

'Here, There, Everywhere': An Ethnographic Study Exploring the Notion of Home

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'You can never go home again, but the truth is you can never leave home, so it's all right'

--Maya Angelou

Introduction

"Home is a place, a site in which we live [...] an idea, an imaginary that is imbued with feelings of belonging, desire and intimacy [...] of violence, fear and alienation" (Blunt & Dowling 2006:2).

We constantly speak of making a home, going home and being homesick- but what do we mean by this? What is home? I have spent most of my life trying to answer this question. Born in Ireland to Sudanese parents and moving to Sudan at the age of 12, my notion of home was far from stable. When choosing the topic for my project, I was certain I wanted to understand other people's notion of home, what makes a home and how identities are shaped by the walls that surround us, the people around us and the distance between us. Thus, my aim is to explore the wider implications of the anthropology of home in relation to concepts of identity, belonging and alienation. In doing so, I will highlight the ways in which 'home' touches upon more than a physical house and how it embodies a wide array of feelings, emotions and thoughts, ones I hope to bring to the surface.

Methodology: Looking for 'the field'

Realising early on that participant observation was an unsuitable research

method for my topic, I chose to rely on face-to-face interviews. Hockey states that participant observation "still occupies the methodological high ground" (2002: 211). I was concerned that interviews would limit the reliability of the information I would receive and that people would censor their true feelings regarding home. I was wrong; further research led me to Giddens concept of 'the interview as participant engagement' - an idea that meant interviews 'were a moment of engagement, a site of participation in the life of the person we want to talk with' (Skinner 2012: 75). Therefore, my personal connection to the topic enhanced rather than hindered interviews, making it the best form of methodology.

By the end of my research period I had interviewed sixteen people, most of whom I had met before and were undergraduate students at the University of St Andrews. Participants also included postgraduates at the university and family friends who had an upbringing similar to mine. As a result, the participants represented many different ages, backgrounds and life experiences which shaped their concept of 'home'. The interviewees ranged from ages 19-70, the older participants being my friend's parents and my older family members, a range that allowed me to understand how age can influence the notion of home.

I conducted these interviews in cafés in St Andrews, my flat and in London during Spring Break. Thus, not only was there variance in my participant group and geographical location of the interviews, but there was also more than one line of questioning as I did not confine myself to the questions I had set prior to the inception of my project and instead responded to the natural flow of conversation. Each interview was recorded and replayed at the end of the interview and during data analysis.

What makes a home or how do you make it?

Throughout my life I've always heard the phrase 'home is where the heart is', and over the years I realized that my heart was with my friends and family. To explore this notion, I asked the participants "what do you think makes a 'home'?" The responses were generally the same. Yasmin, a Sudanese student in England said 'home for me is where my mum is, wherever she is, that's home'. The link between motherhood and the concept of home is worth noting since women, in the past, were considered to be the center of the home. My first interviewee, Bill, my flat mates' father said that during his time in the army, "home was where [his] mother was" he adds that home is not one thing, it's individual and emotional and overall, the "concept of the physical home is becoming more diluted". Dawson and Rapport agree and state that "everyone chooses their own home and one's choice may remain invisible and irrelevant to others" (1998: 27). Thus, our understanding of home is usually based on the people that surround us which makes it more individual. Meredith, an American second-year student in St Andrews mentioned that she names multiple places as home depending on where she is. "When I'm in America and I say I want to go home I mean Scotland because my friends and routine is there". However, when she is in Scotland, America becomes home for her as it is where her family is. In this way, Meredith associates her home with her everyday interactions and activities. Berger states that "home becomes more mobile and can be taken along wherever one decamps" and thus "home is no longer a dwelling but the untold story of a life being lived" (1984: 64).

Similarly, Sarah, like many other participants, connected the concept of home with her family. Although Sarah is originally Egyptian, she has lived all

around the world. During her two first years of university, her parents lived in the Netherlands and that became home for her. However, Sarah's parents currently live in Egypt but she jokingly said "if they move again maybe Egypt won't be home". Therefore, the life being lived that Berger alludes to is embodied by the people we share it with.

Walls, Bricks, and Foundations: The Physical Home

Traditionally, the physical dwelling was known in terms of its furniture, location and interior design (Rapport & Dawson 1998). Homes began by bringing space under control and gave domestic life physical orientations, what Douglas called "directions of existence" (1991: 290). However, on a much deeper level, the home has become known in terms of the relationships people have and the relationships they would like to have with others who share the same space. Home has also become a representation of identity and provides a collective sense of security, belonging or for those who do not have a home, a sense of exclusion (Chapman 2001: 144). Thus, there has been a shift in the meaning of home and it is important to highlight the representation of a home in terms of its physical properties.

