the local community but also within the immediate domestic space.

When the original co-op members were thinking about this place, they worked with an architect and sat down I think for a year or two, and they’re big on consensus decision making processes. So the design process was an ideological process to a large degree because they were trying to design an alternative way of living where the family, the community and the business lines are all blurred, and that was very much an ideological response to what they saw was a fundamental problem with the way that modern capitalist society lives and organises itself. And so it was a political response very much. And one of the other sort of
ideological paradigms is the breaking down of the lines between family and community, and the way that the house is designed respects that too. All the residents have their own bedroom. So Lucy and I have our own rooms. So we often share but we negotiate that as we want or need to, and the communal spaces are negotiated spaces. There are certain ways of approaching that. So there’s been a lot of cultural work done about how the house and the community functions, and that’s a big difference from a shared house, I guess, because a shared house you don’t actually set out with the intention to live together on a sustainable footing for a long period of time, particularly when there are kids involved. And there is a high degree of economic integration as well. So over the 20-odd years that this place has been going, there’s been a great deal of work on the processes and culture of how to share space and to negotiate that space. Which has been wonderful for Lucy and I and our relationship because we’ve taken all this cultural capital of how you negotiate space and living together, which we found very hard. We have had a great relationship for eight years, but the one time previously where we tried to live together, sharing space for us was really difficult and caused a lot of conflict and ultimately derailed the relationship at that time. So having a group of people who developed a culture of how to live together and how to share space together with a whole lot of processes to deal with conflict or difference has been really good for us and worked. [Stuart: male, early 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, resident of intentional community, rural Victoria (Case 1)]

The result of this community design, as the young mother within the same family describes, is a high level of integration both within the housing cooperative itself, as well as with people connected with the cooperative, but who live elsewhere.

From a perspective of actually living here, I’ve just got so much out of having adult company, or even company, even young person company, it’s terrific. And it’s not just the same people either, because it’s a place that’s a venue, you get an interesting flow of people through and we have WWOOFers come in and they’re
terrific, they do lots of babysitting\footnote{Willing Workers on Organic Farms (WWOOF) is an international organisation which facilitates the short and long stays of volunteer workers, known as ‘WWOOFers’, on farms. See: \url{http://www.wwoof.com.au/}} … So there’s sort of a constant flow of people around that you don’t have to go out and find, and you’re still here with the baby and the change table and the toys but we’ve got company \[Lucy: \text{female, early 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, resident of intentional community, rural Victoria (Case 1)}\]

For this family, the high degree of community involvement within the housing cooperative contrasts starkly with the relatively low level of interaction experienced with the nearby local community. In this case, community relationships beyond other members of the cooperative are related to social or political interests and are more closely connected to parts of the metropolitan centre the family had moved from than to the town near where they now lived.

Look, [town] is … I often comment that I don’t live in [town], I live in the very outer suburbs of Melbourne, because our level of integration with [town] isn’t that high. There would probably be a dozen people who live in [town] whose name I know. We use it as a service town, for things like the local GP for Lily. Lily goes to child care. I guess Lucy has started to make some connections with those people. There are a few locals and you can probably count on one hand that have a regular connection with this place and old friendships with other people who live here and so we’ve come to know and be friends with them. But really [cooperative] is an outpost of mostly the inner northern suburbs of Melbourne, that’s where by far the most connection is, and it’s just a matter of travelling between us and them. \[Stuart: \text{male, early 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, resident of intentional community, rural Victoria (Case 1)}\]

In contrast, for the following family, a high level of interaction both within the housing cooperative in which they live – as in the case of the previous family – as well as within the local community is part of everyday life. The family lives in the inner suburbs of an urban centre rather than in rural Victoria.
The only thing is you have to be prepared for a fairly social system. Because there are other kids about all the time and the kids want to play together every day and you have to be prepared for people walking in and out your back door a fair bit. There’s less privacy than you would have in a normal situation … We do a lot of community involvement stuff … I’m involved in the arts. But it’s largely a hobby, the arts, we have a bit of community involvement in the arts, but it’s more environmentally focused nowadays really. So, we host a food co-op, I’m on the parents committee of the kid’s kindergarten, more things like that. It would be very difficult to do that kind of thing with full-time work, no, you couldn’t. [Eliza: female, mid-30s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, renter in intentional community, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 11)]

Finally, in the same case, the impact of having children upon community involvement – both within the housing cooperative and in the local community – is described. Children appear to trigger high levels of involvement, regardless of other characteristics or circumstances.

I reckon my involvement with the community has become far more meaningful through having children … Now I think that we’re more, now that we’ve got more of a stake in things, in terms of our children’s future, I feel much more passionate about community involvement and environmental issues and more willing to change my own behaviour. I think that actually having kids puts you in the community like nothing else, at a more grassroots level. [Eliza: female, mid-30s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, renter in intentional community, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 11)]

While this high level of involvement is less pronounced in non-communal housing arrangements, a high level of community involvement in day to day life at home can still take place for some families, under some circumstances. For example, a family living in a house they own in the middle suburbs of an urban centre describe how a high level of
involvement in the school their children attend has created a sense of trust, which has enabled their home to become a preferred place for their now teenage children and many of their children’s friends to gather.

_Helen:_ Timothy’s done all the school stuff. He knows everyone and everyone knows him.

_Timothy:_ At the dining room, you know, everyone comes there … I know all the kids, it’s great to watch them grow up.

_Helen:_ It’s been great for the kids, too, because we have lots of kids here, especially Suzie’s friends, because everyone knows Timothy and he’s OK, so he’s known and trusted. [Helen and Timothy: late 40s and early 50s, partnered, two teenage children, outright owners, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 3)]

To summarise, interaction in local communities is important to all families studied to a generally high degree, regardless of whether they are alternative or conventional, well or poorly resourced financially or where they reside. This is an important aspect of downshifting not typically identified in the literature, with the exception of sea change research which includes a focus on the integration of ‘new comers’ to local communities (Burnley and Murphy 2004; Gurran et al. 2005). Certainly, findings of this study indicate that for downshifters, at least, local relationships are important, regardless of housing circumstances. Additionally, in some rather than all cases, community relationships within local areas not only provide families with a sense of ‘being at home’ and belonging, but also impact on home life more directly, where a vibrant community life forms part of the way life is lived within downshifters’ homes.

**At home with the environment**

Environmental values held by families, and therefore the extent to they are classified in this study as conventional or alternative, are strongly reflected in many aspects of the

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32 As described at Chapter 4, alternative families tend to express and exhibit higher degrees of environmentalism than conventional families.
way they go about the business of making home. In exploring aspects of their home lives, the relationships downshifter families have with the environment become apparent in numerous ways, among both alternative and conventional family households. These range from being out amongst nature to bringing the environment home, and from being fundamental to consequential in the way day to day life is lived. These relationships are explored here.

At home in nature

Being ‘close to nature’ is an integral aspect of the way a number of downshifter families live. The harmony, aesthetics and sense of peace that accompany the choice to live in highly natural environments are seen as fundamental to their sense of place and of being ‘at home’. As described at Chapter 6, for many downshifter families living in non-metropolitan areas, residential location enables downshifting lifestyles to occur through reduced living costs and, most importantly, reduced housing costs. Some simply want to live close to nature.

And I think the thing about moving to the bush is about the electricity level. Because here we don’t have electricity and we’ve consciously decided not to and we consciously decided to have the toilet out of the house. So our relationship’s to what is happening, to the rhythm of the seasons, the weather and to the stars and so on. And in the city it was just really too easy to stay inside, turn the heater on and not go out for anything. And even though part of us didn’t want to do that, it’s too easy to do it, we became lazy … For some people it’s not an issue but for us it is. And I think there’s something about us as human beings and us as organisms of what things impact us, and how subtle that is and how sensitive we can be. So I see the city in particular as really dense, harsh and a lot of overloading input, whereas other ways of living actually reduce all of that so that I think we become more sensitive to our internal landscape and things that are going on, and connections. [Eliza: female, early 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, owner builders, rural Victoria (Case 2)]
An appreciation of the aesthetics of nature is found across families in many housing circumstances, such as the self-provisioner and comfort trader families above, and the private renter (basic security) family below. While living close to nature is more common among more alternative downshifter families, some conventional downshifter families also appreciate living in natural environments. For one, living in a beautiful, coastal location is closely tied to the integrated processes of both being a full-time parent and of downshifting.

I basically came to a point in my life because of my situation with the kids, and it was as simple as this. It was if I was going to be with two young children, if I was going to be stuck in the kitchen and the laundry for the next 10 years, whatever, I wanted a view. And I wanted to be able to hop in the car and go to the beach real quick. If I had to do what I had to do, I wanted somewhere nice to do it. [Rohan: male, late 30s, unpartnered, two school aged children, renter, rural Victoria (Case 23)]

Typically, being close to nature means living away from metropolitan environments. However, at least in some cases, places within cities which retain aspects of the natural environment are found to provide some of the benefits of country or bush living. In the following case, for example, living in an identifiably ‘leafy green’ part of a metropolitan centre provides many of the aesthetic benefits of living in the bush.

And everyone seems to be dedicated to having a nice, natural environment as well. There are organic shops. Yeah … Here you can get people saying hello to you when you walk down the street, so there’s that, but somewhere along the way I found I liked the bush and somewhere a little bit different. [Sally: female, mid-20s, unpartnered, one school aged child, renter, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 24)]

Being away from perceived negative aesthetics of urban environments draws some family households towards country life, even where no inherent enjoyment of nature is expressed.
Well, I guess we moved up here from Melbourne just after I had my first child, and that was probably fairly crucial. At that stage, I suppose it was when I had a very new baby and I was standing on the corner of Sydney Road and some other road and there were fumes everywhere and I just thought ‘Oh, I can’t bring, I can’t live here’. [Sarah: female, late 30s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, purchaser owner, rural Victoria (Case 5)]

Even where factors other than the natural environment initially draw family households from metropolitan to non-metropolitan locations, the experience of living in a closer relationship with nature, away from built environments, can change the relationship between households and their environments.

*Interviewer:* Have you changed as a result of being here, do you think?
*Tori:* Yeah, totally, I think. Probably in really subtle ways because now I’m bored in the city. So now the city is somewhere where I go just to be filled up … I think I’d go mad living in [inner city] now because through living here the natural world becomes more interesting … So we’ve been changed by the experience and we’ve learned by the experience. [Tori: female, late 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 21)]

Finally, for the following family who built their own home far from neighbouring properties or metropolitan environments, a continuing process of reflection upon the impact their building choices have on their relationship with the natural environment shapes the evolution of their housing and home life. In this case, in which family life takes place in a small dwelling without electricity, a relationship with nature, rather than the comforts a home can provide, is paramount.

Our house here, and how this house here feels too far removed from nature, some of our friends come up from Melbourne and freak. There’s no electricity, there’s no fridge and they’re like ‘Oh my God’ and it’s like I forgot that that could be
someone’s experience because we’re so used to this. Now being so used to this I can really feel how some more traditional cultures, how they are so much more connected to the land because of their dwelling. Simple houses. The idea that corrugated iron, pink batts, plasterboard, mesh – it does start to build a barrier around us. So we’re in the process now of thinking ‘OK, this is not exactly how we want it. How does it look?’ And I don’t think we’re really ready to finalise that but we’ve got some ideas. Yeah, so how to have that connection with the land more strongly? … When we used to sleep out in the hut we were a bit more rugged in that we didn’t have any potbelly stove, then we got one. We didn’t have any gas cooker, but then we got one. As soon as we got the gas cooker we used to cook all our meals inside. And we didn’t used to have our fire outside anymore, and the fire outside was just fantastic because you’d just sit around and cook on the billy and you were out there in nature. And so just that simple act of making it easier by having gas actually removed us from nature. Even though as other people see it, we’re right in nature. There’s something about what we give up as we get more comfortable. Being comfortable seemed to make us more disconnected. That’s the process that we’ve been thinking about. And in our hut we want to have the fireplace outside again, and get the access to that, outside, so that we can have some of those things again that are important to us. To find that balance. I’ve got this funny thought in my head that in time, we’re going to have all these little huts that are less and less until we’re just under a tarp or something or sleeping on that bit of grass over there. [laughing] [Martin: male, early 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, owner builders, rural Victoria (Case 2)]

This theme, the interaction of nature and households through housing, is further explored next where it is seen that environmental considerations are not only reflected in the places in which families choose to live, but also in the material fabric of their homes.
Bringing the environment home

For many families in the study, living in ‘green housing’ forms an important aspect of the processes involved in making and being at home, reflecting philosophical positions about sustainability and the environment, as well as ways of living and sense of identity. This is particularly pronounced among those who hold strong environmental values and who are typically more alternative than conventional. A desire to live in environmentally sustainable housing is also more pronounced within particular types of housing circumstances. Specifically, self-provisioners, exit strategists (private renters with active strategies to become home owners) and comfort traders (home owners who have made significant trade-offs to housing quality) tend to emphasise the importance of green housing in their home lives, both through conscious reflection as well as through practice. In contrast with those families living close to nature, discussed above, who typically live in non-metropolitan locations, downshifter families who make their homes ‘green’ reside in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations.

As seen at Chapter 6, self-provisioning enables family households who build their own housing to have a very high degree of control over its style, design, materials and other aspects, albeit within sometimes very small budgets. In all cases, owner builders in this sample built environmentally sustainable principles into their house designs as these are considered fundamentally important to the way they wish to live, at home.

We wanted to utilise passive solar as much as we could and checked out that and all the angles and cladding, cement not floorboards, and how much glass and what direction to face the windows. So we did all that and we went through all kinds of mediums. We were going to be using straw bales and we were using mud brick and the next week it was rammed earth. And then in the end we went ‘OK, what’s practical for us and how much are we good at maintaining things?’ and we decided we’re not very good at maintaining things so we decided that corri [corrugated iron] was the best thing because it’s really easy to maintain and it’s
light and it’s very easy to build with. [Eliza: female, early 30s, partnered, one pre-
school aged child, owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 2)]

Renovations, retrofitting and replacing existing housing on site along sustainable
principles were discussed by many families during interviews. In the following case,
wholesale renovations to an inner city home in need of extensive repair may be replaced
with rebuilding the family home, with the environment in mind.

