Family life in urban public spaces: stretching the boundaries of sociological attention

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This article contributes to a reconceptualisation of the boundaries of sociological attention regarding where family is enacted. Despite being aware of the cultural contingency of the distinction that is drawn between the public and private spheres, family scholars in the Global North tend to study families as bounded units with an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’, and as spatially centred in the home. I argue that there is a need to systematically explore how mundane interactions and activities in public settings are woven into family life. Furthermore, drawing from research into family life in cities, I make the case for conceptualising public spaces as aspects of and even as characters in family life, and ask how people realise their family capacities in these. I propose that keeping these different facets of family life in view both analytically and empirically could lead to a radical shake-up of sociological thinking about family.

Key words family life in public • sociology of attention • public/private divide • family studies • urban studies

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Introduction

This article is concerned with how sociologists conceptualise and study families, with a particular focus on the gaps in sociological attention regarding family life in public spaces. The significance of public spaces for family life became tangible during the COVID-19 pandemic when people in many countries faced restrictions on what they could do outside their homes. Suddenly forbidden, previously taken-for-granted activities – such as spending an afternoon shopping or accompanying children to the playground – came into relief. As a sociologist fascinated by family life and cities, my interest was piqued regarding the significance of family practices that take place in public view.
At the core of my article lies a concern with how the distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private’ spaces and spheres has informed how scholars have studied family life. Social scientists have explicated the historical emergence of the public/private distinction in Western cultures as well as its gendered, racialised, classed and age-related impacts (for example, Barrett and McIntosh, 1982; Gubrium and Holstein, 1990; Reynolds and Erel, 2018; May, 2019). A rich seam of Foucauldian work explores the origins of the contemporary distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private’ in Europe and how this division has shaped family life. Working-class families were a particular focus of early governmentality, which aimed to contain working-class children and men in the home and to exclude non-familials from the family space (Pestaña, 2012: 131). Postcolonial theorists have examined how ‘public’ and ‘private’ have been conceived in the context of colonialism and the effects of this on intimate life (for example, McClintock, 1995; Fernandes, 1997; Emberley, 2001). These literatures tell us that the public/private distinction has been differently mobilised in relation to different populations. The working classes and racialised minorities in the Global North and indigenous communities in settler-colonial societies, for example, have never had the same rights as the White middle and upper classes have to a private sphere protected from state intrusion.

In his essay ‘On the family as a realized category’, Bourdieu (1996) built on existing literature on the public/private distinction to explore the dominant Western view of the family as a bounded unit separate from the exterior. He observed that the differentiation between private and public is the result of a ‘sustained effort of juridical [sic] and political construction’ that helps to obscure the fact that ‘the public is present in the private’ and that ‘the private is a public matter’ (p. 25). What is notable in Bourdieu’s analysis is that he draws our attention to ‘the symbolic barrier of the threshold’ of the house as the boundary between the inner sanctum of the family and the external world (p. 25). Consequently, the house comes to symbolise ‘a stable, enduring locus for ‘the family’, which is correspondingly ‘durably associated with a house’ (p. 20). Foucault (2016[1999]: 175) similarly argued that, with the emergence of modern governmentality, the family came to shrink to a unit made up of relations between parents and children, and that this family unit came to have a spatial expression in the home, enclosed as it was ‘in a dense affective space’.

The analyses of Bourdieu and Foucault bring to view the historically and culturally contingent nature of the understanding that family life is centred in the private sphere of the home. Despite being aware of this, contemporary family scholars still tend to unquestioningly locate family life in the home. This, I argue, is a blind spot in family studies that deserves analysis. But first, a brief note on terminology. Below, I use ‘house’ and ‘home’ interchangeably, but I do so with the caveat that members of a household do necessarily associate meanings of ‘home’ with the house in which they live (Mallett, 2004).

