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Urban space in the everyday lives of mothers and fathers on family leave in Helsinki

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the meaning of the urban environment for parents on family leave in Helsinki, Finland. Finland is a part of the Nordic model that emphasises ‘family-friendly arrangements’, such as family leave for mothers and fathers. To date, there is little research on how parents use urban space on family leave, although it is known that fathers stay on family leave more often in urban areas. Based on a triangulation of qualitative data on the day-to-day life of mothers and fathers on family leave, the paper argues that particular place-dependent ways of being on family leave take place in the inner city. Mixed-use pavements in many ways help mothers and fathers to cope in their new life situation and break the isolation often associated with family leave. The data also shows the importance of family-friendly public and commercial places in the city, such as playgrounds and accessible grocery shops, cafeterias and restaurants. The paper concludes that there is a need to further explore the production side of the everyday practices of parents, and how they add to city life and participate in changing cityscapes.

Keywords

Families, family leave, housing, inner cities, public space

Introduction

Mothers and fathers strolling inner city streets with strollers have become a common sight in inner cities. After being excluded and defined as out-of-place for nearly a century, families and children are rediscovering the pavement as a family place (Karsten, 2008). Research shows that many inner cities, such as those in Amsterdam, London, Stockholm and Helsinki, have reclaimed their position as living spaces for families (Boterman et al., 2010; Butler and Robson, 2003; Karsten, 2003, 2007, 2008; Saracco and Strandlund, 2007; Lilius, 2014). However, research on this issue, and particularly the understanding of the daily practices of urban families, is still quite scarce. This paper makes a contribution to understanding the reciprocal

relationship between parenting and urban space by focusing on the everyday practices of mothers and fathers on family leave in Helsinki, Finland.

Over 50 years ago Jane Jacobs (1961), in her attempts to argue for the significance of ordinary things and diversity of uses, suggested that city life, and more precisely public sidewalks and parks, create

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conditions for social contact, improvisation, trust and security. She perceived how monotonous streets and the lack of street life brought mothers with small children to more diverse pavements in the city (Jacobs, 1961: 63). At the time of these observations the suburbanisation of families was dominating not only US cities, but also cities and towns in most Nordic and other European countries. There is a body of literature emphasising the connection between suburban planning and the nuclear family, in which the mother takes care of the household and the father is the breadwinner of the family. The suburban environment in many ways facilitated a good environment to raise children in, but it has also been criticised for separating domestic and waged labour and thus isolating women from the public sphere and making it harder for them to take part in working life (Aitken, 1998; Domosh and Seager, 2001; Fainstein, 2005; Franzén and Sandstedt, 1981; Hayden, 1981; Parker, 2012; Saarikangas, 1997; Wilson, 1991).

The renewed interest in inner city living has been explained by new consumption patterns and lifestyle choices (Beauregard, 1986; Lees et al., 2008; Smith, 1996). Contemporary urban lifestyles – spending time in coffee shops, wine bars, restaurants and independent boutiques – have, however, mainly been associated with single people, couples and childless households for a long time (Boterman et al., 2010; Hall and Pfeiffer, 2000; Heath 2001; Karsten, 2003, 2007). In gender studies, the gentrification and reurbanisation of inner cities has addressed questions such as gender equality, fair housing and the increasing rate of (middle class) women in the workforce. The debates have implied that gentrification is a movement away from traditional families (Markusen, 1981). It has been stated that inner city dwelling helps working women to cope with the multifaceted time and space trajectories of their everyday lives (Boterman et al., 2010; Domosh and Seager, 2001; Fagnani, 1993; Friberg, 1991; Markusen, 1981; Warde, 1991). Nevertheless, in the 21st century, Nordic cities were introduced to the phenomenon of ‘latteparents’, referring to parents sitting in cafes with strollers drinking gourmet coffee. According to the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* (28 September 2008), the ‘lattemum’ represents a modern mother who *takes her place, with her baby, her*

stroller and her friends on family leave and has become a self-evident part of the urban landscape (Wiklund 2008). The ‘lattedad’, introduced a few years later, is a father who has *a sense of style, sits in trendy cafés, strolls around with ‘status strollers’, owns design children’s ware, is on family leave for a long time and sees being a parent as a positive lifestyle choice* (Eriksson, 2005). Although there has been a growth in the number of children – and parents – in Nordic inner cities, and although it is known that fathers in urban areas take longer family leave (Almqvist et al., 2011), the phenomenon of spending family leave in public spaces is still under-researched. One reason for this gap in knowledge might have to do with the strong bond between family and the suburb and the long tradition of linking family life mainly to the suburb (Lilius, 2014).

