



Original research article

# The logics of frugality: Reproducing tastes of necessity among affluent climate change activists



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## ABSTRACT

In Bourdieu's sociological classic *Distinction*, he theorized tastes of necessity (in contrast to tastes of luxury) as an habitualized working-class propensity toward consumption practices deduced from constrained economic conditions. These practices also had the capacity to self-perpetuate in the absence of their conditions of generation. This taste/practice may also be called frugality. I encountered this phenomenon in a qualitative analysis of N = 28 interviews with affluent climate change activists in the Washington, DC, area. Though frugality was only practiced by a minority of research participants, it was generally scripted as a motivational component in their climate change activism and imbued with deep meaning and narrative detail. Respondents also referred to an intertwined range of logics of frugality: forced, thrifty, waste-not, environmental, cheap, oppositional and more.... This analysis expands Bourdieu's insights. There is evidence of an embodied and intergenerational frugality: a frugal habitus/disposition—an echo of once constrained economic conditions. Though frugality may be a practice of some affluent climate change activists, its capacity to reduce human impacts on the environment is questionable and deserves more attention. I also call for a greater acknowledgement and affirmation of frugality and its practitioners.

## 1. Introduction

This research is an extension of a larger mixed-methodological project in which I both: (1) *quantitatively* analyzed—from a national, random sample of U.S. residents—survey responses concerning climate change beliefs in relation to particular carbon emissive behaviors and (2) *qualitatively* investigated the oral histories of affluent climate change activists. From the quantitative sample, I reaffirmed the established relationship between household income and a select set of carbon emissive behaviors—flying, driving, and diet. I also found that compared to peoples' climate change beliefs, income had four times the impact on personal carbon emissions. These quantitative findings stimulated my interest in studying affluent climate change activists as an exploration into how they navigated the relationship between strong climate change beliefs and high household income. From this study, I found a number of socially embedded themes: affluent climate activists were generally born into politically Left leaning families and had high socio-political ideals, some were already engaged in other civic activities and some had rebellious tendencies. About half of my respondents, though, spoke about frugality; I consequently identified 14 different

logics of frugality. By logics, I mean a sense making script or an oral frame by which a respondent gives reasons, a defense, an accounting—to themselves—of their frugality and its origins. I also interpretively infer—from a script's content or by the way it is used/expressed—more “non-deliberative” logics that arise from a habitual space of embodied automaticity. For instance, none of my respondents spoke of a nostalgic frugality, but it was evident to me by the way it was narratively framed.<sup>1</sup> Thus, some logics can be understood as more deliberative and others more habitual.

I argue that these scripts and logics, by which respondents made sense of their frugality, are rationalizations of a behavior long perceived as socially deviant; logics are the result of iterative processes where an embedded frugal disposition—as both cause and effect—is intermittently reaffirmed over one's life course.<sup>2</sup> In other words, these 14 logics of frugality can be seen as a recurring rational encounter with an unconscious question—in the words of Bem [2,p. 7] when explicating his self-perception theory: “What must my attitude be if I am willing to behave in this fashion in this situation?” Like a defense mechanism [3], or reason [4], motivated by a desire to relieve cognitive dissonance [5]—these scripts are a creative means of preserving a frugal status quo.

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes I use the terms *script* and *logic* synonymously, but I mostly use the script as the oral carrier of a logic.

<sup>2</sup> I sometimes synonymously refer to an “embedded frugal disposition” as a *frugal habitus*. Though Bourdieu [1] defined the term *habitus* as a “system of dispositions,” I occasionally conflate *habitus* with the more singular term *disposition*.

Therefore, I argue that the multiplication of logics identified in this research is caused by a reactive quest to (self-)rationalize one's frugality and by an awareness—real or perceived—of frugality's perpetually imposing opposite: an immoral un-frugal consumer culture.

## 2. Review of the literature

Frugality—the practice, loosely defined, of trying to live with relatively fewer material possessions—is not something new. In fact, if one were to conflate frugality—perhaps erroneously—as a practice of simple living and poverty, then most people in the world could be categorized as frugal. Shi [6] argues that simplicity and simple living was an iconic goal of many a religious sage and philosopher: one should guard against the excessive making of money and the accumulation of things. In a select historical account, Shi [6] posits that the United States has had a cyclical relationship with simple living: from colonial era Puritans, to Quakers, and the more modern back-to-the-land and hippie movements.

Several present-day phenomena can easily be related to frugality: thrift [7], simple living [6,8] and its related voluntary simplicity [9–11], downshifting [12–15] and decluttering [16]. All of these “movements” somehow focus on reducing the consumerist character or materiality of daily life. From Japan, Fujii [17,p. 262] claims that *mottainai*—respect for resources—“would be an effective means of promoting pro-environmental behavior.” In an earlier study, Wilke [18] found that *resource efficiency* was a factor in constraining greed. While some assert that frugality, and its hopeful widespread adoption, is a necessary component for “saving the planet” [19,20], others argue that frugality would not be enough [21].