So we’ve actually been looking at some of the eco kind of options and if we were
to replace it, you know, I don’t think we could afford to do that at this stage, but
we’ve still got to do the research and find out. There’re homes that are built that
are kit homes that are triple insulated and have really low embodied energy in
terms of what it takes to build them and move it to your site and then the impact
on the site. Those kinds of things we’re thinking about … It’s one of our options,
could we perhaps do it ourselves for a lot less? … And if we were to renovate it, it
would be a retrofit kind of a job, so we would make sure that we’d put in good
insulation and so on. There’s a new insulation in ReNew magazines, I can’t
remember the name of it … We’d do the same things we did in the last place, with
bio-paints and there’s no carpets, did the floors. [David: male, mid-30s, partnered,
five school aged children, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 4)]

In several cases, house renovations already undertaken by downshifter families followed
environmentally sustainable principles, as in the case of the following family who are
midway through renovating their rural home, on a limited budget, and who are choosing
low-harm and ethically derived materials.

Most people I know have probably bought older houses that aren’t particularly
interesting in themselves and then tried to renovate to make them more pleasant to
live in and particularly with reference to environmental concerns. Like for
example, we’ve put in rainwater here, we do have town water as a back up but we
haven’t had to use town water for more than a year. We’ve had new windows
made and they’re made from recycled timber and, you know, the kitchen cupboards are made from eco-ply which is, not eco-ply, brimplly, which is pine from plantation from Queensland and it’s got really low formaldehyde in it, the benchtops are recycled timber, the paint’s all bio-paint. You know, that sort of thing, double glazing in the windows, we’re just getting some other windows made … And then we have indigenous gardens and a bit of a vegie garden as well. [Sarah: female, late 30s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, purchaser owner, rural Victoria (Case 5)]

In addition to incorporating environmentally sustainable building practices into new housing and housing being renovated, many families reduce their environmental impact as a consequence of the way they live. Several comfort traders, for example, discussed at Chapter 6 have deliberately rejected upscaling or refashioning their homes to fit others’ expectations. The notion of a ‘forever house’ – a house built to live in rather than to sell – exemplifies this point. The case of the following exit strategist family illustrates how a house can be built along environmentally sound lines as well as with the needs and expectations of family households, rather than the market, in mind.

*Sylvie:* And Marcus has got this really good point about the house that he’s building and the house that he’s been wanting to build for a long time, is that it will be a long-term home. Forever. It’s not going to be built to be sold.

*Marcus:* I’ve never been able to understand the concept of buying a house and – what do they talk about it – oh yeah, ‘over-capitalising’ and all this sort of stuff. I mean, I can’t …

*Sylvie:* You’re building because you want to keep it and live the way you want.

*Marcus:* People talk about having difficulty with some of the things that I’m designing. They say ‘Oh, it’s lovely, but it’s a very niche market’. There’s a pre-existing expectation that the only reason you’re going to build is to get ahead financially. I mean, sure, I don’t want to just buy the most expensive everything, it’s not exactly my taste I suppose, but it’s not, the idea is not to put as least amount of money in as I can to have the most marketable kind of house at the end
of it. I’m not interested in having a marketable house, I’m interested in having a home. [Sylvie and Marcus: mid-30s, partnered, one baby, renters and land owners, rural Victoria (Case 7)]

In sum, highly conscious, deliberate strategies to build environmentally sound principles and practices into their homes is centrally important to many of the downshifter families studied. Even among those for whom environmental considerations are less or not important, reduced environmental impact of housing occurs as a consequence of modest renovations and non-upscaling of housing over time. Deliberate and consequential consumption practices within homes, discussed next, also reflect the relationship many downshifter families have with the environment.

**Green living**

A third key way the relationship downshifter families have with the environment is expressed through their home life practices, the way day to day life is lived. Rather than reflecting their location or the material fabric of their homes, this relates directly to the practices and experiences of domestic consumption (and production, explored in relation to ‘family life’, above). Reflecting the degree of concern downshifter families have about the environment and their impact upon it, consumption patterns are found to be either deliberately and consciously environmentally aware or, as the following case illustrates, to occur in a secondary way, consequential to reduced incomes associated with downshifting.

I guess another thing is not valuing material possessions as much. And so, like we put the extension on the house while Mike had a higher paying job, but then we haven’t been able to furnish it, we’ve got old furniture and things like that, because we’ve been kind of changing lifestyle and priorities. [Elaine: female, late 30s, partnered, two school aged children, purchaser owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 12)]
In contrast, ‘green living’ forms part of a long-term way of life for some downshifter families. Particularly for those who are more alternative than conventional, consumption practices reflect deep-seated environmental and other ethical concerns, and form part of a long-term, conscious way of living in which environmental sustainability has high priority.

I feel like we’ve got a certain kind of foresight because I think that everyone is going to be forced to downshift because of the environmental crisis that we’re in. We can’t continue to consume at the kind of rates that we are. We’re going to have to totally rethink the way that we live and totally change our behaviour. And I feel like we’re already to some degree in that mode and I’m already conscious of raising my children in a way that makes them aware that our current lifestyle might have to change dramatically. [Eliza: female, mid-30s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, renter in intentional community, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 11)]

For the same family, living in an inner city housing cooperative, the following passage demonstrates not only the novelty of large-scale domestic expenditure (in this case, made in order to maximise time) but also the extent to which many of the decisions made by downshifters – across many spheres of life – are carefully researched and considered.

Eliza: We have recently bought a dishwasher and that’s a big upshift for us.
Interviewer: Do you find that it’s changing your lives?
Eliza: I think it probably has.
Robert: It has.
Eliza: It’s fairly subtle.
Robert: I don’t think it’s subtle.
Eliza: We resisted having a dishwasher for a long time, mainly for environmental reasons, and we just found that we were still doing housework at 11:30 at night. You know, we’d be doing housework right up until we hit the sack.
Robert: And that bled into our creative frustrations and all that kind of stuff.
Eliza: Yep, so we succumbed to the dishwasher.
Robert: I don’t know that that’s an upshift or a downshift. It was a very firm choice to do that.

Eliza: It was, we did a lot of research.

Robert: It was a reluctant choice in some ways, but we just decided that to be able to have that much more time to ourselves was like a downshifting notion to some extent, and it was worth it. [Eliza and Robert: mid-30s, partnered, two pre-school aged children, renters in intentional community, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 11)]

Changed or modest consumption patterns do not necessarily equate to minimalism or ‘going without’. The purchase of second-hand goods is particularly prevalent among alternative downshifters and represents part of a financial strategy among those with low financial resources. ‘Op shopping’ from charity and second-hand stores is common among downshifter families, regardless of where they live, and is most prevalent among alternative, low and medium income families.

Annette: I mean, we consume, but we consume second-hand. Like most of the stuff is all second-hand.

Sean: New socks and underwear, the rest … [laughing]

Annette: So we arrived five years ago with a panel van and we’ve overfilled this house so we do consume quite a lot.

Sean: Yeah, but we scavenge, you know, it’s all garage sale stuff and … unfortunately most of the stuff we hoard, for when it might be useful. You know, that’s another part of being poor, the ‘I might never be able to afford another one’ and part of it is I like having stuff. Yeah, so that bit we’re still working on because we know we have too much stuff. [Annette and Sean: mid-30s, partnered, one school aged child, renters and land owners, rural Victoria (Case 9)]

Other respondents with medium or high levels of financial resources and greater consumer choice spend on those things of importance to them, but which do not necessarily conform to mainstream purchasing patterns.
We have very selective engagement with consumer culture. We’ve got all these Macintosh computers and recording equipment and art software. You know, the stuff that we’re into, we spend on. But as you can see, the house has been restumped but we’ve still got the 1959 lino and, you know, we do spend money on some stuff and not on other types of engagement … It’s not that we’re being ethical and not doing it, it’s just that we’re choosing stuff we want. There’s no big TV. [Helen: female, late 40s, partnered, two teenage children, outright owner, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 3)]

The following insights illustrate the careful ways consumption and trade-offs are considered, impacting upon all aspects of consumption related to housing and home life.

So have I gone without? No. If you apparently go without you end up getting something because all it means is, it doesn’t mean that you don’t get something, it just means that you can move your resources around to get the best. [Tori: female, late 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, owner builder, rural Victoria (Case 21)]

Regardless of what was being accumulated through consumption, ‘stuff” was mentioned by a number of respondents as problematic. This includes by those who perceive themselves as good at being able to manage their possessions, as in the following case, as well as by those who perceive ‘stuff” to be a problem.

There’s this concept of stuff. You know, stuff which is hanging over you and weighs you down. Anyone who’s ever moved house will understand. Keep stuff which actually has a purpose or has a reason. I read an article about storage, people actually paying for storage now has gone up ridiculous numbers and people pay in excess of the value of the goods that they’re storing in storage! You know, instead of getting rid of it and getting ahead, they’re actually storing stuff because they can’t handle the change or the shedding of their worldly goods. [Marcus: male, mid-30s, partnered, one baby, renter and land owner, rural Victoria (Case 7)]
As a means of managing ‘stuff’, minimalism and a rejection of consumerism is a feature of the way some families in this study go about their daily lives. This group represents a minority yet diverse section of the sample. Included among those with a minimalist approach are alternative and conventional downshifters as well as those with low, medium and high levels of financial resources and those living in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations. Minimalism and the reduction of stuff are described here by a rural family who live according to frugal consumption practices.

*Martin:* And you know, something I really admire about Eliza is the constant throwing out stuff we don’t use and not accumulating crap. And we still do it and it’s really easy. But why have these things around? And I think they really stagnate our ability to actually be with ourselves. So that process really drives us as well.

*Eliza:* For me, too, there’s a … I really like objects and space that have multi-functions so you don’t have to have so many of them. And like the less things that you have. Like every object we have, I have to mentally make sure it’s OK, look after it, clean it, clean it you know, buy new ones, whatever, you know. It’s busy with that, whether I’m mentally aware of that or not. And to have less of all that just gives me more time to be creative. [*Eliza and Martin: early 30s, partnered, one pre-school aged child, owner builders, rural Victoria (Case 2)*]

A reduction in consumerism as a response to commercialism which is targeted at children was mentioned by many respondents. Some have moved to locations which they believed to be less consumer oriented (away from metropolitan areas) and several are involved in the Steiner school system which actively discourages brand based consumerism. In the following case, low income coupled with an awareness of child based consumption acts to reduce consumerism.

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33 Based on Rudolf Steiner philosophy, around 95 Steiner schools, play groups and Steiner streams within public schools now operate in Australia, including 36 across rural and metropolitan Victoria (see www.steiner-australia.org). The Steiner philosophy encourages ‘creativity and freethinking’, such as through restricting television viewing and advertising exposure, and seeks to ‘recognise the individuality of the child’ (Hale and Maclean 2004).
I guess my main goal is just having a fairly happy family base, so it keeps it quite simple. So as long as he has a place, you know, to play and bring his friends over and those things. I don’t think a happy family needs loads or an abundance of money anyway. In a way. You know, sometimes Alex will look at other people’s toys and think ‘Wooow, can I go to their place and play?’ But most people think that it’s how you play with kids anyway which is more important, and imaginative play can be better anyway, so, better than the Nintendos and stuff that we haven’t really bought yet. [Sally: female, mid-20s, unpartnered, one school aged child, renter, metropolitan Melbourne (Case 24)]

In sum, the day to day practices of downshifter families in and about their homes reflect their relationships to the environment. For many, particularly those who are more alternative than conventional, consumption practices aimed at reducing environmental harm form a conscious, important and sometimes long-term aspect of home life. For others, downshifting has altered former consumption practices, either through reduced income and/or increased environmental awareness. As the analysis above shows, for many families green living is just one aspect of their relationship with the environment which is also expressed in material aspects of housing and the locations in which home life takes place.

Factors which facilitate the making of home

Previously, family relationships have been identified as important to the development of a sense of ‘home’ (Saunders and Williams 1988; Gurney 1996; Dupuis and Thorns 1998; Giddens 1991). These home-family relationships have been further explored here. It has been found that time spent together at home, not only over periods of years but significant periods of time day to day, coupled with fluidity and flexibility around the conduct of domestic and non-domestic tasks (notably paid work) at home, facilitating a central place for children in home life, significantly strengthen the impact of family life on the making of home.
The analysis above has also identified two other factors which impact on the sense of home downshifter families develop: community and environmental relationships. Each of these can impact on home life in a range of important ways. While environmentalism has been identified earlier as central to downshifting choices (see Chapter 5) and has also been a factor identified as important to downshifting in existing literature (Hamilton and Mail 2003), the analysis of home life presented here highlights the importance of community life to downshifter families. This aspect of downshifters’ lives is typically absent and unexplored within downshifting and related literature.

Aspects of family and community life and environmental concerns transcend the housing circumstances in which downshifter families live to a large degree: each can have impact, regardless of the housing families reside in. However, as also seen in the above analysis, there are some relationships between housing circumstance types and the significance of each of family, community and environmental relationships on downshifter families’ home lives. Table 10 summarises these relationships, showing the degree of influence they have on families in various housing circumstance types.

Table 10. Typical relationships between family, community and environment and the making of home among downshifter families, showing housing circumstance types

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<th>Housing circumstance type</th>
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<td>Family</td>
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<td>Self-provisioners</td>
<td>High</td>
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<td>The lucky ones</td>
<td>High</td>
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<td>Comfort traders</td>
<td>Very high</td>
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<td>Alternative dreamers</td>
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<td>Basic security</td>
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<td>Exit strategists</td>
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As shown, each of family, community and environmental relationships impact on the home lives of downshifter families, but to varying degrees. The influence of environmental considerations varies markedly across families living in different housing circumstance types. For self-provisioners, for example, who are all more alternate than conventional within this sample, environmental considerations are high. In contrast, for lucky owners, environmental awareness and altered domestic practices resulting from this are generally consequential to downshifting and are of lesser importance.

In many ways these relationships relate to the extent to which downshifter families are alternative or conventional. As discussed at Chapters 4 and 6, those with particular circumstances and characteristics are more likely to be found in some types of housing circumstances than others, meaning that there is a complex interaction between family circumstances and characteristics, housing circumstance types and the likely impact of each of family life, the community and the environment on home lives.

