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Walking and wheeling: Exploring the everyday access-making practices of disabled parents and/or parents of disabled children in Greater Manchester

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Introduction

The access-making mobilities of disabled parents and/or parents of a disabled child(ren) are underexplored in the existing literature. This pilot study sought to address this, by taking on board Clement and Waitt's (2018) call to consider how the 'right to the city' is felt for a range of bodies, in our case parents who are disabled and/or parents of a disabled child(ren). We argue that for families living with disabilities, journeying is much more complex than often accounted for in urban planning, and in terms of mental and physical wellbeing. Walking to the playground, or to ease a baby off to sleep, or the nursery/school run may seem a mundane journey, however we argue that the preparation required to go into each walking/wheeling journey, particularly where the parent or child is disabled, is currently overlooked. Using a photograph-elicitation approach, this pilot project explored the everyday access-making practices of families living with disabilities in Greater Manchester, with a focus on their walking and wheeling mobilities. In this paper, we present some preliminary findings around the themes of: preparation for walking and wheeling mobilities; barriers for walking and wheeling mobilities; and prams, slings and wheelchairs as mobility aids. By learning from people who self-identify as having a disability and/or a child with a disability, as experts of access and how access can be made, this project contributes to the development of geographic scholarship on disability and access-making by disabled parents/parents of disabled children.

Academic Context

Whilst the access-making mobilities of disabled parents and/or parents of a disabled child(ren) are underexplored in the existing literature, there is flourishing body of literature that accounts for the mobilities of families with prams and slings. For instance, Clement and Waitt (2018) introduce the concept of 'mother-child-pram assemblage', to highlight the corporeal dimensions of pram journeys. In the context of Wollongong, Australia, the authors highlight the 'affective atmospheres' of pram mobilities. Moreover, Platt (2024) has recently brought to the fore the corporeal embodied messiness of walking with a postpartum body and reframes walking-with a baby to 'worlding-with', to develop a more affirmative understanding of mothering on the move. Platt's (2024) paper highlights the vulnerable and leaky natures of the postpartum body and baby, which are seldom paid attention to in the mobilities literature. The work of Boyer and Spinney (2016) is also pertinent to this study; the authors focus on becoming mobile with a small baby. In doing so, Boyer and Spinney (2016) redress the trend in recent geographical literature which focuses on the positive, well-being producing aspects of mobilities. Instead, the authors highlight the importance of bringing to the fore journeys marked by "slowness, discomfort, premeditation, and feelings of exhaustion (if not dread)" in the typically limited and 'fraught' mobilities of mothers (Boyer and Spinney, 2016:1114). Moreover, Whittle (2019) has provided the first major study of sling use from a mobilities

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perspective, contending that slings have the potential to help parents and children overcome some of the challenges to mobilities in early family life. Whittle (2019) argues that due to the ability of slings to help parents negotiate some of the design challenges of urban landscapes, slings offer potential to reclaim space for parents and children.

The existing literature has highlighted that pram mobility can both extend and restrict a mother's capacity to go places on-foot with children in the city. This latter notion is encapsulated through McDowell's (1993:166) contention that "the stolid figures of urban commuters were never encumbered by a baby, a stroller and the week's shopping," which Clement and Waitt (2018:253) discuss as a form of mobility 'burden'. Platt (2024) and Boyer and Spinney (2016:1120) argue that the range of 'stuff' that goes along with being a parent can be problematic for the mobilities of parents. The authors discuss the role of the pram in partially addressing this problem, providing a means of carrying 'baby-detritus,' including dummies; baby wipes; changing mats; bottles, for example. Interestingly, Boyer and Spinney (2016) contend that participants in their study reported an affinity between themselves and people with physical disabilities, in terms of departing from normative forms of encounter with urban environments. Similarly, Jensen (2018) reflects on his own experience of becoming a father, noting that becoming an 'able-bodied' pram stroller developed new sensitivities and a deeper sense of solidarity and understanding of wheelchair users.

The access-making mobilities are arguably more complex still when the parent and/or child is disabled, which has hitherto been overlooked in the literature. McKeever *et al.* (2003) found that mothers who use wheelchairs felt 'out of place' and resorted to intense but iterative planning. Horton (2017: 1154) similarly describes the "hard work" in pursuing leisured activities outside the home but problematises the nature of inaccessibility and how 'joy' is, or is not, experienced is not always dependent on access alone. There is thus a need to explore the preparation of mobilities, and the mobility experiences, of those who have the intersectional identity of being a parent and being a parent with a disability and/or the parent of a disabled child. It is within this context that this study had the following objectives:

- To enhance understandings of the preparation that goes into walking and wheeling journeys where a parent and/or their child(ren) have disabilities.
- To explore the benefit of the novel method of asking participants to take photographs of their bags/buggy tray and using these photographs in elicitation interviews to enhance insights into im/mobilities experienced by families living with disabilities.
- To contribute to the field of mobilities studies by advancing theoretical debates on the access-making mobilities of families living with disabilities.

