



Families and transportation: Moving towards multimodality and altermobility?



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ABSTRACT

This article explores the transport modal practices of parents with young children in everyday urban life. It is based on a qualitative multi-site approach that takes into account the geographic location, urban form and socio-economic characteristics of four Vancouver (British Columbia) neighborhoods. Our analysis of semi-structured interviews with parents reveals that modal practices were contextually contingent along a spectrum of auto-dependency, multimodality and altermobility. The results expose the contradictions, inequities and social ambiguities of parental modal practices and raise questions about how they might represent possible instances of a transition away from auto-dependency and towards sustainable transportation.

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1. Introduction

Automobility – which is a complex system of objects, subjectivities and signs that are oriented around the private car – is intertwined with all the facets of everyday urban life (e.g. employment, housing, schools, shopping, social networks, recreation, health and safety) and shapes time and space (Urry, 2004). As the automobility system has grown, it has subordinated other modes of transportation such as walking, cycling and public transit (Sheller and Urry, 2000). Increasingly parents have become auto-dependent for a host of reasons such as parental fears about traffic or stranger danger, norms of “good mothering,” emotional attachment to the car, mothers’ disproportionate responsibility for complex household schedules and caring of children, and urbanization (e.g. Dowling, 2000; Sheller, 2004; Schwanen, 2011; Lopes et al., 2014). The extent to which parents rely on the car helps to explain the obduracy of automobility (Sheller and Urry, 2000). Yet, parents’ modal practices have increasingly become a matter of academic and public debate. The case against the negative effects of auto-dependency on families with children (e.g. decline in children’s active mobility, rising childhood obesity rates) and on society as a whole (e.g. traffic deaths, congestion, social exclusion, greenhouse gas emissions) has become stronger (Conley and McLaren, 2009; Carver et al., 2013; Manderscheid, 2014). As a result of growing concerns about automobility’s ill effects, transport theory and policy are seeking to understand how a transition

might be possible away from automobility and towards more sustainable transportation (Geels, 2012).

While considerable research has examined chauffeuring as central to how parents and children move about, a smaller body of qualitative research has focused on parents’ variable and alternative modal practices to the car (e.g. walking, cycling, taking transit). This strand of research has begun to explore how some parents value the benefits of non-car mobilities that range from health and sociability to quality of local space and protection of the environment and the extent to which parents are able to incorporate these modes into their daily lives (e.g. Lang et al., 2011). While this research tends to emphasize parental choice of transport modes, another strand complicates this scenario by mapping out the ways in which low-income mothers have little choice but to use non-car mobilities that entail significant burdens and costs to their lives (e.g. Bostock, 2001). These two strands of research suggest the ways in which parental modal practices are variable and more specifically how non-car mobilities have multiple and contradictory implications for everyday family life. Our study contributes to this research by exploring more fully the complexities of parental modal practices, their variability along a spectrum of auto-dependency, multimodality and altermobility, and their meaning for the possibility of a transition towards more sustainable and equitable daily mobilities.

Our study also contributes to research that is mainly located in Europe, Australia and New Zealand by examining parental modal practices in a North American city. Based on semi-structured interviews of parents with young children residing in four neighborhoods in Vancouver (British Columbia), our study takes into account the specific

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city context as well as the heterogeneity within it by exploring parental modal practices in relation to geographic location, urban form and socio-economic characteristics. The following sections discuss the emerging literature on diverse parental modal practices, the methods and context of the study, the interview results, and the conclusion to the article.

2. Rethinking parental modal practices

Qualitative research on parenting and mobilities covers a broad range of topics that include mothers' and fathers' mobility care practices and children's mobilities (Murray, 2009; Parusel and McLaren, 2010; Barker, 2011; McLaren and Parusel, 2011, 2012, 2015; Wilson, 2015); cars as sites of conflicting power relations and negotiations between parents and children (Laurier et al., 2008; Barker, 2009); the influence of locally derived cultures of parenting on children's aspirations for cars in adulthood (Barker, 2014); the creation, transformation and retention of family life through movement and mobility (Holdsworth, 2013); the relational dynamics within families that shape spatial patterns of everyday mobility (Jensen et al., 2015); and the many reasons why parents chauffeur their children to various destinations (Dowling, 2000; Schwanen, 2011).