There is some variation by housing circumstance type also for the impact of community relationships on home life, although these are found to have significant influence for all families in this study, with only marginal differences according to downshifting characteristics, levels of financial resources and the locations in which they live. There is some support in these findings for existing literature around activism and home ownership (for example, Winter 1994), with those families living in housing circumstances that facilitate stability and security somewhat more active than others. However, in this study, such housing circumstances are found to include home ownership as well as community based housing and some longer-term private rental arrangements.

Of note is the high degree of impact family life has on the home lives of downshifter families across all families, in all housing circumstances. Relative to environmental and community influences, there is little variation in the influence of family relationships on the making of home across downshifter families living in a range of housing circumstance types: the influence is high or very high in all cases. While there is some variation related to the amount of regular time downshifter families spend at home, as
explored in the analysis (among this sample, comfort traders, alternative dreamers and private renters living with the basic level of security appear highly influenced by family life in the way their home lives are lived), this relates to extent and degrees, rather than acting to distinguish families who do or do not spend significant amounts of time at home. In short, family relationships are highly influential with regard to the making of home, regardless of family circumstances, characteristics or housing experiences.

Underlying the potential for each of family life, community and environmental factors to be incorporated into the daily lives of downshifter families and hence to influence their home lives are two further, significant factors – control over how they live their lives and control over time – each of which was identified at Chapter 5 as fundamental to downshifting values and experiences. In turn, these can enhance household stability and sense of security. All of these factors are strongly associated with the umbrella concept of ontological security (Giddens 1984; Saunders 1990; Saunders and Williams 1998; Dupuis and Thorns 1998), discussed at Chapter 3.

In relation to housing, control is typically related to home ownership (see Chapter 3). This relationship is also found in this study, with a high level of control over the way homes are organised and lived in found among all of self-provisioners, lucky owners and comfort traders. However, in keeping with literature which has begun to examine which elements of home ownership can facilitate control (for example, Hulse 2008; Hulse and Saugeres 2008), it is found that other housing circumstances which enable a relatively high level of ‘input’, as well as stability and security, can also enhance householders’ sense of control over their housing. This includes alternative dreamers as well as those families living in alternative realities in private rental where leases are long.

Among families with limited control over their housing, such as some ‘fixed’ private renters, a sense of choice about the way life is lived and the priorities which are being pursued through family downshifting appears to compensate to some degree for relatively low levels of control over their housing (see Chapter 5).
Drawing all of these factors and influences together – family life, community and environmentalism, underpinned by control and control over time – the analyses above indicate that the home lives of downshifter families strongly reflect and are influenced by their lifestyle values, decisions and priorities, to somewhat varying degrees and in highly diverse ways. These relationships are most pronounced when downshifter families enjoy a high level of control via their housing circumstances (such as through home ownership), but they are evident in the ways downshifter families make their home lives meaningful across the board. Strong expressions of lifestyle priorities are found in the home lives of downshifter families who are more and less alternative, more and less well financially resourced, and who live in metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations.

In sum

The analysis in this chapter has used a broad approach to the study of home. This has included analysis of aspects of the physical dwellings in which downshifter families live but, beyond these, has also included relationships which are influential upon the relationships formed between families and their places of residence. The analysis indicates strong linkages between family downshifting as a lifestyle choice and the various ways downshifter families go about making their home lives meaningful.

Results of the analysis support the findings of existing research which emphasise the importance of family life for the making of a strong sense of home (notably Dupuis and Thorns 1998). The increased amount and fluidity of time in the lives of downshifter families on a daily basis acts to emphasise their home lives, as more time is spent at home, including for domestic and work related activities. Consistent with existing research, it is also found that home-family relationships are strengthened over time as well as through large volumes of regular, daily time.

The analysis identified two additional significant influences on the making of home among downshifter families: community life and the environment. The importance of community life for downshifters generally and downshifter families specifically has
received little attention, yet is an important aspect of home related life among all families in this study. Typically, local lives become central hubs of interaction and activity, related again to the increased amount of time spent at or near home. Some housing circumstances and home arrangements facilitate vibrant community interactions within downshifter families’ homes, blurring boundaries between family and community spaces.

The environment is found to be important in the home lives of downshifter families in several ways, including the places they choose to live in, the material fabrics of their homes, as well as their consumption (and production) practices within and about home. These relationships are most pronounced among those who are more alternative than conventional, yet are evident among all families, even where this is as a consequence of downshifting rather than a driver of it.

The importance of these relationships and their influences in the home lives of downshifter families contrasts starkly with notions of financial maximisation through housing wealth, housing as an expression of status as well as with a preoccupation with housing as a consumer product as per the mainstream housing market. The focus on non-material aspects of lifestyle found here reflects the underlying focus among downshifter families upon time over money, explored at Chapter 5 and discussed at Chapter 2.

The control, and related factors of control over time, stability and security, that support the capacity of downshifter families to incorporate these lifestyle priorities into their home lives are most strongly supported by certain types of housing arrangements. Previous literature has focused upon home ownership, almost exclusively, as relating to housing related control (see Chapter 3). These findings are supported here, in so far as families who are purchasing or own their homes have high levels of control over their housing and hence enjoy the factors related to this which contribute to an overall sense of ontological security. However, some elements of housing which facilitate a relatively high sense of control are also found in other housing circumstance types, notably, arrangements based in personal, community relationships, as well as market based
arrangements including private rental where stability, and hence strong relationships between downshifter families and housing over time, are supported.
Chapter 8
Conclusion

At Chapter 1 the overarching, exploratory research question was asked: how does downshifting, understood as a way of living or ‘lifestyle’, relate to the housing experiences and meaning of home of families with dependent children who have downshifted? To address this, three sub-questions were posed. The first asked ‘What is the relationship between downshifting, lifestyle priorities and family life?’ The second, turning to housing, asked ‘What is the relationship between housing pathways and lifestyle priorities among family downshifters?’ The third asked how downshifter families go about making their homes meaningful. It was also asked how the answers vary among the family downshifter population: do experiences differ according to degree of downshifting, household financial wealth and/or residential location?

All chapters in the thesis contribute to addressing these questions. Chapter 2 reviewed what is known about downshifting internationally and within Australia, and established it as a highly self-reflexive lifestyle choice in which the capacity to exercise control over how one’s life is lived is a priority. It also identified two key knowledge gaps: the relationship between downshifting and family life, and the relationship between downshifting and housing experience. Chapter 3 explored approaches to studying the experience of housing among downshifter families. There it was argued that to understand a new type of housing ‘problem’ such as the relationship between lifestyle and housing experience, a sociologically informed, subjective approach is required. The chapter also identified relevant examples of how such an approach can ‘unpack’ experiences of housing and home. Chapter 4 outlined the epistemology and approach taken in this research. It described the exploratory, interpretivist method and outlined in detail the sampling strategy, sample characteristics, interview approach, analytic method and presentation of data.
Twenty-five downshifter families, living across metropolitan and rural Victoria, in a range of housing circumstances and types, were interviewed for the purposes of this research, typically in their own homes. All of these families include dependent children aged under 18 years, although otherwise they comprise a mix of family types. Most parents belong to Generation X (born 1965-79), with a small number slightly younger or slightly older. The sample includes those who are financially wealthy, those who are living well below the poverty line and those in between. It includes downshifters who hold values and exhibit behaviours that in some ways are quite close to the mainstream as well as those who are highly alternative and strongly identify as being so, referred to here as conventional and alternative downshifters, respectively – although all are set apart from much of Australian society due to their particular lifestyle choices. Most adult members of the families have high levels of human and cultural capital – education and ‘knowhow’ – including those living with very little financially.

The analyses presented at Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are based on the voices, views, meanings and experiences of adult members of these downshifter families. At Chapter 5 lifestyle and family values and priorities of downshifter were explored, revealing the parameters within which they make housing decisions. The implications of these lifestyle parameters for housing experience and the meaning of home are diverse and, in many cases, substantial. Chapters 6 and 7 explored these implications with particular reference to how housing pathways and the home reflect the lifestyle choices downshifter families have made. Key findings from these chapters are drawn together below, before the limitations, future directions and broader significance of this study are considered.

Key findings

This study has identified the capacity of downshifters to actively, consciously and highly self-reflexively assess and reshape the way their lives are lived to better fit with their life priorities. This is conceptualised here as ‘control’: a fundamental driver of downshifting and a key characteristic of the family downshifting experience. Control underpins all aspects of downshifting in highly significant ways, from motivating lifestyle changes, to
enabling the living of family life according to core family values and priorities, and as underpinning housing pathways and experiences of home. Closely related to a generalised sense of heightened control over life is the desire and capacity to exercise a high degree of control over the way time is organised and experienced: how and when time is spent. In the lives of downshifter families, time rather than money or materialism is valued most highly. Combined, control, control over time and ‘time over money’ values typically result in a reduction of time spent at paid work, and consequentially a relatively high level of flexibility and fluidity in the way day to day lives are lived.

These core values are found to be highly compatible with the principles found among all downshifters in this study relating to family life. For many, the arrival of children acts as a trigger to downshifting, bringing about a questioning of life priorities and the imagining of different, more balanced ways of living which are a better fit with their family values. For already established or establishing downshifters, family life is readily accommodated within their lifestyle. While general family harmony and sustainability is found to be important among this group, overwhelmingly, their priorities relate to what several refer to as ‘good parenting’. Closely related to control and control over time, good parenting for this group typically involves time: time for children, for parenting and for family life.

Combined, downshifting and family life values and priorities are found to act as the parameters within which decisions about housing pathways, strategies and experiences of home take place. All family downshifters in this study demonstrate a high level of awareness of the costs of housing to their capacity to live their lives in accordance with downshifting and family life priorities. All – regardless of whether they are more or less alternative, well or poorly financially resourced or live in metropolitan or non-metropolitan areas – are aware of the relative freedom associated with low housing costs and the consequent control over their lives that these costs can facilitate. The manoeuvrability achieved through low housing costs is fundamental to the perceived success of the family downshifting experience.
A reduction in time spent in paid or highly paid work has significant and in some cases highly substantial implications for housing experiences, particularly in the housing pathways and housing circumstance types in which family downshifters live. The degree of downshifting (the extent to which families are more or less alternative or conventional), their financial wealth, as well as their residential locations also impact on housing experience. As a result, the housing pathways and circumstances of downshifter families are diverse, ranging from the orthodox to the highly creative.

With regard to housing pathways, there are two overwhelming findings. The first is that, despite the high level of questioning undertaken among downshifter families of the way their lives are lived in relation to broad structures and systems such as the labour market, there remains a strong preference for home ownership. On the surface at least this is somewhat surprising, as this preference mirrors those of the general Australian population so strikingly (for example, Baum and Wulff 2003), while other values held by downshifter families diverge in several ways from the mainstream population. However, the analysis indicates why the perceived control, security and financial wellbeing associated with home ownership are at least equally important to downshifter families as they are to other households. As numerous families explained, it is precisely because of their relative lack of wealth and other forms of security that the control, security and capacity for housing wealth to act as a financial safety net associated with home ownership have significance for the large majority of downshifter families studied.

The second main finding in relation to the housing pathways of downshifter families is that, despite the generally strong, shared preference for home ownership, their housing pathways and housing circumstances are highly diverse. In this study a typology of housing circumstances which takes account of housing tenure, varying degrees of housing related security and control, as well as aspects of the transitional stages between tenures, is developed. Five key groups are identified: self-provisioners, highly resourceful and engaged in their housing outcomes; the lucky ones, comfortable owners; comfort traders who make substantial trade-offs and compromises to afford home ownership; alternative dreamers living in community based housing arrangements; and those living
in private rental housing in alternative realities, some of whom are ‘fixed’ and some of whom have ‘exit strategies’ in place.

This diversity of housing circumstances can be attributed overwhelmingly to differences in both the degree of downshifting – the extent to which the world views of family members are more or less alternative to mainstream society – and, relatedly, to the levels of financial resources available. As set out at Chapter 4, there is an interesting relationship between these three factors included in the analyses: degree of downshifting, resources and residential location. Those families who have values and behaviours most different from mainstream society typically have least strong and/or regular attachment to the labour market (among other systems). This, in turn, has a strong negative impact on the levels of financial resources typically available: alternative downshifter families are typically low or moderately resourced financially; conventional downshifter families are typically (although not always) in stronger financial positions.

The extent to which downshifter families are alternative or conventional and well or poorly financially resourced each relate to residential location. In order to afford the costs of housing, many families in this study opt to move away from metropolitan areas and into non-metropolitan locations where they establish their homes, but this picture is more complex than a process of economically driven migration (for example, Burnley and Murphy 2004, discussed at Chapter 2). Among many more alternative downshifter families there is also a desire, resulting from their typically ‘green’ values, to live closer to nature, and sometimes within communities of like-minded people that are perceived by them to exist in rural pockets of Victoria. Hence, both the world views and financial resources of downshifter families lead to roughly equal numbers of families, in this study at least, living in metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations.

When it comes to the ways downshifter families live within their varied housing circumstances, again there is an interesting finding. Despite the very high level of diversity among their housing pathways, there is a high degree of consistency and commonality with regard to the ways they make their home lives meaningful. Consistent
with existing literature, family relationships are found to be perhaps most significant to the making of home. The additional amounts, flexibility and fluidity of time at home, as well as the over time relationships some housing circumstances afford households, strengthen the home-family bond.

Two other influences on home lives, conceptualised in this study as relationships between downshifters and aspects of their lifestyles, are found. The first relates to the community, and particularly to the local community surrounding downshifter families’ homes and within which they live. While not explored as an important aspect of downshifting in existing literature, engagement in community life is identified here as highly significant to all downshifter families in this study. Community interactions ground people in the local community and, for some, contribute to highly vibrant community lives at home.

A third type of influence on the way home lives are lived relates directly to one of the priorities found earlier in this research (as well as in previous studies) to underpin downshifting for some families. This relates to the environment and the extent to which environmental concerns feature in the general world views of downshifter families. Such concerns can affect their home lives in the places in which they live, the extent to which homes are environmentally sound, as well as the daily consumption and production practices that take place at home. While there is some variation in the extent to which this third influence, the environment, impacts on families’ home lives, related to their degree of downshifting, overall each of these influences are found to be highly significant for all downshifter families studied.

