HOMInG Interview

with Jason Hart

Conducted by Barbara Bertolani and Daniela Giudici

December 2019 [revised: February 2020]

Jason Hart is a social anthropologist by training (BA, MA, Ph.D University of London). He joined the University of Bath in September 2009 after seven years as a researcher and lecturer at the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford. He is also Visiting Lecturer at the Centre for Children's Rights Studies, University of Geneva. Much of Jason's work has explored the experience of and institutional response to young people on the margins of society and the global economy. Themes such as protection, child rights, peacebuilding, home, militarisation and asylum have been central to this research. Much of his research has been undertaken in situations of political violence and displacement. Jason has worked in South Asia (Sri Lanka, Nepal, India and Bhutan) and, increasingly, in the UK. However, his principal area of interest is the Middle East, particularly Israel / occupied Palestinian territories and Jordan. He has also been employed as a consultant author, researcher, evaluator and trainer by various UN, governmental and non-governmental organisations.
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What does home mean to you, in terms of your research experience and disciplinary background?

I've never done a project that explicitly tries to understand home. My PhD was trying to understand homeland, but I think that the two things need to be distinct from each other. So, home – it is a question, isn't'it? It is how people understand it; how people create what they understand to be home; what qualities are implied when we describe something as home, in terms of familiarity, in terms of family or community, in terms of security; and how these characteristics are implied or required for that to be a notion of home that is meaningful for people. But what is most interesting with refugees is the politics of naming something as home, from all sides. It's a profoundly political act, in the process of displacement, to name something as home and people can be very assertive in doing that or, conversely, can be very reticent in doing that. And others may be keen to prevent them to do so, because there is a politics around not accepting "outsiders" to construct their homes on "your territory". And that's very much the case with the increasing activity and popularity of the far right narrative.

What are the most relevant empirical and methodological challenges that you identify in researching home and migration? What strategies would you suggest, in particular, for studying homemaking practices, considering that privacy is a sensitive point?

If one recognizes the inherent political nature of home and claims around home – in my case in relation to displaced populations – then one has to be able to deeply understand the context in which home is named and why in some contexts it may be named and in others not. Think

about, for example, the research I did for my PhD with Palestinian refugees in a camp in Jordan. The camp itself has been used historically by the Palestinian political leadership to demonstrate that the Palestinian issue is still alive. You can't forget about what happened to Palestine because you still have thousands of people living in camps. Therefore, for people in these camps to talk about the space as home is potentially to go against that kind of political rhetoric, which is all about the temporariness, the fact that the people are not at home. Yet, of course people have been there for generations and inevitably have made great efforts to make that space into something that is homelike. And many of these people have never known any other space "at home". So, for example in the middle of my fieldwork, the Jordan government knocked down one edge of the refugee camp to build a highway, which was received as a kind of deliberate act by many Palestinians, a way of dispersing the population living in the camp. I cannot say if this was objectively true or not, but what was very interesting is that when I visited some of the families displaced away from the camp they would say: "Yes, here it is quieter and cleaner, but there is nowhere like the camp". And they would go on weekends visiting the camp.
So it was interesting to me to see how the camp becomes home and you are displaced from that. Affectively, in many senses, the camp is home and much more home that an abstract notion of Palestine. So empirically and methodologically, if someone recognizes the complexities of people's ways of understanding and experiencing home, then one needs a whole approach to research that really counts up for these complexities. And, of course, you need a sufficient trust so that people can articulate that. And, at the same time, an approach that can also hold together a lot of what seems like contradiction: not looking for the truth in contradictory statements, but rather how they are part of a much more complex truth for people, which only grows in complexity generation by generation, as time goes by. As a researcher you need to have that kind of dialogue that opens up such issues, and we often struggle to have that. It's a great luxury to have that as a researcher.

For some people, like the Palestinians children you worked with, "normal life" or "home" may be very different from Western ideas of "home" as place of safety and protection. How can researchers deal with the risk of imposing ethnocentric categories in contexts in which they may have an inherently different meaning?

