

Article

A Sustainable Everyday Life for Counterurbanising Swedish Families

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Abstract: Even though urbanisation is the prevailing trend in modern societies, the net migration balance of Sweden's largest cities has been negative for the past few years, and overrepresented among these migrants are families with young children. The stories of counterurbanisation have often relied on rather stereotypical representations of unsustainable city life versus sustainable rural life, thus strengthening the much criticised rural–urban binary. The aim of this article is to explore how the counterurbanising families' ideas of "a sustainable everyday life" developed during and after the migration event. We uncover the needs, ideological foundations, practices, capacities, social atmosphere, temporality, and place-based understanding of one's own role and responsibilities in society by studying what the families do in their everyday lives, what they are striving to achieve, and how they understand sustainability. Counterurbanising families represent a driven group that are not primarily guided by economic wants—as many of their active choices are lifestyle-driven. Our theoretical foundation highlights the structures and dimensions of social sustainability, relational place, and learning, contrasted with the subjectivity of everyday life in the urban–rural transition. Forty-five in-depth interviews (1–2 h) were conducted via video conference software, and the material was analysed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that the views and understandings of social sustainability among counterurbanising young families highlight place-based needs and conditions, with implications for sustainability and mobility research, individuals, and contemporary society as a whole in navigating the somewhat diminishing rural–urban dichotomy.

Keywords: counterurbanisation; social sustainability; place; learning; everyday life; families



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1. Introduction

Fast and steady urban growth has been a truism for modern societies, and presently, the rate of urbanisation seems to prevail. City life has undergone tremendous transformation from the industrial age's low living standards to the increasing focus on sustainable development in terms of, e.g., social and economic equity, building standards, energy and waste management efficiency, and water security [1]. As hubs of human and intellectual capital, labour, innovation, trade, and expressions of culture and arts, modern cities indeed have much to offer their inhabitants in terms of fulfilling lifestyles.

However, city living may not be experienced as sustainable by all, and the phenomenon of counterurbanisation has spurred academic interest for over five decades, seeking to explain the causes, patterns, motivations, and effects of population redistribution from metropolitan areas to smaller towns and rural settlements [2,3]. Moves to rural areas have been linked to people's life courses and social class and to the economic conditions related both to household and to society at large, as well as to the representations of, and attitudes toward, these factors [3]. Herein, the city is typically represented as stressful, dirty, unhealthy, dangerous, crowded, and expensive, while rural areas in contrast are represented as serene, clean, healthy, safe, spacious, and affordable. Counterurbanisation has often been related to the idea that sustainable lifestyles are more easily

attainable in the smaller settlement structure [4]. The “green wave” of the 1970s represents counterurbanisation as a transition from modern urban capitalism and environmentally deteriorating lifestyles toward self-sufficiency and ecological sustainability [5]. During the 1990s, stressful city life was used as an explanation for “downshifting” and retiring to the countryside [6]. However, the treatment of sustainability within the “counterurbanisation story” [1] has often relied on rather stereotypical representations of unsustainable city life versus sustainable rural life, thus strengthening the much criticised rural–urban binary [7,8]. This critique is especially relevant in the Nordic context where a large proportion of settlement structures fall somewhere in between the rural and the urban [9,10]. In a recent mapping of counterurban moves in Sweden, it was shown that migrants from the metropolitan regions were far more likely to move to medium-to-small-sized settlements of urban character rather than to rural areas [11], adding layers to the understanding of sustainability in counterurbanisation related to a rural–urban divide. Thus, a nuancing of the concept of sustainability in counterurbanisation is needed. This study is part of a research project focusing on the experiences of counterurbanisation among young families in a Swedish context. This informant group was chosen following recent research on counterurbanisation patterns in Sweden, where families with young children (under the age of 13 at the migration event) were found to be overrepresented [11].

The aim of this article is to explore how the counterurbanising families’ ideas of “a sustainable everyday life” developed during and after the migration event. This aim is operationalised through the following research questions: (1) in what ways are the subjective ideas of social sustainability re-evaluated when the families learn the ways of a smaller city? (2) What is the significance of place-specific conditions in the counterurbanising families’ perceptions of a sustainable everyday life?

Two concepts become central for analysing and contextualising the findings of our study. First, the notion of “social sustainability” is here understood as a subjective perception of quality of life, which can be linked to the OECD’s sustainability goals: a sense of security, health, fulfilment, belonging, and purpose [12] in the everyday lives of the family members. Social sustainability becomes crucial in our contextualisation of the everyday realities of the families as quality of life influences both people’s behaviours and how they think about sustainability. Social sustainability is interlinked by notions and practices that are socially oriented and have specific traits that influence how people perceive sustainability structures [13]. Social sustainability is crucial in working towards sustainability, in determined efforts to deal with the problems of climate change and poverty by balancing environmental, economic, and social development [14]. Maintaining balance is important for larger societal or global structural changes, as well as for individuals, as behavioural changes in small steps help fuse together humble advances toward structural changes and the changing premises that structural changes bring about.

The second central concept is “learning”, in relation to the perception of social sustainability in the informants’ everyday lives—where learning is understood as the processes and practices connected to changing conditions and the subsequent adaptations [15]. Conceptualising learning as a process entails analysing and connecting a series of steps or actions taken by the informants in order to achieve a certain goal, in this case a more sustainable everyday life.

In this study, social sustainability is created in relation to the material and social needs, ideological foundations, practices, and capacities of the counterurbanising families. Their understandings of place-based needs and conditions are expressed via the experiences and practices of everyday life, which become embedded in their material lives. The outcome of counterurban migration among the informants entails engaging in many different social sustainability processes that, to a great extent, are taking place in the realm of the everyday practices and adaptations to small town or rural settings. As the families are engaged in making a new home for themselves, they are getting to know and learning to navigate the conditions of their new place of residence. In this process, they may learn new strategies for social sustainability, and they may learn to re-evaluate their own goals in terms of what

a “sustainable everyday life” should entail. Learning for sustainability consists of throwing oneself into new interactions, by networking and branching out and by different types of place-specific performativity related to adaptation and the changed conditions [15]. For the counterurbanising families, learning calls for the reinterpreting of their preconceived views of social sustainability and for learning how to contextualise notions of sustainability in a new place-based context.

The study is situated within the field of everyday geographies, focusing on the daily and ordinary routines of people in relation to their social and material settings [16–18]. Understood simultaneously as a theoretical concept and as an experienced practice [19], the everyday is constantly constructed and reconstructed as individuals interact with the environment and each other. In general, families are not expected to change their residential location to any great extent; however, in the young family the situation may be different. The family formation stage is a period of transition, where the lifestyle of young adulthood is transforming into the lifestyle of parenthood and responsibility. During this period, a re-evaluation of what a “sustainable everyday life” should mean is expected; moreover, we may expect a re-evaluation of how place characteristics are understood to support desired lifestyles.

