

## What Is This “*Home Sweet Home*”: A Course-Based Qualitative Exploration of the Meaning of Home for Child and Youth Care Students

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**ABSTRACT:** This course-based research study explores the meaning of the concept of home for child and youth care students. Data collection strategies included a conversational open-ended interview and an arts-based activity. The open-ended interviews were conducted via the Zoom and Google Meet communication platforms. A thematic analysis resulted in the identification of four main themes: (a) important people in my life, (b) safety and security, (c) comfortable places, and (d) an authentic space.

**KEYWORDS:** *child and youth care, course-based research, home, qualitative*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Over the years, poets, philosophers, historians, storytellers, and scholars have all weighed in on the many meanings of the concept of *home* (Berger, 2020; Moore, 2000; Fehlberg, Natalier, & Smyth, 2018; Polikoff, 1969; Rath, 2014; Summerville, 1997; Tuan, 1977; William & McIntyre, 2001). As Fox O'Mahony (2012) noted, the meanings associated with the notion of home “is reflected in epigrams such as ‘there’s no place like home’; ‘home is where the heart is’; and the suggestion that ‘an Englishman’s home is his castle’” (p.231). What becomes clear from the literature is that the meaning of home is a complex, multi-faceted, and multi-layered concept that has been thought and written about for hundreds of years, traversing a diverse span of cultural interpretations and theoretical conceptualizations as a space, a place, a spiritual encounter, and a relational experience. As Saunders and Williams (1988) wrote, “...the home touches so centrally on our personal lives, any attempt to develop a dispassionate social scientific analysis inevitably stimulates emotional and deeply fierce argument and disagreement. The home is a major political background – for feminists, who see it in the crucible of gender domination; for liberals, who identify it with personal autonomy and a challenge to state power; for socialists, who approach it as a challenge to collective life and the ideal of a planned and egalitarian social order. (p. 91)

#### 1.1 Theoretical Perspectives

A theoretical perspective can be understood as a lens that consists of a set of assumptions through which we view things and in turn informs the questions that we ask and the types of answers that we find. For Amos Rapoport (1995), one of the pioneers of studies on the relationship between people and their environments, the most basic meaning of home is of a place or a site that offers material or physical dwelling. Other scholars, such as Cooper-Marcus (1995); Graham, Gosling, and Travis (2015); and Smith (1994), have discussed the significance of home as not related to architecture or decorating styles but rather the existence of a safe and secure place to meet an individual's basic physiological needs. This view of the home is reflected in Maslow's theoretical framework of the hierarchy of human needs, in which the need for shelter and security immediately follows the basic need for food, water, and sleep. According to Maslow's theory, having a safe and secure *home* environment is a fundamental requirement for achieving a host of succeeding developmental achievements, as illustrated in Figure 1. Similarly, from a social-epidemiological perspective, housing is a key social determinant of health. A safe and secure home is associated with improved health and wellness, superior educational outcomes, greater capacity for social and economic involvement, and community participation (Forchuk, Dickins, & Corring, 2016; Kearns, Whitley, & Tannahill, 2012; Liddell & Guiney, 2015).

Figure 1



<sup>1</sup> Flanagan, K., Martin, C., Jacobs, K. and Lawson, J. (2019) A conceptual analysis of social housing as infrastructure, AHURI Final Report No. 309, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne. <http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/309>, doi: 10.18408/ahuri-4114101.

Home has also been conceptualized as a relational space, as evidenced by individuals who define their sense of home by making reference to their neighborhood, town, country, or place where they were born and/or raised (Mallett 2004; Blunt and Dowling 2006). From a social relational perspective, the idea of a homeland and the land of one's forebears is commonly reflected in the saying "I am going home to my people." This perspective resonates with some of the literature on migrants, refugees, and people living in exile. For example, as Ahmed (1999) explained,

It is not simply a question then of those who stay at home, and those who leave, as if these two different trajectories simply lead people to different places. Rather 'homes' always involve encounters between those who stay, those who arrive and those who leave...There is movement and dislocation within the very forming of homes as complex and contingent spaces of inhabitation. (p. 340)

The psychological significance of home embodies yet another complex cluster of meanings associated with the concept of home. As Cooper (1974) indicated, one's sense of home holds deep psychological meaning that goes beyond the basic function of providing shelter, as home is often intimately tied to one's sense of identity and self-definition. Summerville (1997) also noted that the physical space of one's home becomes intertwined with one's emotional experiences, memories, and personal history, which significantly influences one's well-being and mental health.