It's an interesting question. There is always this risk when we work across different social and cultural contexts. Even our notions about security still leave the question of what security means to people, and it's not necessarily the same. There could be very different understandings of what people want to secure, or what they want to protect. Is it more important physical survival or "moral survival", understood as moral integrity? This is always an issue in anthropology: to become aware of assumptions and not to impose them. And there is another thing that I've become aware more and more recently, not as a researcher but as a kind of local person, as I volunteered in a community initiative to welcome Syrian refugees being resettled in my town. It has been very interesting to see their process of arrival and settlement. One thing that made me aware of the risk of being cultural essentialist is seeing that they were not simply recreating something of their past, but they were rather engaging in a process, in a different cultural context and, potentially, in different kind of changes. For example, what I observed is that because they are living in a society that it is not primarily composed by Syrians, they have certain degree of possibility to be more relaxed, perhaps, in certain aspects of their life. That creates different possibilities, for example in the ways in which their daughters are educated or at which age they are supposed to get married, the ways in which they organize the physical space of their homes, which may

be different from what they did in the past. So they don't just re-create but they are actively engaged in a re-formulation, consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, one must be aware of the risk of imposing essentialist cultural norms, where there is actually a process of evolution taking place, especially if you look at younger people.

You also told us about the importance of achieving a "sense of being safe" within refugees' shelter. In your experience, how central is the concept of "(in)security" to study home and homemaking practices? How would you approach this concept empirically?

When we started our housing project in Jordan, we did a simple exercise to ask people if their shelter would be upgraded or changed, what would be the priority for them. And we were very surprised to see that the security came out as the number one issue. We were assuming that thermal conditions were number one issue. Indeed we were working on how to improve the climatic conditions - which were extremely challenging - inside the shelters. But we were wrong. Then the question became what safety means, and for them it was to secure "the honour" of women and, by extension, the honour of the family. So the shelter should be constructed in such a way that women cannot be seen from outside. So it was about securing the reputation and honour of the family.

In your work you discussed the extent to which refugees are allowed to make changes (or
not) in the physical space of the refugee camp. Do you think that this possibility has implications in their feeling of (in)security and their sense of feeling at home?

Potentially this makes a big difference. It is about the importance of some sense of autonomy and choice, the capacity to exercise choice to be able to take action to configure your space. I think it is a powerful element of homemaking, just to have that possibility. People would still do it in Azraq, but they would be much limited in the ways that they could do that, by the ways the camp is laid out and managed as well. So, for whatever reason the authorities tend to be stricter in Azraq for example, they don't want anybody to plant trees, seen as a kind of security issue from the point of view of military security, because it cuts down visibility for people who are managing the camp. Potentially even the fact of having few tomato plants could be tricky, whereas in Zaatari it was a more random or chaotic setting. Some of the humanitarian organizations or the individuals working for them actually preferred Azraq because they said that it is easier to manage, but it is that kind of lack of manageability, I suppose, that on the other hand can be quite attractive to people actually living there. They have the chance to make space in a better or fuller way.

Talking about refugees' protracted displacement, you recently invited to "question the assumption that 'shelter' and 'home' are inevitably opposite categories". Could you tell us more of what you mean? What are the implications of this for researchers, practitioners and refugees themselves?

"Shelter" is a category that is politically more acceptable to different people, not just to government authorities. They may prefer to use "shelter" because it implies temporariness,

but also people themselves, in the same context, may wish to also vindicate the temporariness of it because "We have not given up our right to return to our own country". So, I think that the two categories of "shelter" and "home" often are held apart for political reasons. There is nothing inherent about any structure, I can't think about anything that inherently labels a shelter so that it can't also become "home". The question is how this structure is managed, whether that enables or prevents people who are living there from somehow making it a "home". Who manages and controls this space, what is their capacity of control over it as well. So, I think that the two categories are kept separate for a kind of strategic reason.

Do you think that people who are living in refugee camps for many years are more likely to develop a sense of home-like feeling?

Yes, absolutely. In the early stages of displacement and residence within a camp, there are changes that take place for people. Initially, it is just about coming to a safe place. It is a tent or whatever, at least it is safe and you secure your family within this space. But then, quickly people seek to create "home" out of this condition; for reasons of physical comfort and safety but also psychologically, it is important to feel that somehow this space has some qualities that render it safe, as well as to feel some degree of familiarity and comfort: it goes beyond simply mere survival. With the passage of time, it is very like that people will increase in acquiring those qualities that make it feel home to them.

