"I DECIDED TO INVEST IN MY KIDS' MEMORIES": FAMILY VACATIONS, MEMORIES, AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE FAMILY

SUSAN M. SHAW*, MARK E. HAVITZ,* and FERN M. DELEMERE†

*University of Waterloo, Canada
†Concordia University, Canada

This article explores the cultural significance of family vacations and the role that these vacations play in the social construction of the family. Based on a series of semistructured interviews with members of families living in Ontario, Canada, the article examines the meanings and experiences associated with family vacations for parents of school aged children. Family vacations were seen as a form of escape from the pressures of everyday life, even though they involved organizational and emotional work, especially for mothers. Family vacations were valued as an opportunity for family togetherness and for improving patterns of family communication. Of particular importance was the long-term goal of creating memories that would enhance family cohesion and construct and support a positive sense of family. The findings indicate that the cultural meanings associated with family vacations, at least for these Canadian families, may be different in some important ways from other forms of tourism.

Key words: Family vacations; Families; Memories; Social construction

Introduction

Family vacations constitute a major portion of leisure travel in North America and in other parts of the world (Mason, 1990; Nickerson & Jurowski, 2001; Ontario Ministry of Tourism and Recreation, 2003). Moreover, it has been estimated that, at least for the US, more than half of all family-related travel involves travel with children (Libbon, 1999). Given these statistics on the economic significance of this form of vacation travel to the tourism industry, it is surprising that relatively little research has been conducted on family vacations and the cultural significance of family-related travel that involves parents and children, and that this topic remains a "marginalized" area of study (Schänzel, Smith, & Weaver, 2005).

A small body of research does exist on family vacation decision making. Some of this research has documented changes in the relative involvement of husbands and wives in this type of decision making over the past few decades (Litvin, Xu, & Kang, 2004; Myers & Montcrief, 1978; Nichols & Snepenger, 1988), as well as the influ-

Address correspondence Susan Shaw, Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, University of Waterloo, Burt Matthews Hall, 200 University Avenue W., Ontario, Canada N2L 3G1. Tel: 519-888-4567; Fax: 519-886-2440; E-mail: sshaw@healthy.uwaterloo.ca

ence of children on vacation travel patterns (Nickerson & Jurowski, 2001). Other research has shown vacation decision making to be associated with the type of decision (e.g., financial matters vs. destination or activity selection), as well as stage of family life cycle, ego involvement, and level of satisfaction (Cosenza & Davis, 1981; Kang & Hsu, 2005; Madrigal, Havitz, & Howard, 1992; Murk, 1983; Seaton & Tagg, 1995). However, although increasing attention has been given to tourism meanings and experiences in recent years (Huxley, 2004; Tribe, 2005; White & White, 2004), relatively little attention has been paid to the meaning of family vacations to parents, or the significance of vacation travel for family life.

A couple of tourism studies have examined women's experiences of going on holiday with their children (Davidson, 1996; Deem, 1996). These studies have shown that family vacations are often experienced as "'work" by women and are not necessarily relaxing, because it is the mothers who have the responsibility of looking after children on vacations as well as for the organization and planning work involved. Thus, family vacations, at least for mothers, may not fit the typical picture of vacations as enjoyment, freedom of choice, and escape from everyday life obligations.

The studies of mothers' experiences of going on holiday with children represent an important first indication that different meanings may be associated with family leisure travel compared to other types of vacation experiences. However, this initial research did not explore, in detail, the meanings, values, hopes, and expectations linked to family vacations for mothers (or for other family members). A recent study of family holidays in Northern Europe (Gram, 2005), though, did explore holiday experiences, and particularly the "good experiences." From the parents' point of view, these good experiences were moments when all family members, and especially the children, were content and happy and there was no "nagging" or "sulking." Moreover, these good moments were also important in terms of whether or not the family vacation was seen by the parents to be "successful" or not.

While there is currently a lack of other empirical studies on experiences associated with family vacations, the research on family leisure provides

some additional clues about the importance of family time and "family togetherness," which may also be relevant. For example, studies have shown family leisure to be positively associated with family bonding and stability, and with healthy childhood socialization and development (Bialeschki & Kelly, 1996; Orthner & Mancini, 1991; Samuel, 1996; Shaw, 2001; Zabriske & McCormick, 2001). Further, the literature indicates that family leisure can be seen as a form of "purposive leisure" (Shaw & Dawson, 2001) in that parents deliberately plan and organize family activities in order to enhance interpersonal relationships among family members and to promote a sense of family unity and cohesion. For example, family leisure is valued because it is seen to provide opportunities to teach children about moral values, healthy lifestyles, the importance of family, and other important life lessons.

