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Ways to go? (Un)sustainable school commuting in Majorna, Gothenburg city

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ABSTRACT

Gothenburg city has bold ambitions of becoming carbon neutral. School commuting is one piece of the puzzle in reducing emissions. While the literature on school transportation is extensive, the issue of climate change has been overlooked. This article explores how parents in the district of Majorna understand mundane choices of school transportation in a context of increasing recognition of climate change. The article shows that school transport is a contentious issue, entangled with subjectivity, emotions, and notions of responsibility. The findings also highlight some complexities: (1) Although most parents are concerned with climate change it is not a significant factor in daily transportation. (2) There is a discourse in favour of active transportation where climate change is explicitly downplayed, on the other hand regular car use merges with deep climate concerns. (3) Informants' anticipations of future urban traffic conflict with their hopes, yet it seems difficult to imagine something otherwise.

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Introduction

The mundane practice of going to school is related to environmental, social, and economic sustainability. This paper takes a closer look at (un)sustainable urban school commuting in the context of the ambitious climate policies of Gothenburg city, Sweden.

Gothenburg, a city whose history, infrastructure and identity are closely intertwined with the car industry, finds itself at a contradictory juncture. One the one hand, there is a growing public and political awareness about the alarming condition of climate change and the pressing need to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. The city of Gothenburg has responded through ambitious policies, aiming for sharp annual emission reductions to achieve carbon neutrality as quickly as possible, and openly acknowledges that this requires a substantial reduction of car traffic, even if electrification of vehicles is taken into consideration (Göteborgs stad 2018; City of Gothenburg 2021).[1] The city has a climate programme in place, congestion charges have been implemented, and efforts have been made to improve public transport and biking and walking paths. Furthermore, for the past five years, Gothenburg has been ranked as the most sustainable city in the world (Global Destination Sustainability Movement 2021) and it ranks number two on another prestigious list of 'smart cities', which includes sustainable traffic criteria (The Future Today Institute 2019). As far as school transportation is concerned, the city of Gothenburg is also implementing several programmes for active commuting, such as cycling and walking (Göteborgs stad 2021a; 2021b).

On the other hand, prognoses predict that car traffic will increase in Gothenburg (Trafikverket 2020), and the policy goal of reducing car traffic stands in stark contrast to the city's continued large-scale investments in increasing road capacity (Pettersson et al. 2021). Furthermore, while recognising the subjective element of the term (Gärling and Schuitema 2007), the city has

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no 'coercive measures' in place, apart from congestion charges and parking fees, to reduce car traffic. Climate activists are critical and recently large manifestations were performed in Gothenburg under the slogan 'Sweden's fossil capital' (Klimatsverige 2022). Regarding school commuting, since the 1970s, Sweden has experienced a radical decline in active travelling in favour of car transport (Björklid and Gummeson 2013; Niska et al. 2017). Longitudinal statistics specific to Gothenburg are not readily available, but information material from the city suggests that the same trend applies here and that 38% of the children that commute by car live less than 1 km from their school (Göteborgs stad 2014a).

These contradictory images of Gothenburg yield questions as to how, if at all, public and political concerns with climate change relate to ordinary people's mundane transport choices; more specifically, in this case, to school commuting. There is indeed, as shown below, a substantial body of survey research on how parents motivate their choice of school transportation. However, what has been less foregrounded in this literature is what role, if any, the growing awareness of climate change plays in such choices. There are also some in-depth interview studies to be found that explores how parents attempt to constitute themselves as caring and responsible subjects through school commuting practices. Again, however, the issue of climate change is not foregrounded, and this prompts questions as to how parents conceive of responsibility in relation to school commuting given our climate predicament.

More specifically therefore, this paper aims to explore how parents understand mundane choices of school transportation, and how they understand themselves in relation to these choices, in a context of increasing recognition of climate change. Our exploration is guided by the following three questions: What motives, subjectivities and responsibilities are articulated by parents in relation to school transport? What sentiments are articulated by parents in relation to school transport? What notions of present realities and imaginable futures are articulated by parents concerning school transport and urban traffic?

The paper, which forms part of a larger research project studying the prospects for reduction of car use in favour of transport by feet and bicycle in Gothenburg, is based on a 'critical case' study of parents/guardians in the residential districts of *Majorna* and *Kungsladugård*, combining a quantitative survey of 400 parents with 20 in-depth interviews. The residential districts of *Majorna* and *Kungsladugård*, and the school in focus, were selected as they, for several reasons, can be seen to represent a 'critical case' (Flyvbjerg 2006) in that the preconditions for transition to more sustainable transportation are favourable. Hence, if a transition is not possible here, it is unlikely to materialise elsewhere in Gothenburg or beyond.

The study is informed by John Urry's (2004) theory of 'automobility' as a self-expanding system and a culture of its own. To Urry, automobility is an assemblage of human activities, machines, roads, signs, and cultures of mobility which restructures time and space so that 'it generates the need for ever more cars to deal with what they both presuppose and call into existence' (ibid., p. 27). Automobility sustains discourses of individual right to mobility and of what constitute reasonable travel distances and 'good life', although this mobility always occurs at the expense of other people and the environment. However, Urry also consider technical-economic, policy, and social 'seeds' of transformation that might potentially alter the car system in the longer run (ibid., p. 33). The present paper shares Urry's interest in the prospects for such a post-car urbanity and its implications for urban life, for mobility and for mitigating climate change.

The paper is organised as follows. The first section situates the study in relation to previous literature. The second and third sections describe the case context and the methodology. The fourth section, organised in four sub-sections, presents findings. The final section offers conclusions.