Your research shows that most families hosted in refugee shelters tend to make some "adaptation" to the space they live in. Could you elaborate on this? How far are the adaptations related to instrumental needs (e.g. functional improvement or enhancing privacy) or to emotional/symbolic needs (e.g. creating a sense of security, or place beautification)? How far are they affected by camp policies and regulations?

In my experience, there is often a big gap between camp policies of regulations and practice on the ground. Not because the resources are not put there to ensure that the policies are implemented, but also because I think that policy has also often a political purpose: to be seen to have a policy is really important, but to implement it is another question. To be seen to be tough on this is important. For example, in the Jordanian case concrete is not allowed as a material to be used. Initially, it was not allowed. Then people were allowed to create a concrete base for the shelter, which was important because it kept out insects or whatever and it was more manageable and hygienic… you know, there is some kind of movement that takes place. The policy may not have changed. Policy often is ambiguous itself, it may not be written down, it is just generally understood but nobody actually writes it down, so people can negotiate their way around that policy, but what was important in disseminating the idea that concrete should not be used was to demonstrate both to the people living in the camp and also to the citizens who live outside the camp that "Look, we are not allowing those people to make this permanent". Concrete symbolizes "permanent" and "We are not allowing it". In terms of people themselves too, symbolic and functional adaptations are bounded up with one another. If I think about the changes in the Palestinian camp, which has a longer history, initially, the shelter may be a tent, and then you get a kind of basic structure, often with a zinco-roof, we call it corrugated iron, which is really bad from the point of view of climate, and sloping. Even if you don't want to build another storey, even if you just want to keep a single storey, people want to have a flat roof, so that you can walk upon it. You can hang up your washing and you also have a space which is an outdoor space where women can sit on

and not be seen by general people coming along the street. Also for children – boys in particular in my experience –, the cool thing to do for them, when I was doing my fieldwork, was to sleep on the roof in summer with their brothers. So, people really wanted to get away from the corrugated iron roof and to have this flat roof to have that space as well where children could play safer. It is a practical thing to make that change, but it is also an improvement that has a psychological and emotional benefit. I remember that I took some master students through the camp and I stopped to show them a building that still had the corrugated roof which was just near the main street. There was a shop, and the guy, the owner of the shop must have seen us because he came out and he said to us "Yes, it is my property but I don't live in it!" He explained that he used it just as a store for his shop and I understood from what he was saying that he did not want us to think that he would live in a structure that had a corrugated iron roof. It was like something primitive from the past. It was okay as he used it as a store, but in no way would he live in such a space.

It seems like these modifications create an internal social stratification among people living in the camp.

Absolutely. You find people that have effectively bought the shelter next door and made it into one double-space as well, they made it quite nice, nice gate outside, painted nicely and so on. Also in Azraq camp, I was there in January – the first time I was there it was probably two and a half year before that –, and people had painted the outside of their shelters with all kinds of designs. So, even in a space with a lot of constraints, they are still trying to make it a more attractive space. Also, there is an area in the camp where they built shelters where nobody came to live in. When I came there this time, basically what you could see would be the concrete base: they had come and they had thrown apart all the panels that made up the structure which did not just slop together, they were built together, but they were managing to pull them apart and take these things to arrange their shelter in some way, although it was not easy as in the other camp. I don't want to be essentialist and say that it is human nature to make your space better in most of the circumstances, but certainly what I saw in the Middle East does strongly suggest that people are really driven to make their space better however that is, whatever the constraints, to make themselves more comfortable, to have a nicer space that also potentially can be a signal to other people that you are somehow managing your life well.

Reading your article "Shelter as home?" (*Human Organization,* 2018) it is fascinating to see about this relational side of refugees camps. In refugees centres in Europe, instead, it seems that people are really isolated and have a hard time in building a relational network.

Of course, in the UK we don't have the reception centres approach and certainly, the Syrian refugees came through a unique program of settlement to the UK. Basically, this was managed by local government and for a family to come over to the UK to be resettled, the local government has to show evidence that they have found a home for that family. They can't just come, unless there is a home there, like an apartment. Initially, the government would pay the rent, I think this is a five-year program and each year the money that the government gives to support the family goes down, the idea is of course that they should be earning because they have right to work over that period. The problem is that the maximum rent the government pays is below what you can find on the regular rental market, it is not

enough to cover the rent. But the UK takes far fewer refugees than many other European countries, and perhaps the conditions are generally better.