The article is structured as follows. First, the theoretical frame is presented, combining the concepts of social sustainability and place-based understanding and learning through place-based social sustainability through migration. In the results, the findings from 45 in-depth interviews are thematically analysed using the main themes of place-based needs and place-based conditions. The discussion focuses on expressions of learning and social sustainability by contextualising place-based needs and place-based conditions for Swedish counterurbanising families.

2. Social Sustainability and Place-Based Understandings

Sustainability, made plain, is a way of planning for the future while balancing environmental, economic, and social considerations in the pursuit of an improved quality of life for all of humanity [20,21]. Social sustainability is a crucial part of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals [22]—aimed at tackling large scale problems of unsustainability, such as climate change and poverty, and upholding and achieving a balanced approach to environmental, economic, and social development [14]. Social sustainability and its subsequent social dimension are rudimentary for sustainability, not only as a means of attending to social problems, but also to mitigate and balance endeavours primarily directed at the economic and/or environmental dimensions of long-term sustainability. The idea of community is closely connected to social sustainability, and Cope et al. [23] argued that community as a concept captures notions of attachment, satisfaction, participation, belonging, and equity. The processes related to these notions are fundamental for analysing and understanding social sustainability, and the notions are worth sustaining.

However, in spite of that, there is still a lack of theoretical and empirical studies regarding social sustainability. The literature reveals that the “social” was integrated late into the debates on sustainable development [13]. Without socially aimed practices, efforts to realise sustainability will be undercut as too many gaps exist in the theory and practice. Eizenberg and Jabareen [13] suggest a wide-ranging conceptual framework of social sustainability, which is composed of interconnected notions of socially oriented practices, where each notion has a characteristic role in the structure and merges with the major social aspects.

We argue that these notions and practices are embedded in both the social and the spatial conditions that influence how people conceive sustainability as being more or less attainable depending on the specific prerequisites. The spatial conditions—such as where someone lives and the place-specific attributes connected to the possibilities and perceived obstacles to sustainability—highlight an understanding of the world in which people’s social endeavours are interwoven with the fabric of spatial settings. The theoretical spatial foundation of the article is a relational understanding of place [24], which

presupposes that places have meaning and are part of our run-of-the-mill understanding of self and the world we find ourselves in. Thus, the specificities of places and how places are understood are made up of both the opportunities and the limitations they contain. Furthermore, in addition to the interwoven wheel of social prerequisites and interactions with place-specific spatial conditions, there are also considerable variations in people's ambitions and their intentions to embrace sustainable ideologies and eventual changes to both everyday practices and long-term changes [25]. Or, as Robert Jordan would have put it, "*the Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills*" (ref. [26] p. 796). Taking the complexities and severities of sustainability into consideration, Svensson [27] argues that the field of sustainable development would benefit from recognising that there are competing interests and unbalanced social relations. Such recognition would facilitate participation and connection through strengthened contributions to sustainability. Sustainability as a concept is riddled with unbalanced social relations and often competing interests which affect social capital, human capital, and people's attempts at achieving a greater quality of life [27]. Social sustainability takes social conditions and infrastructure as a starting point for achieving increased economic sustainability that is inclusive and environmentally sane and adopts a long-term perspective aimed at strengthening a central set of themes that aid in increasing happiness, safety, satisfaction and, of course, quality of life.

One multifaceted aspect of social sustainability that is spatially anchored is how quality of life intersects and ideologically influences people's behaviour, aspirations, and ambitions regarding changes that enhance the experienced sustainability of someone's personal life. The everyday is a useful lens with which to analyse these behaviours and aspirations among our informants. The everyday has been described as a concept with a strong spatial dimension [16,28]—our everyday lifeworlds are intimately linked to the place(s) where we feel at home. The daily life of most individuals naturally revolves around a variety of places/spaces/nodes (such as home, work, service/leisure facilities, and the outdoors) and also through movement between these [16]. Yet, the regular return to a home base in an otherwise rather boundless world presents for most people a sense of grounded security. This home base is not necessarily confined to home as a specific building but can relate to places of various scales, from a house to a neighbourhood or a region, and also comprises the set of feelings, social relationships, and cultural meanings attached to the notion of home [29]. The grounded sense of security and continuity which the home can offer in the fabric of everyday life lays the basis for a sense of stability in one's mindset, what Giddens [30] has called "ontological security" and which forms an integral part of the idea of quality of life. According to the OECD [12], quality of life is a multicomplex phenomenon which consists of meeting individuals' needs within 11 dimensions: housing, income and wealth, jobs and earnings, social connections, education and skills, environmental quality, civic engagement and governance, health status, subjective quality of life, personal security, and work–life balance. These dimensions are also closely related to the composition and nature of spaces and places, meaning that the fabric of place must take centre stage within the wider sustainability framework. It has been noted that not all home places offer ideal conditions for a sense of security [16,29] or fulfilment, and taken from a life-course perspective [31], the respective importance of the 11 quality-of-life dimensions may be subject to re-evaluation. It has increasingly been acknowledged that the everyday also entails momentous events and experiences [16,28], such as migration—i.e., uprooting and rebuilding one's home-base. These transformative events lead to reflection and (re)evaluation and may lead to unexpected processes of learning, which is where we will now turn.

3. Places and Practices of Learning for Sustainability

In beginning to untangle the processes of learning, it becomes apparent that such processes are deeply embedded with the places in which people engage in learning processes. Herein, places are sensed by the subjects and experienced throughout numerous phenomena, such as learning how changing conditions and subsequent adaptations affect

social sustainability. Pred [32] suggests that place is a non-stop on-going collection of geographically related interactions and features. That is to say, place is not derived from space, but at the same time, space is entirely filled with place. The learning processes of social sustainability are entangled in the features and interactions that people can have in the places they operate in. Massey [33] expands this line of thinking when suggesting that global interconnection is a necessity for place. Places can, in this setting, contain more than their made-up boundaries as they are formed by distinctive and specific links to the other places of our world. Keeping that in mind, learning processes connected to a complex phenomenon such as sustainability consist of similar information platforms regardless of whether one operates in an urban setting or a more rural setting. The difference is how the place-specific features of places facilitate or hinder opportunities depending on the prerequisites of each specific place. Rural and urban opportunities may differ, but the information that the learning processes originate from would be more or less the same. In other words, places become distinguished from each other via relational interconnectivities, and the co-relational processes transpire simultaneously on all levels, ranging from the local to the global [34]. Ultimately, places and their connected opportunities for learning processes start to exist in the interlinking of practices and social relations, institutional structures, and ideologies [35]. This suggests that place is the underpinning, the prospects, the settings, and the basics in which, e.g., learning place-based social sustainability is infused with meaning.