There is a relationship between housing pathways and circumstances and the making of home among downshifter families. While the key influences of family, community and environmental concerns transcend their housing circumstances to a large degree, there are some differences in the extent to which families are able to control the strength of these influences in their home lives, which are directly related to the types of housing circumstances they live within. Consistent with existing literature, it is found that some types of housing circumstances facilitate the control – enabling housing stability, control
and predictability – which can enhance the impact of lifestyle influences on the making of home. Again in keeping with existing literature, home ownership is found to be important (Saunders 1990; Saunders and Williams 1988; Dupuis and Thorns 1998), but so, too, are other housing arrangements which provide relatively high degrees of security and control. These include some cases in which relative stability was enjoyed within the private rental market, as well as various arrangements where relatively high degrees of control, security and predictability of housing are provided through community based relationships as alternatives to market based ones.

Reflections on the findings

The interpretivist approach used in this research has enabled a rich and detailed analysis of a relatively unexplored aspect of housing and family life to be examined. The findings refocus attention on the subjective meanings of housing and home which both shape and are shaped by the decisions people make. The findings of this study are a complex mix of diversity and commonality.

First, it was found that the family downshifting population is heterogenous, comprising families of somewhat varying ages, with highly varied levels of financial resources, with divergent world views (from alternative to more conventional) and living in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations. Yet, common to all families in this study is an overwhelming homogeneity of both core downshifting values as well as priorities relating to family life. Control, control over time, ‘time over money’ values, and good parenting in the form of time for children and family are found across all families interviewed.

As well, there is diversity and commonality in housing experience. Depending upon orientation (more or less alternative or conventional), related to this, their desire to live close to nature and away from metropolitan centres, but most particularly upon their levels of financial resources, downshifter families live in highly varied housing circumstances. These range from comfortable, with a high degree of control and security,
to highly compromised (in a range of ways which include housing tenure, housing quality and residential location). There is a clear relationship whereby those with highest levels of financial wealth are able to live downshifted lifestyles, and do so with relatively high levels of comfort, control and security. On the other hand, families with relatively low levels of financial wealth also live downshifted lifestyles, yet do so with sometimes high levels of trade-off and compromise.

In some cases these differences are overcome entirely or to a large degree through the determination and creativity of downshifter families who opt to construct their own homes. As established at Chapter 6 this route enables some to leverage themselves into a position of home ownership from otherwise far less secure and controlled housing circumstances within private rental, while others look to alternative tenure structures to meet their needs. Here, community relationships of various types can provide some downshifter families with a very high level of perceived security as well as control over the way they live.

Across all downshifter families, in all housing circumstances, however, are strong commonalities found in the key influences upon the ways they go about making their homes meaningful. Influences of family life, community life and environmental concerns impact on home lives in ways that substantially transcend housing circumstances. While some types of housing afford greater levels of control over housing than others – and hence the capacity for lifestyle related influences to be strongest – the key influences on home are apparent to a relatively high degree across all housing circumstances, for all downshifter family households. The picture of diversity and commonality in housing experiences found among downshifter families is represented visually at Figure 4.
As the figure shows, downshifting as a lifestyle choice is evident in the housing pathways and home practices of downshifter families in various ways, some more pronounced and/or more controllable by households than others. It also shows that while housing experiences are diverse (due to differences in degree of downshifting and levels of household financial wealth), home life experiences are influenced by common factors (which again reflect lifestyle priorities). Finally, despite diversity in housing experience, the values and priorities underlying housing decisions and practices among downshifter families are highly homogenous.

To a large degree, the intersection of diversity and commonality depicted at Figure 4, and the story that this research tells, is a classic sociological tale of structure and agency. Chapters 1 and 2 established that downshifters are typically highly self-reflexive, sometimes creative and often highly resourceful. In keeping with risk society theories related to the individualisation of life in late modernity outlined at Chapter 1, the findings
of this study suggest these individuals, at least, can determine, to a large degree, the extent to which their lifestyle priorities are reflected in their housing experiences. However, the findings also illustrate, as theorists such as Giddens (1991, 1994), Beck (2000) and Bauman (2000) would predict, that within this period of heightened individualisation households remain affected by underlying structural forces, including inequalities. While some downshifter families have a high degree of financial wealth enabling relatively comfortable navigation through the housing market, this is not the case for all families, for whom downshifting is not always an easy experience.

Despite the consequences of differences in household resources, compounded by inequalities within the housing system, all downshifter families in this study – and those scattered throughout the population more broadly – opt, voluntarily, to pursue their lifestyle ideals.

Limitations and future directions

As with all research, this thesis has strengths, as well as inherent limitations. The limitations relate to the methods used, the exploratory nature of the research topic, and the fact that any one piece of research cannot address all related questions: there is always more research to do. These limitations do not affect the capacity of this research to address the research questions set out at Chapter 1, but they do affect its capacity to address related questions.

Adoption of an interpretivist, qualitative approach has enabled analysis of the values and priorities informing decision making among downshifter families, as well as the way these decisions and priorities are experienced in housing pathways and home lives. As discussed at Chapters 2 and 4, is the most appropriate method for analysis of the housing-lifestyle priorities among this group and has enabled a rich analysis. In keeping with much qualitative research, it is the conceptual insights and depth of understanding, based upon the theoretical sampling within this study, which are able to be generalised, rather than specific details about incidence, extent and precise estimates of variation in the
downshifting experience achievable via quantitative methods. The extent to which findings can be directly transferred to the broader population of downshifter families remains unknown.

As described in detail at Chapter 4, there are no large-scale surveys of downshifter families in Australia which provide population estimates regarding their incidence in different types of locations (metropolitan and non-metropolitan) nor the types of the housing they live in. The TAI survey (Hamilton and Mail 2003) provides some useful information, but not coverage of all variables explored in this research (notably, information about residential location and housing is absent). Hence, as was also discussed at Chapter 4, the approach taken to sampling for the present study was an inclusive one. A diversity of experiences, residential locations and housing circumstance types was deliberately included to ensure a good coverage of issues. The extent to which this sample directly reflects population estimates – and hence the extent to which the research findings reported here can be directly generalised to the broader Australian family downshifter population – remains unknown.

This study has focused on individual family households who together form a ‘group’ who share common values and priorities, most notably around family life, control and autonomy, including control over time. The sampling methods used to recruit participants may affect the relatively high degree of commonality among the final sample, despite differences within it. For example, it may be that other families have downshifted but, for religious or other reasons, and are not necessarily reflected in the findings presented here. ‘Anti-social’ or isolated downshifters, similarly, may be under-represented. Additionally, as discussed at Chapter 4, the focus has been upon families and their experiences of housing, rather than intra-familial differences in the downshifting, housing or home experience. Hence, it is possible that at least for some households, conflicting views within households may be understated in the findings.

The limitations of this study provide scope for future research endeavours seeking to address the same research questions addressed here and related directions. Extending the
analyses presented here in future work through survey based analysis, using larger population samples, will enable accurate estimates of the extent to which family downshifters live in various types of housing, the extent to which downshifting among Australian families relates to mobility, to various types of housing outcomes and so on. Replication of the research using the interpretivist method would validate the findings presented here; the capacity for replication is a strength of all research.

This research does not include either a historical comparison or extensive comparison of the lifestyle-housing relationships among numerous sub-groups within the population. Hence, it is not possible on the basis of this research to conclude definitively whether, as authors such as Clapham (2002, 2004, 2005), lifestyle is becoming increasingly important as a determinant of housing pathways. However, on the basis of this research it can be concluded that for downshifter families, at least, lifestyle choices and priorities are significantly reflected in both the housing pathways households live in and the way they make home within their housing circumstances.

While this study indicates strong links between lifestyle priorities and housing circumstances and experiences among family downshifters, analysis of the housing and home experiences of other downshifter groups in the population are beyond its scope and have not been explored here. Of interest in future research on this topic will be examining the nature of the housing and home circumstances and experiences among downshifters who are unpartnered and/or childless. It is likely their housing pathways and experiences of home will in many ways mirror those of the family downshifters explored in this study, in so far as lifestyle priorities are expressed in housing pathways and the making of home, but there may be significant differences arising from the family priorities associated with the downshifters explored here, and absence of such priorities among other downshifter groups.

By the same token, the findings of this study suggest that a focus upon the ways in which housing decisions are made among families outside of the downshifting population and how these relate to patterns of work, life balance and the experiences of family life,
including at home, is sorely needed. Accounts of housing affordability and research exploring the employment patterns of mothers and fathers rarely cross-fertilise: typically each is undertaken in isolation from the others. However, the accounts of downshifter families in this study suggest that, for family downshiftingers *at least*, questions regarding housing costs and other aspects of home are significantly related to both family and working lives. The extent to which downshifter families represent the tip of the iceberg or are different from other parts of the population remains relatively unexplored.

More broadly, questions relating to the nature of the housing-lifestyle relationship and how this manifests among various population groups extend well beyond the family or downshifting population. Clapham (2002, 2004, 2005) and others suggest housing is an important medium for the expression of lifestyle choices in late modernity, a claim which finds support in the present study. Yet, is this relationship equally evident among other population groups? Is housing which reflects lifestyle priorities the domain of highly self-reflexive populations such as downshifters, or do aspects of housing reflect lifestyle priorities among other groups? If so, what do these relationships look like in terms of housing pathways, and how are they experienced? These and other questions further exploring the relationship between lifestyle and housing are the domain of future research.

**Significance of this study**

In addressing the research questions set out at Chapter 1, this research aimed to extend our understanding of the downshifting phenomenon in two principal ways. As discussed at Chapter 2, family life is cited as the primary motivator for most Australian families who have downshifted, and yet the relationship between downshifting and family life is virtually unexplored in existing literature. Although the ‘downshifting phenomenon’ has received much attention in the real estate pages of major newspapers in recent years, little has been known about the implications for housing, nor about the role of housing and ideas of home in the downshifting experience. This is despite the fact that housing, for the vast majority of Australian households, represents the largest single
budget item, and patterns of consumption have been a central line of inquiry within existing downshifting and related literature.

This study addressed these two significant research gaps. In support of existing research, it has been found that family life is integral to the family downshifting experience. Extending previous understandings of the phenomenon, this study has revealed why this is so. Time for children and time for family life, drawn together under the notion of what downshifter families believe to be ‘good parenting’, lie at the heart of this relationship. Furthermore, it has been found that each of downshifting and family life related to it are significantly and integrally related to the housing experiences of downshifter families. As outlined in detail above, and throughout the analyses at Chapters 6 and 7, the lifestyle priorities of downshifter families find strong expression in their housing pathways and circumstances as well as in the various ways they go about making ‘home’.

The findings of this study also have broader significance. The linking of downshifting, family life and housing draws attention to the extent to which these are treated separately within public policy, despite compelling recent research indicating links between these life domains (for example, Pocock 2003; Pocock et al. 2007). Downshifting, particularly among families with dependent children, has significance for policy discourse around work life balance and family-friendly work practices as existing studies repeatedly link the time squeeze associated with work to decisions to downshift. Analysis of the experience of family downshifting demonstrates how centrally important housing and home are to achieving a balance between life and work. Yet, with some few exceptions (for example, HREOC 2007), housing costs and the experience of home are rarely acknowledged within the work life policy arena.

Further, the present study contributes to an emerging field of research within the sociology of housing literature which seeks to understand the contemporary importance of ‘lifestyle’ for the way housing is consumed and experienced. As set out at Chapter 3, the significance of housing to lifestyle and identity is argued to have increased as a result of structural and cultural changes associated with risk society. Authors such as Clapham
(2005) argue that understanding the relationship between housing and lifestyle represents an urgent need within housing studies. Using an interpretivist approach to explore this new type of housing ‘problem’, the findings of this study lend some support to these claims. While it is not possible on the basis of the research findings developed here to comment on the extent to which lifestyle factors are becoming more significant to housing experience over time, the findings are clear: there is a significant, meaningful relationship, among downshifter families at least, between lifestyle values and priorities and the experience of housing and home.

Concluding remarks

This thesis began by introducing the voice and viewpoint of a young man who, together with his partner and young daughter, had downshifted to pursue what, to them, was better life quality. Through analysing the values and priorities, circumstances and experiences of this family and other Australian families who have downshifted, this research has taken us on a detailed, exploratory journey into the lives of a sub-group within the population not typically represented in mainstream housing research. The study is a window into the values and priorities among a relatively hidden part of our population and, specifically, a window into the previously unexplored area of how the lifestyle choices and priorities of downshifter families interact with their housing and home experiences.