Finally, the concept of home carries different meanings for different cultures. For example, Métis Cree scholar Jesse Thistle, author of the national bestseller *From the Ashes: My Story of Being Métis, Homeless, and Finding My Way* (2017, 2019), shared the indigenous understanding of home "as a web of both relationships and responsibilities connecting people to networks of kin, animals, plants, spirits, the earth, lands, waters and territories as well as to their traditional stories, songs, teachings, and ancestors" (Thistle, 2017 cited in Bowra & Mashford-Pringle, 2021, p.1). For Thistle (2017), Indigenous homemaking consists of "circles of interconnectedness that together form the heart of healthy Indigenous social and spiritual emplacement" (pp. 14-15). As Christensen (2016) explained, the Indigenous concept of home incorporates Indigenous cosmologies that view *home* as set within nature and inseparable from other living things and the spiritual world (p. 84). For example, Thistle (2019) offers the following examples of Indigenous meanings,

...in Nehiyaw (Cree) and Michif (Métis) as miyo wahkohtowin (Kinship Relationships) (Homeward Trust Edmonton et al., 2015) or niw\_hk\_m\_kanak (All My Relations) (Chartrand, 2007); in Lakota as mitakuye oyasin (All My Relations) (Pengra, 2000); in Anishnaabemowin as nindinawemaaganidok (All My Relations); and in Inuktitut as ilagiit (kindred), to name only a few (Trott, 2005). (Thistle, p. 15)

Given the importance of the home environment for the well-being of children and youth, exploring child and youth care (CYC) students' understanding and relationship to the concept of home offers important

perspectives that can inform CYC education and practice. Therefore, this course-based research project aims to develop a deeper understanding of the concept of home to better support children and youth.

## **II. UNDERGRADUATE COURSE-BASED RESEARCH: A PEDAGOGICAL METHOD TO PROMOTE CRITICALITY, REFLECTIVITY, AND PRAXIS**

This section begins with a word about course-based research. The Bachelor of CYC program at MacEwan University is continuously searching for new pedagogical approaches to foster critical thinking, reflection, and praxis as integral components of the overall student educational experience. As such, a course-based research approach, in contrast to the traditional didactic approach to research-methods instruction, offers fourth-year undergraduate Research students the opportunity to master introductory research skills by conceptualizing, designing, administering, and showcasing small low-risk research projects under the guidance and supervision of the course instructor—commonly, a professor with an extensive background in research and teaching. The use of course-based research in higher education has increased substantially in recent years (Allyn, 2013; Bellefeuille *et al.*, 2014; Harrison *et al.*, 2010). The benefits derived from a course-based approach to teaching research methods are significant for CYC students. First, there is value in providing students with authentic learning experiences that enhance the transfer of knowledge learned in traditional education practice. For example, former students have reported that their engagement in course-based research enabled them to deepen their scientific knowledge by adopting new methods of creative inquiry. Second, course-based research offers students the opportunity to work with instructors in a mentoring relationship; one result is that a greater number of students express interest in advancing to graduate studies. Third, results generated through course-based research can sometimes be published in peer-reviewed journals and online open-access portals and thereby contribute to the discipline's knowledge base. The ethical approval required to permit students to conduct course-based research projects is granted to the course instructor by the university's research ethics board (REB). Student research groups are then required to complete an REB application form for each course-based research project undertaken in the class; each application is reviewed by the course instructor and an REB committee to ensure that the project is completed in compliance with the ethics review requirements of the university.