The social processes of sustainability, stemming from social infrastructure, interaction, and practices, have certain common characteristics that are outlined in the research field of learning and sustainability. For instance, the research on learning for increased sustainability is a result of social processes in at least three different ways: firstly, the exchanging of knowledge on sustainability in social networks becomes important for individuals as it provides a common-sense element to otherwise dense academic and professional accounts and reports on sustainability (cf. [15]). Secondly, learning for sustainability generates a will to implement change when it is interaction-driven, e.g., a small or large group of individuals come together and solve common sustainability problems or objectives together via input and interacting with each other [36,37]. Thirdly, learning for sustainability opens up the transferring of tacit and explicit knowledge [38]. In addition, social learning is defined by Keen et al. [36] as the collective reflections and actions among various groups and individuals in their endeavors to improve environmental and human interrelations. Social learning for sustainability consists of interactions with others rather than learning in a more academic context.

One fundamental understanding of learning for sustainability comes from Stagl's [15] depictions of learning as a specific set of tools connected to the practices and procedures that are utilised while simultaneously slightly altering approaches in order to achieve desired outcomes under dynamic conditions. In other words, learning for sustainability is mostly interaction-driven and therefore charged by networking, getting inspired by other people, and drawing conclusions from one's own experiences and what others in similar situations are doing, while at the same time being pushed forwards and influenced by local and place-specific imaginativeness. Valuable deep intuitive understanding into the processes relating to and influencing social sustainability can be found by working from the presumption that social sustainability is possible via many different and connected learning processes [15,39,40]. In this study, we analyse the complex learning processes of social sustainability by highlighting where learning is *taking place*—grounded in the everyday lives of the informants, in the day-to-day activities connected to making a new life and a new home for themselves outside of the big cities. Places and how people understand places are connected, in one way or another, to how people interact with their surroundings and larger structural ideas such as social sustainability. The everyday life and the home provide powerful entry points for exploring the places and practices of learning, as they themselves can be seen not only as mundane routines or static repositories for the quotidian, but as processes of change and growth in themselves [16,29]. Places of learning

are moulded by our actions, longings, and exploits [41], and places become what they are because they are ascribed meaning [42]. Partly, this meaning is ascribed as we get to know new places and create a sense of belonging related both to the physical place itself and to its social fabric [43]. As people migrate, the sense of home is uprooted, and new everyday routines have to be established. Through the practices of home-making [29,43], individuals learn to navigate the new surroundings, learn to know people and the characteristics of a place, and learn about their own place in the environment and in the local community. In this process, the aspirations and expectations about the outcome of migration might be challenged due to unforeseen conditions in the place. Through everyday home-making practices, the expectations of everyday life are implicitly revalued and reinterpreted—a spatially specific learning process is taking place. In migration, therefore, the processes of learning are paramount.

4. Materials and Methods

In order to explore how the counterurbanising families' ideas of "a sustainable everyday life" developed during and after the migration event, we conducted 45 in-depth video conference interviews during 2020. The material was analysed thematically with inspiration from Braun and Clarke [44] and the theoretical chapter of this article. In doing so, we situate the research as being that of counterurban activities involving spatial aspects by different social actors—i.e., family units that have relocated from a larger metropolitan area in Sweden to smaller towns and cities. The gathered empirical material gives qualitative insights into our informants' subjective ideas of social sustainability as they learn the new ways of a smaller city and also into how the informants' perception of a sustainable everyday life is affected by the place-specific conditions.

4.1. Data Collection

The informants had previously participated in a postal survey sent to all counterurbanising Swedish families—with the selection criteria that the parents are living together, that at least one child is under 13 years of age, and that the family had migrated from Stockholm, Gothenburg, or Malmö (Sweden's three largest metropolitan areas) between 2017 and 2019 [11]. The researchers sent out 5.807 surveys and gathered 2.801 responses. The surveys contained an opportunity to register for further research, and the 130 family units that registered provided the starting point for the selection in this study. The next selection criterion narrowed our sampling to 61 families: they had to have relocated to rural areas or small towns and cities with less than 60.000 inhabitants. This criterion was used in order to focus on settlements with a rural or a small-town, rather than an urban, character. We carried out 45 in-depth interviews from the selection via digital video conferencing software during the summer and fall of 2020. The video link software allowed access to more peripherally located informants than the face-to-face format [45] and was also a necessity during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In the digital era, the daily use of video calls and social media has eased informants' concerns about being recorded on video for interview purposes and discussing subtle and delicate subjects [46]. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the use of digital communication methods [40], and the perceived technical threshold of video conference interviews has greatly diminished. With this in mind, we decided that the eventual limitations of conducting in-depth interviews via video link software were minimal and that we could proceed as planned.

The in-depth interviews highlight a transitional period in the informants' lives which entails both large and small changes that affect how they organise their everyday lives sustainably. Biographical interviews may aid researchers in untangling the meaning of previous life experiences as they focus specifically on the process-related and constructive nature of life histories [47]. In our case, the biographical interviews gave structure and meaning to different types of learning and to how social sustainability is contextualised by the informants' stories because the informants give insights into more than just the stand-alone life event that migration entails; they also gave insights into how experiences and

meaning making in relation to previous place attachments affect thoughts on sustainability. The material collected in the digital interviews can be understood as a kind of embodied storytelling whereby informants satiate their stories with references to their lived lives and spaces [48]. This means that our informants tell us about their former lives in the city and their current rural/small city lives while simultaneously providing valuable material on the significance of the attributes and opportunities for social sustainability connected to different geographical places.

The interviews ranged from 45 min to around two hours (Table 1) and followed a loose, semi-structured format [49]. We wanted to allow the informants' narratives and personal experiences to be a big part of the interviews. This flexibility allows for the researcher to revise certain strategies and reformulate questions in a way that fits better than pre-written questions as the informant talks on new topics and subjects [50]. By using in-depth interviews, the researcher can provide the informants more freedom to talk about things that are important to them in the context of the questions of the interview [49,50]. The interviewer does have to be more flexible, but the informants can be provided a much larger margin to explain and reiterate their own thoughts and answers. Our interview guide was organised to allow for the informants to talk about their lives through both urban and rural places, centred around the themes of *Growing up*, *Life in the big city*, *New life outside the big city*, and *Future plans*. We wanted to allow the informants' narratives and personal experiences to be a central part of the interviews. We adopted an open-ended approach that allowed the opinions and experiences of the informants to be encompassed with meaning [51], continuously taking precautions to limit the risk of misunderstanding or misinterpreting the informants' intentions by asking follow-up questions and asking for explanations during and after the interview situation.