Why then is the ‘latteparent’ a Nordic phenomenon? The breadwinner family has been strongly challenged in the Nordic welfare states during the 20th century. The birth rate and the proportion of mothers taking part in working life are high compared to the rest of Europe. The main reason for this is very affordable public day care and generous family leave for both mothers and fathers (Niemistö, 2007). Recently, Finnish fathers have augmented their involvement in family life (Miettinen and Rotkirch, 2012), and in Sweden caring is increasingly becoming compatible with modern masculinities (Almqvist et al., 2011: 203). Time spent together with the family is valued more and more among fathers (Pantzar and Shove, 2005). Aitken (2001: 123) has emphasised the terminology of ‘family geographies’ as a context for understanding social and material transformations that occur on a local scale and in the lived experiences of family members. The everyday life of families, and the activities, responsibilities and options that are connected to family life are grounded in the places and spaces where family geographies are enacted (Aitken, 1998). The main aim of the paper is to understand the meaning of the urban environment in Helsinki as a geographical context in which specific everyday practices of mothers and fathers on family leave occur. By building a methodological framework using paper GIS maps ($n = 15$), time-space diaries ($n = 10$), photographs ($n = 630$) and interviews ($n = 10$), it seeks to answer the following

questions on the dialectical relationship between family leave and urban environments: why do the parents choose to live in the inner city with small children? How do young urban parents use the places in their urban neighbourhood on family leave? Are there any indications that mothers and fathers on family leave in Helsinki use space differently from each other? The everyday life perspective is seen as crucial to understanding not only the everyday realities, experiences, meanings and practices of mothers and fathers (Jarvis et al., 2009), but also for city and neighbourhood life (Jacobs, 1961; Jayne, 2005: 57). The issue of the everyday can be understood with the line of reasoning of Henry Lefebvre and Michel De Certeau. According to Lefebvre's (1991) spatial analysis, space is continuously produced, planned and negotiated in an interaction between the material, the mental and the social. Space is not only a physical structure; it is produced in the social interplay between the environment and its users. Walking, which to a large extent fills the days of urban parents on family leave, is a way of experiencing the city and creating it (De Certeau, 1984).

Empirical context

As already concluded, in a European context of gender relations, Finland is part of the Nordic model, emphasising 'family-friendly arrangements', such as family leave, the option to stay at home to look after a sick child and comprehensive public day care (Duncan and Pfau-Effinger, 2000). The share of Finnish women in paid work is high on an international scale (Confederation of Finnish Industries, 2013). Part-time work arrangements among Finnish mothers are rare compared to Western European and even Nordic levels (Miettinen, 2012). However, fathers do not use family leave as desired, and new ways of promoting fathers to take longer family leave are being developed (The National Institute of Health and Welfare, 2010). Family leave is seen as crucial in order to improve the situation of young women in the labour market, but it is also believed to support fathering and a more family-friendly labour market (Lammi-Taskula et al., 2009).

Finnish parents have the possibility to take family leave for the first three years of their child's life. The

earnings-related allowance is divided into maternity (for mothers), paternity (for fathers) and parental leave (for the mother or the father). Maternity leave lasts for 154 days and starts 30 working days before the estimated date of birth, at the latest. Paternity leave can be taken for a maximum of 54 working days and is to be held both together with the mother and alone. Parental leave starts after maternal leave and can be taken by both the mother and the father. Almost all mothers take maternity leave and 84% of fathers take paternity leave. However, it is mostly mothers who take parental leave. The policy-making thus concentrates on how to encourage fathers to take parental leave more often. Fathers who take parental leave are mostly highly educated and their wives tend to be highly educated too. When the period of maternity, paternity and parental leave is over, parents are entitled to stay on home care leave until the child is 3 years of age. For this period, a child home care allowance can be claimed if the child is not in municipal day care. The allowance includes a care allowance and a care supplement, which depends on the family's income. The allowance is usually substantially lower than the earnings-related maternity, paternity and parental leave allowance. High-income, dual-earner families, in particular, face a notable drop in income if one of the parents decides to stay at home on child home care allowance. Most mothers stay on child home care allowance for some time, but less than 20% of the families use this allowance until the child is 3 (Kela, 2013; *Statistical Yearbook of the Social Insurance Institution 2012, 2013*). Family leave in this paper refers to paid time off work to care for a child and includes maternity leave, paternity leave, parental leave and home care leave.