These ideas about family leisure reflect Daly's (1996) notion of "the family paradigm," which he discusses as a set of ideals and beliefs about the family that parents seek to create and maintain through spending time together with their children. Further, the purposive nature of family leisure is consistent with Parke and O'Neil's (1999) research on how parents seek to "manage" their children's lives to ensure that the children are exposed to positive environments and influences and protected, as far as possible, from negative ones. Some autoethnographic research also supports these assertions (Dustin, 2006; Havitz, 2007). According to Coakley (2006) and others (Furedi, 2002; Gatrell, 2005; Warner, 2005), parenting practices have undergone a significant cultural change in recent years. For example, parents worry more about their parenting, and whether they are "good parents," and are increasingly held responsible for their children's development and for their children's success in life. This cultural change in parenthood may help to explain why parents are willing to put time and effort into family leisure, even when (as research has shown) parents face high levels of stress in their everyday lives as they seek to balance the increasing demands of work and family (Moen, 2003; Presser, 2003; Swan & Cooper, 2005).

Other research has looked at mothers' and fathers' different experiences and levels of involve-

ment in family leisure (Larson, Gillman, & Richards, 1997; Shaw, 2001). While mothers do the major share of the work associated with family activities (Shaw, 2001), the time that men spend with their children has increased in recent years (Gauthier, Smeeding, & Furstenberg, 2004). Also, for men leisure has become the dominant context for interaction and participation with children, and closely linked to their identities as fathers (Harrington, 2006). Research by Such (2006) reinforces the importance of family leisure for fathers, but also suggests that fathers' experiences of "being with" their children (a leisure orientation) is qualitatively different from mothers' experiences of "being there" for their children (which implies a parenting or care giving responsibility).

Overall, application of the ideas generated through research on family leisure and on parenting suggests that parents may value the opportunities that family vacations provide. Recent changes in the ideology of parenting and the importance placed on spending time together as a family would support this contention. The meanings and experiences of family vacations may be gendered due to the gendered nature of parenting. Nevertheless, vacations are often thought of as time away from everyday obligations (whether or not this is always accomplished), and family vacations imply spending extended time together as a family. Thus, both mothers and fathers may see family vacations as a particularly significant part of family life.

The purpose of the present study was to explore the meanings of family vacations for parents traveling with their children, and to examine the significance of such vacations for family life. A constructionist framework (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Lorber & Farrell, 1991) was used to guide the study. Social constructionism has become widely used in recent years in family research: for example, to help understand different forms of transition to parenthood (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006; Hargreaves, 2006), and changing ideologies and meanings of "family" (Shanahan, 2005). Social constructionism has also been adopted to explore how dominant views of gender are perpetuated and reinforced in family settings (DeVault, 2003; Fox, 2001). In this study, the constructionist framework led to the assumption that meanings of family and of vacations are socially constructed through shared beliefs and interactions with others. Accordingly, it is through these interactions that the implicit or explicit negotiations about cultural values and beliefs associated with family and with family vacations are negotiated, constructed, and reconstructed.

The family can be seen as a social system (Parke, 2004), suggesting that all members of the family contribute to the construction of meaning, including mothers, fathers, and children. However, the intentions and experiences of parents are likely to differ from those of their children, given earlier research on parents' and children's different levels of satisfaction with vacation activities (Nickerson & Jurowski, 2001) and given evidence of the deliberateness of parenting and the desire of parents to influence and control their children's environment Moreover, research on the purposive nature of family leisure further indicates that family vacations may also be deliberately structured and designed to accomplish particular parental and familial goals. Thus, a logical first step in understanding the meanings of family vacations was deemed to be examination of the experiences and perspectives of parents, including both fathers and mothers.

The Study

The study involved a series of qualitative interviews with family members from 15 families, and included interviews conducted both before and after a specific summer family vacation. The study was designed this way to allow participants to focus on specific vacation events and experiences, as well as to allow discussion of their views and beliefs about family vacations in general. The discussions related to experiences and perspectives were subsequently used to develop an understanding of the central meanings and significance of family vacations from the parents' point of view. Although the children were involved in some of the interviews, only the data from the parents' interviews are used in this analysis.

The Families

The 15 families were recruited from three public schools located in different socioeconomic

neighborhoods in a Southern Ontario city. In order to maintain some homogeneity among the families in terms of family life cycle stage, only families that had as least one child in the 10–12 year age group were invited to participate. This "middle stage" of child rearing was selected because it is a time when a wide range of children's activities are available (Dunn, Kinney, & Hofferth, 2003). It is also a stage in family life when children are a key preoccupation (Tribe, 1999) and when family leisure activities, including children and parents together, are common (Shaw & Dawson, 2001).