In sum, the specific findings of this research shed light on the way at least one part of the population is grappling with the simple and complex question of how best to live and, in this case, how to do so with a roof overhead.
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Appendix I
Published Study Flyers

Study flyer published in *Grass Roots* magazine, Issue 176:

RESEARCH: Participants wanted for Swinburne University study about family life, housing and place. We are interested in talking with people from urban and rural areas, in any housing circumstances. If you have **voluntarily reduced your income to improve your life quality, have dependent child/ren and would consider being interviewed for this research**, please contact Wendy on (03) 9214 4807 or wstone@swin.edu.au

Study flyer published in *Owner Builder* magazine, Issue 136:

HOUSING RESEARCH: Participants wanted for Swinburne University study about housing and place. If you have voluntarily reduced your income to improve your life quality, have dependent child/ren and would consider being interviewed for this research, please contact Wendy on (03) 92144807 or wstone@swin.edu.au

Study flyer posted on *Australian Policy Online* (APO), October 2006 and *Australian Local Government Association News*, 13 October 2006:

Downshifting, Housing and Family Life: Research participants wanted for new study

Roughly one in four adult Australians have voluntarily reduced their income to pursue a better quality of life (Hamilton and Mail 2003). In a new study at the Institute for Social Research at Swinburne University in Melbourne, the housing circumstances and strategies of these people, sometimes called ‘downshifters’, are being explored. In an era when house sizes are increasing and housing is becoming less affordable, the main question being asked is: how can people who live with less still maintain a roof over their heads? Focusing on families with dependent children, around 50 people will be interviewed for this research. Outcomes of the study will be fed into current housing and work-family policy debates and information about housing preferences and options will be provided to the housing industry. If you live with dependent child/ren (and are either partnered or unpartnered); have voluntarily reduced your income to pursue life quality; live in a rural or metropolitan area in **any housing circumstances** and would like to participate in this study or find out more, please contact Wendy Stone on (03) 9214 4807 or wstone@swin.edu.au.
HOUSING AND FAMILY LIFE: SEEKING PARTICIPANTS FOR NEW STUDY

Roughly one in four adult Australians have voluntarily reduced their income to pursue a better quality of life or have chosen to live simply. In a new study at the Institute for Social Research at Swinburne University in Melbourne, the housing circumstances and strategies of these people, sometimes called ‘downshifters’, are being explored. In an era when house sizes are increasing and housing is becoming less affordable, the main question being asked is: how can people who live with less still maintain a roof over their heads? Focusing on families with dependent children, around 50 people will be interviewed for this research. Outcomes of the study will be fed into current housing and work-family policy debates and information about housing preferences and options will be provided to the housing industry. If you live with dependent child/ren (and are either partnered or unpartnered); have voluntarily reduced your income to pursue life quality; live in a rural or metropolitan area in any housing circumstances and would like to participate in this study or find out more, please contact Wendy Stone on (03) 9214 4807 or wstone@swin.edu.au.
Appendix II
Information provided to potential respondents

(i) Downshifting, Housing and Place study summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Downshifting, Housing and Place:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A study of how Australians balance work, home, family &amp; the community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

About this study
In 2003 an Australian study showed that roughly a quarter of the adult population had voluntarily reduced their incomes to pursue a better quality of life. The study showed that this group of people, sometimes called 'downshifters', typically reduce their income and levels of consumption for reasons such as: wanting to spend quality time with family and friends; concerns about the environment; health and spirituality; and a general desire to gain more sense of control, purpose and balance in their lives.

In a new study, researchers at the Institute for Social Research at Swinburne University in Melbourne are investigating the housing circumstances and strategies of people who choose to reduce their incomes and expenditure. The main question is: how can people who live with less still maintain a roof over their heads?

Around 50 people will be interviewed for this study and interviews will be approximately one hour. Participants will include households in a range of housing circumstances (owners, renters, travelers, owner builders, households in intentional communities, people living on multiple occupancy titles, and many more). We are interested in people who live in cities, towns and remote areas, and people from all walks of life.

Aims of the study
In an era when house sizes are increasing and housing is becoming less affordable for many people, understanding how households negotiate the housing market and different types of housing options, in a range of locations, is increasingly important. Outcomes of this study will be fed into policy debates at federal, state and local levels to shed light on these important issues. Relevant information about housing preferences and options will also be provided to the housing industry.

Materials resulting from the study
It is expected that this research will be published in various reports and journal articles. The research data collected for the study will only be published, on the condition that the anonymity of study participants is preserved and that no-one is able to be identified.
Your privacy
Your privacy is assured. Any information you provide to the researcher as part of this study will be kept in strict confidence.

- **No** name or contact information will be kept with interview material, and any names or identifying information used in interviews will be removed.

- **No** information about study participants will be provided to any other researcher, individual, organisation or agency for any purpose.

- **No** information that enables identification of you/your household will be included in any publicly available results from this study.

Contacting us
Any questions you have about the ‘Downshifting, Housing and Place’ study can be directed to the researcher, Wendy Stone, at the Institute for Social Research by telephoning, emailing or writing to:

    Wendy Stone, Researcher and PhD Candidate
    Institute for Social Research
    Swinburne University of Technology
    PO Box 218 Hawthorn
    Victoria 3122
    Email: wstone@swin.edu.au
    Phone: (03) 9214 4807

Remember
- You are free to ask as many questions about the study as you like, prior to starting the interview, during the interview or after the interview
- If you are asked a question you do not wish to answer, just let the interviewer know you do not wish to answer that question
- If you change your mind about participating in the study at any time, you are free to withdraw consent and to discontinue participation in the study

Concerns or complaints about the research
If you have any concerns or complaints about the way this research has been conducted, please contact:

    The Director
    Institute for Social Research
    Swinburne University of Technology
    PO Box 218 Hawthorn
    Victoria 3122
    Phone: (03) 9214 5466
(ii) Informed Consent form

**Downshifting, Housing and Place:**
A study of how Australians balance work, home, family & the community

**Informed Consent**

I, ........................................................................, have read and understood the information provided to me about the ‘Downshifting, Housing and Place’ study.

Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to participate in an interview for this study and I understand that I may withdraw from the interview at any time, or decline to answer questions I do not wish to answer. I agree that research data collected for the study may be published, on the condition that my anonymity is preserved and that I cannot be identified.

Signed ...........................................................

Dated ...........................................................

**Please tick which of the following apply to you:**

☐ I agree to allow the researcher to undertake the interview for this research in my home.

☐ I agree that the interview may be recorded on audio tape as data on the condition that no part of it is included in any presentation or public display.

☐ I agree that the interview I undertake for this study may be used by the same researcher for future, related research on the condition that anonymity is maintained and that the data is not provided to other individuals or organisations for any other purpose.

☐ I agree that the researcher may contact me again in the future, to see whether I wish to participate in any other, related research at that time. [Note: no name or contact details will be provided to any other individual or organisation for any other purpose.]

☐ I would like to be kept informed about the findings from this study, including through being sent email or postal updates 😊

**Note:** Completion of this form is a requirement of University Ethics Guidelines and will not be given to any other individual or organisation for any purpose.
(iii) Information about the researcher

About the researcher:

Wendy Stone is a sociologist with over 15 years experience in policy research. Wendy worked for many years at the Australian Institute of Family Studies where she undertook research about family life, housing circumstances and experiences, youth transitions, and social capital in community life. Wendy has lectured in sociology and researched at the University of Melbourne and is currently employed as a researcher within the Housing and Cities Program at the Institute for Social Research at Swinburne University where she is undertaking her PhD research. Wendy works almost exclusively from home (telecommutes) to juggle family and work life.
Appendix III
Ethical Research Clearance

Correspondence regarding the ethical clearance of this research by the (former) Institute for Social Research Ethics Committee:
Email received from Keith Wilkins, Swinburne Research, 26 July 2010.

To: Ms Wendy Stone, FLSS  
cc Assoc Prof K Hulse/Prof D Meredyth, ISR, FLSS  

Dear Wendy  

SHESC-ISR Project 7/05 Downshifting, Housing and Place  
Assoc Prof K Hulse, ISR, FLSS; Prof D Meredyth, Ms W Stone  

I confirm ethics clearance issued by the SUHREC Human Ethics Subcommittee - Institute of Social Research (SHESC_ISR) on 25 July 2010. Attached is a scan of the clearance then issued and held on record.  

Thank you for your progress report emailed today with respect to completed human research activity for the above project.  

Please contact me if you have any queries about the ethical review undertaken, citing the project number.  

Best wishes for your thesis completion and submission.  

Yours sincerely  

Keith  

*******************************************************************************  
Keith Wilkins  
Research Ethics Officer and Secretary, Swinburne University of Technology Human Research Ethics Committee (SUHREC)  
Swinburne Research (H68)  
Swinburne University of Technology  
P O Box 218  
HAWTHORN VIC 3122  
Tel +61 3 9214 5218  
Fax +61 3 9214 5267
Project Title: Downshifting, housing and place

Project Duration: from 15/7/05 to 30/9/07

Principal Investigators: Wendy Stone

Address for Correspondence: c/o ISH

Other use only:

Project ID Number: 7/05

Recommendation of the ISR Research Ethics Committee:

☑ Project Approved  ☐ Project Not Approved

☐ Project Approved Subject to the Following:

Chair, ISR Research Ethics Committee

Date: 25/7/05

ETH001 Issue date: 272
## Appendix IV
### Summary case characteristics

Table 11. Summary characteristics by case

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case ID</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Family type</th>
<th>Age cohort</th>
<th>Child age(s)</th>
<th>Housing tenure</th>
<th>Dwelling type</th>
<th>Housing quality</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Income level</th>
<th>Debt</th>
<th>Financial comfort</th>
<th>Financial resources</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>‘Degree’ of downshifting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Stuart and Lucy</td>
<td>2 parent</td>
<td>Gen X</td>
<td>Pre-school aged</td>
<td>Co-operative</td>
<td>Joint living</td>
<td>Un-renovated</td>
<td>Commuter (commutes)</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>No debt</td>
<td>Getting by</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Martin and Eliza</td>
<td>2 parent</td>
<td>Gen X</td>
<td>Pre-school aged</td>
<td>Outright owner</td>
<td>House</td>
<td>Owner built, new</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>No debt</td>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Helen and Timothy</td>
<td>2 parent</td>
<td>Baby Boomers</td>
<td>High school aged</td>
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<td>House</td>
<td>Un-renovated</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
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<td>No debt</td>
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<td>Medium</td>
<td>Combination</td>
<td>High</td>
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<td>David and Lenore</td>
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<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>Medium</td>
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<td>Medium</td>
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<td>Rural</td>
<td>Medium</td>
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<td>Medium</td>
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<td>Commuter (commutes)</td>
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<td>Trade qualification</td>
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<td>Age cohort</td>
<td>Child age(s)</td>
<td>Housing tenure</td>
<td>Dwelling type</td>
<td>Housing quality</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Income level</td>
<td>Debt</td>
<td>Financial comfort</td>
<td>Financial resources</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>‘Degree’ of downshifting</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Baby boomer</td>
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<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<td>Low</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>High</td>
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<td>Medium</td>
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<td>High</td>
<td>Combination</td>
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<td>House</td>
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<td>Commuter (does not commute)</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<td>Getting by</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>High</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>Rebecca and Ian</td>
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<td>Baby Boomers</td>
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<td>Commuter (does not commute)</td>
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<td>High</td>
<td>Combination</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>Eric and Lisa</td>
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<td>House</td>
<td>Renovated</td>
<td>Commuter (does not commute)</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>No debt</td>
<td>Very comfortable</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
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<td>19</td>
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<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Debt</td>
<td>Getting by</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Combination</td>
<td>High</td>
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<td>20</td>
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<td>House</td>
<td>Renovated</td>
<td>Commuter (commutes)</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Debt</td>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Combination</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Tori and Greg</td>
<td>2 parent</td>
<td>Gen X</td>
<td>Pre-school aged</td>
<td>Outright owner</td>
<td>House</td>
<td>Owner built, new</td>
<td>Commuter (commutes)</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>No debt</td>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Combination</td>
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<td>Case ID</td>
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<td>Family type</td>
<td>Age cohort</td>
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<td>Dwelling type</td>
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<td>Location</td>
<td>Income level</td>
<td>Debt</td>
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<td>Financial resources</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>‘Degree’ of downshifting</td>
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<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Hamish and Lalana</td>
<td>2 parent</td>
<td>Gen Y</td>
<td>Pre-school aged</td>
<td>Private renter</td>
<td>Unit</td>
<td>Un-renovated</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>No debt</td>
<td>Getting by</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Combination</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Rohan</td>
<td>Sole parent</td>
<td>Gen X</td>
<td>Primary school aged</td>
<td>Private renter</td>
<td>House</td>
<td>Un-renovated</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>No debt</td>
<td>Getting by</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>Sole parent</td>
<td>Gen Y</td>
<td>Primary school aged</td>
<td>Private renter</td>
<td>Unit</td>
<td>Owner built, new</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>No debt</td>
<td>Getting by</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>High</td>
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<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Leah and Ben</td>
<td>2 parent</td>
<td>Gen Y</td>
<td>Pre-school aged</td>
<td>Purchaser owner</td>
<td>House</td>
<td>Renovated</td>
<td>Commuter (commutes)</td>
<td>Medium Debt</td>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. * Indicates households which owned or were purchasing another property in addition to their usual residence. In all cases this was with a view to building a home, with the exception of Case 11 where the couple owned a small share in a parcel of rural with friends. 1. ‘Financial resources’ is a composite variable which takes into income, financial strain and housing based wealth. 2. ‘Location’ is reclassified for the purposes of analysis as metropolitan, commuter (where respondents live in commuter areas and commute to work) and non-metropolitan (including rural livers and those living in commuter areas who do not commute to work) as discussed at Chapter 4.
Summary tables of case characteristics, showing totals

Table 12. Family characteristics summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family characteristics</th>
<th>Number (N = 25)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family type</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Two parent</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sole parent</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Generation (birth years)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation Y (1980-94)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation X (1965-79)</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby Boomer (1946-64)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child ages</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-school aged</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary school aged</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school aged</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Combination of ages</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: 1. Classification of ‘Generation’ based on oldest partner in a partnership. In most cases partners were from the same generation, with the exception of two cases who are classified as Baby Boomers, each of which also included a member of Generation X. 2. Classification of Generations is based on McCrindle (2006).

Table 13. Housing and locational characteristics summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Housing and locational characteristics</th>
<th>Number (N = 25)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Housing tenure</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outright owner</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchaser owner</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private renter</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperative</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dwelling type</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free standing house</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attached unit</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint living</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Housing quality</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unrenovated</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renovated/modern</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner built (recent)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commuter area (commutes)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commuter area (does not commute)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: ‘Metropolitan’ is defined as within major metropolitan area boundaries, ‘Commuter area’ is outside metropolitan boundaries but within an hour travel time to the CBD and ‘Rural’ is defined as more than one hour travel time from the CBD.
Table 14. Household resources summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household resources</th>
<th>Number (N = 25)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Income level</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Debt</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No debt</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debt</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Financial comfort</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting by</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very comfortable</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Financial resources</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade qualification</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: 1. ‘Financial resources’ is a composite measure taking account of income, financial comfort and housing based wealth, at time of interview. 2. ‘Combination’ of education is a mix of tertiary and non-tertiary levels among partners in family household.

Table 15. Downshifting and environmentalism summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Downshifting and environmentalism</th>
<th>Number (N = 25)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Degree of downshifting</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Low’ degree</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘High’ degree</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Degree of environmentalism</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-green</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Low’ degree green</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘High’ degree green</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix V
Interview Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview schedule</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In this interview I’m going to ask about your lifestyle choices, your housing and where you live, as well as about family and community life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To start, I want to ask you about simple living, or downshifting. We’ll talk about housing a bit more soon.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Downshifting and simple living**

Some people call those who voluntarily reduce their incomes to improve their quality of life ‘downshifters’. Have you heard of the term ‘downshifter’? What do you understand by it?