During my interview with Anna, she mentioned that part of her connection with Ireland as her home was based on her grandparents' house, where the family gathers. "Last summer my grandma had a health scare and it hit me that when she dies, I don't know where the base is going to be ... I think a huge part of home is the physical home which embodies the emotional aspect of a home". Anna's response highlights that the physical home provides a base for the relationships among family members. Khadija, another interviewee shared the same idea and mentioned that as she got

older, the physical home became important. As part of her work with the UN and the World Bank, Khadija had to travel and fill out various forms regarding her “permanent address”. “I used to hate filling in those forms, I realized I didn’t have a permanent address, many times, it would traumatize me and make me reconsider who I was or where I belonged”. Khadija stated that the legality that comes with being an adult makes you think about home; “I’ve thought about burning everything [...] not having a permanent address was a reminder of not having a home”.

Therefore, there is a connection between the physical sense of a home and the emotions that come from the home. Although Khadija wanted a physical home “I never saw Marimba’ as home but I saw it has a place where I was happy, I think that home is an emotional sense [...] perhaps that longing to have that a physical place to call home is to fulfil that emotional sense of belonging”. The walls and bricks that surround us are metaphors for the lives that are held within them. The home remains a “nostalgic illusion”, a place that is created and maintained only in the memory and imagination (Kong 1999: 578).

Bill, a retired Lieutenant Colonel, mentioned that upon entering the United States Army he had to proclaim his “home of record”. “It’s a legal term that’s required, it’s where everything you own will be shipped to ... I think the legality adds something”. Bill like Khadija was nervous filling out these forms because there was a hidden meaning attached to the physical home. This reflects how travel and communication make the globe a unified space, how no place is completely isolated, how no place is completely “other” and no one is never really “at home” (Augé 1995: 108). This feeling of never feeling “at home” seems to be heightened by society’s need to require a “home of record” or “permanent

address” as it exposes the complex feelings one associates with a house. This is also a reflection of the function of home and how it is used by society as a form of control. It confines people’s activities such as their ability to get a driver’s license, to register with a GP etc. Therefore, the home has multiple functions beyond providing a sense of comfort.

Identity, Stability, and Belonging: Does home make you, you?

“The notion of home draws its significance from its function as a metaphor [...] the concept of home is linked to that of identity, it is about the story we tell of ourselves... which is also the story others tell of us” (Sarup 1994: 94 in Nigel & Dawson 1998: 105).

The questions I asked began to shift at this point because I noticed the common desire to have a stable sense of home. The aim of my questions was to target why it was important to have a place to call home. The questions “What is the importance of a stable sense of home, is your identity shaped by your home?” sparked a lot of conversation. Yasmin and Maha both said that when you have a stable sense of home “you feel like you’re part of something and you know who you are”. Gianluca, an Italian student at St Andrews, said that “being Italian is part of me, it’s everywhere I go”. These responses connect the concept of home and identity which proved to be both a negative and positive aspect.

During my interviews with Khadija, she mentioned that the lack of a stable sense of home lead to the creation of mistaken identities and misunderstandings. Khadija’s complex notion of home results from living in America for 30 years with constant travel for work while maintaining a familial connection to Sierra Leone. She said she’s never really at home: “People

question my ‘Americanness’ because I don’t sound or look American and when I go to Sierra Leone people make me feel American because I’m not ‘truly’ Sierra Leonean [...] I realized I didn’t belong anywhere”. She added that: “as someone who has moved a number of times [...] negative impacts—loss of friendships, alienation, and no sense of community—are taking a toll on my life [...] I don’t know who I am”. Thus, Khadija has a heightened desire to have a “stable sense of home” both physical and emotional and for her home is nowhere. At times she “only knows extreme estrangement and alienation” (Hook 1991: 148).

In this case, home creates a sense of self, it becomes a reflection of who one is and who they want to be. Khadija further reflected on her time in America where people ‘created’ an identity for her based on how she looked like and Sierra Leone, where people based her identity on her years living in America. She reminisced on an incident: “After 9/11 an American colleague said to me ‘oh you don’t have to worry, you’re not really American, you can go home’ I was shocked, America was my home”. In this case, Khadija’s colleague connected Khadija’s identity based on her external appearance and knowing that Khadija had connections with Sierra Leone, she did not consider that America might be home for Khadija. Similarly, Khadija mentioned that when she’s in Sierra Leone, “they tell me to go back to America, that I can’t come here and change everything”—referring to western domination over Africa and the history of colonialism, Khadija, although originally Sierra Leonean, was seen as an outsider because she lived in America. Thus, in both situations, a mistaken identity was created based on her appearance, accent and where she was living at the time. Home encompasses these different factors as both the physical home and emotional home give us a set of values, norms and morals that become part of our identities which later

allow others to define us and shape how we define ourselves.

Conversely, the link between identity and home also had positive effects on some of my interviewees. Natasha, born in England to a Sudanese father and Filipino mother, believes: “I am who I am because I’m exposed to three different cultures [...] I can integrate 3 sets of values [...] I have the opportunity to pick and choose what feels good for me but I have a wider palette that a homegrown English person”. Therefore, Natasha’s identity is based on what she calls her “three homes” and she believes that not having a stable sense of home has made her a more open-minded person.