The group of 15 families was comprised of three single parent families (one lone father family and two lone mother families), and 12 two-parent heterosexual families. Although a diversity of family types was desired, no gay or lesbian families volunteered, and probably a different recruitment strategy would be needed in future research to ensure the participation of gay and lesbian communities. While each of the families who participated had at least one child aged 10–12, some had more than one child in this age group. All of the families had either two or three children in total. Three families had an older child (teenager) as well as one or more children in the targeted age group, and three families had a younger child (aged between 5 and 9 years).

The families were relatively diverse in terms of employment and income levels. Of the 12 two-parent families, there were three families in which both parents worked full-time, six families in which the father was employed full-time and the mother part-time, and three families in which the mothers were at home full-time (one of these mothers was looking for paid work at the time). Among the three single parents, two were employed full-time and the third was unemployed, but looking for work. There was also a wide range of occupations among the parents, including professional jobs (e.g., university professor, engineer, teacher, nurse, physician, financial consultant), clerical jobs (e.g., bookkeeper, office manager, clerk), technical, skilled, and semiskilled jobs (e.g., mechanic, computer support worker, and veterinary services worker), and jobs in the retail industry (including car sales as well as other sales positions).

The Interviews

The study included initial family interviews, prevacation interviews (typically conducted with each parent individually a week or two prior to the planned vacation), postvacation interviews (including interviews with each parent and each child as soon after the vacation as possible) and subsequent verification interviews. In total there were 65 interviews with parents: 32 of these were with mothers only, 16 were with fathers only (reflecting the difficulty of scheduling some father interviews), and 17 were joint interviews.

During the initial interviews, information was gathered about the family, including the number and ages of the children, the cultural background of the parents, and the parents' occupations. In addition, the parents were asked about any initial plans for their summer vacation, including information about any decisions already made.

During the prevacation interviews, the parents were asked to confirm their vacation plans and/or to talk about how and why these plans had changed. A wide range of different types of vacations had been scheduled, including relatively high-cost vacations (e.g., travel to Europe, to the US, to the East Coast of Canada, and to the Rockies and the West Coast), as well as lower cost holidays (such as camping, cottage holidays, or within Province driving and staying at motels or resorts). One family was not able to plan a regular vacation away from home because of work-related constraints, and ended up taking several day trips instead. During the prevacation interviews the parents were also asked about their hopes and expectations for their family vacation, as well as about the planning and organizational processes involved. For example, questions included: "What kinds of things do you hope to get out of this holiday?"; "What activities do you plan or hope to do?"; and "Do you anticipate any difficulties?."

The postvacation interviews were used to talk to the family members about their vacation experiences, including both positive as well as negative experiences. Information was gathered about the kinds of activities the family, or certain family members, had been involved in during their vacations (e.g., swimming, canoeing, going to cultural

or historical sites, and going to theme parks and other tourist attractions), and how they felt about these activities. Another focus of discussion at this time revolved around the satisfaction (or lack of satisfaction) with these vacation experiences, their feelings and values associated with family vacations in general, and their thoughts, in retrospect, about the value and benefits (or negative outcomes) associated with family vacations. For example, parents were asked questions such as: "What were the best (and worst) parts of the vacation?"; "What do you think were the benefits?"; "Any negative outcomes?"; and "What role do you think vacations play in family life?" These interviews were typically the longest and most extensive interviews that were conducted because in most cases parents were eager to share their experiences and found it easier to talk about actual events rather than initial hopes and expectations. The parents tended to be more reflective in these interviews as well, giving additional insight into what they valued and why.

The verification interviews, conducted a few months later, were used to discuss the data analysis that had been completed up to that point and the initial themes that had been developed. There was general support in these interviews for the initial thematic analysis, and in some cases parents provided additional thoughts and observations.

The Analysis

The interviews were all recorded and later transcribed. The QSR NVivo software program was used to organize and manage the transcribed data, as well as to record codes and coding decisions as the analysis progressed.

The size and extent of the data set, as well as the involvement of several researchers in the analysis, led to a number of challenges, including the need for consistency in the coding process. This challenge was addressed through the development of broad codes or categories (such as values, activities, benefits, negatives, and constraints) in the initial stage of the data analysis. These were open codes, but kept deliberately broad to ensure that no relevant data would be excluded. The codes and code descriptions, as well as specific categori-

zation decision, were discussed by the researchers in a series of meetings.

