

Gendered Space?

An exploration of the gendered meaning and experience of 'home' in contemporary British society

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Gender, Space, Home, Contemporary British society.

INTRODUCTION

In the field of urban sociology, and particularly in the area of housing and the home, very few studies adopt a gendered perspective. Gender may be considered a relatively new focus on research agendas, with those studies that do contain a consideration of gender and housing in contemporary Britain often focusing on the problems women face with access to housing, and failing to examine the complexities of gender relations within the home. Despite the home's powerful influence on everyday lives and the importance of the interaction occurring within our homes, particularly as a means of socialisation, research, such as that undertaken by Saunders and Williams (1987), which explores the social meaning of home, fails to consider more fundamental gender and generational relations inside the home.

Their emphasis lies on the physical and design features of the home and, in common with other such studies, may be seen to be largely gender-neutral (Madigan et al, 1990).

Although Saunter's and William's work does broaden the scope of urban sociology and marks a shift in research away from concentrating on the public realm towards a focus on the private sphere, whilst recognising that the domestic should be included in urban

problems, it fails to consider questions of power and gender relations within the home (Somerville, 1989).

The trap that many studies fall into when introducing gender as an aspect of research, is that they equate 'gender' with only concerning women (McDowell, 1983). Often women are 'slotted-in' in order to satisfy a claim for a gendered approach. What is really required is a consideration of the relationships between and among men and women, boys and girls, in order to gain an understanding of how the home may be experienced differently according to gender.

The very nature of home life makes it difficult to conduct meaningful research into such relations and experiences. The home is fundamentally private, therefore creating the problem of access for researchers (Allan and Crow, 1989). Even when access is gained, researchers face the problem of interpreting collected information as it is often personal to the particular values of the family within the home; values determined by culture, class, age and sex. The specific nature of the information on the home may raise problems in attempting to generalise data to form theories on the home as a social setting (Darke, 1994).

Despite these difficulties, research into the home remains abundant thus reflecting the importance of the home in British society. It is something that most of us can relate to in one form or

another. Saunders argues that the home is "the crucial medium through which the society is structured." (Saunders quoted by Somerville, 1989: 115). However, the home may be the base point around which local and national politics is organised, but there are a number of other locales (school, workplace, place of leisure) which are influential in our lives. Despite this, the emotional attachment that home possesses for most of us maintains its primary importance in people's lives.

OUTLINE

Before an exploration of gendered space within the home can be conducted it is first necessary to define what exactly is understood by the term the 'home'. This will be examined in the British context in section 1, although it must be remembered that the meaning of home is culturally specific. The subsequent sections focus on three main characteristics of the home within which the construction of gendered experience and meaning will be examined, however, whilst this study explores the gendering of space and experience within the home, it does not attempt to discuss in depth the historical and social factors behind the sexual division of labour. Nor does it enter into debates surrounding women's subordination. Section 2 looks at the private nature of the home and considers how access to private space within the home may be gendered. Issues of security, control and freedom in the home are explored in

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section 3, which emphasises some of the contradictions of home life, and section 4 considers the home as a place of creativity and self-expression in which certain spaces become gendered and in which conflicting meanings exist, particularly with reference to women. In conclusion, suggestions are made for future considerations for research on the home.

1. DEFINING 'HOME'

'Home' is something individual to each of us; we all have our own idea of what we associate with 'home'. For some home may mean their country of origin (particularly if they are resident or travelling in another country), for others a certain region or town. The idea of home very much depends on the context in which the individual finds themselves, as often home is defined by comparing it to what it is not (Dovey, 1985). Although country, region and town are all aspects of what we consider to be home, for the purpose of this study, home is defined as the dwelling in which we live, or used to live, and the relations and social interaction within the dwelling, in which we find emotional attachment through a shared history, memories and a sense of familiarity.

Political groups, as well as individuals, possess varying views of the home within the physical boundaries of the home. Feminists see the home as the locus of gender dominance and female exploitation. Liberals regard it as a bastion of personal liberty and autonomy in opposition to the increasingly expanding state, and socialists view the home as an obstacle to collective life and a place where capitalist social relations are reproduced (Saunders, 1989).

However, these are generalised views and often based on vague evidence.