The study of mothers and fathers on family leave was conducted in Helsinki, the capital of Finland. Finland is one of the European countries that urbanised late. This has been understood to be one of the reasons why a strong anti-urban bias has prevailed in both planning and policy-making (Juntto, 1990; Lapintie, 1995; Saarikangas, 1997, 2002). Helsinki's urban buzz has been considered less vibrant compared to cities in other Nordic countries (Korpinen, 2007: 63, 64). However, in 2013 Helsinki launched a new city plan vision, which strongly emphasises urbanity. According to the plan, urbanity comprises a

new paradigm in urban planning in Helsinki (Helsingin Yleiskaava Visio 2050 Kaupunkikaava-Helsingin uusi yleiskaava, 2013). The study area in Helsinki consisted of several neighbourhoods in the inner city. These neighbourhoods were built in the early 20th century and vary with regard to dwelling size and the availability of playgrounds, but also in the way they are perceived on the mental map of Helsinki. Kallio is a traditional working-class neighbourhood with small flats, which is now gentrifying rather quickly, while the same upgrading of Punavuori has been going on for longer. Töölö is a more traditional middle-upper-class area built in the 1930s and Ullanlinna is a traditionally mixed neighbourhood from the early 20th century with both small flats, originally built for servants, and very spacious flats for the bourgeois. All of the neighbourhoods are currently undergoing changes in their residential strata and the consumption landscape of the pavements.

The study took a multi-method approach, including time-space diaries, photographs, interviews and paper GIS maps. Firstly, to get an insight into places parents find important in the inner city of Helsinki, 15 paper GIS maps were collected in two play parks. Paper GIS maps are used to map place-based meanings (Kytä, 2005). Mothers and fathers marked places on a paper map of the residential area, and briefly wrote about the meanings, feelings, experiences and so on they had related to this place. To mark off different meanings the parents used different colours for the following themes: places that were important for the parent and child; places important for the family; places important for the parent alone; ugly, unpleasant or scary places; and other places that were significantly related to the everyday lives of the parents. The results were transferred into Adobe Illustrator in order to combine the results. Besides giving valuable location-based information, this part of the study was also used as a help to guide the development of the use of time-space diaries, photographs and paper GIS maps.

The sample of parents who kept time-space diaries, and who were photographed and interviewed in the study, were contacted at inner city play parks and on the streets. They were selected to include mothers and fathers on family leave of unequal lengths and with children of different ages. Five mothers and

five fathers took part in the study. The age of the parents varied between 30 and 39. They were highly educated and most had permanent jobs or were self-employed within a variety of fields, including graphic design, photography, engineering, the film industry, banking and law. Most of the families lived in owner-occupied flats. The sample of parents reflects the trend that fathers who take family leave are highly educated, as are their wives, and recent development in Helsinki (Hamilo and Mykkänen, 2012), where the inner city is becoming popular among what Florida (2006) calls 'the creative class'.

The time-space diary method is grounded in Torsten Hägerstrand's (1972) time geography, in which time and space are seen as the preconditions of everyday life. The respondents kept diaries for one week and marked what, where and with whom they did an activity, how they moved or travelled to the activity and what feeling the action evoked. The time-space diaries give a broad and more exact picture of what the everyday of the parent looked like. For example, in Seagers' (1980: 106) study, during interviews suburban fathers described spending more time with their families than the time-space diaries indicated. The time-space diaries in that study thus proved that fathers living in suburbs spent significantly less time with their family than inner city fathers. The data from the time-space diaries in our study quantified how much time parents spent outside, how often they went out, what kinds of feelings certain activities awoke and how parents moved around. However, since the age of the parents' babies and children varied, the differences in time use were also quite large.

