

HOMInG interview
with Margarethe Kusenbach
(University of South Florida)
Conducted by Paolo Boccagni
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Margarethe Kusenbach, Ph.D., is Associate Professor and Associate Chair of the Department of Sociology at the University of South Florida, Tampa, USA. Her research interests and areas of publication include urban and community sociology, social psychology (identity and emotions), disasters and environment, and qualitative methods. For the past several years, her work has focused on issues of home and belonging among mobile home residents and lifestyle migrants, while her new research is on street art and urban development in non-metropolitan cities.

Can you tell us how you started to be interested in "home" within your research trajectory, what home means to you, and if this meaning had an influence on your interest in the topic?

To someone who has lived in five different countries and moved often, questions of what home means arise almost naturally. I have always enjoyed the feeling of freedom that came with arriving in a new place and trusted that I can develop a sense of familiarity and comfort with time. Overall, I care more about personal relationships and living in vibrant urban spaces than about growing roots in any particular place. A large part of my home experience lies in my long-term relationship with my partner. The biggest shift in my geographic sense of home occurred when I realized that I was no longer an international student in the United States but had become a permanent, immigrant American. Immigrants often have more than one home and can experience a sense of rootedness *between* places; and they typically feel connected to other immigrants who share this experience. Of course, my personal history of leaving and making homes has influenced my research. I have learned not to take home for granted and believe that questions of home are central to many contemporary social processes and problems, prompting my academic interest in the topic.

In the Introduction to your edited volume *Home* you propose to understand this notion as a special kind of emplaced social relationship. What led you to articulate this definition? How does it work out and what difference does it make in practice?

Social relationships can take many forms and are not limited to other people; all social relationships happen somewhere, even if located in virtual space. The meaning of places for people is often embedded in past, future or imagined social relationships with

others, whether these others are people or pets or abstract others such as god or nature. A sense of home develops when one's connection to a place (and, by extension, others) takes on particular emotional qualities, namely those of familiarity, shelter/comfort, personal expression and social belonging. When it exists, home is often unnoticed, just like the air that surrounds us. Ironically, home is perhaps most noticeable when there is something wrong with it or in its absence. Practically, it means that places, including homes, form and change profoundly due to social experiences.

Home, you write in the same paper, "is a matter of degree and can be missing altogether". This raises an intriguing question: what is there, where (or when) home is missing? How would you conceptualize the absence of home at a practical, emotional, or affective level?

I think it is important to understand that home is not located *in* a building or other physical place yet refers to particular emotional bonds and practices that connect people *with* certain places. While everyone is from a certain place and lives in a certain place, these places do not have to feel like home automatically. Like the air temperature, one's feeling of home can be lower or higher, it can rise and fall depending on personal, situational and structural circumstances. It is difficult to pinpoint the opposite of home, but I think it has to do with feelings of discomfort and distance, of un-home, at the emotional or affective level. In a practical sense, strategies of home-making are undertaken to overcome this difference, but we can also engage in acts, and imagine outside forces acting upon us, that diminish our feeling of home. Moreover, it is important to realize that "displacement" can happen to people who remain in place, in addition to those who travel, migrate, or are forced to relocate.

What main differences would you see between conceiving (or researching) home and belonging? What does a conceptualization of home add to the preexisting theories of belonging?

I see many similarities between the concepts of home and belonging but also two differences. First, I think of belonging as a broader and more flexible idea than home. One can feel a sense of belonging in a larger variety of locations, including communal, temporary, and public settings such as coffee shops or festival grounds, and this feeling may not be as strong or intense in comparison to home. To me, home tends to be tied to places that are permanent and provide shelter and privacy on a smaller scale. The second, and perhaps more important, difference is that belonging is even more relational than home: it aims at people's *interpretations* of the relationship between themselves and socio-spatial environments, in addition to feeling a connection. When belonging occurs, this relationship is considered "appropriate" or a good "fit". Belonging often involves a relative sense of one's social status and reputation which are determined by social norms and societal structures. In comparison, home is less concerned with an evaluation of one's social standing but more concerned with the

actual, personal feeling of a connection. However, both these differences are gradual more than they are categorical, and the two concepts can often be used side-by-side.

As an ethnographer, what key opportunities and dilemmas do you see in researching people's views, emotions and practices about home? Would you see "home tours", in particular, as a feasible and appropriate research option?