Would you call your family ‘downshifters’? Why? Why not?

Have you or your partner voluntarily reduced your income, or chosen not to increase income in order to improve your quality of life?

Can you tell me about what motivated you to reduce your income or make other changes to simplify your life? (OR to live a low consumption lifestyle from the outset?)

Is it something you had considered for a long time, always imagined, or came to fairly suddenly?

What would you say was the main motivation?

Can you tell me how you went about making those changes, or setting up for a life of more simple living?

What were the processes you undertook?

How long did it take?

How did you feel about making these changes at the time?

How do you feel about it now?

How have other people reacted?

What do you think have been the best aspects of the change?

Which aspects have been most difficult?

Can I just clarify what your work situations are now?

Full-time or part-time, casual etc?

And could you give me a sense of how great the change has been financially – are you able to estimate the size of your income drop in percentage terms or dollars?
**Housing and Downshifting**

What role did your housing play in your decision to reduce your income?
  
  *For example, was it a hindrance and risk, or did it give you a sense of security, for example because of equity you have in your house? Were housing costs a factor?*

Has your housing changed in any way as a result of reducing your income, or living simply?
  
  *For example, moved to a different area, to a smaller house, or to a different tenure?*

Are there aspects of your housing or home you would like to change if you had greater income, for example?
  
  *What kinds of housing trade-offs have you made because of your decision to reduce your income?*

Is your ‘home life’ in similar or different than it used to be, for example do you use your home in new ways or differently than the way other people might use their homes?
  
  *For example, working from home, using family space differently, and so on.*

Has the way you think or feel about housing or your home changed as a result of downshifting or living more simply? Can you tell me about that?
  
  *For example, how important is your home to your life now?*

How do you think the way you feel about your home compares with more mainstream views about the home and housing?
  
  *Do you think your sense of home is similar or different? For example there is a lot of ‘upscale’ going on in the housing industry.*

**Housing**

Can you describe your home and what it means to you, your lifestyle and your family?
  
  *About your home*
  
  *What your home means to family life*
  
  *What your home means in terms of facilitating lifestyle (space, use, cost, etc)*
  
  *Social aspects of home – is home a hub for social relationships, family, friends etc or private space.*
  
  *Other meanings of the home eg green housing, communal life etc*

And what about the dwelling itself? Has the style of this house, its size or cost been significant for you in relation to downshifting or your lifestyle? Can you tell me about this?
  
  *For example, the materials it is made from, or its cost, or it’s feel?*
Housing pathways

Can I just clarify your housing circumstances?
   *Do you have ongoing mortgage or housing costs?*
   *Are you purchasing, own outright, renting or are you in another arrangement?*

I want to ask you a bit about your ‘housing pathways’. That is, where you were living previously, how your housing has changed over the years and why.

And can I ask about your housing circumstances before this – where were you living before you came to this house? Were you owning or renting?
   *How did downshifting or living simply relate to this housing move?*
   *What about moves before this?*
   *What else was happening at the times you moved or made changes to your housing arrangements?*

   ...And what about before that – what was the overall pattern of your housing?
   *Did you usually rent, were you highly mobile, or did you own your place?*

Do you think you will change your housing in the future? Can you tell me about that?

Links to place

Can you tell me a little about the area in which you live?
   *How long have you lived here?*
   *How did you come to live here?*
   *What is it you like best about living here?*

How does this place affect your lifestyle choices?
   *For example, does it reinforce them or make them difficult?*

Some people say that places have their own pace or tempo. Have you thought about the pace of life in this area? How would you say it suits your lifestyle preferences or goals?
   *Does the pace of life here generally suit your own lifestyle?*
   *Do you find the pace of life too slow, too fast?*
   *Is the pace of life here something that attracted you to the area?*

Do you have much interaction with other people in the local community?
   *Do you see your family and friends locally?*
   *Are you able to get support when you need it?*
   *Do you participate in local events or groups?*

Do you have links to like-minded people?
   *Here or elsewhere?*

How does living here affect your access to work, schools and so on?
   *For example, is work near by?*
   *What is your usual commuting time/mode of transport?*
   *Do you use technology such as a computer/modem to work from home?*
And how does your housing relate to this area?
   *Was housing affordability one of the reasons you moved here?*
   *Are the types of housing options here different from other places?*

**Mobility and stability**

You say that you have moved here with downshifting. Can you tell me a little about moving?

Do you think it’s been difficult to move away from where you were before? Can you tell me about it?
   *Are there things you miss?*
   *Has it been easier or harder than you expected?*
   *Would you recommend it?*

**OR**

You say you have remained here while you’ve made lifestyle changes. Can you tell me about that?

Do you think it’s been difficult to remain here and make other changes to your life?
   *What are the advantages or disadvantages?*
   *Has it been easier or harder than you expected?*

**Family life**

I’d like to ask a bit more about family life.

Can you tell me about your family life in relation to your decision to live simply?
   *Was family time one of the reasons you changed your job/income?*
   *What are the benefits of your lifestyle in relation to your family?*

Do you think your decisions and experiences about family, home and work are very different from those of other people?
   *What do you think it is that sets your experience apart from those of others?*

And do you think your housing choices have affected your family life? How?
   *For example, have the choices you’ve made about housing changed the way your family spends time together, uses space, or interacts with family and friends or the wider community?*

Are there tensions for you or your family in the downshifting decision and experience that relate to housing or place, what are these, and will you seek to change these?

**Risk and priorities**

I also want to ask you about risks and priorities in your life.
Have you ever felt that reducing your income has been risky?

Housing is often seen as a source of financial security and nest egg, how do you feel about this, how does this relate to how you perceive housing in your family life?

A lot of people say they would downshift if they could. Some people say they would if they didn’t have to pay for their housing. What are your views about this?

Do you think your sense of risk, or your life priorities are different from those of other people? Can you tell me about this?

**Life planning**

Overall, would you say that as a household you plan for the future, and are deliberate about life choices and how housing relates to these, or follow opportunities as they arise?

*And what about in relation to your housing, employment, family life, lifestyle, location?*

Where do you expect to be in a year, or five years, ten years or more?

*Do you think you will still be ‘downshifters’ or simple livers?*

**Other issues?**

We’re approaching the end of this interview.

Is there anything you think is important to your story about the topics and experiences that we’ve been talking about that we haven’t yet talked about?

**Final word**

Finally, in my study I am interviewing families about the solutions they have found to balancing their lifestyle choices, family needs and housing. I have two final questions.

1. First, do you think your solution has been a successful one?

2. And what advice, if any, would you give to people wanting to make changes to simplify their lives or spend more time with their families?

*What about in relation to housing, or where or how they live?*

**Wrap up**

Thank you for participation in this study. (Clarification about wanting to receive results.)

-> Any other people you know who may be interested in participating in this research?
Appendix VI
NVivo Matrix Example

Below is an example of one of the NVivo matrices used for analysis within this research. Each cell in the matrix represents the intersection of the values of the column ‘node’ and the row ‘node’ (where a case or text is coded at both). In this case, the relationships between aspects of family life relating to children were being explored in relation to degree of downshifting, financial resources and location of households. As shown in the results matrix, there were 14 discussions of parenting among ‘high’ degree downshifters (‘cell D’ and ‘row 1’). When using NVivo interactively, cells can be ‘entered’, and all case or text coded within that cell displayed on the screen, enabling comparison of cases and themes. Where relevant in this research, cells were stored as new nodes, enabling the relationship of these to be examined with other characteristics and themes in an iterative coding and analysis process characteristic of interpretive or grounded research (referred to in NVivo as ‘coding on’). This was just one of the ways multiple themes were handled in analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family (children) by degree of downshifting, financial resources and location</th>
<th>A: child as priority</th>
<th>B: impact on children</th>
<th>C: isolation</th>
<th>D: parenting</th>
<th>E: pressure on relationship</th>
<th>F: shared roles</th>
<th>G: support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: alternative = alternative</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: alternative = conventional</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: financial resources = Low</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: financial resources = Medium</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: financial resources = High</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6: location = metropolitan</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7: location &lt;&gt; metropolitan</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix VII
Case Summaries

Below is a summary of the downshifting, housing and family experiences of each of the 25 family households included in this study. Cases are identified by a number (1 to 25) and parent(s) names. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Case 1 Stuart and Lucy
Stuart and Lucy are a young professional couple with a two year old daughter Ava living in a well-established community cooperative approximately one hour north of Melbourne set on a bush block, with several shared buildings. The couple had a friend who lived there and got to know the community through regular visits before considering that they, too, might become members. Stuart had left his well-paid full-time job and had foregone the opportunity for postgraduate study while Ava was small, instead working part-time at a city university. At the time of interview, Lucy was also engaged in part-time work, some of which she could do from home using the internet for remote access and some of which she commuted to (also at a city university). Dissatisfaction with their previous housing arrangement (a rental house in inner northern Melbourne) and their sense of isolation that had come from this, as well as financial considerations around balancing time with their daughter, were the main reasons this family had recently joined the cooperative. Jointly, the parents spent a good deal of time sharing care of Ava and working to ‘pay their way’ within the cooperative. The couple felt they had a great deal of security and support despite not owning their own title. In this case, housing and family priorities were integrally related to the decision to downshift and relocate into a supportive community.

Housing: members of a community cooperative
Location: commuter area (commute)
Family: two parents, one toddler
Age: each early 30s (Gen X)
Finances: low/modest wealth
Education: tertiary
Housing change as a result of downshift: Yes
Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: Yes
Downshifter: Yes (changed work, modest consumers)
Case 2 Martin and Eliza
Martin, Eliza and their son Sage (a toddler at the time of interview) live in a small
dwelling they designed and built themselves, in a peaceful location surrounded by hills
and boulders. The couple spent considerable time and energy searching for the right
block for them, within budget, and not too far from Melbourne CBD, before finding and
falling in love with their land. Wanting to be closer to nature as well as away from the
stressors of city life were the central reasons they had relocated to their mountain
property. In the time they had lived there the couple had completed building their
dwelling, had conceived and given birth to their son, and had integrated into the local
community. Eliza, an artist, works from home in a studio the couple built. Martin works
part-time in a professional role (social work) in a regional centre about half an hour away.
The reduction of stuff, including noise, is central to the way this family live, as is
functionality. The house is changed according to the seasons and is adapted to meet the
needs of family life. At the time of interview, the couple intended to build an outbuilding
in which to sleep, and had invited friends to join them and live on their property,
imagining that their current home would become a communal space in the future.

Housing: owner occupiers (no mortgage) in an owner built house
Location: rural
Family: two parents, one toddler
Age: mid- to late 30s (Gen X)
Finances: medium wealth, comfortable and secure
Education: tertiary
Housing change as a result of downshift: Yes
Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: No
Downshifter: Work and family had changed as a result of move to rural property.
Voluntary simplifier term perhaps more appropriate
Case 3 Helen and Timothy
Helen and Timothy, along with their two late teenage children Jake (also interviewed) and Suzie, have lived in their current home since immediately prior to the birth of the eldest child almost 20 years earlier. Neither had followed a linear work path, despite having their own careers and qualifications (Helen tertiary and Timothy a trade). Instead, each had worked both full- and part-time and had shared primary care of their children as opportunities arose and needs changed. The couple deliberately reduced their working hours when they could, in order to pursue other non-work interests (including caring for their children when they were younger). Debt reduction and avoidance were key to their financial strategy. The family is actively anti-consumerist (choosing a Steiner education for their children to fit with these values) and lives in an unimproved 1950s suburban home in an outer metropolitan suburb surrounded by renovated, extended or rebuilt housing. The size of the home is modest, and used flexibly (rather than renovating and accruing debt). For example, the master bedroom is used to sleep in at night but during the day the bed is folded up and the room becomes an office/music space.

Housing: owner occupiers (no mortgage) in a suburban Melbourne home  
Location: metropolitan  
Family: two parents, two late teenaged children  
Age: late 40s/early 50s (young Baby Boomers)  
Finances: medium wealth, comfortable and secure  
Education: tertiary and trade qualifications  
Housing change as a result of downshift: No, purchase of house because of pregnancy  
Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: No  
Downshifter: Always had work reduction strategy, focus on anti-consumerism and living frugally
Case 4 David and Lenore

David is a committed environmentalist, keen to contribute to this research in order to promote these goals. He and his wife Lenore are parents to five children (one of whom was planned) and live in an inner northern Melbourne suburb, having recently relocated from the outer eastern suburbs. David embraces downshifting as a lifestyle choice, having previously worked in a highly stressful, unfulfilling role. Reaching a peak in stress around the time of early fatherhood had been a key trigger for lifestyle change. David reads keenly about environmental issues and is politically active. He and Lenore now each work part-time, he at a community environment park, and the family also perform comedy at various festivals. In order to afford their current location, they live in older-style housing with many ‘tacked-on’ rooms, all in need of renovation. The family lives on a low income, relying primarily on cycling for transport, and is an active user of public/community assets. They are enthusiastic home-based producers, having established a flourishing permaculture garden in their new home.

Housing: owner occupiers (mortgage) in an inner city Melbourne home
Location: metropolitan
Family: two parents, five school aged children
Age: early to mid-30s (Gen X)
Finances: low income, medium housing wealth
Education: tertiary
Housing change as a result of downshift: No, purchase of house because of pregnancy
Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: Yes, along with work stress and environmentalism
Downshifter: Yes (changed work, modest consumers)
Case 5 Sarah and Tony
Sarah and her family (husband Tony and two young sons, both pre-school aged) relocated from inner city rental accommodation to a rural commuter town upon the arrival of their first child. Sarah had left work at that time and Tony, who had done odd jobs of whatever he could find, is now employed part-time at a local primary school. The town, which Sarah had visited many times on family holidays as a child, is associated with alternative lifestyles and environmentalism. At the time of interview, the couple were slowly working their way through renovating their town home, using recycled goods and environmentally friendly products. Progress was slowed due to their lack of income ($19,000 last year). Sarah is heavily involved in volunteer activities and well integrated into the local community. She describes the way they live as a lifestyle choice, despite feeling the strain of both low income and lack of time.

