

Designer's Corner

Centring the Home in Research

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The Oxford dictionary includes in its definitions of the home (a) "the place where one lives; the fixed residence of a family or household," and (b) "a dwelling-house." This core space of everyday life, embedded in a legacy of ideas of the home as a haven of domesticity, separate from the harshness of the public world of paid work, is, however, being shown to be a far more complex concept and reality than a simple dictionary definition suggests.

Geographers, particularly those working from a feminist perspective, have challenged accepted notions of the distinction between public and private, of "family home," and of the home as necessarily a safe space for women and children. An array of findings demonstrate, for example, a multiplicity of family forms and living arrangements accompanying demographic and social change, and a blurring of the boundaries of home and work as women's engagement in different forms of domestic and paid work in their own or others' homes is recognized. Furthermore, the influence of normative heterosexuality and notions of the private, nuclear family are being shown to marginalize certain family forms, such as the lone parent or the gay/lesbian household, and to shield domestic violence (see Dowling & Pratt, 1993, for an overview of geographical studies).¹ In sum, "the family home" is a complex spatial and social institutional arrangement that needs considerable unravelling if it is to be fully understood. Certainly, the diversity of families, household arrangements, meanings of home, locations, and spatial arrangements of homes suggests that integrating the home into research can contribute to our understanding of the connections among everyday lives, health, and the management of illness and disability.

¹ My work includes investigation of the home as a site where disability and chronic illness are negotiated by women with multiple sclerosis (Dyck, 1995, 1998) and where domestic labour and paid labour are integrated by suburban mothers of young children (Dyck, 1989, 1990).

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This is particularly so given trends in the health-care system towards community care.

Designing research centred on the home entails thinking about the links between chosen field methods and conceptualizations of the home. It also entails thinking about the home as a field site where the complexity of research relations plays out. Let us think first of the home as a core site in the sociospatial arrangement of everyday life, which may encompass multiple activities and meanings. To begin with, and in light of existing research, this means approaching the home as both a material and a "discursive" site. As a material site its spatial arrangements, location (neighbourhood), amenities and furnishings, and running costs are all relevant. Considering it as a discursive site means taking into account how dominant social discourses — for example, on gender, ability/disability, health/illness, and sexuality — inform social and health policy and also inform and are negotiated in the ways a home is used and the meanings about it created. Yet materiality and discourse are neither separate nor fixed, so that while normative ideas shape how the home is used and arranged, specific uses and arrangements may "rework" dominant ideas. For instance, a woman with multiple sclerosis who can no longer function in a city workplace and thus restructures her home environment can renegotiate her identity as "able" and redefine her home as a workplace outside the confines of commonly understood norms. Similarly, the entry of care services into the home both challenges the notion of the home as a private space and redefines it as a workplace (of the paid caregivers).

In practical terms, we need methods that focus on observation and/or accounts of the home as both a material and a discursive site. A particular dimension of the home may be foregrounded, however, depending on the research question and the scope of the research. There may be a focus on policy, for example, or on the experiences of various users of the home, or there may be a comprehensive view that aims to bring in several dimensions of the home. Narrative accounts of everyday life through in-depth semi-structured interviews can reveal many uses and meanings of the home and many aspects of its relationship to external spaces. The arrangement and uses of home can also be observed and recorded, through mapping, videotaping, and other observational techniques that offer a nuanced view of the materiality of home space.² The people, spaces, and temporal rhythms of daily

² An interdisciplinary project headed by Patricia McKeever, Co-director, Home and Community Care Evaluation and Research Centre, Faculty of Nursing, University of Toronto, is currently investigating the home as a site of care using a variety of interview and observational methods.

routine can enable the researcher to reveal the significance and meanings of the home to those living in it, as well as how these are shaped by other spaces and relationships not visible in a tangible way in the home. For example, the meanings and uses of home for a man with HIV/AIDS may change with his decreasing ability to use neighbourhood spaces, but are also framed by social policy, the power of biomedicine to label him as a palliative-care patient, and local friendships and resources (Dyck & O'Brien, 2001).

Another aspect of the research equation is the home as field site. In conducting interviews or other field work in the home, we blur the boundaries of public and private by entering the participant's home as a researcher backed by the authority of a university or granting agency. And we do not leave the site undisturbed. The questions we ask and the information we may dispense may result in participants renegotiating how they see themselves or possessing the knowledge to access resources. In research that is potentially intrusive the researcher must be careful to follow ethical procedures. The reflexivity common to qualitative inquiry is a further important ingredient of the research process. It helps us to understand how the home as field site, in both its materiality and its meaning, mediates research relations and the knowledge constructed.

Centring the home in research offers an exciting opportunity to enrich analysis by investigating the role of space in everyday experiences and the ways in which socio-economic and political processes condition these experiences. A focus on the home may also suggest taking a different perspective on a particular topic, such as domestic violence, parenting a disabled child, or living with a psychiatric illness. In short, taking the home into account opens up ways of looking at health-related issues that do not isolate the participants' experiences from the material conditions of their everyday life and the relations and discourses that shape them.

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