The home, and the meaning it has for individuals in today's society, is an issue

that has been seized upon, developed and promoted by all aspects of the media through the use of idealised images of the home. Such images have played (and continue to play) an important role in influencing people's ideals and aspirations surrounding homes, and have also proved to be a powerful marketing tool. What must be remembered is that there may be a considerable difference between the romantic image of the home as portrayed by the media, and the reality of home in a constantly changing British society.

Whatever our image of home, what needs to be questioned is whether these interpretations of home are themselves gendered? Is the picture of the mother as carer and nurturer of the nuclear family, content in her cosy, comforting kitchen, with the male earner and head of house busy in his garden, a reality portraying the sexual division of labour in British society, or is it the gendered image of advertising? The issue of whose images are portrayed and what dominant cultural values are being represented in such images needs to be challenged as it is apparent that the image of white, Western, middle-class families is plentiful.

This may be interpreted as being a feminist approach towards images of the home. Indeed, Saunders (1989) criticises much of the feminist literature on the home for seeing images of the home as only representative of male experience. In research undertaken in 1986 among 522 men and women in 450 different households across 3 different towns in England (Slough, Derby and Burnley), Saunders showed that men and women shared the same images of love, warmth and comfort about the home. Saunders concluded that their replies in his survey should be seen to reflect their everyday experiences (Saunders, 1989). However, what must be remembered is the question of power within the home and whether this is gendered, therefore influencing reactions to, and replies provided by

females to the interviewers. Saunders' method of research, by aiming only a few questions in a large-scale survey at the meaning of home, is not an appropriate way of exploring complex and subtle areas of meaning (Darke, 1994).¹

Our ideas about the home are very much linked to family. Home life shows a strong imprint of the modern domestic ideal in which 'home' and 'family' (being the kin resident within the dwelling) are run together (Allan and Crow, 1989). The family plays a key role in ensuring the home's social importance, rather than the household, yet the physical nature of the household remains the focus of much of the literature about home (Somerville, 1989). It is the family and relations between kin rather than the physical structure of the household, which reproduces the labour force, socialises the young and which helps to explain the existence of women's unpaid work; and it is the kinship relations which help to explain the creation of communities and nations (Somerville, 1989). Focusing on the household may result in gender-biased research, as it does not adequately understand the meanings of the household to different people. Relations within the household must be an emphasis of research (Varley, 1994).

This link between home and family is not new. Women's lives have been seen to revolve around the house since at least mid-C19th, and in some cases much earlier (Williams, 1987). Traditional ideologies view the home as the private realm of the woman, whilst the public sphere (paid work, politics) is predominantly the man's space (Darke, 1994).

¹ Saunders' interviews were conducted by both males and females, however the private nature of home life may cause reluctance on the part of the interviewee to divulge details concerning certain aspects of individual experience in the home. For further discussion see Somerville (1989).

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This is not to imply that ideas about the family have remained static. More women are now entering the labour market and it is suggested that men, as husbands and fathers, are becoming more home-centred, but the ideals of family life remain central to the home (Allan and Crow, 1989). According to figures collected by Somerville (1989) in the 1980s, over 80% of the British population continue to live as 'traditional' families and opinion polls show that even more prefer it that way.² However the significance of such statistics today must be challenged as non-traditional family arrangements continue to increase. Oakley (1976) says the home is the family.

"If society has grown more 'family oriented' the family itself has identified more and more squarely with its physical location, the home. 'Home' and 'family' are now virtually interchangeable terms". (Oakley, 1976: 65).

The age and generalisation of this quote may mean that it requires some qualifying, but Gilman supports the central role of the family to the home by saying that home "is home while the family are in it. When the family are out of it, it is only a house." (Gilman quoted by Allan and Crow, 1989: 2). However this denies any emotional attachment that remains felt for a dwelling when a particular family no longer reside there.³

The home has often been associated with the presence of women as wives and mothers, and the ideology that requires of home life the presence of a wife (and, ideally, mother) remains a

powerful one (Allan and Crow, 1989), and one which extends into other aspects of how we identify our home, for example, Mother Earth and nations being referred to as 'she' It must be remembered that this association of women with the home is culture specific (Kellett, 1995), but nevertheless is an association that causes difficulties for less 'traditional' forms of home, such as lone-parent households and homes for the elderly.