## **III. RESEARCH DESIGN**

A research design serves as the lens that guides the research process and specifies the methods and techniques that are used to collect and analyze the data (Coe, Waring, Hedges, & Arthur, 2017). The current course-based study is located within an interpretive paradigm. According to Creswell (2013), a research paradigm represents a researcher's conception of the world, its nature, and their position in it. An interpretive paradigm was adopted for this course-based study to grasp the subjective meaning of the participants' social worlds. Situated in the interpretive paradigm reality is understood as a social construction that is shaped by one's personal experiences and social interactions (Yin, 2013). Interpretive research tends to heavily rely on qualitative data collection methods to capture in-depth information about a phenomenon (Coe, Waring, Hedges, & Arthur, 2017). According to Myers (2009), qualitative data collection methods focus on making sense of the participants' lived experiences.

### **3.1 Research Question**

The main objective of this course-based research study is to explore the meaning of the concept of home for child and youth care students.

### **3.2 Sampling Strategy**

A non-probability convenience sampling strategy was employed to recruit CYC students from all four years of study in the Bachelor of CYC program at MacEwan University. The strategy was informed by the exploratory nature of the study, time and other resource limitations (Patton, 2002).

### **3.3 Data Collection Strategy**

The data collection methods used in this study included conversational open-ended interviews and an arts-based activity. The open-ended interviews were conducted via the Zoom and Google Meet communication platforms. Within the literature, there is general agreement among researchers that Zoom and Google Meet are useful platforms for conducting qualitative interviews (Archibald *et al.*, 2017; Horrell, Stephens, & Breheny, 2015). The reported benefits of using remote data collection strategies include cost savings (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013; Sedgwick & Spiers, 2009), greater access to larger and more diverse populations (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013; Winiarska, 2017), and the mitigation of unpredictable circumstances, such as poor weather conditions and last-minute cancellations (Sedgwick & Spiers, 2009).

### **3.4 Statement of Research Question**

What is the meaning of the concept of home for CYC students?

### 3.5 Data Analysis Methodology

Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis was used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (e.g., themes) in data. This sequence of analysis consisted of six steps: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing and refining themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing a report. The thematic analysis resulted in the identification of the following four themes: (a) important people in my life, (b) safety and security, (c) comfortable places, and (d) an authentic space. Each theme is discussed below.

#### a) *Important People in My Life*

The first theme to emerge from the data was the relational aspect of home for many participants. For example, one participant said, "where my family is and where I am most comfortable." Another participant commented, "home is being able to spend time with the people who see me and love me for me." Others discussed home as a place to make meaningful connections (e.g., "it's where you get those really close connections with those really close caregivers, and it really doesn't matter where that person is" and "it's just like associated with the people that I love").

#### b) *Safety and Security*

The second theme to emerge from the data was the notion of safety and security. As several of the participants noted, "home is somewhere that I feel safe...where I can walk through the front door without knocking and be comfortable to do that." "It's where our things are and where we're able to go at the end of the day in, like, a safe space and knowing that, even if you leave that place, you can always come back to it, and that it's always there for you," and "to me, home is being able to spend time with the people who see me and love me for me, who are able to hold space and grant me security and safety so that I don't have to worry about, you know, protecting myself."

#### c) *Comfortable Place*

Closely related to the theme of safety and security was the theme of a comfortable place. Most participants discussed the concept of home as invoking feelings of warmth and comfort. General comments included "home feels warm and cozy," "it is a warm environment that is welcoming and inclusive," and "there's something about sleeping in your own bed that's just so awesome." Moreover, many participants viewed the concept of home as an important place for their overall happiness and health. As one participant commented, "home is a safe place, a place of rest, acceptance, somewhere you can be free to be yourself and unwind."

#### d) *Authentic Place*

A fourth theme that emerged from the data was the view of home as a place for participants to be their authentic selves. Comments included "home is where you can just be you," "for me home means belonging and familiarity," and "home is a place where you can relax but also a place where you can be your true, authentic self."

## IV. SUMMARY

As highlighted in the literature review and the findings from this course-based study, home is an extraordinarily malleable concept. However, it is crucial to understand, as CYC practice largely focuses on supporting children and youth who are removed from their homes due to a variety of issues and placed in residential care. Interestingly, the findings from this study were consistent with dominant themes: the meaning of home for participants centered more on relationships, safety, and feelings than physical space or material possessions. Further research on this topic could engage in a deeper exploration not only of the meaning of home but also the potential absence of home in one's life and its implication for one's well-being.

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