Thus, according to Foucault, the home is intimately tied to what he calls the “games of truth”- relations of power which form relations to oneself and to others. The home, therefore, supports the operations of modern regimes of power and technologies of self. In turn, the home facilitates the connections between the body and the nation which function as regulatory controls (Harper & Mwaniki: n.d). Most importantly, each country has an identity: a set of norms, values and ideologies and for each person present in these different countries, an individual identity is created and recreated by the physical and emotional home.

Hiraeth: Distance, Memory, and Nostalgia

During my research, I came across the Welsh word *hiraeth* which means “A homesickness for a home to which you cannot return, a home which maybe never was; the nostalgia, the yearning, the grief for the lost places of your past” (Swaffer 2015). I felt more than anything that this word encapsulated a lot of the feelings associated with home and so the concept of distance became a key aspect of my

research. I asked some of my interviewees if they felt more or less connected to their nation home now that they did not live there. "My desire to have a connection with Sudan was stronger because I didn't grow up there ... living here [in England] I've become more appreciative; I know that I'm Sudanese and see the need to protect that" said Maha. She added that distance has made her reconsider her "Sudanese-ness" and heightened her ties to Sudan. Similarly, Yasmin said that "I never expressed the fact that I was Sudanese when I lived there but now because I'm not surrounded by a lot of Sudanese people or the culture, I try harder to connect to home". Bill also spoke about his time in the army and about how he realized that "distance increased the desire to make a certain place home because I wanted to attach to something".

What is common in the responses is the desire to connect to a place as home. Although these seem like positive responses to the distance, Omnia said that she realized that the distance from Sudan had affected her language skills, "I hear myself struggling and stuttering when speaking Arabic now because the distance has limited how immersed I am in the Arabic language and culture". However, Omnia added that when she was in Sudan, she complained about it, never appreciating it or seeing its true beauty but since her time at university, that has changed. According to Wills, "the time spent living at [home], the people they knew, the place they lived in [...] beauty that went unnoticed before becomes visible when they are away" (2008: 134).

I followed up by asking a hypothetical question "if you could not go back to [nation home] would you over time feel less connected due to the physical distance between you?" Natasha states that because she was born in England she would feel a greater level of detachment from Sudan and the Philippines if she could not go.

She adds that "there would be less of a connection on a day-to-day basis". In this case, her inability to physically connect to Sudan and the Philippines may limit her connection to it rather than increase it. Conversely, Anna's answered, "Physical separation from Ireland would make me want to look out for Irish people' and 'I would never let distance make me lose the sense of being Irish." Natasha and Anna both show different outlooks towards the effect of distance on their notion of home. Distance did not seem to be an issue for everyone which I interpreted as a reflection of their relationship with home. Charlotte, born to parents in the army, to a different country every few years. To her, "home is not a big thing, when I came to university I was used to it, I never get homesick and so distance is not a huge factor for me mainly because I was never really connected to a home before". Therefore, distance only seemed to be an issue to those who either had a connection with a notion of home or wanted a connection with home.

Memory and nostalgia also played a significant part in my interviewees' responses. Both terms were connected to the idea of distance and home. Khadija's connection to her grandmother's house in Marimba is mainly based on her childhood memories and the nostalgia connected to her inability to be there all the time. She did not live there but it became hiraeth, a home that never was but provides you with the feeling of yearning, safety, and love. Similarly, for Yasmin, Maha and Omnia the years they spent without appreciating or connecting with Sudan are lost. Now they desire to bridge the distance between themselves and Sudan.

Both questions highlighted the importance of distance in creating a sense of home or lack of home. Distance and time do their part in slowly transforming a bond with home into a more emotional connection with

one's native country. Home then becomes a symbolic place, an idealized place, a place that exists only in the memories of the person who has left it. This concept of home that lives in the imaginations of the interviewees, encompasses both 'ideals of an abstract nostalgic past and utopian future' (Wiles 2008: 134).

Home: A working definition:

In conclusion, my research highlighted the complexity of defining home. Which is evident through my analyses of differing views concerning people's associations with home, their effects on identity, and the power of distance on a sense of home. In a wider context, the anthropology of home is connected to notions of identity and belonging. My interviewees had difficulty coming to terms with their definition of home and mentioned conflicting feelings of alienation, belonging and pride. It is difficult to find a definitive answer to a concept that is ever changing and evolving. However, it is evident that there is a shared desire to understand and explain what we mean by home. The way I conducted my research proved to be very successful, I was able to uncover some of the most personal stories associated with people's families, history, and desires. What is certain is that home brings together memory and longing, the effective and the physical, the local and the global (Rapport & Dawson 1998: 7-9). Overall, my research highlighted the concept that home is neither here nor there- it is both here and there, a hybrid.

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