My aim in this article is to encourage a shift in the attentional focus of family sociologists such that the activities of family members in public spaces, and public spaces themselves, come to be seen as a core seam of family life. First, I engage with the notion of sociological boundaries of attention and how these can be challenged through interdisciplinary dialogue that aims for ‘stereoscopic vision’ wherein different conceptual lenses are brought to bear on family life (Sousanis, 2015: 37). The subsequent analysis is grouped around three conceptual lenses: doing and displaying family in public; interactions with strangers and acquaintances in public spaces; and public spaces as characters in family life. Much of the research that follows families
outside the home takes place in urban settings, which is why I will be focusing on the city. In the concluding section, I argue for a need to keep these different conceptual lenses in simultaneous view when we study families.

**Boundaries of sociological attention**

This article interrogates what family sociologists do and do not include in their conceptualisation of family life, with a particular focus on how the literature has dealt with family life in public spaces. The spirit in which I ask these questions is inspired by David Morgan’s work, which was similarly concerned with questioning how families were conventionally seen and studied (Morgan, 1996; 2011). Rather than taking family structure as a starting point, Morgan urged scholars to pay attention to how family was ‘done’ through everyday family practices. Furthermore, I draw on Zerubavel’s (2015) sociology of attention, especially his argument about the collective, usually implicit, agreements that are reached concerning what is and is not worthy of attention. The ‘collective attention patterns’ that result from such agreements form the basis of ‘attentional communities’, the members of which are ‘perceptually readied’ to notice things ‘that reflect [their] collective expectations’ (Zerubavel, 2015: 52, 53).

Family sociology is one such attentional community. A collective expectation shared among Euro-American family sociologists is that the public and the private spheres of life are separate and that family life is predominantly located in the private sphere of the home (Jiménez, 2003). This is also, perhaps surprisingly, true of geographers who study families (Valentine, 2008). One explanation might be the tendency of family studies to adopt a sedentary and immobile approach while endorsing immobility ‘as the norm for family life’ (Holdsworth, 2013: 75). Holdsworth points out that when studied through the lens of mobility, we see that family is not confined within the home and that mobility is important for how families ‘do’ family. Jiménez (2003: 150) similarly argues that while families ‘do indeed live in houses’, the common coupling of family and home is artificial given that families ‘also hold themselves together outside the house’ and that it is ‘what they do outside the house that brings value to the family’.

The distinction drawn between public and private spheres is reflected in the (sub)disciplinary boundaries concerning how families are studied in public spaces. For example, the study of interactions with strangers in public spaces tends to be left to urban sociologists, who in turn rarely theorise family relationships. Geographers, on the other hand, while they do study geographies of intimacy, do so through the lens of the individual rather than of relationships. This observation has led Valentine (2008; 2008) to describe family studies as ‘an absent presence’ in geography. I suggest that similarly, urban studies tend to focus on the constellations of people that make use of and traverse through public space, while the nature and content of their relational lives remain obscured from view. Such a division of labour is the result of what Zerubavel (2015: 56, 63) calls the ‘intellectual blinders’ adopted by ‘attentional subcultures’ as they ‘confine their scholarly attention to specific “fields”’. Such siloed thinking is problematic because it can create a ‘flatness of sight’ (Sousanis, 2015: 6).

In family sociology, flatness of sight means that our view of families tends to be restricted to particular activities and interactions, conducted in certain settings, while analytical weight is placed on family relationships and less on other aspects, such as how these relationships are realised in space. In the words of Zerubavel (2015) and Brekhus
certain aspects of family life are foregrounded such that they become figures with recognisable contours, whereas other dimensions of family life, such as what happens outside the home, fall into the background. This is not to say that family life outside the home is absent from family sociology. Indeed, I draw from such studies in this article. But rather, the question is how it is present; I would say ‘dimly and marginally’ (Zerubavel, 2015: 77), glimpsed in the background. I am urging family sociologists to pay a different kind of attention to these background features of family life by engaging in a process of reverse marking (Brekhus, 1998). This entails giving previously ‘unmarked background features’ (Brekhus, 1998: 44) of family life a shape of their own.

My process of reverse marking draws inspiration from work by Cresson (1997) and Terrail (1997) who explored the boundaries of attention of medical sociology and sociology of education, respectively, in relation to family life. They argued that when these subdisciplines do focus on families, they tend to be interested in extreme and problematic cases, and to treat families as a variable rather than interrogating family as such. ‘Family’ is reduced to a container of relationships, while these relationships and their gendered and generational characteristics are rarely analysed as such. Analogously, I contend, family sociology tends to treat public space as a mere context for doing and displaying family, rather than as an analytical category.