Literature overview

The literature on school transport is extensive. What is presented here is merely a selection and the purpose of the section is mainly to position the paper. More exhaustive literature reviews can be found, one of which was published recently in the present journal (Rojas Lopez and Wong 2017).

Following global developments (McDonald 2007; Fyhri et al. 2011; Shaw et al. 2015), Sweden has since the 1970s experienced a sharp decline in active school commuting in favour of car transport (Björklid and Gummeson 2013; Niska et al. 2017). This trend could be seen as problematic in relation to environmental, social, and economic sustainability. First it is beyond scientific doubt that car emissions contribute to global warming and to local air pollution. Health problems, not only related to air

pollution, but also to the decreasing physical activity that comes with car commuting, such as child obesity, type II diabetes and depression, are other concerns (Davison et al. 2008; Loprinzi et al. 2012), as are the public expenditures that these health problems generate (Giles-Corti et al. 2010). Moreover, children's increasing dependency on car transport has detrimental effects on social and cognitive development, individual autonomy, and way finding abilities (Brown et al. 2008; Fyhri et al. 2011). Traffic security around schools is another concern (Zhu and Lee 2008; Parusel and McLaren 2010). Evidence further suggests that transport-related lifestyles are established early in life and that children take after their parents (Baslington 2008; Davison et al. 2008).

How, then, can this trend in school transportation be explained? While this development can be seen as part of the self-expanding system of 'automobility' (Urry 2004), certain specific (infra)structural factors contributing to car transport have been pinpointed. One is increasing car ownership which, in turn, is related to increasing household income (Fyhri et al. 2011). Another related factor is higher rates of female employment (ibid.), but research also shows that driving children to school forms part of daily care work mainly undertaken by women (He 2013; Scheiner 2016). Another factor is implementation of school choice policies, which tend to lead to longer travel distances (Jarvis & Alvanides, 2008). The probability of car transport further increases if children must cross main roads and if there is a shortage of signalised intersections and zebra crossings (Panter et al. 2008). Yet another factor is increasing prevalence of mobile phones amongst pupils which facilitates car pickup (Hjorthol 2008).

Regarding how parents motivate their choice of school transportation, previous research provides a fairly coherent picture. This research includes many survey studies that demonstrate that parents who drive their children explain this behaviour mainly with reference to timesaving, convenience, safety issues ('stranger danger' and traffic), and their child's level of maturity (McDonald and Alborg 2009; Faulkner et al. 2010; Lee et al. 2013; Mitra et al. 2014).

There are also some in-depth studies, seeking to understand the lifeworlds and subjectivities of parents driving their children to school (Dowling 2000, 2015; Murray 2009; Barker 2011). This research shows that car transport is associated with conceptions of care and efforts to constitute oneself as responsible parental subject, providing 'safe' transport and making productive use of the child's time (ibid.). However, there are also a few recent in-depth studies showing that notions of 'good' parenting can conversely benefit active school transportation, particularly with reference to health, wellbeing, and independence (Forsberg et al. 2020; Levi and Baron-Epel 2022). While environmental sustainability is briefly mentioned in these studies, it is not portrayed as a critical factor and there are no explicit references to climate change. That 'good' parenting can, somewhat contradictory, be associated with both car commuting and active transportation depending on context, has also been highlighted by Larouche (2018).

The present paper adds to these in-depth studies of notions of 'good' parenting by gearing focus towards climate change and urban sustainability. Arguably the increasing awareness of climate change reiterates the question of what responsible parenting means in relation to school commuting. The changing context calls for further investigation and diving into a residential district with favourable preconditions for sustainability transition, in a city with ambitious climate policies, is a good starting point.

The critical case of Majorna, Gothenburg

Gothenburg is the second largest city in Sweden with 587.549 inhabitants (Göteborgs stad 2021d). It is located on the west coast and has the biggest port in the Nordic countries. The car industry is prominent, and cars are a significant element of the city's identity and infrastructure. According to statistics from the city, the overall car-per-capita-ratio of Gothenburg is 283 cars per 1000 inhabitants (Göteborgs stad 2021e). Recently, however, efforts have been made to prompt transition into carbon neutrality which ultimately requires a reduction of car traffic (City of Gothenburg 2021). The city's climate programme stipulates that:

> The goal is for Gothenburg's climate footprint to be reduced annually with the aim of reaching a zero-climate footprint as soon as possible. The emissions within the geographic area of Gothenburg will be reduced by at least 10.3 percent annually, and the consumption-based emissions will be reduced by at least 7.6 percent annually by 2030. The City of Gothenburg needs to reduce its emissions at a faster rate and use all tools and policy instruments available to drive the transition in society (ibid., p. 19).

However, research suggests that institutional silos complicate implementation of cross-sectoral sustainability policies (Valencia et al. 2019) which is, for example, reflected in the disconnect between the city's policy of reducing car traffic and its largescale road investments. Furthermore, the 'tools and policy instruments available' to reduce car traffic are merely incentives and ultimately based on individual decision-making.

The residential districts of *Majorna* and *Kungsladugård* are defined by the city of Gothenburg as belonging to the inner city (Göteborgs stad 2021c). The districts are located west of, and adjacent to, the city centre and are glued together by a well-known square called Mariaplan.

Majorna is an old working-class district, composed of apartment buildings. It is subject to gentrification with an inflow of middle-class people, often with a leftist and 'green' political orientation. This has made the district more socio-economically diverse, with a mix of socio-economically vulnerable and wealthier households. Majorna has 10.841 inhabitants, and the car-per-capita-ratio is 249 cars per 1000 inhabitants which is low compared to the city average above. Housing is composed of 60.7% rental apartments and 39.3% condominiums. The average income is 320.800 SEK, which is below the city average of 326.100 SEK, but the share of people with post-secondary school education is significantly higher, 46.8%, as compared to the city average of 37.3% (Göteborgs stad 2021e).