On the basis of the time-space diaries, photographer Nina Kellokoski followed the parents with their child for one or two days and took pictures of their day-to-day-activities in the city. A written consent to use the pictures for non-commercial purposes was received from all parents and archived by the photographer. One guiding notion in using pictures for this study was that of Rose's (2008: 151), stressing that pictures can add to a range of different kinds of geographical knowledge. The images had an informative function in the analysis, but were also used to provide new insights and to clarify things that were not visible in the time-space diaries or were not touched upon during the interviews. The photographs,

totalling just over 630, were grouped chronologically by person and according to place, but also as per prevailing themes, such as day-to-day-activities, stopovers, dads, mums, caring, 'me time' and accessibility. According to Karsten et al. (2013: 3), 'public parenting can be considered a display of family identity'. In this way, the photographs might challenge prevailing images of public parenting, as for example the notion of the suburb being equal to a stroller-pushing mother (Forsberg, 2005), and make visible a variety of everyday activities undertaken by both mothers and fathers in inner city spaces.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as a research method to deepen the understanding of the everyday life practices (Valentine, 2005) of the families. The interviews took approximately one to two hours, and were founded on themes: housing history, contemporary housing, neighbourhood and future housing, becoming a parent, day-to-day-family leave, social networks and everyday environments. Prior to the interviews, it was made clear to the respondents that both the interviewer and the photographer were also mothers. This was done to highlight that there was an understanding of the obstacles that might occur during photographing and interviewing. It was also done to avoid a hierarchical relationship and instead make way for a more intimate interview (Oakley, 2005: 231). As Oakley (2005: 225) also noted while interviewing mothers, some respondents asked the interviewer questions concerning parenting and housing. These questions were honestly answered, although it was also highlighted that they were the personal views of the interviewer. During the interviews the pictures were used to help the respondents remember, interpret and even find new meanings or broaden their interpretations of the spatiality of their everyday life. According to Rose (2007: 246), pictures can offer respondents an opportunity to reflect on things they do not usually think about. This was very obvious when it came to small mundane things, such as how strolling is interrupted by either the needs of the toddler, for example giving them their dummy, or by something interesting happening on the street, such as a rubbish truck parking. The practice of walking was in a sense slowed down in the picture, making it possible to really grasp what happened on the street.

The interviews were fully transcribed, after which concepts and categories were coded according to themes (Curtis and Curtis, 2011: 44–45; Weiss, 1994). After this the different pieces of data were combined and collated.

Day-to-day life on family leave in the inner city

A housing choice to meet the needs of an urban lifestyle

Most people identify themselves with a certain kind of setting for their everyday life. The identification usually stems from childhood experiences, a stage in the life cycle or from essential personality traits (Cooper Marcus, 1995: 190–191). In the lives of young, inner city parents, the housing choice made before having children is likely to prevail after becoming a parent (Lilius, 2014). Among the parents interviewed in this study, the choice of living in the inner city was the sum of many concerns, but the preference for proximity to traffic connections, short walking distance to amenities and work were crucial. Most of the families were living in the inner city when they became parents. They were living in small apartments with one or two bedrooms, in other words dwellings that do not meet contemporary standards of living space for families. As a result, many had carefully planned how to utilise their apartment space optimally. It was obvious that the parents had traded having more space for living in an urban environment. Among some of the mothers, there had been a perception that the city centre would not provide the most convenient housing environment for families. However, those that had been uncertain also found themselves quite satisfied with their neighbourhood as mothers:

It's just so lovely because there is so much life around here and everything is close by... When we first moved here [from a suburb with one child] it felt exceptional, but now it's like if we moved to some suburb, then there'd be nothing like this. (Mother A, two children)

The parents identified a difference between living in the suburb and living in the inner city. This distinction had to do with the qualities of life that the

parents recognised in the inner city, including the possibility of encountering crowds of strangers:

I knew I wanted to be on family leave, so it was my wish to live as centrally as possible. I knew I didn't want to be in the suburb when everyone else was working. (Father A, two children)

Some respondents had noticed that the choice they made to live in the city with children was being challenged by other people:

A lot of people were like, 'well then [when you have a child] you have to move to Espoo [a neighbouring municipality of Helsinki]' and my husband and I thought how we didn't want to, that I don't want to bury myself in some suburb and just be with the child one-to-one. (Mother B, one child)

A common interpretation of the parents was that caring in the inner city is less isolating than in the suburb (also Caulfield, 1994). For the fathers it was more an active choice to live in the city, and several of the fathers stressed how much time was saved by living in an apartment building, with no obligation to shovel snow or fix anything on the house or in the garden.