I aim to foreground public space with the help of what Sousanis (2015: 37) calls ‘stereoscopic vision’, which entails interweaving ‘multiple strands of thought’ to create a ‘richly dimensional tapestry’. The act of interweaving means that ‘[e]xisting boundaries are transcended’ because ‘borders become links’ that create ‘an interconnected, inclusive network’ (p. 37). In the resultant tapestry:

Distinct viewpoints still remain, now no longer isolated, each informing the other in iterative fashion viewed as integral to the whole. In this new integrated landscape lies the potential for a more comprehensive understanding. (Sousanis, 2015: 37, emphases added)

What is particularly appealing is Sousanis’s emphasis on the importance of keeping different viewpoints in view at the same time to understand how they are interconnected. The result is what Sousanis calls an ‘unflattening’ of our field of vision. Such stereoscopic vision can be achieved using Mason’s (2011) facet methodology, a research orientation that is concerned with the multi-dimensionality of the lived world. It is built on the understanding that because the different dimensions, or facets, of a social phenomenon are connected, research aims to ‘seek out the[se] entwinements’ (Mason, 2011: 79, emphasis in original). This should however be done with an awareness that the facets are ‘not just “there”’ but are ‘brought into being through the critical and imaginative practice of … researchers’ (Mason, 2011: 81, emphasis added).

In the analysis below, inspired by how Cresson (1997) and Terrail (1997) conducted their analyses, I bring into dialogue research conducted by family sociologists and scholars from a range of disciplines including urban studies and geography. This process is important because the different spheres of life that these specialisations carve up as distinct are mutually constitutive and bring into relief different facets of the same ‘thing’ (Terrail, 1997; Mason, 2011). For example, a family sociologist and an urban sociologist might have different readings of a family group walking through a public space. This is because of what they foreground, namely, family relationships or public relations respectively. A geographer might offer yet a third interpretation
based on a critical reading of the affordances of public space. An important part of the stereoscopic vision I am aiming for is holding *in simultaneous view* the different conceptual lenses adopted in these (sub)disciplines. In practice, this requires iteratively and in an analytically ‘nomadic’ fashion shifting between different ‘analytic vantage points’, thus bringing into view ‘different layers of social phenomena that are visible from some vantage points while hidden from others’ (Brekhuis, 1998: 47).

An exhaustive overview of research on family life as it is ‘done’ outside the home is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, I bring together studies that offer some insight into how the private/public distinction informs the boundaries of attention in family sociology. Most of the empirical examples in this article concern parents and children because it is these families that gain the most attention from family scholars. The sections that follow group together texts according to the conceptual lens through which they bring to light family life in public. I first discuss examples of empirical research from what could broadly be termed ‘family studies’ which focus on what families *do* outside the home and how they *display* themselves in public. Second, I explore studies that offer insight into the significance that *interactions with strangers and acquaintances* have for family life. Third, I engage with texts that bring *the spatial* into view as an analytical category. These, when brought together, offer a stereoscopic vision into aspects of family life that tend to be marginal in mainstream sociological accounts.

**Families venture outside the home**

I begin by exploring a body of work within family studies that focuses specifically on the activities that families engage in when they venture outside the home. Lilius (2016: 1771) notes that ‘[m]uch of what urban parents and children do together today takes place outside – away from the home and in the public arena’ (p. 1771). Haldar and Røsvik’s (2021) analysis of travel diaries written by Norwegian school pupils provides more detail on family life as it is conducted across a variety of public spaces, with parents and children engaging in a range of activities such as shopping and cycling. Haldar and Røsvik conclude that ‘[t]he family is shaped by the back and forth from home’ (2021: 119). Public spaces such as parks and cafés are important destinations for families with children (for example, Karsten, 2003; 2008; Loukaitou-Sideris and Sideris, 2009; Karsten and Felder, 2015).