After all of the interview data had been coded using these initial open codes, the first author worked with the data to develop axial codes related to the meaning and significance of family leisure, such as the categories of benefits perceived, the specific values mentioned, and types of negative experiences reported. This process involved comparing data segments both within and between interviews, with attention to a number of different factors, including gender, occupational status, and type of vacation, etc. In addition, the developing codes were examined for internal consistency and for distinction from and relationship to other themes. During this stage of the analysis some codes were merged, while others were subdivided and/or redefined. The final stage of analysis was that of selective or theoretical coding, when attention was paid to the development of core or central thematic ideas. This was done through a careful examination of the relationships among and between codes, and through drawing comparisons between individual participants as well as between mothers and fathers.

The Findings

The analysis process led to the development of three main themes that best reflected the meanings and experiences of the parents. These were: 1) that family vacations were seen by most parents as an escape from the pressures of everyday life; 2) that parents were determined to make use of this opportunity to spend time together as a family; and 3) that creating positive memories of family for their children was an important (and urgent) long-term goal for the parents, and one that was associated with strengthening the family unit. Within these themes there were some commonalities of meaning that were shared by mothers and fathers, and there was also some evidence of gendered perspectives and experiences.

The Family Vacation as an Escape From the Obligations of Everyday Life

Although previous research has indicated that family vacations are not free of work and respon-

sibilities, at least for mothers, the data from this present study indicated that family vacations were seen as an escape from the stresses of daily life in a number of ways. Of interest, too, was the discovery that mothers were more likely to talk about escape than were fathers.

Both the fathers and the employed mothers talked about getting away from the stress and pressures associated with paid work. Several of the parents talked about having particularly stressful work. For example:

> Well for me personally, it was kind of . . . recharge your batteries right now. Like I have a stressful job, so it's really nice to go a hundred and eighty degrees, and go to a very nonstressful, relaxing environment. (Married father, 3 children)

One of the mothers also expressed a need to get away from the work environment, at least for a while:

> It eased out a lot of tension from work when I left [for vacation]. . . . It gave me the opportunity to sort of forget about it, and I could look at it more partially . . . when you're in the thick of it you're less objective. So it gave me that opportunity to sort of forget about it and relax and be able to come back with a fresh mind. (Married mother, 2 children)

Getting away was seen to be worthwhile even if the build up of work, such as the accumulation of emails, voice mails, and work orders, added to the stress of returning to work after the vacation.

Families in which both parents worked fulltime particularly valued the escape from work pressures. As one mother said:

> The time spent at home, there's my work, his work . . . where this (the vacation) is just us as a family . . . because your daily routines are basically work, and work, and work, and work. (Married mother, 3 children)

However, in general, it was the fathers who were more likely than mothers to characterize their lives as ongoing work-related stress, primarily because they were more likely to be working full-time and to see themselves as the primary income earner in the family.

A more evident gendering of the notion of escape, though, was that the women, unlike the men, talked at length about the need to escape from their everyday household responsibilities. Even the employed women were more likely to focus on getting away from household chores rather than from paid work obligations. Many talked about not having to do laundry while they were away (even though they were faced with considerable laundry on their return home), or not having to cook or clean up after every meal. For example:

> Got a week without washing laundry . . . you can do it all when you come home. (Married mother, 3 children)

> The benefit is the time to live away from the routine of life, and live away from the noise of traffic . . . working at home, cooking, doing dishes. (Single mother, 2 children)

Whether or not the mothers were able to escape cooking and other household chores depended, of course, on the type of holiday they had. For example, camping holidays provided less of a break from routine chores, although even on camping holidays meals at fast food restaurants provided some degree of escape for mothers.

Another form of escape that was commonly mentioned by mothers, but not by fathers, was the idea of getting away from the constant source of stress associated with the structured nature of family life. When at home, the mothers were responsible for their family's often complicated and busy schedule of activities, including the children's school and recreational activities, music lessons, band practices, and sports events, as well as doctor's appointments and birthday parties, etc. This not only involved a lot of driving, but it also meant keeping track of each family member's activities and making sure that the children were dressed and ready to go at the appropriate time. As one mother said,

> My kids are in lots of activities. . . . My daughter takes dance three times a week. My son takes dance and violin and we have midweek Sunday School, and [my younger son] has been taking swimming lessons and judo. . . . So for me it's [going on vacation] a step down from the treadmill. (Single mother, 3 children)

Some of the mothers talked about how their children needed a break from activities as well, suggesting that they, too, might be suffering from the stress of being over-scheduled.