How then, did the parents conceive the inner city as a place to raise a child in? Concerns over whether the city is a proper environment for children to grow up in was common among the mothers. This had to do with accessibility, the fact that children would not be able to move around independently in the neighbourhood because of traffic before going to school, and not necessarily even when they were at school. Another worry was that the yards of the houses did not meet the standards of good playing environments. One father also felt his son was a little maladjusted because he had asked to go to the forest when he meant a small neighbourhood park.

We felt it was quite tragic, but quite funny too. (Father A, two children)

This family was now planning to move to a one-family house in the suburbs, mostly to offer their children an environment in which they can move around more freely by themselves. In their case inner

city living was an important choice for the father because he took family leave. When he went back to work, the immediate environment with social stimuli such as cafés and other spaces where he could meet people became less important.

Family leave in the inner city

Holloway (1998, 1999) argues that there is a local understanding of 'good mothering' or a 'moral geography' that often influences the mothers' decision to take part in paid work. According to Duncan and Smith (2002), the housing choice of families is also influenced by the notions of what constitutes 'good' parenting and parenting on family ideals and gender roles in that place. Why did the parents in this study decide to share their family leave the way they did? The decision about which of the parents was to take family leave and when often seemed to be related to the employment situation in the families. For example, three of the fathers were self-employed, who would have been entitled to paid parental leave and home care allowance, but in real life they did not have the option to stay on because of the fear of losing clients. In these cases it seemed to be self-evident that the mothers with permanent jobs stayed at home. These mothers, however, underlined the fact that the character of the work of the husbands was flexible, enabling them to take time off for lunch, for example. Other fathers took parental leave and home care allowance for a range of reasons. One father could, by staying on paid parental leave, avoid unemployment. Other fathers saw family leave as an opportunity to take a break from work and concentrate on something totally different, or their wives had jobs that for different reasons did not allow them to stay at home with a child for a long period. All parents seemed satisfied with the decision made in their family, and the experience of being on family leave was mainly understood as something very positive.

According to Nyström and Öhrling (2003: 327), becoming a parent is often connected to feelings of being 'drained of physical and emotional energy'. The interviews indicated that the city diminishes the isolation that parents fear family life might 'trap them into'. The changes in life after becoming a

parent were perceived differently by the parents. For the women, life as a mother was more social than they had imagined. This had to do with their housing choice, which allowed them to meet other people frequently, especially those still in work:

Everything changed [when I became a parent]. The biggest change is that I haven't worked for a really long time [7 months] and due to the fact that I haven't worked, my social life has actually grown, although previously you might have thought exactly the opposite would happen; but somehow I've seen a lot more friends, both those with children and people who I haven't met for a really long time. What I've done is I've had lunch with friends who are working, and that's actually quite a big change. (Mother D, one child)

For one mother the solution to break away from the 'bluntness and drudgery' she felt on family leave was to form a company with her husband. Living in the city made it easy to organise meetings with clients. The parents could also quickly change work and childcare shifts because their life was so local. Having this 'twofold' life was very satisfying for the mother.

Walking in the city with strollers allowed the parents to be in the company of others, and offered the possibility to meet acquaintances, something that was especially appreciated by one father who felt very isolated on family leave:

I tried to go to places where I knew my working friends might walk by, or where I knew I might bump into them, because that little child doesn't communicate that much... You might lose contact with other people, actually it was almost as if I couldn't even call people that didn't have children just to hear how they were, so I tried to get caught up in situations where I'd meet people. (Father B, one child)

The parents recognised that having a child not only changed life – it also changed their relationship with their neighbourhood. A major reason for this change was that the parents suddenly spent so much more time in their neighbourhood.

At first it was quite a shock that I had to go out there, even when it was raining cats and dogs, strolling with

the strollers, three times a day, but I got used to it and now I'm even able to enjoy it. (Father C, one child)

Another father highlighted that the time he spent outside had increased 10-fold after he had become a parent. The time–space diaries showed that the parents went out approximately twice a day and that their geographical span was very local. Gehl (1987/2011) differentiates between three ways of being outside. *Necessary activities* are performed regardless of weather or physical circumstances and include going to work, buying groceries or running errands. *Optional activities* take place when the physical circumstances are satisfying, and include taking a walk, finding interesting things on the streets or sitting on a bench enjoying the sun. *Social activities* demand the presence of others and occur as a consequence of the first two activities. The time–space diaries showed that for most parents a day included one necessary activity, such as going to the park or walking the baby to sleep in the strollers, and one optional activity, such as taking a short walk, going to look at cars or scenery or having a coffee in a market square (Figure 1). In most cases, both activity types included a social dimension.