Though frugality may revolve around material practices, ideas and ideals are not far behind. There is present, in most studies, something of the frugal wager: frugality and simplicity for moral righteousness. For the title of his book, Shi [6] borrowed a quote from William Wordsworth, “plain living and high thinking,” and Cherrier [22] speaks of “consumer resistant identities”: individuals who construct hero- or life-projects in resistance to the exploitative positional nature of consumption. In another study, Cherrier [8] argues that these individuals move from a more profane to a more sacred form of consumption. Etzioni [10]—like others [11,23]—frames consumerism as a vacuous enterprise, and its rejection can offer an individual greater satisfaction, quality, and meaning in life. Some argue, though, that higher thinking and greater meaning—via voluntary simplicity—is only accessible to the more elite in society [6]: who else would “choose” such a life?

There is, though, a history in the scholarship on such a “choice,” or perhaps social pressure. Echoing Shi's [6] historical analysis is Weber's [24] conceptualization of an elite Protestant asceticism that rejects the pleasures of luxury and the temptations of consumption. Furthermore, Bourdieu [1,p. 286] draws a distinction between elites of high economic versus high cultural capital; those of high cultural capital—unable to match the economic standards of their counterparts—make a virtue out of necessity by cultivating an “ascetic aristocratism,” as they “hardly ever have the means to match their tastes” [1,p. 287]. Building on Bourdieu—but in the U.S. context—and reiterating the moral ideals described above, Holt [25,p. 110] argues that—and I quote him at length:

Material abundance and luxury are debased, crass forms of consumption because they are antithetic to the life of the mind. [Those with High Cultural Capital] HCC tastes can be characterized as anti-materialist because they are very sensitive to, and desire to absolve themselves from, ascriptions of materialism. While they tend to have higher incomes, HCCs live in smaller houses..., are interested in ethnic rather than fine dining, and have furniture that is more worn and less valuable.... Idealism can take on a positive cast: like functionalist design, material paucity (i.e., asceticism) is often an aesthetic for HCCs (cf. Bourdieu, 1984: 196). This said, it should also be

noted that HCCs are at least as willing to make material acquisitions, often spending large amounts of money in so doing, as long as these acquisitions can be rationalized...

Frugality, then, becomes culture—a distinguishing practice—or in Lamont's [26] terms the result of symbolic boundary work. When engaging a Bourdieusian framework—and as can be discerned in Holt's quote, notions of games and boundaries offer a useful metaphor. Bourdieu often used athletic imagery and theorized the analogue to social space as a field of play—as individuals struggle for economic and cultural positions, and the distinctions that accompany these positions. This “gaming” of economy and culture can be seen in Holt's assertion that his HCC respondents are sensitive to ascriptions of materialism, but they are not averse to distinguishing themselves intellectually and culturally (boundary work), or spending more money when it can be rationalized; they also invert the luxuries of fine dining for the distinctions of ethnic, and turn paucity into aesthetic. Frugality, in their eyes, appears to be the preferred presentation of self [27].

Though Carfagna et al. [28] theorize a developing and general *eco-habitus* that crosses class boundaries, few scholars link frugality or simplicity to climate change activism, the subject of this research. Climate change activism, however—or climate activism for short—is a relatively uncharted phenomenon, and recent studies tend to analyze organizations over individuals [29–31]. Concerning *environmental* activists in general, Guagnano [32,p. 63] posits that they are motivated in part by an *agentive disposition*: “a type of norm activated altruism.” Others observe environmental activists as having supportive social networks [33]; and yet others [34] argue that they generally have political behaviors or environmental experiences that prefigure their activism. Scholars have also found environmental activists to be more prevalent among those of higher income [35,36].

The following research explores the stories, logics, and some of the sense making scripts recounted by affluent and self-admittedly frugal climate activists in the Washington, DC, area; and to my knowledge, there is little research at this specific nexus of personal identity.

## 3. Method

This research proceeded qualitatively with the intent of analyzing high-income climate change activists: those whose beliefs in climate change were so strong that it drove them to civic engagement [34,37–39]. My original reasons for targeting those of higher income was to probe how they—in accord with the established association between higher incomes and larger carbon footprints [40–44]—made sense of the possible contradiction between their beliefs and their lifestyles. Frugality was but one of many themes originally coded from the narratives of my interviewees, but it proved to be relatively rich in detail.

I initially identified climate activists at a number of protest actions in Washington, DC, around Pope Francis', 2015, visit—in the wake of his encyclical, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* [45]. On September 24, 2015, a number of environmental groups planned a “Moral Action on Climate” rally on the National Mall [46]. I attended and was assisted by a group of seven (human-subjects-trained) researchers and we caught something of a “randomized purposive” sample—an attempt at a random sample of a specific gathering of people concerned about climate change. I used a screener questionnaire to identified respondents with the strongest climate change beliefs; I also obtained some demographic data: household income and some other information on climate change.

In something of a snowball effect, I learned of another action—the next day—at the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC). It was timed as the closing ceremony of an 18-day fast, with about 40 people participating. This action was planned by Beyond Extreme Energy (BXE); BXE has a mission to stop all new permits for fossil fuel infrastructure while pushing for “Renewable Energy NOW” [47]. Though

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