

Home/House

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INTRODUCTION

Even though in Western culture the ideas of home and house are closely linked, home does not equal house. There are complex social and political dimensions to home that cannot be reduced to a certain kind of dwelling. Many of the places people call home are not houses, parts of buildings, or even structures at all. Furthermore, many homes are not owned in a legal sense but are still homes, just as formal “homeownership” does not guarantee the experience of home. Despite these incongruities between home and house, without any doubt, the subject of housing – how and where people physically live – is a very important one. Many entries in this encyclopedia deal with issues related to housing, which allows for a primary focus on “home” as a distinct phenomenon and experience in this entry, while “house” is considered throughout.

A home is a special kind of place. While no official definition of place exists, it is often characterized by three features (Gieryn 2000): a geographic location, a material form, and investment with meaning and value. Regarding the first aspect, it is quite obvious that the location of someone’s home is variable and occasionally changes throughout the life course. Some people have more than one home, or a home can be missing altogether. It is also possible that one’s home is on the move – as in the case of members of migrant

cultures, or people living at sea – or, at least to some degree, located in virtual space. In short, while the geographic location of one’s home is often a matter of great importance, there is much plasticity in this regard, even though most homes are, of course, clearly and stably positioned somewhere.

Likewise, it is obvious that the material form, or the bundle of physical “stuff,” that signifies home can be variable, ranging from an overbearing amount to virtually nothing. In the extreme, home materials can come with the place itself, such as the institutional furnishings of a nursing home or the natural features of a cave, and may not include anything that is personal or owned. However, again, most homes are not like that. A growing number of studies investigate the material aspects of home in Western and global cultures, examining furniture, food, electronics, toys, art, and other objects. Yet, whatever home may consist of, it is clear that there are no universal features to its material form.

Perhaps, then, the defining characteristics of home lie in the third component: the meanings and values that people invest in it. But what are the meanings and values that characterize home? Where do these ideas come from, and what implications and impacts do they have? How is home created and experienced as a specific kind of relationship that connects people with places and with other people?

Sociologist Jan Willem Duyvendak (2011, 38–39) described three aspects of what many people (and scholars) mean when they refer to the complex sentiment of home: familiarity, haven, and heaven. First, familiarity signifies a person’s in-depth knowledge of a place that has been built up over time. Familiarity is not always positive: one can

be very familiar with a stifling or dangerous place. Yet, for the most part, familiarity has been associated with feelings of well-being and with the reduction of fear. It resembles what has been described by others as “rootedness,” “dwelling,” or “habitus.” These ideas have in common that they aim to capture the taken-for-granted features of daily life and routine environments and therefore, ironically, frequently become overlooked.

The second meaning, haven, is most commonly associated with home. It refers to feelings of comfort, safety, and privacy often linked to the physical space of home, which, in some cases, is a house. Haven is typically viewed as a positive, comfortable experience, echoing other scholars’ concepts of the “hearth” or the “nest.” However, this feature, too, can be problematic, because it may not capture correctly what some people experience in their place of daily living and because establishing one’s personal comfort, safety, and privacy in a place may carry more or less hidden costs to others, and even one’s self. For instance, creating personal safety and security within a home may entail the surveillance and vilification of people perceived as others. Likewise, owing to constant reminders of outside threats and potential intrusions, living in a gated community can, paradoxically, feel less safe than living in a less fortified environment.

The term that carries the third meaning of home, heaven, is one rich in associations. Heaven suggests that home is a social place in which one feels connected to others, for instance through a shared history and common cultural practices. Heaven thus permits a broadening of the concept of home beyond one’s private room, apartment, or house, to include larger places such as neighborhoods, cities, regions, and even nation-states. Here home not only refers to the self and the household but also indicates membership in other groups, for instance

one’s neighborhood, community, or region. However, one should keep in mind that a person’s sense of connectedness may be limited to other old-timers, coethnics, or fellow citizens, thereby excluding newcomers, people of different cultural backgrounds, or noncitizens. At this larger scale, home takes on fewer material and more symbolic, ideological associations and resembles the concept of belonging, which is discussed below in more detail. To conclude, despite its comforting and deceptively welcoming overtones, the sentiment of home – for instance, in the form of a home quarter or homeland – can be a highly selective experience, which “seems to entail including some and excluding many” (Duyvendak 2011, 39). And, as is the case with familiarity, the boundary aspect of home is often overlooked.