The differences demonstrated by the time–space diaries between the parents were large, and the outcome greatly depended on the age of the children. Around an average of 1 hour and 45 minutes per day was spent outside in the playground. Another 1 hour 45 minutes per day was spent outside running errands, and approximately 30 minutes per day was spent on walks, either with just the child or with the spouse and the child. Most outside activities in the time–space diaries were characterised with positive words such as *nice, good, revitalising, stimulating, good mood* and *nice company*.

The places of the city parent

For the city parents in the study, walking was the primary means of transportation from A to B, but it was also a way to spend the day without any specific destination. Out of 156 cases of going outdoors reported in the time–space diaries, over 60% were performed on foot. The importance of walking has also been reported in Caulfield's (1994)



Figure 1. An optional activity: ice cream in the park.

study of inner city parents in Toronto. However, in Finland there is a particular reason for parents to stroll around the city with their babies. Dating back to the early 20th century, there is still a strong belief that babies stay healthier and sleep better if they sleep outside during the day as long as the temperature stays above -13°C . Since few people in this study had a balcony where the baby could sleep during the day, the parents went for walks to get their baby to sleep.

According to Mäenpää (2005: 205), mothers with small children go to shopping centres to be in the company of others, which is important in a life stage when life is very much centred around the home. Talbot (2013: 231) stresses that there is a confluence between the ‘concept of urban villages’ and parents’ search for community. This becomes evident in this study. The interviewed parents seemed to understand that being out in the street was autonomously an act to overcome social isolation. The pace of walking

changed along with the less stringent time budget that the parents felt was realised on family leave. This meant that the parents had the time to really get to know their neighbourhood and to see things that they previously just passed by without really noticing. The parents mentioned play parks, public toilets and shop windows with something interesting for children as examples. The mothers in particular repeated how much they enjoyed the aesthetics of the inner city – not only the old architecture, but also ‘modern’ features such as graffiti. As the parents were spending more time in their neighbourhood, they also became acquainted with other people in their neighbourhood:

I’ve got to know a lot of people in this neighbourhood that I would never have met alone. People on the streets really notice the children, old men stay to chat for a while and now in a sense I could say I know many of them quite well, and if we’re in the vicinity it’s actually one of our routines to go and say hello to a man who is always in a particular cafeteria. (Father D, two children)

Not surprisingly, playgrounds were important places for building social networks between parents:

There’s such a fantastically rich playground community here. When you have a toddler you really meet a lot of people and you have the opportunity to share experiences. (Father B, one child)

Residents’ houses, provided by the municipality in play parks in some neighbourhoods, were very much appreciated by the parents, especially during days with bad weather (Figure 2). These are indoor facilities where children who do not attend day care can play under the supervision of their parents, usually for a few hours before noon. Generally, the time–space diaries, interviews and paper GIS maps indicate that the most popular play parks were those where there is a possibility to talk to other parents (Figure 3).

In inner city Helsinki, there are also many activities for parents, such as swimming for babies, singing groups and play groups. These seemed to be especially important to the fathers:



Figure 2. The residents' house on the right attracts families.



Figure 3. Parents enjoy going to the play park as it gives them an opportunity to socialise.

By the time the highlight of the day was to buy an espresso just to be able to say a few words to another adult, I started to look for activities for families. I filled my days with different activities where we met friends, so through my children I now have a social network here. But our family friends, well, it's usually me and the mother who know each other... (Father A, two children)

The commercial streets of the neighbourhoods were mentioned as important places by the parents.

Small independent shops are usually seen as a crucial part of the urban milieu and street landscape. Spending time and money in small shops is something often understood as a trademark for urban lifestyles (Jayne, 2005; Pacione, 2001: 7–8). For the parents, they seemed to be an appreciated feature of the street, but little shopping was actually done elsewhere than in grocery shops. Shop windows were important places to make stops on the streets:



Figure 4. Coffee in the market square is also possible in the winter.