Kungsladugård shares most of these characteristics, although it also encompasses a wealthier area with old garden villas and townhouses whose value have increased dramatically recently, making the district even more socio-economically diverse. Kungsladugård has 11.139 inhabitants and a car-per-capita-ratio of 242 cars per 1000 inhabitants which is, again, low compared to the city average. Housing is composed of 73.8% rental apartments, 19.3% are condominiums, and 7.0% private houses. The average income is 309.900 SEK, significantly lower than the city average, but again the share of people with post-secondary school education is higher: 45.4% (Göteborgs stad 2021e). Thus, on average, people in Majorna and Kungsladugård have lower income (although internal socio-economic disparities are considerable), are more educated, and have fewer cars as compared to the city average.

Colloquially both districts are often referred to as *Majorna*, i.e. as if they were one. People who formally live in Kungsladugård often refer to themselves as residents of Majorna (also confirmed through quotes in the findings section) and the two districts largely share a common identity. Henceforth this term will therefore be used to refer to both districts unless otherwise specified.

Majorna is considered to have 'good public transport' as residents can reach 50% of Gothenburg's workplaces in 45 minutes (Göteborgs stad 2014b), but Majorna is also, given its proximity to the city centre, well placed for walking and cycling. There have also been several initiatives for transition towards sustainable transport and living, e.g. *Bicycle city Majorna* and *Ecological district Majorna (Our translations)*. As indicated above, Majorna is typically depicted as a district with an environmental profile and leftist alternative culture (Jonsson 2007), which is also confirmed in political elections where the left and green parties are strongly overrepresented, as compared to the country and the city as a whole (The Swedish Election Authority 2022). Hence, despite being part of a city with deep roots of 'automobility' (Urry 2004), Majorna could be seen as a 'critical case' (Flyvbjerg 2006) as there are reasons to assume that the preconditions for transition to sustainable transportation are relatively good given the district's: geographical location, access to public transport, political culture, and socio-economic characteristics, i.e. relatively highly educated inhabitants with relatively low levels of income and car ownership.

Methodology

The selection of the school, whose catchment area is mainly Majorna and Kungsladugård, further reflects the rationale of a 'critical case'. The school enrol 654 pupils from preschool class to grade 6.[2] According to the principal the traffic situation around the school has been a contested topic in recent years and it has been discussed at several school council meetings (Interview 1). School commuting by car has created intense traffic, and many parents have expressed concerns, mainly in terms of children's security. Hence, although opinions are divided there are social forces demanding a reduction of car traffic.

This study is based on a sequential combination of a quantitative online survey of 400 parents/guardians and 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews. The quantitative survey provided a general overview and informed the interview questions, which had the purpose of going deeper into the topic of investigation.

The results section entails findings both from the questionnaire and the interviews but given our aim and research questions, greater emphasis is placed on the latter. The survey was distributed via the school's communication platform, to 911 registered email addresses, and it was open in April-May 2021. This period was deliberately chosen because spring weather in Gothenburg is varied and one particular mode of transportation is not necessarily more suitable than another. The survey received 400 responses, giving a response rate of 43.9%, and 60.3% of the responses were given by females (it was possible to classify one's gender as non-binary which one respondent did). The survey included a range of questions, covering number of children enrolled at the school, home-school distance, perceptions of the school route and the traffic situation around the school, mode of transportation to school as well as for other journeys, motives for mode of transportation to school, concern with climate change and the environment, perceived need for change, and reactions to a few hypothetical proposals in relation to school commuting and traffic around the school. The survey allowed for differentiation between different age spans for parents with more than one child enrolled at the school.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 parents, one principal, and one property developer (involved in traffic planning around the school). The parents were selected through a non-probability volunteer sampling method. Parents were invited to participate in the study via the school's communication platform and at two school council meetings. Many wanted to participate and ultimately of 18 parents were selected representing a variety in terms of *gender* (10 females and 8 males, broadly reflecting the gender balance of the survey) and *mode of transportation* (car, bicycle, walking, public transport).

Due to covid19, all interviews but one were conducted by telephone or video link. The semi-structured interview guide entailed a range of questions related to school commuting, traffic, and sustainability, with possibilities of probing, organised in five overall themes: (1) Life situation and mode of transportation; (2) Motivation for transportation mode and perception of traffic; (3) Conflict, identity, and parental responsibility; (4) Perceived need for changes; (5) Conceptions of the future. The interviews lasted between 30–60 minutes and were recorded and professionally transcribed. The transcripts were subject to thematic analysis and carefully coded/recoded.

(Un)sustainable school commuting in Majorna

The following four sub-sections present our findings. Several themes are intertwined but for analytical purposes we present them separately. The first subsection provides a descriptive contextualisation whereas the subsequent three sub-sections address each of the research questions.

School commuting in numbers and perceptions of the traffic situation

The first step is to provide an overview of the geography of school commuting in Majorna. An immediate observation is that most pupils live close to the school. The survey findings show that 21.5% of the pupils live less than 300 metres, 72.5% less than 1000 metres, and 91.8% less than 2000 metres from the school. A further 5.0% report to live between 2000–5000 metres away and only 3.3% more than 5000 metres from the school. As a point of reference Swedish Bicycle Cities, an association of Swedish municipalities promoting cycling, define 0–1 km to school as 'walking distance' and 1–5 km as 'bicycle distance' (Svenska Cykelstäder 2020). However, the survey findings also demonstrate that 69.7% of the parents perceive that there is a 'barrier' between the home and the school, e.g. a heavily trafficked road or a tramway.