But public spaces are also more than mere destinations. Haldar and Røsvik (2021) observe that while they are out and about, parents and children ‘do’ family (see Morgan, 1996; 2011). For example, the literature on leisure and sports venues tells us that parents bring their children to such venues not just for pleasure, but also to build family relationships and socialise their children (DeVault, 2000; Hallman and Benbow, 2007; Kremer-Sadlik and Kim, 2007). Here family members also become knitted into broader social networks, individually and as a family unit (Fletcher, 2020). But where, when and how it is appropriate to ‘do’ family is culturally prescribed, as exemplified by Herrero-Arias et al’s (2020) study of migrant parents in Norway. While the migrant parents felt that the Norwegian emphasis on children’s outdoor activities was potentially unsafe, their own late-night communal celebrations were in turn deemed a ‘risk’ to child wellbeing by Norwegian health and childcare professionals. Normative prescriptions are in other words an important feature of family life in public.
Family life in urban public spaces

Family holidays offer an opportune setting in which to study the conduct of family practices in public. This is because while on holiday, families ‘reconfigure family relationships’ and ‘establish and reinstate their collective identities’ (Hall and Holdsworth, 2016: 296, 297). A key family practice that families engage in while on holiday is family display. Finch (2007: 66–67) has argued that for practices to constitute family practices, ‘these actions need to be understood by others as carrying meaning associated with “family”’. While on holiday, families tend to ‘perform family as it should be’ (Hall and Holdsworth, 2016: 295), as illustrated in Larsen’s (2005) study of tourist photography in Denmark. Larsen observed that families try to capture an idealised version of the loving family, while any family friction is put on hold while photographs are taken.

According to Finch (2015: 73), families are more on display while on holiday because ‘holidays mean that life is lived more publicly’. This statement might well be true for families in the White, middle-class and heterosexual majority because they are likely able to go about their daily lives without a sense of being publicly observed. In contrast, those who do not fit within the norm and therefore feel ‘out of place’ (Ahmed, 2000) are likely to have an acute sense of being observed by others and of living their daily lives in public view (see May, 2019 for an overview). The normative landscape that families must navigate while out in public thus encompasses both the idealised families we live by and the variety of institutional and structural power relations that make up the public sphere (DeVault, 2000). There is evidence that class (Karsten, 2008; Karsten and Felder, 2015), dis/ability (Ryan, 2008), sexuality and ‘race’/ethnicity influence how family members display family in public spaces. I discuss examples of the latter two because these have gained the most attention recently from family scholars.

Many same-sex parents become in a heightened manner aware of their family displays in public because public spaces tend to be ‘sites of naturalised heterosexuality’ (Gabb, 2005: 422) where heterosexual identities are the expected norm. Same-sex parents find themselves in a range of child-related settings and networks, such as maternity clinics, childcare centres and schools, where this assumption of heterosexuality is particularly strong. Consequently, same-sex parents report a heightened sense of being not only visible but under surveillance and scrutiny (Gabb, 2005; Almack, 2007). This renders their family displays highly conscious, even political, acts (Almack, 2007; Hicks, 2011). This sense of visibility is shared by families from minority ethnic or racialised backgrounds because they depart from the implicit norm of whiteness (Anderson, 2015).

As family members move through a multitude of public spaces, they must navigate several, at times contradictory, norms related to these. For example in the US, Black people have to become adept at ‘code-switching’ as they move between predominantly white and black spaces (Abdill, 2018). This code-switching also influences how family relationships are conducted. In her study of Black fathers living in Bedford-Stuyvesant, a neighbourhood in New York characterised by concentrated poverty, Abdill (2018) observed that there is a certain ‘cool’ public front that is expected of Black working-class men. This performance of masculinity influences how they interact with their children in public, to an extent obscuring the more tender, nurturing or playful aspects of their relationships. Abdill explains that for Black men who are used to code-switching, displaying fatherhood in differing ways depending on context is nothing unusual.
The work discussed in this section has illustrated the range of things that families do outside the home and how their family displays are shaped by normative prescriptions that underpin family life and public spaces alike. I now turn to explore interactions with strangers and acquaintances, a facet of family life that has hitherto been relatively ignored by family scholars.