Yes. I believe that ethnographic "home tours", as a type of mobile interviews or go-alongs (Kusenbach 2003), are an excellent method to understand the meanings and makings of home. It is important that such tours are dominated by the priorities and sensibilities of the residents themselves and not controlled by the researchers. Home tours do not have to stop at the front door, as it can be very insightful to include outdoor areas—i.e. back yards, front yards or court yards—that are adjacent to the home in a tour, and even conduct broader neighborhood tours intentionally in connection with home tours, to understand the larger contexts in which homes are embedded practically, socially, and emotionally. As a mobile and spatial research method, home tours can easily include visual elements, such as photographs or drawings, as well. In any case, like all ethnographic research, home tours should be thoroughly documented in fieldnotes. I find it particularly productive to conduct home tours in conjunction either with sit down interviews or with neighborhood go-alongs. Mobile, participatory method are particularly suited for research with children, migrants or other marginalized social groups. In sum, home tours are excellent opportunities for both ethnographic observation and interviewing.

Several colleagues argue that researching home is problematic, for a number of reasons: this is both a category of analysis and practice, it may obscure the "dark side" of the real home experience, and it points to something inherently positive (who could ever be "against home?"). What would be your counter-argument, based on your own research experience?

I think it is important to take the critical arguments seriously: indeed, home has a positive ring to it. One must not forget that practices of home-making and feelings of home are always balanced by processes of home-*unmaking* and *not* feeling at home. What constitutes and means home for one person can destroy and deny home for/to someone else. There certainly is the potential of alienating and excluding others in the creation of home, and these typically hidden sides of home-making must be carefully studied in close connection with its positive aspects and acts of inclusion and expression. In other words, feelings of home are related to a much a larger range of "place feelings" (Kusenbach 2013) that people may develop with places. I believe as long as scholars do not forget or downplay the multiple contexts of practices and feelings of home, researching home is legitimate. As mentioned above, home and its opposite are doubtlessly significant issues not only on an individual basis but also for our understanding of larger social and political movements and even international politics.

Among other aspects, home can be appreciated as an emotional experience. How would you research it in this optic, sociologically, and how can it be distinguished from similarly "positive" emotions?

To me, the emotional aspect of home—i.e. understanding home as a feeling—is central, next to conceptualizing home as a bundle of practices. Unlike what some scholars call the “primary” emotions (such as anger, shame and happiness, among others), feelings of “home” are rather complex. As others have pointed out, they are also often taken for granted. Home tends to be an invisible feeling that is perhaps better described as a “mood” than as a distinct and notable emotional experience—that is, unless one’s home is interrupted, diminished or absent. Clearly, the absence of a home is often strongly felt, for instance in feelings of “homesickness” or “homelessness”. So far, scholars who study emotions have not focused sufficiently on feelings of home, even though we do need their expertise in conceptualizing home-as-a-feeling to go beyond often-used scales of “attachment” as measured in quantitative surveys. I see a need for scholars of place, space, migration and mobility to become (or collaborate with) experts on emotions to fully understand the phenomenon of home. In the long run, this will improve our theories but may also lead to better methodologies and methods in the study of home. At the moment, until we develop more specific knowledge, my preferred methodological approach to home is ethnography. Compared with other positive emotions such as being-in-love or happiness, home feelings are not as obtrusive and all-encompassing. It is a quieter, less noticeable, and perhaps also a more complex emotion that will require sensitive, qualitative tools and approaches to be fully understood.

What do you think that theorizing and researching home can add to, respectively, housing studies and urban studies?

As already outlined, I think studies of home bring a greater awareness of the role of emotions and interpretive processes to studies of housing and cities. Buildings and cities are more than physical containers for social life; they are important elements of social/personal identities and larger social and political processes. Practical research on home-making will illuminate how built environments are physically, symbolically and emotionally constructed through complex personal and social processes. These impulses will lead to better theories and methodologies in urban and community research.

Last: I have a sense that social research on home is much more developed in Europe, and to some extent Australia and Canada, than in the US. Would you agree with this? If so, why is this the case?

I think this is correct. Currently, the most numerous and interesting studies on “home” appear to come out of Europe. It is possible that this is due to a conceptual issue. I do believe that many North American social scientists study *issues* of home and home-making yet filter them through different concepts and debates, perhaps based on the unique history and conditions of the United States. Questions of “community” have loomed large in the Chicago School tradition and still play a large role in American urban and community sociology today. There are significant overlaps between the concepts of home and community, and related schools of research, that will have to be examined more closely in the future. Another reason may be that questions of immigration and migration have played a larger role in American history (and therefore sociological interest) compared with Europe. To some extent, questions of home and mobility are attended to in these particular subfields who have developed their own vocabulary to discuss them. In the future, it might be very productive for home scholars to look beyond the *concept* and focus on *issues* of home and belonging in order to develop new collaborations and perhaps learn from prior and ongoing relevant work in related subfields.

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