If a Moomin figure or a teddy bear or a giraffe appears in a window, then it might be that we stop there for a while and sometimes if there is something interesting in several windows, we might walk between them... (Father B, one child)

Going to shopping centres was not very common either. One mother mentioned that she had discovered shopping malls after becoming a parent and liked that they were so accessible with children. Others stated that they represented the sort of environments they did not favour:

In the winter the only place you can walk inside is the shopping centres and I find that very, very boring. (Mother D, one child)

Cafés and bars were commercial places that the parents visited with and without children. According to the paper GIS maps and the time–space diaries, market squares – a traditional meeting place, especially in old Finnish towns – were important places for coffee breaks. This is interesting, since the planning authorities in Helsinki understand market squares to be a trial feature for the urban culture of the city (Helsingin Yleiskaava Visio 2050 Kaupunkikaava-Helsingin uusi yleiskaava, 2013). The parents enjoyed market squares because they were easily accessible. In the interviews it also came out that going to the

market square for coffee was something unusual that the parents would have liked to include in their everyday lives prior to having children (Figure 4).

Both mothers and fathers went to cafés, either for lunch or for a coffee with the baby or toddler. Having lunch out was particularly common among parents with babies:

... It was part of our daily routine that I parked my child...out there, there are a lot of good cafeterias where you can leave the child (in the stroller) outside the window and eat and monitor the child from the inside. (Father B, one child)

Cafés were also important as social places where the parents could meet friends and family who were not on family leave (Figure 5).

Some of the families also went out for brunch together during the weekends, something they thought happened because there were places to go for brunch so close by. So in many ways they used the city to realise an urban lifestyle, even as parents.

However, there was also some questioning among the parents on what was appropriate to do in the city. The need for a good environment for the children was one concern. One mother explained that some days, if the weather was really bad, she would play with her son in the gateway of the house and she was worried how that might affect her son:



Figure 5. Meeting friends for lunch is something that many parents on parental leave define as a luxury.

It's really rough. (Mother A, two children)

The possibility for the child to move around in the city independently was not mentioned, although other studies have shown that traffic safety is a major concern among city parents (Lilius, 2014).

Another set of questions were related to accessibility and regulations for the use of space. For example, choosing where to go for coffee was connected to where it is alright to go inside with strollers. Cafeterias were chosen on the basis of where there was room for strollers. In some cities like Copenhagen, it is almost impossible to find a cafeteria where you are allowed to go inside with strollers (Lilius, 2013), but this is not the case in Helsinki. The parents said they felt welcome in most cafeterias and restaurants.

There was a phase during the day, however, when the street and children seemed an inappropriate combination:

If there was something I could change in this world and in this city... it's been really surprising to notice how isolated you get from other adults and the social context when you are with your child, for example if you are at home with your child on a Friday night you have no place to go... you hear people out on the street and you feel like an outsider because you can't go anywhere... I remember once, it was a beautiful

summer night so I thought we'd go down to the beach at Eiranranta, it's pretty peaceful during the night, we were going there to throw some stones into the water, and I wanted to show my daughter what the night time heavens look like, and then a police car drove past us and it was so obvious that they were checking what was happening... So I would really appreciate it if there were some social places where I could go at night. (Father B, one child)

The city of mothers and fathers

Considering how accessibility to different spaces and places in the city by men and women has been problematised in earlier studies, it is interesting to look at differences in the use of space by mothers and fathers. From the point of view of the baby or the toddler, their needs are more or less the same whoever the caregiver is. The data in this paper does not point to great differences in the spatiality of mothering and fathering on family leave. However, the fathers in this study were generally more active and social during their family leave. It was also obvious that it had been a more active choice for them to live in the inner city – and consequently the urban environment was also the kind of environment that they found more attractive for family leave. In their daily lives, the fathers planned more as a matter of routine to go to different activities organised for parents on

family leave. It was harder for them to just stay in for a morning or an afternoon. One father explained:

My plan was actually to be on family leave alongside my friends, we had plans to do things together and then we thought the children could come with us... I think fathers are generally better at taking the children with them to different kinds of activities. (Father A, two children)

On the other hand, mothers tended to find it harder to manage things in connection to going out. Many of the mothers also felt it was difficult to handle their babies crying in public. However, living in the city eased this fear:

In the beginning with the baby, well I would not even have thought about going anywhere by bus or by car as she cried so much, so it has been very important that we have been able to walk or take the metro, because you can get out of the metro really quickly and get home really quickly if she gets nervous, because every now and then, she gets these fits of laughter, so it has been really important. (Mother B, one child)

Both the mothers and the fathers in the study seemed happy with their ‘playground community’, and they both visited playgrounds together with their child or children.