Interactions with strangers and acquaintances

The study of interactions with strangers and acquaintances usually falls within the remit of urban studies, which perhaps explains why the few studies that do explore such interactions in relation to family life are mostly set in urban contexts. Morgan (2009) did importantly pave the way to understanding the significance of fleeting interactions with strangers and acquaintances in personal life, but he did not discuss how these entwine with family relationships. In conceptualising this latter point, I find enlightening Bissell’s (2013: 355) critique of the mobilities literature for its tendency to focus on how mobility aids the ‘active achievement of already-established social relations’ such as family relationships. Instead, he urges us to also pay attention to ‘the near-dwellers that are encountered in everyday family life as a result of being mobile’. Similarly, I argue, sociological discussions of family life rarely include these near-dwellers, such as ‘[o]ther people in the shop, neighbours, teachers, bus drivers, train conductors, street sweepers, postal workers/mail carriers, delivery drivers, etc.’ (p. 355), or the ‘transient, emergent relations’ (p. 357) that family members have with them. I propose that we go a step further, namely that research into family life could benefit from keeping in simultaneous view ‘co-presence with specific, significant others’ and ‘other multiple near-dwellers’ (Bissell, 2013: 357).

Existing research does offer glimpses into the insights that such an analytical move might afford. Finch’s (2015) analysis of British people’s accounts of their family holidays illustrates how encounters with people from different backgrounds allow families to reach an understanding of ‘what kind of family we are’. For example, class differences in how and what families eat or whether and how they show affection for each other in public can be important points of comparison. Abdill’s (2018) study of Black fathers living in Bedford-Stuyvesant also provides insight into how interactions with strangers and acquaintances can inform how family relationships are conducted. She observes a shift to public fathering in the neighbourhood, visible in greater numbers of fathers out and about with their children and involved in their children’s schooling. This, Abdill argues, encourages other fathers to become visibly involved in the lives of their children. In addition, relatives, friends and neighbours offer ‘[i]mplicit and explicit judgments of new fathering roles’ which ‘greatly influence[s] the adoption of fathering roles’ by fathers living in the neighbourhood (p. 77). In this way, interactions with those outside the immediate family come to shape ‘a family’s internal processes’ (p. 122).

How interactions with strangers become woven into experiences of family life is the focus of a recent study by Klocker and Tindale (2021) of the stereotypes encountered by visibly different mixed-ethnicity families in Australia. The nature of the stereotypes varied depending on which family members were out and about together. For example, a Malaysian mother recounted that she was often mistaken for the nanny when she was accompanied by her lighter-skinned children, but when she and the children were joined by her white husband, the family ‘made sense’ and she
was correctly identified as the mother. The point I take from Klocker and Tindale is that these interactions with strangers to an extent informed how their research participants felt about themselves as individuals and as a family.

To sum up, mundane interactions in public with strangers and acquaintances are an important feature of family life because they shape people’s experiences of their families and can also become woven into relationships between family members. I contend that these aspects could be studied in a more systematic manner across a range of families from different backgrounds, not just in the case of families from minority backgrounds or of extraordinary times such as family holidays.

**Through the looking glass: families in cities**

In the final part of my argument, I explore how our view of families could be further unflattened if our analytical viewfinder kept in sight families and cities in equal measure. There is a fascinating body of research within what I, as a shorthand, call urban studies that explores the relationship between families and the city. However, when these studies – conducted by sociologists, geographers, planners and more – bring into view families, ‘family’ tends to remain a bounded unit making use of city spaces in particular gendered, racialised and classed ways (for example, Karsten, 2003; 2008; Loukaitou-Sideris and Sideris, 2009; Karsten and Felder, 2015). Conversely, in family studies, the city is backgrounded as mere context. What is missing, I argue, is a systematic analysis of the relationship between families and urban spaces where both are equally foregrounded.