The survey results demonstrate a variation in means of transportation to school within and between age spans, and around one third of the survey respondents report regularly using, and altering between, several transportation modes (more than one choice was possible in the survey). For preschool class children the most reported mode of transportation, 66.7%, was walking to school accompanied by a parent. The stated figure for travelling by bicycle with a parent was 38.0%. The reported figure for car commuting in preschool class was 27.8%. Figures reported for independent walking and cycling to school were 4.6% and 2.8% respectively. Stated figures for public transportation was 6.5% with, and 2.8% without, parental company. Moving to grade 5–6, the most reported mode of transportation, 78.0%, was independent walking to school, and the reported figure for independent bicycling was 8.5%. Corresponding figures with parental company in grade 5–6 are down to 5.9% and 1.7% respectively. Regarding car commuting, the stated figure in grade

5–6 is 13.6%. Reported figures for public transportation was 0.8% with, and 21.2% without, parental company.

These figures tell us several things. Firstly, unsurprisingly, there is a clear tendency towards more independent child mobility and less car commuting as children grow older. Secondly, that the share of children that commute by car is relatively small, and yet the consequences are considerable in terms of the traffic situation (cf. below).

The interviews also confirmed that car use is not always consistent, but that mode of transportation can vary. Weather, season, and if the guardian will continue to another location after dropping-off at school plays a role, as do issues related to shared custody and stress. Hence everyday matters related to weather, irregular work locations, and family life, contribute to irregular patterns of school transportation.

The findings further demonstrate that there are divergent views of the traffic around the school and of the city's traffic management more broadly.

Traffic around the school is perceived to be worst in the morning. Survey responses regarding the traffic situation were distributed as follows: 'very bad' 16.6%, 'bad' 35.2%, 'acceptable' 32.2%, 'good' 9.5%, and 'very good' 2.3%. Hence most parents are unhappy with the traffic situation, while a small minority perceive it to be satisfactory. The survey further asked whether the traffic situation around the school must change. The responses were distributed accordingly: 'yes' 66.2%, 'no' 11.4%, and 'don't know' 22.5%.

The interviews confirmed that some parents are very concerned about traffic around the school. Words like 'completely horrible', 'chaos' and 'a life-threating situation' were used and the school principal added bluntly: 'It is absolutely wonderful (*sic*) that nobody has been run over yet' (Interview 1). The principal further claimed that car traffic around the school has increased in the last few years. Most informants emphasised the immediate security problems posed by cars. Several stressed that the 'speed' of the cars is an issue and that many cars drive 'aggressively'. It was also mentioned that the narrow sidewalks close to the road and the limited visibility resulting from numerous parked cars make pedestrians, particularly children, vulnerable.

Other informants expressed more long-term concerns related to air quality and climate change. As stated by one informant with reference to traffic around the school: 'I can't understand how this can go on in Majorna. A residential area that is quite environmentally minded. To have to inhale all these exhaust fumes. I don't quite get it' (Interview 17). Several other informants similarly expressed concerns about high levels of particles in the air.

However, traffic is a contentious issue and not everyone subscribed to the negative description of the situation. One informant, who drives his child to school every day, stated: 'I think it works pretty well. I do not really understand the complaints' (Interview 19). Another car using informant recognised the traffic situation around the school as problematic but interestingly framed the problem entirely from a car user perspective: 'It's messy for cars. There is really no place to park. One must drop the kids in the middle of the road.' (Interview 13).

Many informants that were concerned about traffic around the school saw it as part of a larger problem in Gothenburg:

> My view of the traffic situation, both around the school and in Gothenburg in general, is that one has primarily planned for cars. Car roads are straight, nice, smooth, and connected. If you are walking, cycling, or out walking with a pram, it is difficult. Walking and cycling are at the end of the priority list and that's the big problem. One should have done things the other way around. Start by making it pedestrian and bicycle friendly. After that, the cars can have what is left (Interview 10).

The informant continued: 'There is no coherent bicycle path to the school at all. You must ride on sidewalks and in the road with the cars. As a cyclist, you clearly feel non-prioritised' (ibid).

Other informants concurred with this: 'All of a sudden, the bicycle path just disappear' (interview 7) and added that construction work and other temporary disturbances always impact the walking and bicycle paths to a greater extent than they do the roads for car traffic – something which was claimed to pose challenges for children trying to get to school. These remarks reflect Urry's (2004, p. 26) argument that automobility is a system that 'subordinates other mobilities of walking, cycling, travelling by rail and so on'.

Critical remarks were also directed towards the (pre)school administration's inability to guarantee sibling priority and enrolment close to people's homes. Several respondents claimed to use a car as means of transportation to (pre)school, against their will, because siblings are enrolled in different schools, or because the school and preschool are located too far apart for walking or bicycling to be reasonable options. As stated by one informant:

> If it is 7:50 in the morning, and you must get one grumpy 8-year-old to one school and one grumpy 6-year-old to another, and then you also have a small baby that is hungry, well, then you are going to find yourself at that darn (*sic*) parking lot anyway (Interview 7).

These remarks remind us of Valencia et al. (2019) observation of how the institutional silos in Gothenburg hamper cross-sectoral sustainability policies. They also illustrate how city management impact people's everyday life and how it can hinder (or enable) climate smart transport choices.