Methodology

The reflexive "I" of the researcher is not a regrettable disturbance (England, 1994), our subjectivity is a salient part of the research process. It is therefore important to reflect on our positionalities. Our motivation for this study focus is influenced by our positionalities as disabled people, or parents of disabled children, in which we recognise the bag/buggy tray as an important technology within everyday forms of mobility and access making. In this pilot study, we have thus far recruited seven disabled parents and/or parents of disabled children living in, or frequent visitors to, Greater Manchester. We secured ethical approval from Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Westminster. Our methodological approach involved firstly asking participants to take photographs, using their own mobile devices, of the preparation that goes into their walking and wheeling mobilities over the course of a week. For instance, they could take photographs of the content of their buggy tray and/or bag.

The idea to use photographs of the buggy tray and/or bag to elicit discussion in interviews supports the findings of Platt (2024) and Boyer and Spinney (2016) which highlight the sheer amount of 'stuff' and 'baby-detritus' that parents bring with them on their walking and wheeling journeys. Further, White (2019) found that the content of people's bags was an important aspect of materialities that came out during face-to-face interviews with people with Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS). For instance, those living with IBS carry spare tissues, medication, radar keys, and 'Can't Wait' cards as part of navigating their symptoms when going out. The importance of bags has also previously been explored in the context of dementia by Buse and Twigg (2014), demonstrating the significance of the contents in, and handbags themselves, in the lives of women with dementia.

Participants were asked to spend up to 30 minutes on the task of taking photographs of the contents of their bags/buggy trays. We then used these photographs as prompts for discussion during the interviews, and found they acted as oral catalysts for discussion. This importance of flexibility and inclusive care-full research with disabled and chronically ill participants has recently been highlighted by Budworth (2023) and Larrington-Spencer *et al* (2024). Consequently, to ensure the research process was as 'comfortable' for participants as possible, we offered participants the choice of undertaking the interview in person, virtually e.g., via Teams, or asynchronously in which participants could be e-mailed interview questions and reply in their own time. Out of seven currently interviewed participants, five participants opted for a virtual interview, and two opted to type their responses. Interviews that took place virtually typically lasted around 45 minutes. Having discussed our methodological approach, we now turn to present some preliminary findings around the themes of: preparation for walking and wheeling mobilities; barriers for walking and wheeling mobilities; and prams, slings, and wheelchairs as mobility aids.

Findings

Preparation for Walking and Wheeling Mobilities:

All parents in our study made clear that a significant amount of preparation goes into each walking/wheeling journey, whether that is for their child(ren), and/or for themselves. Participants in our study recognised that getting out and about can be challenging for parents in general but felt that this is compounded when they are disabled and/or have a disabled child.

Laura, Rebecca, Kelly, and Emily tell of the significant amount of 'stuff' that is needed to accomplish everyday walking and wheeling mobilities for their disabled children:

> Raining on and off, so we took wheelchair, rucksack with change of clothes, change stuff (pads, wipes, change mat) leg muff, poncho and wheelchair organiser on back of buggy. 'Piddle pad' seat cover is always on because [my daughter] is not able to use a toilet and it protects the seat so we can just wash the pad every couple of days or when it gets soiled. We have to remember to switch this between chairs so if I don't mention it- I still have had to put the pad on whichever chair she uses … Also took some snacks and some water which went in the wheelchair. [My daughter's] bag also has in it her implant box which contains spare batteries and things for her implants. (Laura)

> So this is the contents of the first bag that I showed you with the epilepsy machine. So at the back, that's a kneeling mat. So sometimes if I do have to change her, like on a floor, then I'll use that for my own needs, to be honest. Obviously, all the nappies and wipes, spare clothes. In the pink bag, I've got toys to keep her entertained…I've got snacks, chew toys. (Rebecca).