Building on these initial remarks, the following sections move on to discuss social and political dimensions of home that are particularly relevant within urban and community studies, that is, culture, identity, practice, emotion, and belonging. The entry ends with brief thoughts on the methods of studying home.

HOME AND CULTURE

Although individual homes may vary considerably, societies typically develop strong normative ideals of what a home *should* be like. These ideals may vary between generations, or among different social classes, racial or ethnic groups, or subcultures. Nonetheless, across social differences within a culture, most people have a clear sense of the type of home to which one should aspire and that would indicate an acceptable social status. Some actively reject these ideals; nevertheless, even those reactions are evidence of the strength of cultural norms.

Western cultures share the expectation that people should have a private, permanent

home somewhere. Failure to satisfy this expectation invites stigmatization, such as that attached to persons called homeless or to some of those who live a transient life, for instance migrant workers (tellingly, middle-class lifestyle migrants such as “snowbirds,” who move *between* homes in different regions, are exempted from this stigma). In Western cultures, homelessness is a master stigma that dominates other identities, and the people labeled “homeless” suffer disrespect and discrimination as a result. A permanent home is, in multiple ways, a condition for full citizenship. Not only do certain rights such as voting depend on having a fixed address; unhoused individuals typically have no explicit right to engage in practices that make the spaces they use more homelike. While they may adapt public spaces to find shelter, build familiarity, or enhance privacy, these adaptations are vulnerable to the whims of governments and law enforcement, particularly as neoliberal policies increasingly criminalize homelessness and “harden” public spaces. The unhoused are thus culturally and politically marginalized due to their lack of an acceptable home.

What home means in Western culture today is a recent historical and social construct. Ideas of homes as providing privacy, creating domesticity, and offering comfort, as well as aspirations of homeownership, are all very recent in Western history (Rybczynski 1986). They appear to be rooted in Romantic notions of the proper balance between civilization and nature (town and country), increasing expectations of privacy for both the family and the individual, and the privileging of individual autonomy and self-sufficiency. Although the view that a freestanding single-family house is the most desirable home is pervasive across many Western societies, especially in North America, the presentation of this view as “traditional” is false. In the United States, this type

of home was made affordable, particularly for white families, only in the mid-twentieth century, through federal mortgage policies. Since then, ownership of a freestanding, suburban single-family home has become associated with middle-class respectability and ideal community life (McCabe 2016). In countries with a strong norm of homeownership, homeowners are afforded a social status that contributes to, and contrasts with, the stigmatization and marginalization of those who do not legally own a home, and even of those who own only a less perfect home.

Family life is also culturally bound up with home and homeownership. Moving out of one’s family home and, in particular, purchasing one’s own home are key rites of passage in most Western societies. These steps signal one’s transition into of full adulthood. Culture, therefore, also prescribes what kinds of dwellings should be associated with particular stages in life and family types. For instance, while an apartment might be suitable – or even optimal – for young singles and childless couples, family life has typically been associated, in North America in particular, with the freestanding single-family home. The rise of this cultural view coincided with the first suburban expansion in the late nineteenth century, when a home surrounded by a garden came to be seen as the optimal place to raise children. Suburbs promised the privacy, comfort, and homogeneity that cities could not deliver, and promotional materials equated these qualities with decency and responsible parenting. Children’s health and welfare would be enriched by opportunities for outdoor play, while the latter removed the children from the unwelcome crowding and diversity of urban life (Wright 1981). Even so, contemporary housing markets often complicate this ideal. In many cities, freestanding single-family homes are financially out of reach for all but the wealthiest families. As a result, many families today

must redefine how the homes they can afford will facilitate a respectable family life (Lauster 2016). Nonetheless, cultural norms of the “good” home inform the expectations placed on parents and other caregivers regarding how they should provide for children.

The variety of ways in which individuals and families actually make homes, and the changes we can observe, over time, in standards of the good and decent home, suggest that cultural norms surrounding home are not compulsory or immutable. However, they are part of the cultural “toolkit” (Swidler 1986) that informs social action. Normative ideologies, beliefs, symbols, stories, and rituals of home suggest to individuals certain patterns of behavior. Regardless of whether or not individuals conform to these norms, they are nevertheless aware of them. Those whose homes are not appropriate to their stage in life, to their social class, type of family, and so on, may feel pressure to conform or to explain why their home does not reflect cultural expectations. Alternatively, they may provide accounts of why their culturally “inappropriate” homes are indeed respectable or desirable and, in doing so, they may initiate a process of shifting cultural norms.