Homemaking in refugee camps, you wrote, is "an ongoing process that entails negotiation of constraints from a position of precarity in order to imbue a dwelling with some element of an ideal". Could you tell us more about this concept of "ideal"?

Basically, people's own ideal is what they are trying to create. There is not one single "ideal" of course, it is an ideal in relation to particular people, and the "ideal" I was talking about in the paper was not simply to reproduce what you had already: that might be a strong element of what you are trying to do, but it is not that all people try to recreate what they had already. Just because they are now in a camp, this does not mean that they are not engaged in trying to improve, if there is a possibility to do something which might be better than what they had before. That may sound strange if we think about a refugee camp, but if there is a possibility to do that… and that is what we pointed to when we talked about people saying that they did try to create for themselves what they saw as an American kitchen in their shelter, which is something that they wanted in Syria but they were not able to do for whatever reason, and yet somehow they were able to build that within their shelter in a refugee camp. It sounds like "How can you do something that is somehow better than what you had?" But there was still an effort to try to do that, so the "ideal" is not just about reproducing the past, the "ideal" is always to some degree prospective. It is always looking to improve. And I think that is… if we think about the constraints in the refugee camps it is very powerful to witness people's desire to actually not just recreate as much as you can, that's important, but actually to do something new, do something better and sometimes just move away.

What about the issue of "return"? If refugees manage to do something better where they are, would they would consider coming back to their country of origin anyway, if they had the possibility?

It is such a complex question if you think about return. If we talk about the improvement of their immediate surroundings, for instance Syrian refugees in Jordan camps, these are people who have often time in their hands. Maybe they would do some kind of work but there is not much… many of them were builders, they have skills and they actually have the time now to create things in their home, which they did not have before. So it is actually the act itself, as a matter of engaging in doing something meaningful, but I don't think that you can improve so much that it means you don't want to return. There are maybe reasons that you don't want to return due to the fact that you don't feel safe to go back. For example, Iraqi refugees in Jordan are different from the Syrians in the sense that many of them said: "We are never going back to Iraq. Iraq is finished for us". Many in their forties are saying: "My whole life has been left in conflict, my children are going to have a different future, we are never going back". So, return for them is not about how good conditions are now, it is the fact that you just don't want to go back to a situation where you think your children would suffer what you have suffered. This is the worry of authorities, that people would improve their conditions so much that they will not go back. But I don't think that people living in a refugee camp would not get back because their house is nicer now. Then the other aspect about return, of course, if we are talking about prolonged displacement, is that each generation may answer that question "Do I want to return?" in a different way. What does it mean for an older person? That relates to the challenges of integrating into a new environment; if you are an older

person it is often much harder than if you come as a child. You see that with the Syrian families coming now, within a year or two the children can speak good English, they are enjoying school in the setting where they are living… in other parts is perhaps not that much, as living in a more rural area is a different dynamic. They are enjoying their life and opportunities that maybe they did not have even before the conflict in Syria, so for them return means something rather different from parents who are struggling to learn English and not going to get a decent job or not being able to get a work with the qualifications they have come with and certainly elderly people who want their life to end back where they came from. So, it's a different proposition for different generations.

So, we can say that homemaking is also a generation-related process.

Yes, it has that dimension, and homemaking, the basic point, somehow a cliché from the point of view of your project… but you know, home is not singular, you can make home in one place and this does not mean that you don't have a sense of home that endures somewhere else, that you don't want to return and enjoy home back where your journey may have started from. One of the things about the return literature, the ethnographic literature on return is how often return is not "return", in the sense that you don't go back to what it was before, you're going back to something new and in some ways it may be alien, it may be hostile. Some of the literature about return to Bosnia tells that there is a lot of resentment between the people who stayed and the people who left: "we stayed here, we kept this place going and now you are coming back and you want everything how it was, it is not going to happen!" Or people from Afghanistan who left for the West, got a very good education, in some cases came back with fluent English and get government jobs, and local people say "we stayed here, we did not abandon our country and now we are pushed out from good employment!" Dynamics of return are really complicated and each year that passes are getting more complicated. So, people come back and they have to renegotiate home, it's not just like automatically they pick it up again. Maybe the home they were thinking about does not exist anymore. For example in Syria, so many places have been destroyed, they literally do not exist anymore, also from the structural point of view.

It was really fascinating to talk with you. Thanks, Jason!