Table 1. Duration of interviews.

Number of Interviews	Duration
19	45–60 min
23	60–90 min
3	90–120 min

4.2. Background on Informants

The 45 families who participated in this study present a rather homogeneous group. The defined life stage is “young families”, based on the age of children (13 years or younger at the migration event), and most of the families have children in pre- or primary school age. The ages of the parents differ somewhat; however, with few exceptions, they are within the range of 30–40. The study group consists entirely of hetero couples, and almost all the families consist of the biological parents, even though these were not selection criteria. With few exceptions, the occupations range within the qualified public to private sectors or self-employment, and the education levels are generally high. The informants, thus, do fit rather well with earlier definitions of counterurbanisers as a “middle-class” group [8]; however, the rather large proportion of public sector employees still suggests a wider scope than earlier theorised [11]. Though a few informants had grown up in one of the major cities in Sweden, most had moved into the metropolitan regions during early adulthood for education or work; this is when and where most of them met their partners. During this time in their lives, the attractions of the big cities were many and revolved around access to opportunities for education, work, and leisure. The wide range and accessibility of cultural events, socialising, restaurants, and shops were often mentioned as the most important benefits of city life, as well as high education and career opportunities in a competitive and specialised job market. The families were formed in the context of the large city, and generally, most families were well contented with the living situation while the children were still little. It was commonly during the pre-school to school age when everyday routines became complicated, and the living space began to feel inadequate. When leaving the big city, a common theme has been a “return to the roots”

move, where relative proximity to the extended family members of either partner was sought. Among those who originated in metropolitan regions, the move was commonly inspired by childhood nostalgia from vacations or visits to grandparents or a complete break with childhood experiences.

4.3. Thematic Analysis

The empirical material was analysed using a systematic thematic analysis [44], relying on both inductive and deductive procedures. Familiarity with the source material and an understanding of the contextual nature of the informants' answers are crucial in the analysis. The context and the narratives of the informants can give insights into how they understand and make sense of multifaceted goings-on [52]. The thematic analysis used in this study highlights three different aspects: (a) the structure of the answers of the informants (cf. [52]); (b) how the informants' answers give guidance in the formation of themes for the study (cf. [51]) and emphasise place-specific traits [53]; and (c) how thematic analysis has the potential to highlight influences, experiences, and practices [54]. Braun and Clarke [44] pinpoint the step-by-step processes of the different stages of thematic analysis as the familiarisation with the data, the generation of initial codes, the search for themes, the review of the themes, the defining and naming of the themes, and the production of the report (Table 2).

Table 2. Coding procedure of the thematic analysis (inspired by and reworked from Braun and Clarke, [44] p. 87).

Analysing Phase	Description—Social Sustainability for Counterurbanising Young Families
Familiarisation with material	Watching the zoom interviews, transcribing the video material, reading and rereading the transcriptions multiple times, writing down initial thoughts, ideas, and notions to follow up on.
Creating initial codes	Coding interesting features, such as reoccurring topics, activities, processes, connections to theory or previous research, surprising elements and hidden features—throughout the material and systematically across the entire empirical set.
Thematic organisation	Organising codes into groups and into sub-themes, gathering all material relevant to each potential sub-theme and building connection to main themes by generating the thematic framework (Figure 1).
Evaluation of themes	Investigating whether the themes work in relation to the codes, the narratives of the interviews, and the entire set of empirical material, and generating an initial thematic map (Figure 2).
Examining and naming themes	Analysing each sub-theme and main theme to refine and work through the particulars in relation to the whole story generated by the analysis and settling on clear names for each theme.
Writing the article	The last step of the analysis. Going through the material again in search of compelling examples and writing a report linking back to the theoretical background and research questions.

The thematic analysis shows different trends or patterns in the material on the place-specific conditions and place-specific needs connected to social sustainability among young counterurbanising Swedish families (see Figure 1). The themes are derived from the thematic framework that guided the analysis. The codes are constructed both from the empirical material and the theoretical background. The thematic coding and the analysis were conducted by one researcher, and coherence in the coding was assured through discussions with the other researcher, who also conducted interviews.