> A toddler carrier for my younger child, double pushchair if on big days out for when rests or quiet time is needed, lots of snacks as distractions, a variety of hats/accessories to choose from. Water and waterproofs. (Kelly)

> And then he's he's got a little carrot cake bar, little orange bar. It's little snack. And yeah, the tubes, the middle kind of packet tube is like the feeding extension tube. And that attaches, that attaches to a little. I call it a mini button in his tummy. And then the white, you know the syringe. You fill that with water and then prime the tube and then the tube goes in. And then the one on the right is the actual balloon, the bottom itself. So you always got to take it with you everywhere you go. (Emily)

For Kelly, whose son has autism, the preparation for walking in Greater Manchester extends beyond a consideration of which items to bring with her; it involves research into what the area is like:

> Have to check exactly what the area is like; whether there's a café, what it looks like, so that we can explain to my eldest what to expect. (Kelly)

Figure 1: A selection of the images taken by partipants of their preparation for getting out and about.

For Natalie, who has Chron's disease and arthritis, she reflects that the amount of 'baby detritus' (Boyer and Spinney, 2016) she packs has decreased as her children have gone past the baby stage:

> So when they were much younger, this bag was, like, really heavily filled with like loads of things like bottles. Like formula if I was making a bottle like out and about or. Like loads and loads of nappies, multiple changes of clothes and things, different things in case the temperature wasn't right and now I'm much more like…there's like a snack at the bottom there like some little like chocolate animal biscuits just for a bit of kind of distraction. (Natalie)

Instead, Natalie recognises, due to her Crohn's disease and arthritis, for which she packs cream; a radar key; toilet toll; and spare clothes:

> I actually spend more time preparing for me to get out the house than I do the children. (Natalie)

Barriers for Walking and Wheeling mobilities

A lot of strategic thinking and planning by parents goes into not only what to bring with them, but where to walk and wheel, which as Shona tells, consumes a lot of energy.

Busy places were unanimously avoided by participants (e.g. Market Street in the City Centre). Shona recalls how she specifically visited the city centre in November, hoping to avoid the Christmas markets, not realising these had been set up already. Similarly, Kelly tells how she "normally avoid[s] crowded areas or long walks". This point was made similarly by Lewis:

> I think he [Lewis' son] really struggles going into the city centre because of the noise and the sound. (Lewis)

In terms of other places to avoid, Shona remarked:

> You can't go to those really nice little cafes that have like an awkward, tiny little door and you're getting inside and taking up all the space possible. (Shona)

Additional mobility barriers spoken about by parents in this study include heavy doors, which are particularly problematic when parents are trying to push a pram at the same time (Shona). Further, Shona spoke of the importance of step free areas: "with the pram and a walking mobility problem that's been really. Yeah. Really helpful". Shona and Rebecca spoke highly of museums and libraries as welcoming spaces:

> Museums, museums and libraries are just built for people to be there and just doing stuff. So those buildings are what I kind of gravitate towards. (Shona)

> The Whitworth Museum that's got ramps all the way in it and it's nice big open spaces. (Rebecca)

Shona also spoke of how she did not want to commit to baby classes, many of which require you to block book, as it does not accommodate a flexibility to how one feels on the day:

> Like all those baby classes that are amazing classes, but you have to book six weeks at the time, I had no idea how I would feel waking up every day, never mind how she would feel waking up every day. (Shona)

In comparison, she valued the flexibility of being around nature:

> And then also seeing how much she [Shona's daughter] enjoys being around nature, I think I kind of give myself maybe more permission that I could just do the easiest stuff that was actually for us better value. (Shona)

It is noteworthy that some participants also recognised the barriers nature can provide:

> Around the local park near me, I'd definitely put her in her pram because there's loads of tree roots and stuff like that. So it depends on like comfort levels for her. (Rebecca)

Rebecca further remarked on the importance of road quality, including pavements:

> You know the road quality, like the pavement. I didn't realise and that this is when she was a baby. Actually, I first noticed it. But now she's in a wheelchair. It's even more obvious. The pavement is completely angled. So then that's really difficult. She wouldn't if she was on her own. She would categorically fall". (Rebecca)

Recognising the lack of accessibility of some areas in Greater Manchester, it is noteworthy that some participants have decided to take this into their own hands through access-making mobilities:

> We are now looking at buying a portable ramp as we find my daughter can't go in some places, or we struggle to get her up kerbs (Laura).

Prams, Slings and Wheelchairs as mobility aids

Many parents in the study spoke of the significant thought-process and strategic planning that goes into their pram choice, recognising its value as a mobility aid for both children and parents. For instance, Shona, states:

> We made the decision a year ago because our daughter's quite tall, that we were going to invest in another and a bigger pram. So, the pram, the pram that we use is, its looks like a running pram, but it's technically not a running pram, but it means we can go out and walk in places like muddy places and by the park and stuff (Shona).