Motives, subjectivity, and responsible parenting

Are parents concerned with climate change and, presumably then, with Gothenburg city's ambitions of becoming climate neutral? The survey asked whether parents think about climate and environmental issues in their everyday life. 34.1% responded 'yes, a lot', 48.6% 'yes, quite a lot', 15.3% 'no, not so much', 2.0% 'no, not at all'. Hence a vast majority report to think about the climate on an everyday basis. But is it a factor when they motivate their choices of school transportation? Our findings suggest that this is not the case. In everyday life of school commuting, other factors rank significantly higher. The survey asked, 'what factor is most important for your choice of mode of transportation to school?' Responses were distributed as follows: security 40.1%, timesaving 23.9%, the child's independence 16.0%, convenience 9.1%, exercise and health 7.9% and, finally, environmental and climate concerns 3.0%. This broadly reflect previous research findings (McDonald and Alborg 2009; Faulkner et al. 2010; Lee et al. 2013; Mitra et al. 2014), and it illustrates that even in an environmentally minded residential district, where most parents think daily about the climate, climate change is not a decisive factor in mundane school transportation.

This picture was confirmed by the interviews. Some informants, who used active transportation, stated bluntly that it feels good to go climate friendly to school but that it is not an important factor. Others offered more elaborated justifications which illustrates how transport choice is entangled with subjectivity and notions of responsible parenting.

Several parents who walked with their children to school, motivated this with reference to social aspects: 'It is cosy to walk with my youngest girl to school and chat about life' (Interview 7). Another informant, who alternates between walking and car transport, made similar remarks when comparing the two modes of transportation:

> I feel that a positive thing about walking is that I get a little moment with my daughter, a calm moment. Then we have a nicer conversation. When we are in the car, I am more stressed. But when we walk, we unwind a bit. So, it is often a small, pleasant moment (interview 16).

Another informant who walks with his daughter stated:

> I walk with my daughter to the school entrance. We have our little ritual, we hug, wave, and make these hearts with our hands, you know. [. . .] I feel that I am doing the right thing here. The walk we do to and from school is for the both of us. It is something we do together (Interview 9).

This shows that some see walking to school not merely as a means of transportation, but also as quality time with their children.

Another motive for active transportation concerns health and physical activity:

> The motive is that children feel better from cycling than from car transport. I think physical activity is extremely important for children. It's about health and wellbeing. [. . .] I want to be a physically active parent . . . where you like get from point A to point B on your own. I have read a bit about this. That it is important for children to feel that they can make a difference and go to school on their own. It becomes a more active transportation (Interview 16).

This quote illustrates how the mother's transport choice is entangled with who she wants to be as a parent and how she tries to foster her daughter into an active lifestyle.

Another motive raised by several parents is fostering of the child's independence:

> For me it is important that my daughter learns that she has a responsibility for transporting herself. In a car she becomes so passive. In the future, I don't want her to expect to get a lift. I think a lot about this. Habits are established early in life. In fact, that's my biggest responsibility, I think. I don't feel that much responsibility from an environmental point of view. [. . .] As a parent, I must be a role model. To act and do things in a certain way rather than just talk about how things should be done. I think my daughter will do as I do, rather than as I say. I think that is how we can influence our children. Through our everyday actions (Interview 16).

This informant clearly associates responsible parenthood with promoting independent child mobility, but the quote also shows that environmental matters are of little significance to her choices.

Another motive for active transportation concerns appropriation of an urban lifestyle. As stated by one informant who owned a car but normally walked or cycled:

> I don't want to be associated as someone who drives a car when it is not necessary … In principle, I think one should avoid driving cars inside the city. Mainly for pedagogical reasons. I think one part of living in the city is that children should learn how to get around and they cannot do that by car. It is important to learn how to handle unattended pedestrian crossings and tram crossings, it's an important part of learning to live in the city (interview 15).

This informant also explicitly stated that 'environmental aspects' are not an important factor but rather emphasised her parental responsibility to foster independent child mobility and an urban identity:

> I identify with someone who lives in the inner city. My family has lived in Gothenburg for several generations. This becomes most obvious to me when I meet people from outside … from smaller places or the countryside. They seem to think differently. For me, there is an element of pride to it. To be capable … that the child can move around independently in the urban environment. I think I have gained a lot from that myself at that is something that I want to pass on to my children (Interview 15).

Similar arguments were provided by another informant with reference to notions of the 'good' city and the 'good' citizen:

> If one lives in a city, as we do, you can walk, cycle, or use other means of transportation, to and from most daily activities. For me, it is not so much a matter of the environment but about living better together in the city. […] There will not be a good city if everybody drives a car. So, it is a part of raising our children and teaching them to transport themselves in these different ways … To take responsibility for yourself, for others and for society … […] We cannot simply decide to take the car everyday just because we happen to be lazy. It is not sustainable. It will not make for a good citizen (Interview 7).

This informant emphasised the importance of fostering active transportation with reference to what it means to be a responsible citizen and to live in 'good' city. Notably, again, climate and environmental concerns were explicitly downplayed.

What motives, then, are put forth by those who drive their children to school and how do such motives relate to notions of subjectivity and parental responsibility? Several of those who use car transport reported to do so despite concerns for the climate. One informant claimed time and security (traffic and 'stranger danger') to be the most important motives. However, she expressed severe inner tensions between her choice of car transportation and her self-understanding as an environmentally conscious person, working professionally with sustainability issues: 'Considering that I am working with environmental issues, there is a constant anguish as I am basically travelling 100% by car' (Interview 5). This informant was clearly aware of the contradiction between daily car use and her efforts to constitute herself as an environmentally minded and responsible parental subject.

> I am a kind of person that easily worry about things, but I think it is important, I mean we rarely buy new things. We like to buy used stuff, retro you know, that's our style. We rarely buy new clothes to our children, we fly as little as possible, we try to live climate smart. We monitor our garbage to ensure that we steadily decrease waste and improve our waste sorting and so on. And then, well, it does not feel good to drive a car (Interview 5).