In addition, a growing body of qualitative research has begun to explore the ways in which parents use a variety of transport modes and take up alternative options to the motor vehicle. This topic has become increasingly important for understanding the challenges of a societal transition away from automobility. These studies consider parents' ambivalences in car usage, the barriers they encounter in using alternative transportation to the car, and their experiences in using non-car modes. In multimodal urban contexts such as Copenhagen (Denmark) and Helsinki (Finland), researchers show how parents and children switch readily between varied forms of mobility (Kullman and Palludan, 2011; Jensen et al., 2015). In Utrecht (The Netherlands), where cycling infrastructures are well developed, the bike is the primary mode for many parents (especially mothers) and children (Schwanen, 2011). In such cities as Tirana (Albania), where the car does not dominate other modes, most children walk the school journey and very few are driven (Pojani and Boussauw, 2014). In cities where the car is the dominant mode of transportation, however, scholars have explored the challenges and social ambiguities that confront parents in using alternative mobilities. Although Dowling's (2000) influential study in suburban Sydney (Australia) argues that the motor vehicle helps mothers to fulfill cultural norms of "good mothering," it also found that some mothers are "reluctant drivers" in their discomfort in traffic or concern about the environmental costs of using the car. Furthermore, research in relatively affluent suburbs of Auckland (New Zealand) illustrates the tensions parents experience between using a car and wanting to promote walking (Bean et al., 2008) and the reasons why some mothers drive their children to school whereas others encourage walking (Lang et al., 2011). Other research undertaken in Auckland suburbs highlights the phenomenon of the walking school bus – in which adult volunteers (usually mothers) walk with a group of children along a set route to and from school – that supports walking as an alternative to using a car (e.g. Collins et al., 2009). Based in Lancaster (England) and mainly on a sample of relatively privileged households, Pooley et al. (2011) explored how walking requires a great deal of parental commitment due to the complexity of organizing children and their belongings.

This body of literature contributes to an understanding of how, within car-dependent contexts, parents (especially mothers) with young children negotiate non-car (walking or biking) mobility. However, such research is primarily located in suburban and/or relatively privileged areas, leaving considerable gaps of knowledge about the experiences of parents who live in more urban and less socio-economically advantaged settings. Although many social groups (in relation to inequalities of age, class, gender, race, disability) experience transport disadvantage in automobilized environments (Sheller and Urry, 2000; Lucas, 2012),

few qualitative studies have considered how low-income parents get around with young children. Notable exceptions are Bostock (2001) and McQuoid and Dijkstra (2012). Bostock examined low-income mothers in the Midlands (UK) who could not afford to own a car or take public transport. The women had to walk, which had the contradictory health effects of exercise, on the one hand, and physical and psychosocial stress, on the other hand, and exclusionary effects of restricting access to resources. McQuoid and Dijkstra explored the emotional experiences of low-income single mothers in San Francisco (California) in their daily travels that often included the discomfort on buses of feeling physically unsafe and out of place. Their study is also distinct in being one of the few in the qualitative literature on parental alternative modal practices that is based in a North American city.

Our study adds to this body of literature on parental modal practices in several ways. First, unlike most of the research, it is located in a North American city, which contributes to understandings of place and how it intersects with cultural and socio-economic factors. While it is well known that the "love affair" with the automobile is deeply entrenched in North American society, creating hyperautomobility (Henderson, 2009), it is also recognized that the transportation systems of contemporary societies, regions and cities vary substantially in the ways that they are auto-dependent and make non-car options available (Soroni, 2009). Second, in utilizing a multi-site comparative approach within a particular city, our study illuminates the diversity of parental modal practices across specific urban neighborhoods. This approach brings together the two strands of qualitative research noted above that scholars usually examine separately: higher income chauffeuring parents and lower income carless parents. In addition, our article expands knowledge of parental modal practices in its illustration of how parents are engaged in a wide range of modal practices that vary along a spectrum of auto-dependency, multimodality, and altermobility that has been little recognized in the extant literature. Auto-dependency refers to parents' primary reliance on the motor vehicle, multimodality to reliance on other modes of transportation as well as the car, and altermobility to not owning a personal car and relying instead on such modes as public transit, walking, cycling or car-sharing. This typology helps to characterize the degree to which parents are dependent on the motor vehicle and the meaning of the practices within an automobility context. As Sheller and Urry (2000, 745) note, automobility "dominates how both car-users and non-car-users organize their lives" (emphasis in the original). Furthermore, the typology provides a linkage to recent quantitative studies that show a growing trend among certain segments of the urban population (adolescents, younger men and older adults) towards greater multimodal or altermobile practices (e.g. Nobis, 2007; Vincent, 2009; Kuhnimhof et al., 2012). As car usage has become more politically charged, these trends can represent resistance to automobility and a transition towards sustainability. However, these modal concepts have equivocal meanings. Auto-dependency and multimodality may represent the choice of owning a car but may also include the social ambiguities and coercion of having to use a car (Sheller and Urry, 2000; Soroni, 2009). Altermobility, or carlessness, can be defined as mobility practices in opposition to the car-based society (Ravalet, 2012) but also as a type of transport inequality associated with social disadvantages (Lucas, 2012). This article explores the various meanings of these modal practices and the complex question about the degree to which they serve as signs of parents moving towards multimodality and altermobility in a transition towards sustainability.

3. Methods and contexts

Our research examines parental modal practices in four urban neighborhoods in the city of Vancouver that differ in geographic location, urban form and socio-economic characteristics. Out of the city's 23 administrative local areas, we selected Downtown, Dunbar-Southlands, Sunset and Grandview-Woodland using two primary criteria related to location: inner city or inner suburb and Westside or Eastside of the

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