Housing: owner occupiers (mortgage)
Location: rural commuter town (don’t commute)
Family: two parents, two pre-school aged children
Age: early to mid-30s (Gen X)
Finances: low income, modest housing wealth
Education: tertiary
Housing change as a result of downshift: Yes
Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: Yes, along with environmentalism
Downshifter: Yes (changed work, modest consumers)
Case 6 Nick and Eleanor
Nick is a lawyer who, having come to law relatively late and working in a commercial firm for several years, chose to forego his salary in favour of working in a more meaningful role providing legal aid to refugees. He and his wife Eleanor live with their two young children (one at primary school, one of pre-school age) in Melbourne’s inner suburbs in a partially renovated older-style free-standing house. After many years renting, the couple purchased their home following a force moved from a rental property very soon after the arrival of their first child. Purchasing a reasonably modest house at the time (while Nick was still employed in commercial law) enabled him the freedom to change his work and Eleanor to work part-time. The family enjoy inner city life, are keen public transport users and Eleanor is active in environmental campaigns.

Housing: owner occupiers (mortgage) in an inner western Melbourne suburb
Location: metropolitan
Family: two parents, one primary school child and one child of pre-school age
Age: mid-30s (Gen X)
Finances: medium income, comfortable, secure
Education: tertiary
Housing change as a result of downshift: No
Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: No
Downshifter: Yes (changed careers, modest consumers)
Case 7 Marcus and Sylvie
Marcus and Sylvie live in a rural tourist town in mountains to the north-east of Melbourne with their five month old daughter Sioux. Currently they are renting, sharing a house with their landlord, with a view to building their own home on a parcel of land nearby that Marcus has owned for a number of years. Building along environmentally friendly principles and remaining fully independent from government or business provided systems (water, gas, electricity) is important to them. Before meeting Marcus, Sylvie lived in her own home in the town, which is now being sold and will help fund their building project. Previously she had lived and worked in Melbourne’s inner north, but found herself increasingly drawn to areas away from Melbourne for leisure. Marcus, also originally from Melbourne, has worked as a park ranger in the area for several years. He routinely uses the flexibility his workplace offers (such as purchasing leave for reduced salary) to pursue family life and other interests. In contrast with their family and many (former) friends, the couple is strongly anti-consumerist. Their daughter Sioux has become a focal point for all family decisions.

Housing: renters and land owners
Location: rural town
Family: two parents, one baby
Age: mid-30s (Gen X)
Finances: medium income, comfortable
Education: tertiary and TAFE
Housing change as a result of downshift: Yes
Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: No
Downshifter: Yes (changed careers, modest consumers)
Case 8 Jane and Phil

Jane lives with her husband Phil and baby Zachery in a rural commuter location approximately an hour and a half’s drive from Melbourne. The couple recently moved from a home they were purchasing in a nearby town to their new house, a two bedroom, solar powered, chalet-style log house on a two acre bush block, where they enjoy peace and privacy. Both are attached to university work in the city (Phil is also studying) and each works mainly from home. Jane describes herself as a ‘second generation downshifter’, having been raised by parents who pursued a self-sufficient lifestyle throughout her childhood and who now live nearby and offer some support to the young family. The family’s home is a somewhat chaotic mix of domestic life and work, with computers and work spaces spilling out from their kitchen and living areas. Because of this, space is an issue, with their baby Zach now sleeping in his cot in their walk-in robe. Learning about power systems, water and bushfires as well as looking for wildflowers and wallabies are all part of their new home life.

| Housing: owner occupiers (mortgage) of a two bedroom home on a bush block |
| Location: commuter area (commute and work from home)                  |
| Family: two parents, one baby                                       |
| Age: mid-30s (Gen X)                                                |
| Finances: low income                                                |
| Education: tertiary                                                |
| Housing change as a result of downshift: Yes                        |
| Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: No                       |
| Downshifter: Yes (modest consumers) although Jane says she never ‘upshifted’ |
Case 9 Sean and Annette
Sean and Annette live in a rural commuter town approximately 70 kilometres from Melbourne with their son Ari who attends the local Steiner school. The couple describe themselves as drop-outs rather than downshifters because when each of them left relatively well-paid work some years before, they ‘really left’. The family live hand to mouth, relying on the sale of Sean’s woodwork and Annette’s craft at weekly markets as well as government payments to get by. They are currently renting but have recently bought a small parcel of land in the town and are in the process of finding an environmentally aware builder to build with, and are in discussion with council about permits and requirements. The couple purchased the land with the help of a family loan, thereby avoiding bank debt, and will build modestly and slowly according to budget, and along environmentally friendly principles. Sean will do as much of the building as he can to reduce costs. Their rental house is full of old and second-hand ‘stuff’ picked up at garage sales and markets, much of which they have to get rid of to move into the smaller house they will build. Despite being self-confessed hoarders, Sean and Annette are strongly anti-consumerist, with a large part of their choice to live on very little money driven by environmental concerns.

Housing: renters and land owners
Location: commuter area (commute and work from home)
Family: two parents, one primary school aged son
Age: mid-30s (Gen X)
Finances: low income
Education: trade/TAFE
Housing change as a result of downshift: Yes
Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: No
Downshifter: Yes, although couple describe themselves as drop-outs
Case 10 Christine
Christine lives with her young high school aged son Oliver in a ‘green wedge’ suburb of Melbourne. They remained in the house following the end of her marriage, in order to provide Oliver with a stable family base. Christine has a senior position in the state public service and for several years has worked part-time in order to better manage work-life balance. Following a period of long service leave, she reduced her working hours even further to three days a week. As well as enabling her to spend more time with Oliver, Christine’s part-time work status enables her to pursue other interests. Currently she spends Wednesdays learning traditional craft techniques. Through her professional life, Christine is aware of policies and programs aimed at facilitating work life and increasing volunteering in the community and feels strongly about these issues. Christine says she’s never been defined by her career even though she has always had interesting work.

Housing: owner occupier (mortgage) in a north-eastern Melbourne suburb
Location: metropolitan
Family: one parent, one high school aged son
Age: late 40s to 50 (young Baby Boomer)
Finances: medium income (due to being part-time), comfortable, secure
Education: tertiary
Housing change as a result of downshift: No
Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: Yes
Downshifter: Yes (changed work hours, modest consumer)
Case 11 Eliza and Robert
Eliza and Robert, along with their two young children (both pre-school aged), live in an unrenovated older-style house in Melbourne’s inner northern suburbs. The house forms part of a small intentional community which the family were invited to join a couple of years earlier, through friends already living there. Both are highly educated and consider themselves to be broke rather than poor because, as they see it, they have choices. According to Eliza, her father considers the couple to be ‘hopeless dreamers’ and has stopped waiting for her to see sense. They are somewhat uncomfortable with being labelled ‘downshifters’ as they are not sure they ever ‘upshifted’. They have made deliberate and informed choices to live with a low income in order to spend more time with their children and reduce their environmental footprint. Each is involved in local community life, although Robert is frustrated that he does not have more time to be politically active. Currently they are having to decide whether to increase their working hours – most likely at the cost of family time and the community lifestyle they have come to value – in order to take up the opportunity they have recently been offered to buy their home in the intentional community, or whether to leave the supports and lifestyle the community offers and rent or purchase elsewhere.

Housing: renters in a small inner city community housing cooperative
Location: metropolitan
Family: two parents, two pre-school aged children
Age: mid-30s (Gen X)
Finances: low income
Education: tertiary
Housing change as a result of downshift: Yes, the family took up community housing soon after having children
Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: Yes
Downshifter: Yes, although they say they never really ‘upshifted’
Case 12 Mike and Elaine
Mike and Elaine are financially secure, own most of their renovated and extended home and live in the inner northern suburbs of Melbourne. Mike works part-time in the IT industry and has led the family along its downshifting path. Having achieved a high salary, Mike also felt a high level of stress in his former position. He made changes to his working life and now works part-time, in a less competitive company and in a more cooperative way. He enjoys being more a part of his children’s lives and is highly involved in domestic tasks in the home, including shopping and cooking well. Downshifting has led to many family changes including healthier diets and a TV free home. Mike embraces the downshifting label and is keen to expound its benefits to anyone who will listen. Elaine is completing a PhD and shares care with Mike for their two primary school aged children. The changes that Mike has made to his lifestyle are leading Elaine to consider that, when she re-enters work following her studies, she may also decide to choose part-time work. The family laugh that their house was extended and renovated before Mike’s decision to reduce his work and salary, but is filled with their old furniture as they hadn’t yet refurbished it at the time. Both Mike and Elaine feel they are very fortunate to be in a position where they are able to make the lifestyle choices that they have made, attributing this to their high levels of education and salaries.

Housing: owner occupiers (mortgage) in an inner northern Melbourne suburb
Location: metropolitan
Family: two parents, two primary school aged children
Age: late 30s to 40 (Gen X)
Finances: high income, comfortable, secure
Education: tertiary
Housing change as a result of downshift: No
Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: No, mostly work stress, though family relationships clearly benefited
Downshifter: Yes (changed work hours, changed consumption habits)
Case 13 Doug and Tracy
Doug and Tracy live in a large suburban home in outer eastern Melbourne they are purchasing. The couple met and married relatively late in life and now have two pre-school aged daughters. Previously, Tracy had been a highly successful buyer in a large national company, enjoyed a large salary, lived in a townhouse she was purchasing and spent much of her time partying with her girlfriends. Doug’s career path had led him in and out of both academia and commercial enterprise. After having both children, Tracy left work and the couple moved to their family home. Tracy believes Doug has downshifted twice, first to a lower paid commercial job he enjoyed more than a previous role, and second to the TAFE teaching job he now loves. The couple enjoys a secure and comfortable housing base, but occasionally Doug needs to undertake consultancy work to boost the family income. Tracy thinks she will undertake some kind of part-time work, most likely from home, when their children are school aged, but is not sure what this will be. She is exploring options. Their home has been deliberately chosen to accommodate family life, and in particular the needs of their children. It includes a large playroom and large backyard, providing plenty of secure space in which to play.

Housing: owner occupiers (mortgage) in an outer eastern Melbourne suburb
Location: metropolitan
Family: two parents, two pre-school aged children
Age: early 40s (Gen X)
Finances: medium income, comfortable, secure
Education: tertiary/job-trained
Housing change as a result of downshift: Yes, also linked directly to having children
Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: Yes
Downshifter: Yes (changed work hours, changed consumption habits)
Case 14 Adam
Adam lives in a rented house in a small town approximately 60 kilometres from Melbourne. The town neighbours another one in which Adam owns land where he plans to build a small wooden house within the coming year. The money for the land and building costs come from a divorce settlement (including his share of a fully renovated larger house which he had restored). Adam trained as a carpenter prior to a nursing career in which he held a stressful and well-paid position, and which he has now left. He has two children to a former wife who are in a shared-care (50-50) arrangement between the two parents. As well, he is about to have a baby with his new partner who lives in rental accommodation near his house site and will move into the new home with him when it is built. Adam lives on a very low income. He established and runs a small business which sources organic produce and delivers to local customers on a weekly basis. Adam believes that if he were a single man he would live far more remotely and self-sufficiently than he does, in an intentional community. He avoids consumerism and his children attend the local Steiner school.

Housing: renter and land owner
Location: rural commuter area (works from home)
Family: reconstituted family, shared care arrangement for two primary school aged children and living apart currently from new partner (expecting baby)
Age: late 30s (Gen X)
Finances: low income
Education: tertiary and work qualifications
Housing change as a result of downshift: Yes, also tied to divorce from former wife
Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: No, although time with children is central to lifestyle
Downshifter: Yes (reduced income and consumption patterns)
Case 15 Rebecca and Ian
Rebecca and Ian live with their six children (a seventh lives with his mother) in their unrenovated barn-style home in a rural commuter area approximately an hour and a half from Melbourne. Previously, Ian had owned and run a chiropractic business and Rebecca had been a nurse. Now, Ian works part-time in a health care facility while Rebecca works at the local school in lieu of the school fees they could otherwise not afford, and the family gets by on a very low income. Finances are tight. Rebecca describes the houses the family has owned together as ‘growing homes’. They have slowly and carefully been adapted to family needs as these have changed, for example, by adding extra bedrooms, converting spaces and shuffling family members around within their dwellings. In this home, children’s needs are prioritised. Rebecca reminds herself that she can live with a rough wooden benchtop which cannot be cleaned, no kitchen cupboards, a too-small stove and holes throughout the floorboards when she is conscious of why they are living as they are. In this case, it is in order for their children to gain educational opportunities through which they can excel in their own ways. Being a large family impacts on all decisions and activities. Entertainment is at home and holidays are limited to a once a year camping trip. The house is surrounded by an established and productive garden in which much of the family’s food is grown.

Housing: owner occupiers (purchasers) of own home and share of a rental property (former home)
Location: rural commuter area (do not commute)
Family: reconstituted family, two parents and six children of school age, the youngest now five
Age: late 30s (Gen X) and early 50s (young Baby Boomer)
Finances: low income
Education: tertiary
Housing change as a result of downshift: Yes
Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: Yes
Downshifter: Yes (reduced income and consumption patterns)
Case 16 Kylie and Joseph
Kylie is a well-paid professional in her mid-30s who works part-time and whose husband Joseph works full-time over four days in a senior academic position. Kylie has the primary care role for their three year old son and is expecting their second baby. She is bursting with enthusiasm about the major life changes she has undertaken. In only a short period of time Kylie has fundamentally altered her philosophies around consumption and production patterns and transformed herself from a ‘shop till you drop’ kind of woman with ‘the best wardrobe in town’ to a committed voluntary simplifier and passionate environmentalist. In the process Kylie and Joseph have not only got rid of masses of stuff from their lives, including their television, but Kylie has dropped eight dress sizes. The pair has discovered organic food, local produce and shared community resources, and have the ambition to accrue sufficient financial wealth to enable freedom from work in order to pursue other goals, most likely political activism. Through voluntarily simplifying their lives, Kylie and Joseph have discovered money they never knew they had (simply by not buying ‘stuff’) and are now paying their mortgage off at twice the rate they had been a year earlier. Currently, the family is getting its three bedroom unit ready for sale, so that they can enjoy the flexibility and freedom of the rental market and invest their money for higher returns elsewhere. Kylie expects they will also sell their car ‘so they don’t have to worry about that either’.