> Because I feel like they [the children] . . . are pushed to do a lot of other things [in addition to school]. And they need down time that is just relaxing, that is not structured or geared towards just learning—down time. (Married mother, 3 children)

In general, from the parents' point of view, the idea of "escape" seemed to be important because of the high level of time stress experienced in everyday life. Consistent with the literature that indicates increasing levels of stress among parents (particularly among employed mothers) the lives of these parents seemed to include little "down time": there was always work to be done. One mother summed up the situation this way:

> I think the main reason that you have a holiday is to be able to relax. . . . In this day and age, with downsizing, reorganization, and everyone has to do more, that our lives are much more stressful than what they used to be. . . . So that's what a vacation does, for us, is to give us that time to relax and not always be go, go, go, go, go. (Married mother, 2 children)

Although family vacations may still involve family caregiving work, most of the parents indicated that, for them, work pressures were relieved, household chores were at least reduced, and perhaps more importantly (particularly for the mothers) the highly scheduled lifestyle that characterized their everyday family life was temporarily relaxed.

Taking Advantage of the Opportunity to Spend Time Together

The parents' escape from the pressure of everyday life at home did not mean that family vacation time was free from obligation or from a sense of purpose. Rather, vacations were seen to provide an important opportunity to spend time together as a family. Many of the parents, both mothers and fathers, felt that they were not able to spend much "quality time" with their children when at home.

Being on vacation, on the other hand, meant that the family was free of individual schedules, children's activity schedules, and other distractions.

Through their discussion of family vacations, the parents talked about a range of benefits that they associated with the family spending time together. These included talking to each other (something that happened much less often at home), getting to know each other better, becoming aware of each others' feelings, and developing more positive patterns of interaction. For some, especially in families where the father was employed but the mother was at home, it was particularly important for the father and children to be together on vacation. For others, seeing their children playing together and not fighting with each other was an important positive outcome of "family togetherness." Examples of these perspectives included:

> I think it would be important for families to, sort of, get back in touch with . . . be able to talk to every body . . . share your feelings and what not . . . important for me to see the kids playing together too. (Married mother, 3 children)

> Instead of racing around to music lessons, violin lessons, rehearsals . . . we can eat breakfast together every day . . . and dinner, and the kids would be off playing right after dinner. (Single mother, 3 children)

> You talk more with each other when you go camping. You see more of each other. (Married father, 3 children)

The parents were aware, of course, that these positive outcomes could not be guaranteed simply because of being on vacation. Rather vacation experiences had the potential to be "good" or "bad." Quarrels could erupt, and disagreements about what to do, what tourist attractions to visit, or even what restaurant to go to for dinner could become problematic. A couple of parents talked about the artificiality of family vacations. As one father said:

> Family vacations are artificial. They just are. You put four people in a car for 3,400 kilometers, in the same hotel room for 12 nights. We don't spend that much time with each other normally. . . . It has the potential to be good or bad. . . . It

was good to put the four of us together in one room for 12 days and discover, yeah, we can live together for 12 days without killing each other. (Married father, 2 children)

Another mother talked about the problem of forcing people to spend time together, and how she wanted her children to choose whether or not to go on the family vacation once they were old enough to do so. She explained how her parents had come to this decision "after 10 years of miserable vacations." She said,

It was one of the few things I think that they [her parents] did right, is to say, "why should I force you to come to Niagara Falls and hear you complain the whole time?" (Married mother, 2 children)

Nevertheless, even when these potential problems were recognized, all of the parents in this study felt that family vacations were important because of their *potential* for positive family outcomes. Vacations, as several parents pointed out, provided the opportunity to interact differently—and hopefully in positive ways—because they occurred away from the home setting and in what was designed to be a more "fun" environment. One father explained it this way:

I think [vacations] give the family a chance to interact in a different setting, often a setting meant to be more fun, more enjoyable, more engaging, and so I think family vacations give the family an opportunity to bond in a context where . . . where things are designed to be more fun. (Married father, 2 children)

And another father commented,

[At home] we get into patterns where we do the same thing over and over again . . . but vacations just kind of . . . get you into a new way of being together, and that's really valuable, I think. (Single father, 2 children)

The work associated with family vacations was clearly gendered, with women doing much of the interpersonal work as well as the planning and organizing, but even for the mothers this work was seen to be different from the normal everyday chores and responsibilities of being at home. Vacation work consisted of making sure that, as far as possible, the positive opportunities associated with family vacations were enhanced and that the negative outcomes were minimized. This involved finding "fun" activities that everyone would enjoy (or at least, that the children would enjoy), concentrating effort on "working things out" as a family, "deciding whose turn it is to choose," and dealing with problems such as "getting on each others' nerves."

The purposeful nature of this family vacation work was evident. Clearly it was "work," but work that was "worth the effort," as far as most parents were concerned. For some of the fathers (who were less likely than the mothers to mention involvement with the emotional work of facilitating positive experiences), family vacations were still seen as an obligation of parenting, or, as one father said, a "commitment." The fathers felt that it was important for them to spend time with their children.