Another informant, who drives his child every day before continuing to work outside of Gothenburg, offered a different account which illustrates the relative and contextual dimensions to environmental subjectivity:

> I think I take climate change more seriously than most people do. At least when I compare myself with my colleagues. Then, of course, if we look at the part of the city where I live … . I mean, Majorna is very 'green' residential district. And in that Majorna context I am perhaps not as environmentally conscious as I become when I arrive at my workplace. If I had taken climate change even more seriously, I would of course have to find a job elsewhere. But then I would also have to change my life quite a lot (Interview 19).

The informant further argued that his family was compensating for the car emissions in other ways.

> If you look at us as a family, I think we are on the plus side in many ways. My son's mother has chosen to commute by bicycle. We don't eat much meat. We don't travel much. We have an old house in the countryside that we take care of. We don't buy a lot of clothes. I think one must look at the total. And I can feel that … Well, if

> most people lived like us, I think things would be much better (Interview 19).

This car using informant obviously displayed less anguish than the former. Still, both examples illustrate that car use and concerns for climate change can coexist and that people's self-understanding as environmentally conscious does not prevent them from getting behind the wheel. However, the informant's account of his daily work commute is also reflective of how automobility enables, or constrains, people to 'live their lives in spatially stretched and time-compressed ways' (Urry 2004, p. 28).

Carried away by cars: shame, loss, hate and joy

In the survey, the reported figure for car use in everyday transportation to work/studies was 28.4%. Figures for other regular car transports were 'grocery shopping' 41.5%, 'leisure activities' 34.0%, and 'weekend trips' 77.3%. However, behind these numbers, complex human emotions reside, both amongst car users and amongst those with whom they compete for space in the city. *Fear* has already been touched upon in connection to people's perceptions of the traffic situation around the school but, as we shall see, there are other sentiments at play.

One prominent sentiment is that of *shame*. An informant, who alternates between cycling and driving to school, due to irregular work locations, contended:

> On the days that we go by car I cannot say that I feel very proud. There is a bit of car shame to it. I would much rather be the mother who rides a bike and who makes a physical effort to get to work (Interview 20).

The informant stressed that she is trying to cope with this shame and that it is, as a single mother, sometimes difficult to make everyday life work. Another informant, who also alternates between different modes of transportation to school, reported similarly: 'Well, there is a bit of shame here. Walking and cycling are of course easy to defend. The car less so' (Interview 14). Yet another informant, who mainly cycles in her daily travelling but still drives her three children to school by car, said: 'It's not good. It doesn't feel good. [. . .] And yet I am doing it every morning, and I dislike it every morning' (Interview 6). We can also recall the anguish of the informant who works professionally with sustainability issues and yet drives her children to school every day. She underscored that she lives in a very environmentally conscious area: 'The part of Majorna where we live, in Kungsladugård, is not an area where you say that you have two cars for example' (Interview 5). Apparently, car use is not something to be proud of in this area and yet, when asked how many of her neighbours that own a car, she responded: 'Where we live, let me see now, in our street everybody has a car' (Interview 5).

Other informants referred to sentiments of *loss*. One informant recalled, with nostalgia, a time when parents did not drive their children to school: 'In the past, most children cycled to school. That is not the case anymore' (Interview 6). As previously indicated this observation is confirmed by research (e.g. Björklid and Gummeson 2013; Niska et al. 2017). Another informant also related to loss but in a different way.

> When you walk, you look people in the eyes. There is something collective to it all. A feeling that disappears when you go by car. You see a lot of other cars. You don't really see any people (Interview 16).

Hence, according to this informant, there is something about human interaction and sense of community that gets lost behind the wheel. Again, this resonates with Urry's (2004, p. 29) observation that 'car-drivers are excused from normal etiquette and face-to-face interactions with all those others inhabiting the road'.

Other informants reported entirely different sentiments: *hate*. This was blatantly verbalised by one informant: 'I am a notorious car hater' (Interview 17). He continued with reference to parents driving their children to school:

> It makes me so angry. All the children that are forced to inhale the parents' exhaust fumes. I really would just like to kick in their car doors if could, but I have, of course, some self-control. But I would like to give them a little . . . [. . .] The car users destroy everything, at all levels, exhaust emissions, the climate, spatially. I mean, there is nothing but bad things coming from cars in a city. People's health deteriorates . . . [. . .] Driving their children everywhere . . . I see it as a kind of mental disorder. They totally restrain their children's personal development. (Interview 17).

Other informants expressed similar sentiments albeit using less vociferous language: 'The cars stand in the way of *everything* else. [. . .] In my view, cars are pointless in a city. I think we suffer a lot from being a car manufacturing city' (Interview 10, *informant's emphasis*). One informant compared

car use to an addiction that parents tend to pass on to their children: 'I don't want to force my children into car addiction, or any other addiction, that destroys the environment and the air quality here in the city' (Interview 3). That the cars around the school provoke strong negative emotions among parents accompanying their children was confirmed by an informant who drives his child to school: 'One can see that there are parents who are very annoyed with the cars coming there [to the school]. They express their anger physically when they see the traffic and all that' (Interview 8).

However, in stark contrast, one informant expressed very positive feelings towards cars, associating them with freedom and joy:

> I mean, I like to drive. I think it works well with the roads, one should not make it too difficult, I think the freeways are good, and it is good that more are being built. [. . .] I cannot really advocate for public transport as I don't like using public transport myself. But I do think that it is good that people do. Otherwise, it would become messy, huh. No. I favour car and freedom (Interview 13).