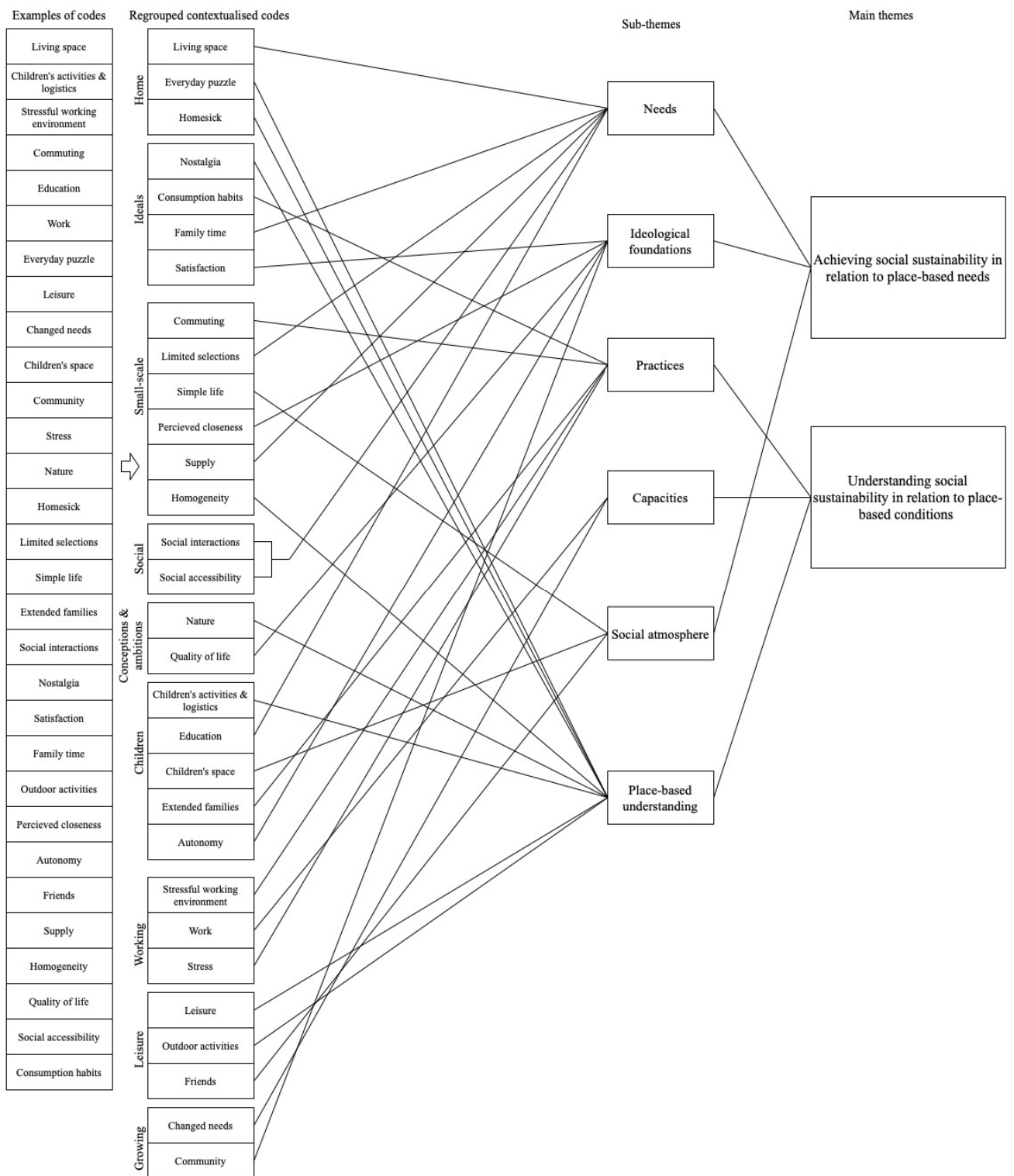


Figure 1. Thematic framework.

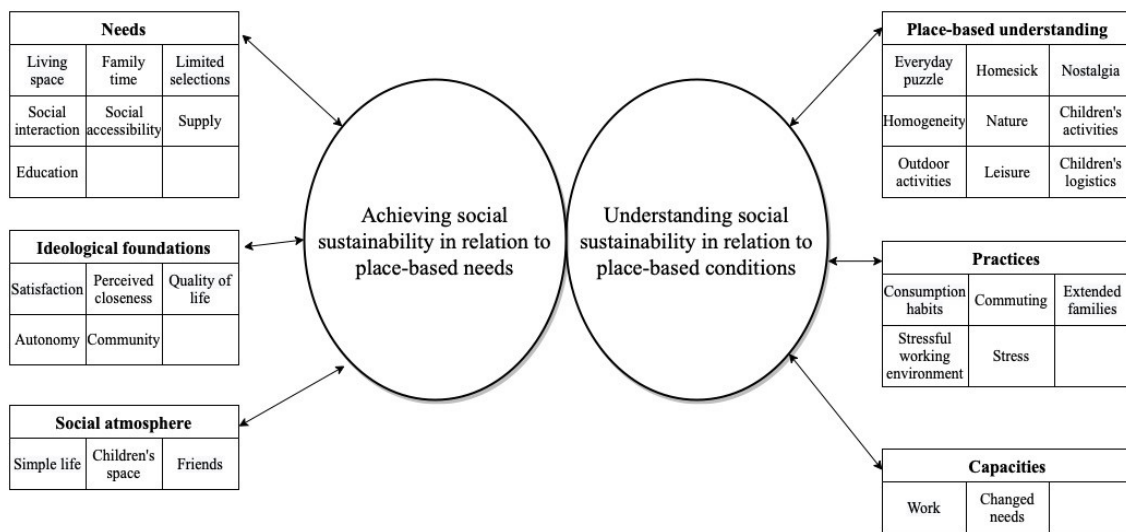


Figure 2. Thematic map.

5. Results—(Re)Negotiating a Sustainable Everyday Life after Counterurbanisation

The thematic analysis uncovered two main themes in the material—achieving social sustainability in relation to place-based needs and understanding social sustainability in relation to place-based conditions. These two themes connect directly to the two research questions of the article. The first theme connects to research question 1 (in what ways have the subjective ideas of social sustainability been re-evaluated when the families learn the ways of a smaller city?) and is presented in Section 5.1. and further discussed in Section 6.1. The second theme connects to research question 2 (what is the significance of place-specific conditions in the counterurbanising families' perceptions of a sustainable everyday life?) and is presented in Section 5.2. and further discussed in Section 6.2.

The thematic framework (Figure 1) was a useful tool for getting an overview of the material and aided in visually analysing different connections to the sub-themes and main themes. The thematic map (Figure 2) was the next step in the analysis and aids in providing the reader with clearer, structured connections to the findings. Each main theme and the associated sub-themes are presented in their own subheading below.

5.1. Social Sustainability in Relation to Place-Based Needs

Place-based needs are connected to how the informants imagined a sustainable everyday life for themselves and their families via the sub-theme needs, ideological foundation, and social atmosphere (see Figure 2).

5.1.1. Needs

One recurring topic in the empirical material is the way that informants discussed living spaces. Many had come to really enjoy the pulsating and content-filled lives they led in the metropolitan areas. In most cases, living space was not a key issue before starting a family. These big city years tended to centre around education, careers, and the general allure of the city. Note that many of the informants did not grow up in a big city environment. However, as the informants started their families, the thoughts and discussions on living space became more prevalent. Some informants saw the impracticality of fourth-story apartments without elevators as they were dragging strollers up and down on a daily basis. For others, the concept of more living space manifested as a dream and an ambition to have more in- and outdoor room for their families and for their children: "...we realised that we need a house with a yard" (informant 7). Money definitely played a role in many families' decisions to migrate to rural or small cities elsewhere in Sweden. However, housing prices never seemed to be the driving factor in the decision-making

process—rather, they set a predetermined condition that set geographic boundaries to where the families “...could afford to relocate” (Informant 28). Living space was ultimately connected to how the informants viewed time spent with their families. The endeavour to achieve social sustainability, for the informants, appears to be undeniably linked to learning what wellbeing meant for each family. For example, their lives could be lived in a way that enabled more space to enjoy each other and to find happiness in togetherness, closeness, and calm: “*It’s the calm and, the feeling of safety and child safe [environments] . . . like idyllic townhouse areas*” (Informant 51). This, of course, meant that the new living situation would be in a smaller geographical context with limited selections and supply in terms of activities, consumption, education, and people to interact with. Most informants looked back with glee and satisfaction on their younger years spent in the city—all the culture, culinary experiences, scholarly opportunities, and friendships along the way. However, social interaction and social accessibility seem to be fundamentally different in the informants’ new everyday lives. Fear of missing out on social gatherings and quantity of culture had in many cases been replaced with a need for a different type of more intimate connection. Social interactions with close and extended families were valued higher and provided a safety net that for most informants was part of their migration strategies.