So you have to just spend the time with them. And, yea . . . that kind of commitment. I think that with this vacation, I would say that—I can do that commitment. (Married father, 2 children)

Creating Memories: A Sense of Urgency to Accomplish Long-Term Goals

It became evident, as the analysis progressed, that underlying the parents' desires to use family vacations as a time to be together as a family and to enhance positive family interactions was a more important long-term goal. Specifically, parents were actively engaged in creating a strong sense of family that would not only solidify the family unit, but would be of value to their children in the long term. Vacations were seen to be crucial to this goal because they created memories that would last, that would provide meaning into the future, and that would become a basis for future life decisions.

Many of the parents talked about memories of their own family vacations when they were children:

The camping holiday for me is like a learning experience. . . . You're seeing new things and doing new things . . . camping, frogs, and snakes

and nature-related things. My parents did that for me when I was a little younger than [her daughter]. . . . Those are priceless times. (Single mother, 2 children)

These childhood memories, though, were not always positive. For example, the mother quoted earlier, who talked about 10 years of miserable vacations as a child, also said:

> I always remember being dragged by my mother to vacation. My dad and my mom stopped doing family vacations 'cause my dad hated to drive on the highway. (Married mother, 2 children)

Because of her childhood experience, this mother was very aware of the fact that children may not always enjoy family vacations:

> I've heard so many kids say, "I don't like being dragged along." And the parents are saying, "we're doing this for our kids," and you ask the kids and kids don't really want to do it. (Married mother, 2 children)

Some parents, for example a mother who had grown up on a family farm where family vacations were highly constrained because of the obligations of farm work, regretted that they had missed out on this as children. For other parents, though, childhood memories were positive, and many talked about their memories of going camping with their parents, or going to the family cottage, or playing board games on holiday, or learning to canoe or to fish. Even going on day trips with her parents was remembered fondly, and with gratitude, by one mother:

> I didn't do much vacationing when I was a kid, so they were—even day trips as a kid—were a big thing. So, you know, I have memories of going to, I don't know, some place down in northern New York, and I got this picture when I was a little kid. But it was because it was very different, and my parents were doing this for me, and they were taking the time to do something that was unusual and special. So that specialness just . . . it creates wonderful memories to draw on about what life is all about. (Married mother, 2 children)

It was these positive memories that the parents wanted to create. This was a sentiment expressed often by parents, including fathers and mothers, and including parents who had good memories of childhood vacations and those who did not. One father, who said that his own childhood vacations were a "mixed bag," talked at length about how important it was that his own children had enjoyed their family vacation, and his confidence that their recent vacation had created positive memories.

> I know they [the children] enjoyed the tennis. I know they enjoyed the swimming. I think they had fun doing the canoeing piece of it and they enjoyed the place that they stopped. They both thought the Imax was amazing. That was really great, and the Science Center has some interesting things in it they enjoyed. . . . So everybody ended up doing things that were fun, often all together . . . shared memories [that are] useful for just feeling good about each other. (Married father, 2 children)

For many of the parents, creating these positive memories of family was clearly a central purpose of the family vacation, sometimes described as a "job," and definitely a parental responsibility. Being together and having fun together and finding enjoyable activities for children were important goals in and of themselves, but the more important, long-term goal was the memories and feelings the children retained from these experiences. One father, commenting that family vacations were a lot of work, and even "brutal," also saw the central purpose as (hopefully) creating positive memories.

> I think it [the vacation] does create memories for the family unit which does help bind as opposed to everybody going off and doing their own thing [i.e., when at home]. Right. They're brutal, they're lots of work. They're a pain in the butt . . . but there's a purpose that people do it, and we do it too, and that is to create the memories of the family for the family. . . . I think we were doing this less for immediate gratification as to put lasting memories in the kids' heads. (Married father, 2 children)

Another father commented:

> I think it's important to give the kids very positive and happy memories of the family. And the day-to-day life [at home] would be rather stressful, and can at time bring out the worst in us.

Vacation is a time where you can sort of compensate for that bit, and then show the good side of the family and have fun together. Yah. It's important. (Married father, 2 children)

Even those parents who did not initially (in the pre- or postvacation interviews) talk about memories of vacation, typically responded positively to the idea when it was raised in the verification interviews, confirming that this did capture an important aspect of their feelings about family vacations.

Of course, family vacation experiences were not always positive, but many of the parents were optimistic that the more negative experiences of the vacation would be forgotten and the positive ones remembered.