The differences in the use of space were more apparent when the parents had some time of their own. A recent Finnish study on the time usage of families shows that mothers wished they had more social interaction outside the home, while fathers wanted more opportunities to take part in sport (Aalto and Varjonen, 2012: 57). The importance of having some time for oneself was stressed by both the mothers and the fathers in the study. The perception of the parents seemed to be that living in the city enabled this better than another environment would have:

Living in the city makes it possible to have time to go to my activities, and the threshold to do something is lower, it's an important way to relax. (Father E, one child)

I have a lot of friends who don't have children who I go out with, so it's really nice and easy just to go there, a

few blocks away. Well, if we were to move to Lauttasaari, [approx. 5 km from the city centre where the family had thought about moving] although it's so close, it would be a totally different thing. (Mother C, two children)

It's so nice to live in the centre...I go to listen to bands. As soon as my wife comes home I can go...it's like really nice...also that I don't necessarily need to talk to anyone, but I can still be in the company of others. (Father B, two children)

In this sense, both mothers and fathers were still making use of the spaces and places that were important to them before they became parents. Bars and restaurants were also marked by parents on the paper GIS maps. However, the interviews and paper GIS maps indicated that mothers spent more time on their own in cafés than the fathers.

Well if I'm alone today, I have perhaps a kind of [laughter], I just feel like going to a café to read a magazine on my own. (Mother E, two children)

Fathers, on the other hand, participated more in sports activities. They used local gyms and yoga studios, for example, when they had some free time.

Conclusions

This paper adds to the understanding of families residing in the inner city and the meaning of the urban environment in their everyday lives. It has shown that the urban environment in many ways facilitates an attractive environment for parents on family leave, although an urban way of living has mainly been linked to singles and couples without children in both research (Hall and Pfeiffer, 2000; Heath, 2001) and planning (Domosh and Seager, 2001; Franzén and Sandstedt, 1981; Hayden, 1981; Saarikangas, 1997; Wilson, 1991). The paper has evidenced that when becoming a parent, one's relationship to the immediate environment changes, as more time is spent there. Particular place-dependent ways of being on family leave take place in the inner city. The mixed-use streets in many ways help parents cope in their new life situation and can help break the isolation often associated with family leave (Holloway, 1998: 325). Among other things, the

street provides opportunities for bumping into acquaintances, having coffee, showing something of interest to the child or enjoying architecture. It is often in the act of walking that parents write and rewrite the city as their own space (De Certeau, 1984). Walking is of constitutive importance in the building of the city parenting identity, since it is the most common way for parents to move around the city and their neighbourhood. It is not only what Gehl (1987/2011) calls *necessary activities* that take place in the everyday life of the parents; there is also more time for *optional activities* every day. The social dimension and social activities in public and semi-public space become more important than before. This also highlights how the everyday practices of parents alter city spaces. More parents on the streets generate more life on the streets, which according to Jacobs (1961) and Gehl (1987/2011) generates even more city life. The paper has also looked into the differences in the use of space between mothers and fathers during family leave. The results indicate the importance of easy access to public and semi-public space also for fathers on family leave.

The findings of this paper indicate that there is a need to explore the production side of the everyday practices of parents further, and to look deeper into how families might or might not change inner city neighbourhoods. This would be of particular value for urban policy-making and planning, as an important strategic aim of city planning in many Western cities is to create and shape lively urban areas and diverse urban spaces. The new city plan vision for Helsinki 2050 even acknowledges families as an important group of residents in the future urban Helsinki (Helsingin Yleiskaava Visio 2050 Kaupunkikaava-Helsingin uusi yleiskaava, 2013). This can be seen as recognition for the diversity of everyday practices in urban space in Helsinki. Simultaneously, however, urbanity also brings about questions of affordability as real-estate prices make it more and more difficult for families to locate themselves in the inner city of Helsinki.

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