5.1.2. Ideological Foundations

The informants’ migration decisions were multifaceted and varied to a certain degree, depending on each family’s specific conditions and available options. One aspect that tied together most of the informants’ renderings on relocating to a smaller geographical setting was a notion that many families talked about in an off-handed manner. The sub-theme that characterises and best portrays these notions was given the name *ideological foundation*. Herein, codes and narratives tell a tale of wants and ambitions, not in terms of economic success or even as the practical everyday needs as described above. Rather, the informants satiated their answers with attempts to lay the groundwork for achieving satisfaction—“*My partner really changed when we moved here. He feels a lot happier. He’s become quite the outdoorsman, hunting, fishing and spending time in nature. I actually think that he was like this the whole time, but us moving here brought it out*” (Informant 7).

Fulfilment was perceived not only as something concrete to strive for and obtain, but also as something intangible that needed learning to accept and embrace. It may be manifested in the perceived nearness of driving the children 10 min to school or day care, of just getting into the car and driving 20 min in the other direction for work, and at the same time knowing that if anything happened, they could be there, back with their children within half an hour (informant 35). This was often contrasted in the informants’ narratives with the stories of lamenting the big city commuting, stress, and feelings of inadequacy. Moreover, closeness in terms of extended family living nearby and the opportunity for everyday interaction was weighted against travelling far distances just to end up having the same discussions over and over again within the family unit—“*wouldn’t it be great if we lived closer to the grandparents?*” (Informant 60). Often, quality of life was implicit as a driving factor for migrating, for making personal sacrifices for the greater family good, and for coming to terms with and learning the parameters of the new family situation. The drawbacks were, in most cases, not overwhelming, instead they were reasonably juxtaposed with sensations of autonomy and empowerment in acting and choosing to provide the children with a greater sense of community with its accompanying accountability. The neighbour, as a concept, takes on a new meaning when you actually know their name, they know yours, and you interact with them on a more frequent basis. They are the people that, together with the informants, make up the fabric of society on a much smaller scale than the metropolitan scenarios the informants moved away from—“*...people seem to have more spare time here . . . and they all do so vastly different things. Some exercise, some like gardening, others are into motorsports. I really like it*” (Informant 30).

5.1.3. Social Atmosphere

Embedded in the place-based needs for social sustainability discussed by the informants was the social atmosphere that they were striving for and simultaneously learning to adapt to. A common occurrence was learning what it actually meant to lead a simple and fulfilling life. The informants saw simplicity as both a tempo and a contentment and in some cases as a real necessity for keeping their family content and happy. Simplicity took on different meanings for the informants as their children adapted to their new lives outside of the big city. Most widespread were the processes of change for families with children older than toddlers. Children's space and the opportunity to move around in a safe environment became a privilege and an ease of mind for quite a lot of the families; *"If we were in the city or [the suburb] even with the kids and you lost track of them the heart races in just a minute, like shit where is he? But if that's in [the new town] it's just, yeah, he's over there somewhere. It's cool."* (Informant 28). The contrasting small scale of the families' new living situation helped shed light on some of the fear and safety issues the parents had only speculated about in a big city environment. Many felt certain that the risks of rural and small city conditions were significantly smaller than if the family was still residing in a big city. In addition, as an added bonus, the small scale of the families' new lives meant that their children actually had a chance of befriending the children they met at the playground.

5.2. Social Sustainability in Relation to Place-Based Conditions

Place-based conditions were reflected in the answers of the informants through learning processes and social sustainability via the sub-theme practices, capacities, and place-based understandings (see Figure 2).

5.2.1. Practices

Many of the practices discussed by the informants explain how the place-specific conditions influenced the changed and changing behaviours connected to everyday life. Getting groceries and necessities are examples of how consumption habits are affected by counterurbanisation. The informants tended to spend less time on these activities; yet, at the same time, they incorporated them into a daily or weekly routine that was admittedly time-consuming, e.g., using their bicycle to drop children off at day care, biking to work, and then going grocery shopping "on their way" home. Furthermore, the families' consumption habits were affected by the geographical conditions of the places they resided. Less diversified supply at smaller towns meant buying most of their clothes, necessities, pharmacy goods, birthday gifts, and speciality items online, a habit which was also realised to be rather practical. Commuting also changed for most of the informants, either in terms of transportation mode, from public transport to driving their own car or taking their bikes, or in terms of how they viewed and experienced commuting. Even a longer commute could feel more relaxing, and sometimes, the movement through a beautiful landscape was described as almost therapeutic—*"Every day when I sit in the car and drive through [the landscape] I just feel 'God this is beautiful'. Even though there are those grey clouds almost touching the water . . . the beauty is almost numbing, and I get to live here!"* (Informant 47). Some informants still spent almost as much, or even more, time on the daily commute. These commuters tended to frequently make use of closer access to extended family networks. Grandparents would assist in picking up children in the afternoons and in babysitting, with the dual function of spending more time with their grandchildren while simultaneously helping the young families manage their time in a more sustainable way. Connected to this is the way that the informants discussed stress and stressful working environments. A common leitmotif for the informants was the insight that the lives they had built for themselves in the big cities had an outspoken stress-related price tag attached to it. One striking example is what informant 47 said: *"I worked like that for two years. Then I noticed that my youngest daughter was playing with her dolls and pretending that the dolls were stressed . . . it felt like a punch in the gut!"*. In the informants' new rural or small city context, stress was not as prevalent. This, however, took some time getting used to. Several informants

reflected on learning how to address certain bottlenecks they had taken for granted in the big city—these bottlenecks manifested themselves clearly for the informants when dropping off children at day care before work and realising that they no longer had to just make the drop and run off as the other parents lingered for a couple of minutes to talk to each other and the day-care staff. This contrast solidified that migrating was the right decision for their families, and previous social un-sustainabilities emerged from the fog as stress levels dropped.

5.2.2. Capacities

Related to the issues of stress were the current options available for paid labour among the informants. Here, the broad story among the informants was that at least one parent in the family unit had equal or better opportunities to pursue their careers or work in a related field. The informants' capacity to adapt to the new circumstances of the post-migration place of residence entailed learning to make changes, both on how they viewed their careers and how they prioritised their families. Many of these informants worked in the public sector as, for example, municipal officials, teachers, doctors, librarians, and social workers. Their spouses, depending on their job specificities, tended to engage in hybrid work, working part time at their previous employer or leaving their careers to open small or micro businesses or alternatively working in a totally different field than they did while living in the big city. Our sample size is too small to pull on large gears, but the findings indicate that the gender roles of the trailing spouse appear to be reversed among the informants. The informants, on average, did not move to the new place in order to pursue their careers, instead they were attempting to achieve more socially sustainable everyday lives for their families—*"I have five times as long of a commute now, but time spent in my car is about the same . . . the difference is that everything is easier and I feel better now"* (Informant 26). The place-based condition related to this situation is the transformative and ultimately changed needs of the family units. Collectively, they learned to prioritise and organise their lives around the wellbeing of their children, resulting in the goals and individual aspirations of the parents taking a back-seat position in the overarching ambition to safeguard a socially sustainable future and present everyday life.