You put up with the crap at the time, so that 10 years from now they're not gonna remember the long hours in the car. There'll be something—whether it's the trees , or whether it's a glimpse of the mountains or whatever it is—there will be something in there that they will remember, and they will go, "Oh yeah. I remember that. Wasn't that neat." (Married father, 2 children)

Similarly, the mother from the same family said:

And they will say, "Oh, it's boring." They will say., "Is this all there is?" but they will come back and they will remember it, and 20 years from now they will be taking their children out there because it's cool, and they'll think it was amazing. That's my theory: time will tell if I'm right. (Married mother, 2 children)

One mother seemed to capture this sentiment by talking about "investing" in children's memories. In her prevacation interview, prior to an expensive overseas holiday, she said:

I decided to invest in my kids' memories, because they're not going to remember a new couch. They're definitely not going to remember new windows. But they will remember a trip. (Married mother, 2 children)

The long-term goal, as verbalized by some parents, was primarily the creation of a strong family unit. Positive memories, it was thought, would help to solidify the family unit through the creation of a family history.

I think it's really important to make a distinct vacation holiday time. And I think it just helps to build family history and family memories, you know. It helps grow together, I think, to plan something, and anticipate it, and then remember it. (Single father, 2 children)

This is something that parents wanted to give to their children for the long term, and something that would be of value to their children when they grew up and had children of their own.

[It] keeps you united, creates memories that you can fall back on. . . . It can set a trend for our own children when they have their families. (Married mother, 2 children)

I remember the good times that I've had with my family. So I give it to my kids, and they will, you know, benefit from that, and they will give that to their kids. So I think that is the best thing that happened when you do stuff, on holidays, or time that you spend with your kids. (Married father, 3 children)

An important aspect of the parental imperative for creating memories and strengthening the family unit was the sense of urgency expressed by many of the parents. Having children in the 10–12 year age group was seen, by most, to be an ideal time for family vacation and the creation of family memories. However, many of the parents had a sense that only a relatively short window of opportunity remained to accomplish this important task. They felt that, as their children got older and entered the teenage years, there would be fewer opportunities for family vacations. They anticipated that their teenage children might not want to go on family vacations, and might not appreciate them in the same way. Comments included:

When the boys are young like they are now they enjoy going out and, you know, I find that to be a good time for just getting together with them. As they get older they're not going to want to spend too much time with their parents, and they'll get busy as teenagers, as jobs start coming up. (Married father, 2 children)

You know sometimes you've just got to take the bull by the horns, and just do it. Because life's too short, and, you know, the kids are growing up. (Married mother, 2 children)

This sense of a brief window of opportunity was particularly evident among the parents who had an older child in the family and among those with friends or family members with teenage children. It made the parental role of creating positive family memories at this stage of family life all the more urgent and salient.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study of parents' perspectives on family vacations indicated that, similar in some ways to other types of vacations experiences, family vacations did represent an escape for everyday life stresses and obligations. For those who were employed, vacations with children were an escape from work responsibilities and work environments. But for the women, whether employed or not, being on vacation away from home meant escape for the everyday chores associated with household duties (e.g., cooking, cleaning, laundry), and just as importantly, as escape from the constantly scheduled family life, for which they had the responsibility of ensuring the smooth running of everyone's activities.

This escape from the pressures of everyday life, though, also brought a new set of responsibilities related to the idea of family togetherness that are unique to family vacation travel. The parents felt they needed to pay attention to enhancing family interactions and patterns of communication, and to find activities that family members (particularly children) would enjoy. Vacation time provided a vital opportunity to focus on being together as a family, not only because parents were less distracted by their responsibilities, but also because the children were less distracted by their school and recreational activities, including organized activities as well as television and video games and phone calls from friends.

The importance of family togetherness for the families was, in part, to improve and enhance relationships between parents and children and between siblings through spending time together in a more relaxed and fun environment. However, a more important long-term goal was related to the notion of creating a strong sense of family. It was particularly important that the children would feel closely connected to the family unit, and that this would provide them with a firm base for life. The creation of positive memories of family vacation experiences was a central part of this creation of family. Despite some of the challenges associated with spending extended time together, with less personal space than at home, family vacations were seen to have the potential to create positive memories because of the different, more relaxed, and more fun environment that they could provide. The importance of taking advantage of this potential was particularly evident when parents talked about the limited window of opportunity for family vacations as the children moved into their teenage years.

There was a considerable degree of consensus among the parents on the importance of family vacations. This included mothers and fathers in single-parent families as well as dual parent families, and two-income as well as one-income families. Interestingly, the meanings associated with family travel also did not vary to any great extend across different types of family vacations either. While low-income families were economically constrained in their choice of vacation, and were likely to opt for camping or other low-cost holidays, the idea of family togetherness was just as central for these families as it was for those who were able to opt for more expensive forms of travel and accommodation. Even doing day trips, though not considered the ideal family vacation, were appreciated for their role in bringing family members together and creating family memories.