HOME AND IDENTITY

Gaining a sense of control, agency, and personal expression is essential to what it means to have a home (Douglas 1991). Unlike in places like work or school, where others control our behavior and expressions, at home we can – at least ideally – be true to our own selves. This is one of the characteristics of home that distinguishes the concept from that of house or any other dwelling. Many people can identify a place other than their own residence where they feel a home like freedom and comfort in being themselves. This may be a neighborhood, a “third place”

such as a bar or coffee shop, or someone else’s dwelling. In addition, many people live in places where they have little control or ability to express themselves. Living in a place in which one cannot change the furnishings or the decorations may seem like a rather trivial issue, yet it can be deeply frustrating and unsettling, as it compromises one’s ability to truly feel at home (Zavisca 2012).

Home, then, is a site for the formation and expression of one’s self. A home place allows individuals to perform their personal identities in many respects, including in relation to gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, class, nationality, and the like, yet also in terms of their subcultural identities and tastes. The task of expressing oneself can become very complex, as different layers of one’s identity may overlap, even contradict one another, while one has to negotiate relationships with other household members as well. The connection between home and identity can seem so close as to create an obligation to express one’s self through the choice of a dwelling and its décor as well as through its location, since neighborhoods, too, are presumed to express one’s identity. Furthermore, beyond articulating the self through style and design, a home can become a literal tool for identity construction. For instance, buying a larger apartment or house, or substantially remodeling or redecorating an existing home, both announces and facilitates one’s improved class status.

Studying institutional settings – such as nursing or group homes, which are often designed to depersonalize and create conformity – reveals how these places constrain the self-expression as well as the resilience and creativity of individuals, as they resist those restrictions in creating a home. Displaying favorite pictures or posters, or rearranging the furniture, are techniques of making institutional spaces one’s own. Yet pressures and constraints exist

everywhere, as all individuals must make do in their home-making with the financial, social, cultural, and place-related resources that are available or can be obtained. Even middle-class adults who have some degree of freedom to choose their housing are often unable to attain what they understand to be the fully appropriate or desirable housing that should reflect their household type, class status, life stage, and other facets of identity.

Gender identity deserves special attention, as the extent to which men or women are viewed as respectable is often linked to home (Bowlby, Gregory, and McKie 1997). Men typically claim the economic spaces of work and the public spaces of politics for personal expression, while women are understood to be caretakers of the home and thus responsible for the dwelling's appearance. As a result, the decoration, provisioning, maintenance, and cleanliness of the home can be of particular significance to women. Home tasks of all sorts constitute key ways in which women in particular "do gender," and women's perceived value is often closely associated with the state of their homes, regardless of whether or not they work outside the house. Domestic work is both a burden and a source of pride and identity for women.

In sum, homes are important means for the expression of personal identities, whether individuals wish them to be or not. Homes are sites that demonstrate proper socialization and the internalization of cultural norms, and, perhaps more pleasurably, they act as a canvas for the expressions of memberships, affinities, styles, and tastes.

HOME AS PRACTICE

The strategies used to make dwellings a space for the expression or reflection of identities suggest that home-making is best understood as a set of routines or practices (Bowlby, Gregory, and McKie 1997; Douglas 1991).

What is meant here is not the domestic chores and tasks usually associated with home-making (cooking, cleaning, home decorating, and the like), although these may be important means by which a dwelling is transformed into a home. A broader set of practices are considered here to constitute the ways in which homes are made: care of the self, others, and belongings; activities that are idiosyncratic to household or family; and leisure, relaxation, and other behaviors typically reserved for the domestic sphere. These actions allow individuals to connect with intimate others in distinct ways and enhance attachment to people and places. They also hinge on privacy and control.

Home-making can thus be characterized as an ongoing and often performative practice. Some scholars have proposed that home is best understood as a matter of "doing home," which is similar to the "doing" of gender or any other socially significant social category that is enacted within the context of specific and imagined audiences. For instance, as we engage in domestic tasks, we might consider whether our families, our neighbors, or others would regard these as respectable or decent. Emphasizing the practical work behind a social category is a key concern in interactionist social theories, and a similar concern also appears in performance-oriented post-modern approaches. Yet, even though they are useful, the metaphors of work or performance perhaps conceal the fact that "doing home" is not a distinct competence, recognized and valued in clear terms by others.