5.2.3. Place-Based Understanding

Place, memories of place, and the meaning of place were inserted into the narratives of the informants when they discussed their everyday struggles and joys. The puzzle of organising the family in their new locations became a combination of adapting to place-specific conditions such as work schedules, time spent on everyday activities, and attempting to fulfil their perceived notions of what life outside of the big city would entail. These notions were often derived from imagined benefits coated in nostalgic childhood memories. Nostalgia manifested as homesickness and rurality when living in the big cities—a dream of a simpler life closer to nature with opportunities for various outdoor and leisure activities. Many informants had grown up in rural or small city contexts and were trying to recreate their childhood experiences for their own children. Having grown up in a smaller setting, most informants also had a fundamental understanding of the haves and have-nots of smaller places. However, knowing that limited supply and homogeneity exist is not the same thing as experiencing them when adapting to the new life outside of the big city. However, the everyday puzzle of the families was almost always easier to uphold in life outside the city due to the somewhat limiting supply of children's activities combined with increased childhood autonomy, mobility, and logistics—*"I feel that you don't have to do something with them [the children] or take them somewhere every weekend, it's good that they are a little bored sometimes . . . it means that they will find something to do by themselves"* (Informant 35). In other words, the children could in many cases move around more freely and even transport themselves to some of the activities they were engaging in. In addition, it felt safe for the parents to have the children walk or bike home from sport events and practices. The places were smaller in scale but grander in the possibilities of self-reliance.

6. Analysis and Discussion

In what ways have the idea of “a sustainable everyday life” been re-evaluated and re-negotiated among the counterurbanising families after they moved to a smaller setting? In what ways is this re-evaluation connected to a spatial learning process? The way that the informants negotiate a sustainable everyday life does not suggest that they, as a group, are more socially sustainable than others in society, but it highlights how social sustainability and learning are influenced by the place-specific conditions that these informants negotiate and re-negotiate in their new lives outside of the big city. Social sustainability is envisioned to be important in striving for sustainability as it provides balance for economic and environmental development as well as aiding in determining efforts relating to justice and the climate [14]. Exploring how counterurbanising young families make sense of social sustainability brings into being a deeper meaning of how counterurbanisation embeds the families’ everyday lives in larger discussions of the complex dimensions of social, economic, and environmental sustainability, such as work, commuting, rural development, education, community and long-term commitment, including, but not limited to, how people perceive and understand sustainability structures [13].

In the following discussion, we first turn to the ways in which the subjective ideas of social sustainability have been re-evaluated as the families learn the ways of a smaller city. Second, we discuss the significance of place-specific conditions in the counterurbanising families’ perceptions of a sustainable everyday life.

6.1. Achieving Social Sustainability—Place-Based Needs

Place-based needs refer to the themes, needs, ideological foundation, and social atmosphere, which were identified as being important for a socially sustainable everyday life. Many of the informants did not grow up in large metropolitan areas but relocated there for work or education. As the informants’ lives changed and they started their families, they made the decision to relocate to a more rural or small city context. In this transitional phase, how they organise their daily lives in the places where they choose to relocate can tell us a lot about how they view social sustainability and the learning processes related to this change. We argue that the place-based needs of the informants are interlinked with how they imagined a sustainable everyday life for themselves and their families. As they reflected on moving out from the city, thoughts of social sustainability could be highlighted from how they talked about time spent with their families and how their living space had become more accommodating. There were, however, quite a lot of traces of unbalanced social relations, in accordance with Svensson’s [27] research. The informants gave renderings of competing interests—connected to personal growth and spending time in the city during different stages of their lives. Social interactions, a backbone concept connected to learning for sustainability [15], were described as more intimate in the smaller setting compared to social gatherings and the quantity of culture in the cities. This allowed the informants to more easily access information about social sustainability (e.g., gardening, logistic tips, planning, and place-specific benefits) by interacting with people in their surroundings. Much in line with the research of Crossan et al. [38], the transference of tacit and often explicit (place-specific) knowledge appears to be directly linked to learning for sustainability. We argue that the social interactions of our informants became important tools for the families as they were valued highly and, in many ways, provided a safety net that allowed for the informants to more openly engage with learning to create a sustainable future for their families.

In attempting to achieve social sustainability, the informants talked about satisfaction in terms of desires and ambitions connected to what life outside of the city had the potential to be. Relocating to a smaller place was never about achieving economic success; it was, rather, about achieving a different type of life that most of the informants had started to imagine for themselves long before the actual migration took place. The new living situations provided more than different types of recreation, or a change in perception with regard to how they viewed closeness. Their new life outside the city made possible

behavioural changes that they had had no opportunity to learn before the migration, changes such as showing the children nature and small-scale community, the positive effects of different types of outdoor activities, both in nature and closer to home, and showing to themselves that it is possible to strive for and achieve a different life for their families—a life that makes it easier to try living more sustainably—in which small scale, cooperation, participation, and togetherness help generate satisfaction for themselves and their loved ones. Here, the socially oriented practices and notions helped the informants to organise their thoughts on sustainability, albeit a little differently than in the findings from Eizenberg and Jabareen [13]. The informants in this study did connect socially oriented practices with social sustainability, to an extent, but almost none of the informants had given a lot of thought to how their behaviour and eventual changed lifestyles and ambitions after the counterurban migration connected to larger structural societal changes on sustainability. There were a few comments relating to notions of the common duty of all of humanity to act more sustainably, but on the whole, our informants were more focused on improving the quality of life for their close family. All things considered, the informants were struggling intensely to meet the quality-of-life needs outlined by the OECD [12] without connecting these attempts with larger sustainability objectives. In this, we argue that Massey's [24] understanding of relational place can help untangle the analytic predicament of the informants. The young counterurbanising families were thrown into a new place-based reality that contains the opportunities for what they believe to be a better quality of life (according to subjective needs) while at the same time coming to understand that the limitations of a smaller setting in many cases influences how they view the world. The informants were trying to put themselves first, and in the process, they were becoming more sustainable thanks to engagement with different social processes. Learning how to engage with small-scale changes towards social sustainability—e.g., being more autonomous and working towards a better quality of life by learning new ways of being—means giving up previous views on sustainability, such as, for instance priding themselves on not driving cars to a great extent. However, even when the informants' views on sustainability (most often environmental sustainability) changed as they migrated, the views on social sustainability seemed to align more with the research of Cope et al. [23], with notions such as (place-based) attachment and belonging taking centre stage. A simpler life provided ontological security [30] as the counterurbanising families tried to create a sense of stability to assure themselves that they had made the right decision to move.

