

**Homing interview**  
**with Nathan Lauster**  
(University of British Columbia)  
Conducted by Paolo Boccagni<sup>1</sup>



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**What does home mean to you, in the light of your research experience and interests?**

I am open to try to get a broader perspective on home than those accomplished so far. I am especially interested in the emotional resonance of home, and in how people have attachments to place. Home is then a specific attachment, but in a broad sense: involving place, people and things, as well as networks that connect people on a routine basis. Home has to do with the establishment of a routine that serves as a secure basis to explore the world. However, it can also be insecure! In either case, home opens up a special space for understanding our social life.

I started my career as a demographer. The question then was what effects housing policies have into household formation and experience? And the experience of home became more of my own research interest, especially as I moved into qualitative studies (although I still use quantitative work too).

In terms of conceptualization, we keep moving toward the complexity of home. There is not a common theoretical ground yet, but we are working towards it. Home should be a central aspect of sociology, but has not really been so far. In my view, and following actor-network theory and Latour, home stands not for an accomplished social system but for how things are made social through specific interactions: how we make things social, and construct home networks.

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<sup>1</sup> The interview was originally conducted in Toronto, July 2018. It has been revised by prof. Lauster in June 2020.

Overall, the social study of home may be not so well-developed in North America as elsewhere. This may be due to lesser public support for housing, and for the study of the housing, which indirectly affects the study of home too.

**Can you tell us more of your recent research on home, and of the underlying theoretical approach?**

I have been doing parallel research in Arviat (Nunavut) and in Vancouver. In Arviat, a very small rural community which is mostly Inuit as its ethnic composition, “home” stands more for the importance of the land and of being-in-the-land. Interestingly, both contexts have distinct but parallel housing crises. There is more of an issue of overcrowding and suitability for households in the North, and of housing affordability in Vancouver. I’m studying them with a similar conceptualization of home based on everyday life routines.

Comparability is a challenge, for researching home, even at a lexical level. However, even only in English home means so many different things! There are conceptual overlaps to attend in the first place, not to mention the existence of different meanings in different languages.

Attachment theory, in my view, provides the conditions for building a better conceptualization of home. Home is developed mostly through personal attachments, first of all between an infant and one or more adult figures. It is fundamentally a matter of moving back and forth between a very familiar, routinized and secure base, and an external environment to be explored. One of these poles is the basis of what we can understand as home, as a generalizable human experience. There is a foundational relationship of providing a secure base, which is probably generalizable. It does not involve only children and their parental figures but, over time, it also extends to people, places and things.

In this sense, the “absence of home” can be appreciated as a matter of insecure attachments, which is actually another way of conceptualizing homelessness. This is an insight to be developed further, but there is something there. And legal homelessness however does not necessarily equate with the conception of home we would like to develop.

Home as a concept is undertheorized. We know it is important, but we keep reinventing the wheel, rather than making substantive advancement... nonetheless home is central to understand how we live our life and how the social world works, based on “networks of home” through which people navigate in the everyday, as the basis for their own social life.

**Can you tell us more of your study on “Labour migration and the missing work of homemaking”, which was recently published in *Social Problems* (64, 4, 2017)?**

This was a study of homemaking among immigrants from Beijing to Vancouver. We were trying to lay out how you re-establish a sense of home after uprooting yourself and making this jump; how routines and everyday lives inform a sense of home, retrospectively and at the present moment; how their home-making trajectories are played out accordingly. We attempt to start and develop a better understanding of settlement, as the work involved in homemaking is always going on, in Beijing as well as in Vancouver in this case. A lot of what motivates people to move and settle into new routines is the possibility to remake home anew. Homemaking can be a motivation for migration, as well as a challenge brought on by immigration in terms of settlement.

We encountered different views of home, and different ways of defining it. We also used pictures of home objects while doing research with young migrants, and then made a booklet out of it. We found this to be an important way of getting people involved in the research and making sure they can see they are expressing their sense of home in a way that makes sense to them, and to us as researchers. Indeed, we should always be able to make the work of translation between what makes sense to them and what makes sense to us.

**What do you think of the concept of homing we are working on, as a way to describe people's tension to appropriate space as home-like, and the underlying cognitions, emotions and moralities, over the life course?**

Homing? Well, I have mostly looked at the past home, but home is also forward-looking! The work of homemaking can also motivate you to do things, to build a better home in the future! Indeed, the sense of home is not only backward-looking, as in the bulk of research so far. This should be complemented with the study of a future-oriented sense of home.

House and home are obviously not the same, but there is a relationship between the two – even while more and more people may understand home as a different location from where they actually sleep. There are universal aspects of home that can be operationalized through everyday routines, what things you do there, what people are there, what are the bases for you to enact home networks... parts of the experience of home are generalizable, whereas a part of it is always going to be experienced in very diverse fashions.

For instance, is the single-family detached house the most desirable form of housing and most strongly desirable home, as long as it enables the maximum control of space? Does it necessarily become a protected space in the Canadian and American context – one reserved through land possession? I'm interested in different experiences and conditions too, outside of single-family detached houses. The experience of Vancouver shows that lots of people can feel at home outside of this kind of houses.

**What about the most suitable research questions and options, for the social study of home?**

Well, there is a need to integrate quantitative and qualitative methods. For instance, you could try to figure out home-related routines through time-use surveys, which are not used so well yet. Whatever the method, it is important that questions are intelligible for those involved. For instance, in asking participants to graphically lay out two days of their routines with counters, we employed stickers. One sticker consisted of a smiley face inside a house-shaped structure, used in order to highlight whenever participants felt at home in a particular place. But, as a technique, it's somehow misleading, it's too much referred to a house!

Speaking about surveys on home, not many of them have been done in sociology, but many have been conducted in environmental psychology instead. I think the two should definitely talk more to each other and borrow each other's strengths. I think there definitely should be some overlap between environmental and community psychology and sociology. I think it's also the case, actually, that within psychology they are not talking enough to each other. That's a problem between disciplines as well as within disciplines. Anyways I think we could definitely learn a lot more from each other.

**Could you briefly tell us what are your next research steps in studying home?  
What do you expect to do next and why?**

I will keep on working on data gathered in Arvika as well as Vancouver, including those about immigrants from Beijing. These also include, to some extent, visual data. I am really interested in developing out this notion of attachment as linked to home and figure out how these things fit together, trying to come out with a "theory of home". One of the things I would love to do is to contrast a theory of home with one of home ownership. I think these are separate concepts following separate logics, and we should acknowledge how these get mashed together through a normative expectation of homeownership in people's life courses.

**Ok, so thank you very much!**

Thank you for interviewing me, it was fun!