Generally speaking, in today's Western cultures, we develop the skills involved in doing home without being explicitly taught. Children acquire the skills necessary to "do home" through primary socialization, by observing their own families' routines, as well as by absorbing the cultural messages supplied by television and other media, and

by toys and games. The game of “playing house” is very common across many societies as a way of first mimicking, and eventually mastering, the expectations, skills, and tasks associated with home.

If home is best understood as a set of practices, those practices are not tied to one specific place and can thus be performed at multiple locations (just as doing gender is not limited to romance, sexuality, or clothing). People can engage in home-making in a variety of places, including at work, in vehicles, or in hotel rooms. Rudimentary forms of home-making also happen in public spaces, such as at bus stops, on the subway, in restaurants, in parks, or on the sidewalk – anywhere where people put forth ownership claims, however minimal and temporary, over a sliver of place. In sum, home should be understood as a complex interplay of cultural, personal, and interactional processes, and as involving different kinds of home-making practices in which particular identities and social relationships are expressed.

HOME AND EMOTION

The emotional aspects of home are frequently implied, yet rarely investigated and explicitly discussed in social research. One would expect that there is much to be learned about the feeling of home when consulting the literature on emotions. Yet, surprisingly, emotion scholars have largely neglected to study home as a feeling. As mentioned in the introduction, the experience of home has been linked to feelings of comfort, safety, and privacy, while many other ingredients of home, such as familiarity and the expression of personal and collective identities, also have emotive undertones. In addition to their dizzying complexity, feelings of home are often taken for granted and overlooked in everyday life, which makes them more

difficult – and perhaps less exciting – to study than other emotions.

In contrast, experiences of *not* feeling at home are associated with potent and reflective emotions that frequently prompt action and have piqued the interest of many social researchers. One could argue that (collective) emotions of displacement, disconnection, and uprooting play major roles in today’s social and political conflicts at the national and global scale, and are thus of central concern to scholars in many academic sub-fields (e.g., Moïsi 2009). However, disturbed or absent feelings of home are the flipside of actual home experiences and, likewise, require a solid theoretical framework for emotion that is generally lacking and often overshadowed by most scholars’ primary interests in material, cultural, or political aspects of home.

One might argue that, within North American urban and community sociology, there are considerable bodies of work that deal with emotional aspects of familiar places, for instance there are numerous studies on “sense of place,” “place” or “community attachment,” and “place” or “community satisfaction.” However, upon close investigation, it becomes obvious that sense, attachment, and satisfaction in this literature are not usually investigated from a conceptual perspective on emotion; they are operationalized as quantitative scales and measures, or merely examined in terms of associations and descriptions. Many of these studies are carefully crafted and produce interesting results, yet they generally do not contribute much to our understanding of what constitutes the emotions of attachment or satisfaction with regard to home as a particular kind of place.

Another problem is that, by and large, this literature seems to assume that a “strong” attachment to dwellings and neighborhoods is inherently positive and that responses suggesting only “weak” attachment, ambivalent

emotions, or detachment from certain locations indicate decline or dysfunction in one's social or personal life. Yet, as already noted, home is not a switch that is either on or off; it is a dynamic set of practices, informed by culture, that facilitates a range of emotional experiences and allows individuals to express personal and collective identities. When home is narrowly conceptualized as a dwelling, feminist and other critical scholars have justly pointed out that residences can be "hell" for certain individuals and groups (Mallett 2004; Manzo 2003). Domestic places are frequently sites of abuse, neglect, and isolation, yet this does not mean that the victims of these harms permanently lack all sense of home. Clearly, the discovery that some people are hurt in their private quarters must be conceptually separated from the idea of home as an experience involving a mixture of personally significant feelings that can be pursued and found in other locations.

Overall, scholars must strive to develop more sophisticated theoretical frameworks and methodological tools to better understand the emotional experience of home – and of places more generally. Concepts and topics that are debated in the current study of emotions – such as emotion cultures, feeling rules, emotion codes, emotion management, and emotional labor – must be brought to bear on questions related to home. Future studies could investigate in greater depth what home feels like in the body, how home feelings are learned and expressed individually, how such emotions are debated in public discourse, and what social and political consequences they have.