It is worth noting that most of the empirical work discussed so far originates in the Global North, where the public/private distinction is rooted in a particular history of industrial capitalism and where the privacy of the home is for many, though not all, a taken-for-granted privilege. In the Global South, personal and family lives are not necessarily sequestered in private spaces and the street can be an important venue for everyday life. This is perhaps most starkly the case for the urban dispossessed such as street children who eat, sleep, work and form relationships on the streets (Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi, 2010). Bayat (2013: 16) has written about how marginalised groups in cities in the Middle East ‘flood’ public spaces in an act of ‘everyday encroachment’ whereby they assert their presence and make claims to rights and services. Given that his focus is on the political and urban realms, it is perhaps not surprising that, for the most part, Bayat describes the unemployed people, street vendors and street children who lead many aspects of their lives out in public as ‘atomized individuals’ (p 53). He makes only occasional mention of their personal and family relationships and thus this dimension of street life remains occluded.

In contrast, in her study of a traditional mahalle (neighbourhood) in Istanbul, Turkey, Mills (2007) observed that the ‘interior space of the family’ is extended ‘to the residential street’, while practices of neighbouring meant that ‘home spaces [are] open to neighbors’ (p. 336). However, what remains overlooked in Mills’s article, focused as it is on neighbouring relations, is how family is done in public and the significance of this for family relationships. I suggest that adopting a relational lens allows us to see that, even when they are not involved in collective action, people are not necessarily as atomised as Bayat assumes, but bring their relational selves with them wherever they go. What would also come into view are the ways in which families conduct their familial lives on the residential street of the neighbourhood.
But it is important to keep in mind that even in the Global North, the distinction between public and private is not uniform. For some, such as those living in institutional settings, including children’s homes and care homes, and families who live in the same building as their business such as a hotel or shop, their home is also a public or institutional space (Dorrer, 2010; Seymour, 2011; Lovatt, 2018). And, as documented by Abdill (2018), in deprived Black communities in the US, the public/private distinction can become blurred because the overcrowding of housing means that many ‘private’ interactions take place in public spaces such as street corners and barber shops. It is here that men exchange viewpoints and witness other fathers’ interactions with their children, which then shapes how they ‘do’ fatherhood, as discussed above. In this way, place itself comes to shape family life.

And vice versa, some notable studies in Europe on the growing number of middle-class parents who choose to live in city centres show how these families are shaping their urban environments. By making ‘the domestic sphere visible in the city’, these families are ‘domesticfying’ city centres (Lilius, 2016: 1771). In their study of middle-class family life in Paris, de Singly and Giraud (2012) found that the neighbourhood is an important location for socialising for parents and children. For example, picnics organised with other families were a popular activity. Sociability in urban settings is often centred around children to the extent that many of the parents in de Singly and Giraud’s study almost exclusively socialised with the parents of their children’s friends. City planners and businesses also cater to such families with disposable incomes (Karsten and Felder, 2015). De Singly and Giraud (2012) note another way in which family life and the city are mutually constitutive. Due to children’s education having become a primary focus for many parents, those parents who have the resources to do so, choose to live close to good schools. This then drives house prices up in these areas, eventually leading to a certain homogenisation of the local population in terms of socioeconomic status. In these ways, families structure social relations in cities, something about which, according to de Singly and Giraud, many sociological studies on urban life remain silent.

While the studies above do illuminate the relationship between family life and cities, they do not offer an analysis of space as such. For this, I turn to Jiménez’s (2003) ethnographic study in the Chilean city of Antofagasta. Jiménez critiques existing research on social relationships for its conventional understanding of space as ‘the (geographical) framework of action’ and of social relationships ‘as something exterior to and distinct from the setting where they take “place”’ (p. 140). Instead, he depicts social relationships as ‘inherently spatial’ and space as ‘an instrument and dimension of people’s sociality’ (p. 140). Therefore, Jiménez proposes that public spaces such as parks and avenues should be understood not merely as ‘the context … that frames the relationships’ but as ‘aspects of those relationships’ (p. 150, emphasis added).