Interestingly, however, he did not see car mobility in the city as that important and he claimed to have no objections against a car free zone around the school or around Mariaplan for that matter:

> I would not have anything against if we had, as they have in many other countries, car free zones here and there. You'll find that in many countries. You would need permission to go in there by car. [. . .] I really have no interest in driving inside the city. I am moving around in much larger territories. That's why I drive a car. I am not the kind of person that just stays in the city. I live in the city, and I drive out to the woods, one can say. (ibid).

Here we can possibly discern some common ground between outspoken car haters and car lovers, at least as regards restrictions of car mobility in the inner city. Still, the informant's statement clearly illustrates how car use and circulation are intertwined with identity and sense of entitlements in a culture of automobility (Urry 2004).

Another positive emotion that cars were associated with, also recognised by Urry's (2004), is a sense of safety: 'When you have children . . . And perhaps you must go to the hospital with them in the middle of the night. It is a kind of safety-thing' (Interview 8).

Finally, there were also car owners who displayed mild, if any, emotions towards their cars. One informant, who uses his car for daily commuting to work and school, said:

> The car is merely a practical thing. It is not important what kind of car it is. I want it to work. I don't see the car or the car brand as a kind of identity marker in any way at all. I drive because there is no other option (Interview 19).

Another informant, who does not drive on an everyday basis, but sometimes drives his son to school, displayed a similar attitude:

> Ownership is uninteresting to me. I own . . . I mean I own a used car. I am not the kind of person who like . . . 'Here's my car', washing and polishing it and so on. For me it is only a means of transportation. [. . .] What I am longing for is a more widespread and better car sharing system. With a better developed car sharing system we might perhaps get rid of many cars. (Interview 14).

This 'de-privatisation' of cars that the informant is longing for is, according to Urry's (2004, p. 34), a significant element in a transition to urban post-automobility.

'Reality', the imaginable, and the future

Everyday life can be stressful and many informants reported that it sometimes difficult to make climate-friendly transport choices even if one wants to. Hence people's ideals and their perceived 'realities' do not always match. According to the survey almost half of the parents reported to have experienced stress 'very often' or 'quite often' in the last weeks.

One informant, who was upset both with the city's traffic management and policy campaigns encouraging more climate-friendly transports, argued that planners are not in touch with people's everyday 'reality' and that they impose guilt on people:

> They have lost touch with reality. There is a person in an office telling us to be climate friendly and to walk and cycle to work or preschool, and then I think 'Excuse me, the rest of us are living in reality' . . . I think many people want to do the right thing and many probably have a bad conscious for driving a car, but they must make their life work (interview 7).

If this is a fair description of planners' efforts to manage both traffic and carbon dioxide emissions can of course be debated. However, the quote points to two things. One is that 'reality' come across as something static. If people find themselves locked into 'realities' that prevent sustainable transportation we need to consider how different 'realities' can be enabled and constructed (cf. below). The other is that planners might need to pay more attention to people's everyday lives but also to communicate such awareness:

> I think they (city management) must communicate more clearly . . . . Often, they talk about the overall goals and the visions of how our society should develop. But as an individual resident, in the street, it can be difficult to see . . . and realize that you must make sacrifices. And to understand the connection between different efforts from the city. It is important to be very clear in communicating why changes must be made, for example outside a school, so that everybody understands. For example, what goal conflicts that exists and why some things must be prioritized at the expense of others. If one is clearer about that, I think it would be easier to bring about change (Interview 16).

If carbon neutrality should materialise in the time frames stipulated by the city, it seems inevitable that people's 'realities' would have to change. One thing to consider here is the 'imaginable', i.e. what we can envision that is not yet part of 'reality'. What is striking, from the interviews, is that it seems difficult to think beyond present 'realities' and to envision something otherwise. For example, when entering a speculative discussion of a future Majorna without, or with much fewer, cars, one informant stated: 'It would become much calmer of course. But it would also become desolate because we have dimensioned the streets for the cars. So, there would be a hollowed . . . a desolated feeling' (Interview 14). This quote seems to disregard the possibility that new vibrant activities could emerge if cars disappeared and if the space that they now occupy was made available for others. Another informant likewise found it very difficult to envision a Majorna without cars. She could see that there would be benefits in terms of less noise and cleaner air but still resorted to the conclusion that 'Somehow, I think that cars form part of the cityscape' (Interview 15). Yet another informant stated, with reference to a hypothetical no-car zone around Mariaplan: 'It would become . . . I am not sure it would even be possible' (Interview 8). These quotes suggest that a car-free inner city is perceived as impossible, undesirable, or leading to emptiness and desolation. They also illustrate that it is difficult to think beyond present 'realities' and to imagine something otherwise. Hence, one challenge seems to be to enable 'yet-unimaginable alternative futures to emerge' (Amsler and Facer 2017, p. 7).

This brings us to notions of the future. Our findings point to an obvious tension between what informants anticipate and what they hope for.

Most informants think that traffic in Majorna will increase in the future. Car traffic is believed to increase but there is also a notion of more mixed modes of transportation, including more electrified vehicles. These anticipations were related to several factors. One argument concerned the powers of the car industry and the city's continuing investments in road capacity: 'I am afraid that we will see more asphalt for many years to come. When we should really have less asphalt, more preservation of green spaces, and perhaps of water and houses' (interview 3).

Several informants also related anticipation of more traffic to the ongoing densification of Majorna. With new houses being built, and more people moving to the district, traffic is anticipated to increase in the future:

> I think they will build more and more. I think they will almost overbuild the area and I think they will remove a lot of green spaces. And continue to squeeze in buildings . . . I think they will make sure that there are bicycle trams because there is some thinking around that. But I think it will become overpopulated and that we will be a lot of cars (Interview 20).