While many similar sentiments related to values and meanings were expressed by fathers and mothers, the study also revealed some gendered aspects of family vacations. The notion of escape, in particular, was gendered, with men focusing on escape from employment related activities, and women talking much more extensively about escape from the constant pressure of family responsibilities, household chores, and the management of family schedules. Clearly these difference reflected men's and women's different relationship to the labor market (Armstrong & Armstrong, 1994; Hoffman & Averett, 2005) and the continuing unequal division of labor within the household (Baxter, 2002; Craig, 2006). The gendered division of labor was also reflected in the responsibilities that the mothers shouldered for the facilitation

of positive family experiences while on vacation and their focus on patterns of family interaction. This is similar, in some ways, to Such's (2006) distinction of fathers focusing on "being with" their children during leisure, and mother seeing the situation more as "being there" for their children, in this case being there to facilitate the leisure experience.

The process of the social construction of the family was particularly evident in the parents' discourse related to vacation memories. Questions about family memories have been a topic of interest among family researchers in recent years. However, most of this research has focused on negative memories, such as memories of childhood abuse or memories of divorce and/or family conflict (Curran, Hazen, & Jacobvitz, 2005; Futa, 2003; Kelly & Emery, 2003). These negative memories have been shown to influence adjustment to adult life, as well as marital satisfaction and parenting behavior. In contrast, the present study provides a different perspective—the "flip side" of family memories—by suggesting that positive memories in childhood, and especially vacation memories, are believed by parents to strengthen the family unit and to help build "strong families." Moreover, this process is seen as a foundation upon which the children can rely when they become parents themselves.

A traditional notion of family is evident here, with the expectation of marriage and children in the next generation. In addition, the social construction of family also contains ideas related to "generativity," and parental responsibility for helping to guide that next generation. While the concept of generativity originated with Erikson's (1965) work in the 1960s, it has more recently been applied to help explain new approaches to fatherhood (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997), and to explain the importance to fathers of being involved in their children's sports activities (Harrington, 2006). In the present study, the idea of helping to guide the next generation was mentioned by both mothers and fathers.

The instrumental nature of family vacations, at least from the perspective of the parents, illustrates some similarities between family vacations and the purposive nature of family leisure (Shaw & Dawson, 2001) as well as family routines and rituals (Fiese et al., 2002). Family vacations, though, are by nature much less frequent, typically taking place over 1 to 3 weeks at some time during the summer months. It is perhaps because of their infrequency that vacations are seen as special or salient, and that the significance of family vacations is seen to be particularly profound. It was evident that the parents paid attention to the potential value of family vacations, and that they saw the effort paid to the construction of positive vacations experiences and memories to be worth the effort.

In sum, this study adds to the growing body of research that looks at the experiences and meanings of tourism (Huxley, 2004; Tribe, 2005; Uriely, 2005; White & White, 2004), as well as the literature on gender and tourism (Kinnaird & Hall, 2000; Swain & Momsen, 2002). The cultural significance of family vacations is reflected not only in the cost, time, and effort involved in the organization and management of this form of tourism, but also in its associated meanings. The time together away from the distractions of everyday life at home, the shared activities and the collective memories, all indicate the importance of family vacations in the social construction of the family. That is, family vacations create and maintain—often deliberately from the parents' point of view—a sense of family identity, shared values, and shared beliefs, which potentially strengthen family bonds.

The significance of family vacations for family life indicates that this type of vacation experience, at least for the Canadian parents in this study, appear to be different in some important ways from other forms of tourism. First, while the desire to escape from the pressures of paid work is evident among most holiday travelers, parents with school aged children, and especially the mothers, have a particular desire to escape from family routines and the pressure of family schedules. They seem to be looking for flexibility and relaxed time. Perhaps more importantly, parents with children are different from other tourists because of the strong focus they have on family togetherness, creating family memories and providing important lessons for their children for the future. This divergence of purpose for family vacationers compared to other groups suggests that tourism service providers

need to take the specific values and needs of parents into account in terms of the kinds of activities, services, and environments that they provide.

Because of the specific focus of this study on the meanings of family leisure, other issues associated with the workload of parents, the gendered division of vacation-related work, the role of specific vacation activities and their relationship to positive and negative vacation experiences, and vacation-related constraints, have only been briefly addressed here. More attention needs to be paid to these issues in the future. In addition, an important consideration for future research is the perspective of children. Children are active participants in vacations activities (which are often selected and planned for them by parents), and children are also active partners in the creation of the family. Research on children's family vacation experiences, and longitudinal research on how children view these experiences in retrospect, would help to provide a more complete understanding of the individual, family, and cultural significance of the family vacation.

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