Paraphrasing Jiménez (2003: 140), we can say that when people conduct their family relationships in public, these are not merely contained in space, but create space; at the same time, space is ‘no longer “out there”’, but is a ‘condition or faculty’ and ‘a capacity’ of family relationships. Jiménez’s study illustrates the importance of having destinations such as playgrounds and parks outside the home to go to with family members, not only because these offer things to do, but also because it is while moving through these spaces that family members realise their capacities. Take for example zoos, ‘family-friendly’ leisure spaces that are ‘intentionally constructed social and cultural landscapes’ the aim of which is to act as ‘stages for behaviors understood
to promote family interaction and togetherness’ (Hallman and Benbow, 2007: 827). The venue itself is thus important for the ‘doing’ of family. Public settings are in other words not merely ‘geographical locations’ but ‘vehicles for the expression of social relationships’ (Jiménez, 2003: 146). Not being able to ‘deploy their capacities’, for example for lack of appropriate space, in effect curtails social relationships. Jiménez argues that ‘people’s sense of power and efficacy flows from their realization of spatial forms’ (p. 147). The activities of family members outside the confines of the home ‘brings value to the family’, while ‘the family’ is not a closed unit but instead a ‘propagated structure’ that encompasses other relationships and spaces beyond the private dwelling (p. 150). The role of public settings in family life was made visible in a powerful way through its absence during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Jarvis’s (2005) fascinating study on the relationship between urban infrastructures and family life in London helps illustrate Jiménez’s argument about space as capacity. Jarvis argues that it is important to pay attention to how the attributes and amenities of a specific locality shape the activities and social encounters of family members. These attributes and amenities, such as ‘when and where the buses run, when the shops are open, how safe the streets appear, levels of congestion, parking restrictions and so on’ (p. 136) amount to what Jarvis calls the infrastructure of everyday life. Jarvis’s point is that this infrastructure becomes an integral part of how families with children organise their daily lives. The local labour market and the housing market will shape whether and how many hours a week parents work and whether they can afford to live close to their workplace. This in turn affects their patterns of movement between home, school and work as well as how these are coordinated between family members (often in a gendered fashion). All of this is of course also influenced by the unequal distribution of resources which for some means working two jobs to make ends meet or facing long and complicated commutes to work on public transport.

I argue that in Jarvis’s (2005) text, city spaces, including the inequalities by which they are riven, become more than a mere backdrop for family life – they emerge as characters in their own right. As noted above by Hallman and Benbow (2007) about zoos, how public settings are designed shapes how families experience place. In other words, families do not just live in or move through public settings, but the affordances and qualities of public spaces are ones that families live with in the sense that these actively shape the daily routines, activities and interactions of family members. I propose that it would be fruitful if family sociologists began to similarly conceptualise public spaces as aspects of or even characters in family life. This would entail a more systematic study of how people realise their family capacities in public spaces and how these spaces act in family life – but also vice versa, as shown by de Singly and Giraud (2012), how families shape the places in which they live.

**Conclusion: Ways forward**

I have aimed to persuade family sociologists that more systematic research is needed on how family life is conducted in public spaces. I have approached this question by bringing into view the boundaries of sociological attention (Zerubavel, 2015). Such an exercise in attending to and challenging disciplinary boundaries of attention can be fruitful because it can open up new ways of seeing both families and public spaces. Much of the existing research on families is centred on family relationships, with home as the locus of family life. Yet, as the examples that I have drawn from
above illustrate, the movements and activities of family members outside the home are important features of family life. While family life in public spaces has not escaped the attention of family scholars, I contend that the main focus has been on how family relationships are displayed to the outside world (for example, DeVault, 2000; Gabb, 2005; Almack, 2007; Finch, 2015). Analogously, while urban scholars do bring families into view in city spaces, they rarely follow families into their homes (for example, Karsten, 2008; Lilius, 2016). This empirical slicing of family life helps preserve the idea of a private ‘inside’ and a public ‘outside’. The analysis in this article has aimed to transcend these boundaries of thought by building a creative tension between family sociology’s tendency to see ‘family’ as separate from the ‘outside’ world and other disciplines’ inclination to see the goings-on in public settings as distinct from the private sphere of the family.