As Shona's quotation attests, the decision to purchase this pram facilitated access to parks, and muddy spaces, that may not have otherwise been possible. For Shona, "the pram itself gives me a lot of freedom when I'm walking". Shona makes clear that the pram offers "support with my balance … the pram itself has always been actually a walking aid for me and a rehab tool." Shona no long uses walking aids, but notes that when she previously used crutches, the pram offered the ability to hang the crutches on the side of her pram. Shona continues to highlight the pram's usefulness as a mobility aid, describing how she would:

> … Hang shopping bags on it. The hooks that we hung on the pram itself became like … a lot easier for me when I was out and about balancing stuff. (Shona)

Shona spoke with fondness about an earlier pram, and how the "basket was huge and amazing", which was beneficial for storing a "lot of stuff underneath". Shona describes the pram as "symbolic" and discusses the emotional connection she has with her pram, expressing that it was very emotional when she got rid of the first pram that her daughter had grown out of.

Akin to Shona, Laura tells of the significant thought process that goes into which mobility aid to use each day:

> [My daughter] recently got a powered wheelchair, so depending on where we are going and the accessibility of the place/how crowded it is etc, we either take her power chair or her manual wheelchair. The power chair has no basket underneath to put things in, so everything has to be hung on the handles. The manual wheelchair has a basket and long handle going across so it's easy to store things and have a 'wheelchair organiser' on the back with things we might need in a hurry (phone/juice/tissues etc). (Shona)

Likewise, Kelly discusses the affordances of both a carrier, and a pram, and which factors may influence her decision regarding which mobility aid to use:

> The carrier enables me to contain my younger child when my eldest is having a meltdown and is at risk of hurting his brother. It also helps when his legs are tired. The double pushchair is really helpful for longer trips and for when my eldest needs a rest and time out from over stimulation. (Kelly)

Participants in our study demonstrated a significant amount of agency in adapting their pram to greater facilitate their comfortable mobilities, through accessories including: separately purchased rain covers; added hooks; and the addition and subsequent retraction of a drink holder:

> **Samantha Wilkinson** (using the photograph to prompt discussion): Is that a rain cover on the pram?
>
> **Shona**: Yes it is. So it didn't [the raincover] come with the pram by default, but we bought it with the pram immediately because I'm of the belief that when you live somewhere like Manchester, you can't let the rain stop [you]. You go outside because you'll never be outside.
>
> So I was showing that the basket underneath is now full of shopping. So I'd just been to the supermarket and then I'm using the hook on the handle. So I've kind of adapted it (Shona).
>
> It is actually just a few toys, mostly food, mostly food and bottles of water. And actually, we had a coffee cup holder on our last pram. But when you push the pram it shaked so much, the coffee just spills everywhere. So I just put the coffee underneath now (Shona).

Conclusions

The preliminary findings from this pilot study bring to the fore the hitherto overlooked complexities of access-making mobilities for disabled parents and/or parents of disabled children. The use of a photograph-elicitation methodological approach facilitated insight into the preparation, barriers, and adaptive strategies participants use when walking and wheeling in Greater Manchester. The findings reinforce the need to recognise these experiences within urban planning,

Figure 2: Improvising and making adaptions to support 'successful' mobility.

policy, and academic discussions of mobility. As this paper has demonstrated, preparation for everyday mobilities extends beyond packing essential items; it involves extensive strategic thinking about accessibility, comfort, and contingencies for both disabled parents and/or parents of disabled children. The study participants underscored how mobility-related decisions – such as selecting prams, slings, or wheelchairs – are influenced by the need for physical support, storage, and ease of navigation in different spaces and places. For some participants in the study, the emotional connections to these mobility aids further illustrate their significance beyond functionality. Despite participant's agency in adapting their mobility aids to enhance their access-making mobilities, barriers to mobility remain for many participants in the study, for instance, in terms of inaccessible public spaces (heavy doors, small door frames, small spaces, and noisy spaces). To circumvent some of these barriers, participants displayed expertise in researching destinations in advance, avoiding crowded areas, and even considering investing in personal mobility solutions such as portable ramps to counteract urban inaccessibility. The insights from this study contribute to the growing field of mobilities research by operating at the intersection of disability, parenting, and im/mobilities. By bringing to the fore the lived experiences of disabled parents and parents of disabled children, we advocate for more inclusive urban planning and mobility policies.

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