Housing: owner occupiers (mortgage) in a northern Melbourne suburb
Location: metropolitan
Family: two parents, one pre-school aged child, baby on the way
Age: mid-30s (Gen X)
Finances: high income, comfortable, secure
Education: tertiary
Housing change as a result of downshift: Yes, also linked directly to having children
Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: Yes, along with environmental concerns
Downshifter: Yes (changed work hours, changed consumption habits), although Kylie prefers to call herself a voluntary simplifier
Case 17 Louis and Catherine

Louis and his wife Catherine live in an affluent Melbourne suburb with their primary school aged daughter Anastasia. The pair bought their house 10 years ago when it was due to be demolished. For several years they lived in one room, with no need for locks on the doors as many of the windows were wide open, without panes. The house has now been immaculately renovated and extended. The only remaining job is a small part of the ceiling needing painting, which is the point of renovations the couple had reached when their daughter was born around eight years earlier. They consider themselves to be downshifters as, despite their relatively high income and housing wealth, Catherine works part-time and Louis has left highly paid business work, as well as a business he owned, in order to enjoy the flexibility and family-friendly conditions his university teaching job affords. They remember the stress and strain of Louis’ job at the time their daughter was born as a low point in their lives and relationship. Now, the couple spends each Friday together and the family is involved in much local community activity, primarily through their daughter’s school. On their current salaries, Louis and Catherine say there is no way they could now afford their current home or to live anywhere nearby.

Housing: owner occupiers (no mortgage) in an affluent Melbourne suburb
Location: metropolitan
Family: two parents, one pre-school aged child
Age: late 30s/early 40s (Gen X)
Finances: high income, comfortable, secure
Education: tertiary
Housing change as a result of downshift: No
Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: Yes, as well as family harmony
Downshifter: Yes (voluntarily reduced income for family and leisure time)
Case 18 Eric and Lisa

Eric and his wife Lisa relocated to their large rental home in a commuter tourist town an hour from Melbourne around a year ago, after selling their home. Lisa is a highly successful artist and paints from her studio next to the house, while Eric has a home office from which he undertakes various business dealings. The couple share care of their four children over scheduled days of the week, two of whom attend primary school. Eric and Lisa would like to have one or possibly two more children and become one of the town’s ‘large’ families. Eric describes the pair as high achievers. It had taken them four years from the time of making the decision to downshift, to achieve the move, as they untangled themselves from the highly profitable businesses they had built up in Melbourne. Two of their children had previously started at an elite private school where the family was faced with what Eric sees as rampant consumerism. Having more time with family was a primary reason for the changes the family has made and they are far more comfortable in their current environment, where they have enrolled their children in a Steiner school. Eric and Lisa strive to create a strong, caring bond between their children, and limit external activities to some degree to protect ‘family time’. The family plans to build their own home but will wait until the children are slightly older because Eric and Lisa can get ‘so full-on’ about any project they undertake.

Housing: renters of a large house with studio and home office
Location: rural commuter town
Family: two parents, two pre-school aged children, two primary school aged children
Age: late 30s/early 40s (Gen X)
Finances: high income, comfortable, secure
Education: tertiary
Housing change as a result of downshift: Yes, tenure and location
Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: Yes
Downshifter: Yes (voluntarily reduced income for family time)
Case 19 Cassandra and Rob
Cassandra works part-time in a professional job she enjoys while her husband Rob cares for their two young children (pre-school aged) and Rob’s teenage son. Cassandra enjoys the four days a week she has with the kids. She is regularly asked ‘how they can do it’ and can’t understand why other people don’t add up the sums and realise that if they, too, worked part-time, paid less tax, less HECS and received more financial assistance from government including a health care card, then they could do it too. The family rent in an inner northern suburb and own a small parcel of rural land approximately an hour of north of Melbourne. They had gained a small taste of country life as until recently they had been living in a small straw-bale shed on their land, which they had built, until the council asked them to vacate as they had not sought approval to occupy the dwelling. The family moved to the land after being given notice to vacate their previous rental home, also in Melbourne’s inner north. Rob is a keen scrounger, recycler, re-user and fixer of things. He has a qualification in renewable energy and is pursuing part-time work in that field. Cassandra spends much care on the family shopping, going to places to find cheap goods of high quality. Cassandra and Rob are not sure where they will end up living, are a bit jaded by their recent experiences and are not sure whether or not they will keep their block of land in the country.

| Housing: renters in a northern Melbourne suburb, land owners of rural block (mortgage) |
| Location: metropolitan |
| Family: reconstituted family, two parents and two pre-school aged children, one high school aged son |
| Age: early to mid-30s (Gen X) |
| Finances: low income |
| Education: tertiary and trade qualifications |
| Housing change as a result of downshift: No |
| Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: Yes |
| Downshifter: Yes (reduced income and consumption patterns) |
Case 20 Margaret and Daniel
Margaret teaches part-time at an outer metropolitan university, only 15 minutes commute from her home in a small country town where she grew up and a number of her family still live. Her husband Daniel works locally in a wine business where he is senior manager. Margaret has changed her work due to the demands of child rearing and wanting to spend more time with her three sons, in particular one who has a mild disability. She still sometimes misses the glamour and status of her former role in a highly prestigious alcohol company but has now become used to wearing clothes from Target. She also sometimes misses the opportunities she knows she could pursue in her career, but has learned the difficulties of trying to balance higher professional roles with the care of children. Quality family time has become a priority. Margaret and Daniel are heavily involved in local events, sports and children’s activities. They live in a charming older-style home which they have slowly renovated and feel they are lucky to have bought three years earlier, since when local house prices have more than doubled.

Housing: owner occupiers (mortgage) of home in a rural town
Location: rural commuter area (work locally)
Family: two parents, three primary school aged children
Age: late 30s (Gen X)
Finances: high
Education: tertiary and trade qualifications
Housing change as a result of downshift: No
Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: Yes
Downshifter: Yes (reduced income and consumption patterns)
Case 21 Tori and Greg
Tori, her husband Greg and their four year old daughter Saskia live in a modern, self-sufficient house they designed and built themselves largely from scavenged and recycled materials, on their one-acre bush block in the heart of a rural commuter town. In her former professional life Tori was a highly successful architect in both Melbourne and Europe. Greg is a talented carpenter and musician. Tori now teaches sustainability and design courses and is heavily involved in local permaculture groups. She commutes to Melbourne by train two days a week. Her ambition is to achieve the highest hourly wage and smallest number of hours of work possible to live comfortably. The arrival of Saskia led the couple to think about owning their own home. In exchange for carpentry work, Greg was offered their block for an extraordinary $5,000, an offer the couple seized with both hands. The house has been built to fit their steep, treed block and budget (a trickle of stop-start income and a commitment to debt avoidance). For eight years the couple lived with their daughter in a two by three metre shack hidden on their block until their workshop and now home were completed. Tori describes herself and Greg as seasoned downshifters with sufficient time and freedom from debt to make good decisions, explore opportunities and live with creativity. For her, life is now comfortable but the process of downshifting, leaving a high status career and becoming a mother (‘the lowest status of all’) has been a lonely and wearing one.

Housing: owner occupiers (no mortgage) of home in a rural town
Location: rural commuter area (commuter/local work)
Family: two parents, one four year old daughter
Age: late 30s/early 40s (Gen X)
Finances: low to medium income with no housing debt
Education: tertiary and trade qualifications
Housing change as a result of downshift: Part of an ongoing process
Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: No, although was a trigger for their housing choices
Downshifter: Yes (heavily reduced income and consumption patterns)
Case 22 Hamish and Lalana

Hamish and Lalana live with their six month old baby son in a fully self-contained unit in Hamish’s parents’ backyard. Hamish’s sister also lives on the suburban family property in a studio, sharing some facilities with her parents. Hamish is studying part-time to complete an arts degree while his wife Lalana is considering a return to studies when their son is a little older. While Hamish is still a young man in his 20s, he already experienced almost 10 years in the armed forces, working, drinking and partying hard in the navy, where he developed the sense that ‘there had to be more to life’. Without telling his navy colleagues, he secretly attended meditation and Buddhist classes to explore alternative life choices while he was stationed in Western Australia. Through these, he met his Thai Buddhist wife and the pair now practice daily meditation. Hamish also works part-time, but limits his hours to almost exactly the number needed to bring home a wage on which he and his family can survive, in order to gain more family time. Lalana is a skilled shopper, hunting out the few goods they need cheaply and from op shops. Coming from modest conditions in Thailand, she is frugal in all her consumption patterns. The pair imagines they will purchase their own home one day, but are comfortable in the current arrangement where they can also share their son with Hamish’s family and assist his frail grandmother to stay at home. Hamish aims to work in a more meaningful way following his studies, most likely as a social worker. Lalana believes it is important to care for her son until he is of school age and would like to devote more time to meditation.

Housing: renters (from family) in a middle Melbourne suburb
Location: metropolitan
Family: two parents and one baby son
Age: late 20s (Gen Y)
Finances: low income
Education: tertiary and TAFE
Housing change as a result of downshift: Yes
Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: Related to it but not main trigger
Downshifter: Yes (reduced income and consumption patterns)
Case 23 Rohan
When his marriage fell apart Rohan was left with sole care of his two sons, then aged one and two. Within a year he left the very highly paid and highly successful consultancy role he loved, pulled the boys out of full-time child care and decided that if he was going to spend much of his time working in the kitchen and laundry and looking out the window, he wanted a view. When his divorce was settled he sold the family home (the ‘for sale’ sign went up the next day) and he and his boys moved to a small coastal town in rural Victoria. Having just disentangled himself from a property dispute, Rohan wanted the freedom of renting, and the family still live in the rental home they moved to several years earlier. Rohan is a dedicated ‘stay at home’ dad. His main aim is to be there for his boys, now of young primary school age. He lives on Parenting Payment and money received for odd jobs and, now that his sons are older, is heavily involved in volunteer work such as through the CFA. He consumes little, though will not skimp on healthy food and organic produce for his family. Several meals a week come from fish he catches himself. As a man, his decisions to prioritise care for his sons over his career have isolated him from his extended family and from many people in the local community. He now wishes he did own the house the family live in but will not sacrifice looking after his boys to do so. He believes he will probably own his own home again one day, but will not commit to working long hours away from the family until his sons no longer need him, perhaps when they are 17 or 18.

Housing: renter in a rural coastal town
Location: rural
Family: one parent and two primary school aged sons
Age: late 30s (Gen X)
Finances: low income
Education: tertiary
Housing change as a result of downshift: Yes
Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: Yes
Downshifter: Yes (reduced income and consumption patterns)
Case 24 Sally
Sally is a mature young woman, now in her mid-20s, who has primary care for her son Alex who is in Year Two at the local primary school. Having a baby when she was 19 provided a great deal of focus in her life and reoriented her priorities significantly. When her relationship with Alex’s father broke down she left the home the couple had begun purchasing together (funded almost solely by her former partner) and searched for a local environment which she believed would provide her and her son with a stable, family-friendly neighbourhood in which to live. Sally and Alex rent a small two bedroom apartment in a north-eastern suburb of Melbourne which is bushy, established and known for a strong sense of community. She is conscious of the difference in age, income and housing wealth between her and friends she has made through Alex’s school, but believes living in a relatively affluent, friendly neighbourhood is positive for both of them. Sally is in the final stages of a university degree she started before her pregnancy. She works part-time in work she feels is meaningful, at a local neighbourhood house and meditates in order to gain clarity and make good decisions. For Sally, time with Alex is critically important, as is a sense of freedom to pursue interests and career opportunities as she chooses. The family live frugally on a very low income. Sally wants to increase her work hours somewhat when she finishes her degree, and follow a social work path. While her career had not yet ‘upshifted’, downshifting has meant reassessing lifestyle and priorities at a very young age, managing life to maximise time with Alex, and having the freedom to work meaningfully. She knows this may mean never owning her own home.

Housing: renter in a north-eastern Melbourne suburb
Location: metropolitan
Family: one parent and one primary school aged son
Age: mid-20s (Gen Y)
Finances: low income
Education: tertiary (almost completed)
Housing change as a result of downshift: Yes
Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: Yes
Downshifter: Yes (reduced income and consumption patterns)
Case 25 Leah and Ben

Leah is a young professional writer who now works from home in the house she shares with husband Ben and their two pre-school aged children. Leah describes getting pregnant and having a baby as a magical opportunity to explore the ideas and make the lifestyle changes that she and Ben had just begun to discover at the time. She recalls her experience as an epiphany, moving from a marketing job in Melbourne (in which she realised she was ‘just selling stuff’ and using loads of hair dye) to becoming politically aware and active, changing and bettering her life in parallel with becoming a mother and partner. The process of downshifting and life change cost Leah all her friends and was a lonely experience. For primarily economic reasons the couple searched for a piece of land outside Melbourne on which to build their family home, choosing an area with a reputation for progressive ideas and a vibrant community life. With the help of Ben’s builder father, they built the house modestly but without compromising on environmental principles. Leah is able to do her freelance writing while spending as much time as possible with the kids. Both take great joy in home production, growing their own food, sewing their own clothes and making their children’s toys – new skills they have learned. Ben commutes via train to Melbourne to his full-time job – the cost of a small blow-out in budget in their house build. He would dearly like to work part-time or be a ‘stay at home’ dad. Leah describes the gendered roles in the family as different from those of, say, the 1950s because of the underlying respect and partnership upon which the relationship is founded, as well as the fact that Ben does much of the domestic work. Both Leah and Ben are active in generating discussion around issues and ideas they see as important. Leah is currently researching and writing about the impact of marketing on children.

Housing: owner occupiers (mortgage) of home on rural block (several acres)
Location: rural commuter area (commuter/home work)
Family: two parents, two pre-school aged children
Age: late 20s (Gen Y)
Finances: low to medium income
Education: tertiary
Housing change as a result of downshift: Yes, as well as a result of having a family
Child rearing a key trigger for downshift: Child bearing coincided with changes the couple had just embarked upon
Downshifter: Yes (heavily reduced income and consumption patterns)