6.2. Understanding Social Sustainability—Place-Based Conditions

The main theme connected to the place-based condition of the informants focuses on the practices, capacities, and place-based understanding that were acknowledged as being significant for a socially sustainable everyday life. Places, in general, were discussed as being the geographical arena, an arena that happened to contain positive and negative feelings, nostalgia and indifference, environments enabling a certain kind of life while working against other kinds of lives and ultimately full of both opportunities and limitations in connection with the ambitions and aspirations of the informants.

Herein, the everyday puzzles of the counterurbanising young families give an explanation that is connected to both the theoretical concepts and the embodied practices [19], as the informants' post-migration lives are in a constant state of being constructed and reconstructed as they make their new homes [29]. One such example is how consumption habits changed for the informants when they moved from the big city, primarily in how they rearranged their lives to manage getting groceries and in the general consumption that was affected due to the size of the community they had moved into. The unavailability of certain goods in close proximity to the informants seemed to have had more effect on changing consumption habits than changes in sustainable consumption ambitions among the informants. Here, we analyse the findings weighed against Fisher and Riechers [25] research, in which the ambitions and intentions to embrace sustainable ideologies differ vastly among individuals. Embracing, or bringing about, change related to sustainable

ideologies is hard to achieve. Nonetheless, there are direct consequences of the informants' migration that have an impact on social sustainability, such as time-related concerns connected to commuting patterns, place-based work-related issues, and stress, which appear to provide the informants with new opportunities to evaluate and learn ways to make ordinary practices more socially sustainable. In addition, for many informants, the lives that they had built for themselves in the cities were causing them stress. Having gone through significant periods of perceived stress, the access to extended families appeared as a very sweet treat connected to the place-based condition of their new homes. Santos and Moreira [14] discussed the importance of social sustainability in terms of generating balance for environmental, economic, and social development. Our informants gave answers that put even more emphasis on the importance of balance for a sustainable everyday life. Nonetheless, balance was something that the informants had to relearn via different social interactions in the new setting, and for some, it took some getting used to, as the reminiscences of their old lives and tempos still cast shadows over some aspects of the families' everyday lives.

It is worthwhile noting that some of the informants in the study claimed to not care that much about sustainability, and as a result, they were not that keen on discussing such issues to a great extent. There were, however, none of the informants that did not factor in work and work-related issues into their migration decisions. On average, the place-based conditions and the related opportunities for work the informants were interested in were good in the new place of residence. Additionally, in most cases, at least one of the adults in the family had equal or better opportunities to work in their field or a related field. We argue that much social sustainability-related learning took place in connection with the processes around the parents, who implemented work-oriented changes as a direct result of place-based conditions. The transformative and ultimately changed needs of the family units entailed learning how to prioritise with regard to collective reflections [36]. Social learning for social sustainability aims at improving human interrelations. The ambitions and aspirations of the parents take a back-seat position in the overarching ambition to safeguard a socially sustainable future and present everyday life when the informants organise their everyday lives around the good of their children.

Many informants had grown up in rural conditions and equated homesickness and nostalgia with what they imagined the place-based conditions would be outside of the big city, while contemplating together with their families whether or not to relocate. Once the families had settled in after the counterurban migration, they engaged in practices of home-making such as navigating the new place and getting to know their neighbours and their community [29,43]. Nature and closeness to nature (and distance from urban settings) played a rather noteworthy role in the informants' understanding of place-based sustainability in relation to place-based conditions; this concerned both notions of a simpler, more natural, and sustainable backdrop for the families to have a better quality of life and the limitations of homogeneity and have-nots of smaller places. As with the findings of Eimermann et al. [4], it is, however, important to note that none of the informants generalised with regard to appointing meaning such as life in general being better or worse outside of the city. Instead, most informants were very specific in attempting to provide more nuanced narratives in which the periods of a person's life seem to be closely interlinked with the informants' urban–rural ambitions. These nuances were reflected in how the informants talked fondly of their earlier years in the city, and often, the perceived benefits and opportunities to live full, connected, and meaningful sustainable lives in a big city were something that the informants envisioned for themselves again in the future. They moved out from the city because they believed it would provide them with the best opportunities for their young families and their children. Learning to find small-scale, place-based solutions to unsustainable circumstances requires essential reorganisations that rely on adaptation and the willingness to embrace change. Our informants understand and attempt to achieve social sustainability in relation to place-based needs and conditions. It entails learning to become involved in and to take part in rural benefits—rather than

escaping perceived urban drawbacks, as well as accepting rural shortcomings weighed against urban benefits.

7. Conclusions

The aim of this article was to explore how the counterurbanising families' ideas of "a sustainable everyday life" developed during and after the migration event. To fulfil the aim, we studied how the subjective ideas of social sustainability were re-evaluated when the families learnt the ways of a smaller city and the significance of place-specific conditions in their perceptions of a sustainable everyday life. The theoretical contribution involves applying a relational place-based understanding and theories on learning to the social sustainability of a specific group of counterurbanisers. We provide new knowledge on issues in social sustainability, wherein socially aimed practices connected to learning and relational place aid in attempting to realise sustainability. In sum, the findings indicate that the way that the informants engage with social sustainability demonstrates how different features of place-based needs, conditions, and learning are infused with meaning and play a large role in the informants' sustainability strategies. Moreover, the reflections made by the informants exemplify how social sustainability, place, and learning are interrelated in the everyday lives of counterurbanising young families via place-based needs and place-based conditions. First, the perspective of *place-based needs* highlights various desires or ambitions that the families re-evaluated when learning the ways of a smaller city. For example, it highlights the importance of space for play, togetherness, and stress relief, how the place is understood to support well-being in terms of a meaningful lifestyle and a sense of ontological security, and how place supports feelings of safety in the social environment. Second, the perspective of *place-based conditions* highlights the learning process through the families' adaptations to life outside of the city and the significance of place-specific conditions in the counterurbanising families' perceptions of a sustainable everyday life. It highlights how place conditions encourage changes in behaviour toward more socially sustainable everyday practices and the families' capacities to adapt to the changing circumstances in their everyday lives and how learning to embrace place-based solutions to unsustainable situations requires significant overhauls that rely on transformation and the desire to embrace change. Our results need to be reflected on in relation to the limitations of qualitative research in general and our chosen method in particular. The informants' subjective will, and ability, to explain and contemplate on life choices in the 45 in-depth interviews—and the small but significant variations in the levels of details that each informant's answers contain—does limit the generalisability of our study. Future research could conduct new and more specialised studies with more and new informants that fit the selection criteria. This could generate a more encompassing new knowledge on social sustainability among counterurbanising young families.

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