However, anticipation of increasing car use was not only related to densification as such but also to gentrification:

> I think the area will become even more gentrified . . . There will be a greater share of middleclass people. I mean, all the old lads and lassies will be gone. And then, unfortunately, there will be greater needs of transportation. 'We have an apartment in Majorna, and then we have our summer house, and we play golf, and we have the sailing boat, and the football club.' I mean, active people . . . People who have grown up in an environment where there are lot of activities (Interview 14).

This quote also clearly points to the connection between subjectivity, sense of entitlements, and perceived need for transport as previously discussed (Urry 2004). Yet another informant anticipated that children's active transportation to school would decrease due to increasing traffic and decreasing child independence in general (Interview 6).

However, informants also expressed hopes for the future. One question in the survey asked what the guardians thought of the suggestion to establish a car-free zone around the school. 50.7% responded that this was a 'very good idea' and 23.6% that this was a 'quite good idea'. Several interviews also confirmed that this was something that people hoped for: 'I am not an environmental nerd, but the dream scenario would be that cars do not get through to the school' (interview 7). Some informants extended this

future vision to a greater car-free zone around the whole of Mariaplan: 'The politicians ought to create small clusters in the area where you are not allowed to drive a car' (Interview 14). Freedom *from* cars is thus a recurrent theme in many informant's hopes for the future. When discussing visions of a future with fewer cars, one informant was looking 'back to the future' through old photographs: 'Majorna is an old, beautiful residential area. When you look at old pictures there are almost no cars. Back then, people strolled around in the streets' (Interview 10). Finally, one informant expressed hopes for a completely different way of prioritising when planning the city in the future.

> I would like to see things turned around entirely so that 'small goes first'. Always, when planning a society, small should go first . . . . I believe in that motto. [. . .] How everything is organised in a city . . . all infrastructure. This is of course incredibly provoking for a mighty corporate and transport sector. That they would have to restrict their ability to move around quickly and massively (Interview 3).

This idea of 'small goes first'[3] could partly be seen in contrast to abovementioned notions that children should learn to master a heavily trafficked urban environment. What this informant hopes for is rather an urban environment that is adjusted to the children.

Conclusions

This paper has explored how parents in the residential district of Majorna, Gothenburg, understand mundane choices of school transportation, and how they understand themselves in relation to these choices, in a context of increasing recognition of climate change. Our findings show that traffic is a contentious issue and that motives for mode of school transportation are entangled with subjectivity, emotions, and efforts to constitute oneself as a responsible parent. However, while most parents are concerned with climate change, it is not a significant factor in everyday school transportation. Hence, although this research was conducted in a context of growing concerns of climate change, in a city with ambitious climate policies, and in a residential district with favourable preconditions for sustainability transition, our study confirms that other factors pinpointed by previous research prevail (McDonald and Alborg 2009; Faulkner et al. 2010; Lee et al. 2013; Mitra et al. 2014).

Yet, our findings also point to some complexities. On the one hand, there is a discourse in favour of active transportation to school wherein the issue of climate change is explicitly downplayed. Instead, social benefits, promotion of independent child mobility, and appropriation of an urban lifestyle are foregrounded. These findings contrast with previous research on how parents try to constitute themselves as responsible subjects by driving their children to school (Dowling 2000, 2015; Barker 2011). What we see is a competing discourse of what responsibility means in relation to school commuting and this finding supplements recent literature showing how notions of 'good' parenting can also benefit active transportation (Forsberg et al. 2020; Levi and Baron-Epel 2022). What is interesting, however, is that this competing discourse overlook, and even explicitly downplay, the issue of climate change. On the other hand, our findings also show that daily car transportation to school can merge with deep concern for the climate. Hence climate anxiety does not prevent parents from getting behind the wheel, as other factors in daily life are perceived as more pressing.

In regards to perceptions of future traffic in Majorna, our findings expose a tension between what informants anticipate and what they hope for, but also that it seems difficult to imagine something otherwise. Most informant's anticipate traffic, and the problems that it is associated with, to increase although they wish for a situation with fewer cars. However, there is also a notion that less cars would imply a desolated city and it seems difficult for informants to envision the emergence of other activities and modes of transportation in the spaces currently occupied by cars.

Ultimately, our exploration of parents reasoning around different ways to go to school suggests that Majorna, and the broader urban assemblage of which it belongs, has a 'ways to go' in meeting Gothenburg city's bold climate ambitions. Yet it is important to be cautious and to recognise the limitations of this study. This paper is based on a minor case study using a voluntary sampling method. Hence, the study is limited in scope and the results may not be generalisable except where other researchers see their application. There is also risk for biases both related to the voluntary sampling method and in terms of the researchers' interpretations. More research is thus needed on how the growing recognition of climate change might interfere with choice of school transportation and notions of responsible parenting; how urban climate policies matters in people's everyday life; and how different urban traffic futures can be imagined.

With these limitations in mind, it is difficult to offer any prescriptions for policy and planning. However, the findings point to the importance of infrastructure and of physically restricting car accessibility if car transport to school is to be reduced. Furthermore, findings indicate that urban climate policy needs to get closer to people's everyday life and facilitate children's active transportation. Finally, it seems urgent to nurture imaginations of new ways of organising transport and living in the city, beyond 'automobility' (Urry 2004), and to highlight the potential environmental and social benefits thereof.

Notes

1. When printed information from the City of Gothenburg is available in English, we refer to the translated documents. When not, we refer to the original documents written in Swedish.
2. Pupils enter preschool class in the year they turn 6. Hence the age span of the school is roughly 6–12 years.
3. The informant's expression 'small goes first' is difficult to translate into English but it is a word play on the Swedish expression 'störst går först' (literally 'big goes first') which resembles the English expression 'might is right'.

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