HOME AND BELONGING

Just like the concept of home, the scholarly idea of "belonging" involves meaningful and emotional connections between people and places. In experiencing belonging, people are

understood to evaluate their personal and collective "fit" within certain social and spatial environments in a positive way (Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst 2005). Thus belonging also involves identities and is rooted in culture. One difference between belonging and home is that belonging is primarily used by scholars to describe people's connections to larger places, such as neighborhoods, towns, regions, or nations. Since the early 1990s, a rapidly growing interdisciplinary literature has examined belonging within the areas of (im)migration, (trans)nationalism, and citizenship at the national and global level. Geographically speaking, studies of belonging typically pick up where most studies of home leave off: at the walls of private residences. However, when home is understood as a social experience and practice rather than as a dwelling, interesting similarities and connections between the two ideas emerge (Boccagni and Brighenti 2017).

In recent years, urban and community scholars have begun to embrace the concept of belonging. Various regional and local subforms of belonging – such as "elective," "selective," "neighborhood," and "contested" belonging – are vividly debated, typically in relation to mobility and migration (Watt and Smets 2014). At this meso-level, the newer concepts of belonging and home (Duyvendak 2011) compete with the older idea of "community," which is still used widely in urban and community studies, especially in North America.

When compared with research on home, studies of belonging emphasize the structural contexts in which individual experiences, practices, and identities are embedded. It is no accident that belonging is often examined as a matter of power and politics, displacement and exclusion, thereby highlighting macrosocial dynamics and constraints (Yuval-Davis 2011), whereas home is frequently understood as an issue of

creativity and adaptation that foregrounds individual agency, self-expression, and identity. To date, only a small number of studies connect examinations of people's experiences within private dwellings with their belonging in neighborhoods, cities, and nations (e.g., Kefalas 2003). Regardless of which concept is used, more research is needed on how local practices and identities are intertwined with processes in larger settings and how they are influenced by macroforces. Arguably, the recent rise of nationalist and populist political movements in both North America and Europe is based on shifting experiences of home and belonging at multiple spatial and social levels.

Overall, the concept of belonging is closely related to the idea of home; however, belonging appears to be more spatially flexible and politically sensitive, which makes it attractive to those who study larger social processes such as mobility, migration, (trans)nationalism, globalization, and conflict. As cities and communities are increasingly shaped by these and other developments at the macrolevel, urban researchers who study home and housing may be well advised to add belonging as a useful concept and framework to their vocabulary.

HOME AND RESEARCH METHODS

Because home is so tightly bound up with culture, identity, and emotion, scholars typically conduct research in this area using qualitative methods. In-depth and open-ended interviews, as well as observational fieldwork, have provided researchers with insight into how people use and understand their homes (Boccagni 2017, ch. 2). One challenge in this area of study is the habitual nature of home. As discussed above, familiarity is a key component of home. An initial task for the researcher is to uncover the taken-for-granted practices and relationships that both reflect

and facilitate this familiarity. Doing so can require observing, and asking questions about, very mundane and personal facets of domestic life, such as sleeping, hygiene, or eating habits. Evidently, to be successful in this requires a strong rapport and trust between researchers and study participants. As research on home issues matures, one can expect to see an increase in the use of more formal and standardized methods that formulate hypotheses-driven rather than exploratory and interpretive research questions.

The bias of social science research toward studying problems means that we know more about how homes are made and unmade under difficult circumstances than we do about the most mundane home-making practices. For instance, scholars have provided valuable insight into how home is accomplished in situations of crowding (Zavisca 2012), or when real estate markets undermine households' attempts to realize their ideal visions of home (Lauster 2016). In these studies, subjects' inability to create comfortable and socially acceptable homes may have made them especially aware of the kinds of home-making practices that others without such constraints engage in with little reflection, and of how their own practices differ. Home-making practices are also easily made visible in institutional settings such as dormitories, rehabilitation centers, and nursing homes. There the basics of human necessity are provided by the institution, and researchers can observe just how residents adapt their spaces to create comfort, identity, privacy, and the like.

Moments of transition and disruption can create research opportunities as well. The "downsizing" engaged in by families whose adult children have moved out sets in motion purposeful choices about how a reshaped household will craft a new home. Some people manage to afford two (or more) homes,

which they occupy through cyclical lifestyle migration. Alternatively, dislocation caused by events such as natural disasters, political upheaval, or other calamities may require people to reassemble homes in entirely new locations (Boccagni 2017). Hence difficult personal and structural situations during which home-making practices are particularly visible can provide useful opportunities for researchers to study the facets of home. These populations are not representative of all those who engage in home-making, however, and care must be taken when generalizing the results of such studies to those whose experiences are more typical and mundane.

SEE ALSO: Displacement; Homelessness; Housing; Housing Career; Informal Housing; Place; Place Attachment; Place-Making; Residential Choices

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