I conclude by considering ways forward for family sociology. I return to Sousanis’s (2015) notion of stereoscopic vision that creates an integrated and multi-layered landscape of interconnected viewpoints. Achieving this requires keeping different facets of a social phenomenon in view at the same time (Mason, 2011). This means viewing through an analytical lens not only family relationships and how these are displayed to non-familial audiences, but also relationships with strangers and acquaintances as they become woven into family life as well as space as a capacity. This entails, if not simultaneously foregrounding these different spheres of family life, then at least switching back and forth between different analytical lenses. In other words, what is needed is an analytically nomadic perspective whereby different analytic viewpoints are brought to bear on the analysis (Brekhus, 1998).

I propose that our sociological understanding of families could be ‘unflattened’ (Sousanis, 2015) if we systematically explored how mundane interactions and activities in public settings shape how family relationships are conducted and inform how family members understand their families. In practice, this means not assuming a priori where ‘family’ is happening, what constitutes ‘family life’ or what the boundaries of ‘family relationships’ are. Instead of studying families in specific spaces (homes) or in relation to specific relationships (such as parents and children) or practices (such as caring), it would be fruitful to re-train our sociological attention to remain alert to movement in and out of the house, to activities not necessarily coded as ‘family’ and to interactions with strangers and acquaintances.

Furthermore, by conceptualising public spaces as aspects of and even as characters in family life, we can appreciate how people realise their family capacities in public spaces and how these spaces act in family life. In other words, public spaces are more than a backdrop to family life and families are more than units populating public spaces. By this, I mean that public spaces – whether urban or rural – are not merely containers for family life, but that the affordances and characteristics of these spaces come to shape what families do and where, and also colour the affective quality of family life. I suggest that such an analytical shift could offer new insight into our understanding of how families are constituted and lived.

Our methods also need to become nomadic. Paraphrasing Cook et al.’s (2004) ‘follow the thing approach’, I suggest that it would be worth trying to ‘follow the family’ in an effort to gain insight into the ‘complex inter-spatiality’ (Valentine, 2008: 2097) as well as inter-relationality of family lives. A fitting way of conducting such research would be to adopt a facet methodology approach (Mason, 2011). As Mason notes, facets are not just substantive – what we look at – but also methodological, that is,
how we look. By devising a set of interlinked mini-investigations that shed light on the associations that exist between facets, we could empirically capture a wider set of ‘goings-on’ (Mason, 2018: 179) as part of family life.

There are inevitably limitations to my argument. It will not have escaped the reader’s attention that most of my empirical examples concern how parents and their children display themselves in and make use of public spaces. This merely reflects the fact that these are the relationships that have gained the most attention from scholars who have studied what families do outside their homes. There is a whole host of other family relationships that are not being noticed. Future research could focus on grandparents and grandchildren, siblings and extended kin. Another productive area of research would be how family life is conducted in a wider range of public settings and how interactions in these become woven into family relationships, as studies by Borgstrom, Ellis and Woodthorpe (2019) in hospitals and Davies (2018) and Chiong (2020) in schools indicate. Furthermore, while not solely focused on the Global North, the core argument of this article is probably most relevant to Anglo-European family scholars because of the particular distinctions that are drawn between public/private in Europe and by descendants of European colonisers in North America, Australia and New Zealand. An analysis of the boundaries of sociological attention among scholars working in the Global South would no doubt bring to light a different set of issues.

Regardless of the context, my fundamental point remains, namely that a key reason for engaging in a stereoscopic way of seeing is to ‘facilitate the emergence of new perspectives’ (Sousanis, 2015: 37). For example, by drawing connections between subdisciplinary fields of attention, I have tried to bring about fresh questions to explore. What if we did not presume the contours of family life? What if previously foregrounded figures, such as interactions with strangers and acquaintances as well as public spaces, became characters in their own right in our accounts of family life? Asking such questions brings to light the socially constructed boundary between ‘public’ and ‘private’. If done systematically, this could lead to a radical shake-up of sociological thinking about family. Family studies could be enriched were we to understand ‘family’ to be constituted not merely by family relationships as narrowly defined and if we instead brought into view the multitude of spaces and relationships that make up what it feels like to be a member of a family and what that family’s life consists of.

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Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

References
Family life in urban public spaces