2. THE PRIVATE NATURE OF THE HOME

Privacy is perhaps the most valued aspect of home life in contemporary British society. Having a private place is central to what it means to many to be at home (Rybczynski, 1986). There is a clear distinction, both physically in the form of the house, and emotionally, between the inside and the outside of the home. The doorstep forms a boundary between the private realm of the family, away from the scrutiny of others where they can exercise control over outsider's involvement in domestic affairs, and the public world of wider society (Saunders, 1990).⁴ The idea of 'normal family life' being built around the nuclear family living independently in its own, separate dwelling remains a popular image (Allan and Crow, 1989). However it may not be that simple to distinguish between the public and the private, as access to the home varies; different people have different access at different times (Mason, 1989). This particularly applies to women, who once in the home of another family, are more likely to have access to more (or all) parts of the home than men. Access to bedrooms, kitchens and bathrooms is often more free for women than men (Gullestad, 1993), and this would appear to be a cross-cultural occurrence.

Home provides a private place for the family, but does not necessarily secure

equal amounts of privacy for all members of the family. This is particularly true for women, but could also apply to children who are subject to parental approval (Allan and Crow, 1989). Within the home children have their own bedrooms or, if they share a bedroom with other siblings, they claim at least part of that room. However, privacy within the home in terms of segregation of adults is often ignored. There would seem to be a contradiction between 'privacy' being equated with being alone, and family ideology emphasising a form of 'togetherness'. Lack of privacy is seen as a problem, yet being confined to a private sphere is often regarded as a form of deprivation (Madigan et al, 1990).

Male partners frequently have space that can be regarded as their own personal territory in the form of the garden, a garage, a den, or in better equipped and often larger dwellings, a study; a space where they have the freedom to do as they choose. Women, as housewives, rarely have defined personal space. The female partner may have personal space in her part of the bedroom, yet total privacy is denied due to the bedroom being a shared space between adult partners. Of course exceptions exist in homes where partners have separate bedrooms. The kitchen may be defined as a 'woman's place' because of its ties with domesticity, but in many homes it is also a 'family space' where food is consumed and a workplace, rather than a place of leisure, for women. Hunt (1989) echoes these views, but also emphasises that not all women require privacy. What must be avoided is the assumption that all individuals seek the same level of privacy. Differences within levels of privacy sought by dwelling members, regardless of gender, needs to be acknowledged.

Much of the early literature by feminists on the home concentrates on women's subordination in the home due to domestic chores resulting in lack of

² A major weakness in Somerville's work is that he offers no explanation for what he considers to be a 'traditional' family. For the purpose of this study 'traditional' has been defined as meaning nuclear.

³ A wealth of literature focuses on the debate surrounding the difference between 'house' and 'home'. For discussions see Benjamin (1995).

⁴ For further discussion on the dichotomy between inside/outside see Saunders (1990).

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privacy and freedom.⁵ In a study of 5 middle-class and 5 working-class households in Britain by Hunt (1989) relatively few women reported having a problem with lack of personal space. Indeed, they associated the need for personal space with feeling depressed (a space to have a good cry). Apart from jewellery and clothes, the women that Hunt interviewed had few personal possessions that would create a need for personal storing space. Having the house to themselves during the day was adequate personal space.⁶ Personal space is closely linked to the issue of self-identity. The lack of personal territory and property, and the lack of a felt need for such, indicates the extent to which the houseworker's self-identity becomes submerged in the job of caring for others (Hunt, 1989).

Yet privacy within the home is not always experienced positively. The private nature of home life allows for limited contact with others, which may result in feelings of isolation, particularly for housewives. Such feelings are experienced in more 'traditional' families as well as less conventional ones where only one partner is present (Allan and Crow, 1989). "Home, as the setting in which most caring is carried out, becomes not so much a haven from the rigours of the labour market as a prison." (Graham, 1983: 26). What Graham fails to acknowledge in the above quote is the element of choice; many women choose to stay at home, rather than it being something that is forced upon them, and surely introducing gender onto the agenda is about maintaining this choice.

3. SECURITY, CONTROL AND FREEDOM WITHIN THE HOME

Just as there would appear to be a contradiction around the notion of privacy in the home, similar contradictions are to be found in considering security, control and freedom in the home. Traditionally home has been viewed as a castle; a retreat where individuals are free to do as they choose (Allan and Crow, 1989). However, as also expressed by Allan and Crow (1989), actions within the home are regulated by the wishes of other members of the dwelling.

A tension exists between the idea of the home as a place of relaxation and freedom away from the rules and regulations of the public sphere, and the requirement of regulation and predictability with regard to domestic arrangements (Allan and Crow, 1989). Indeed it is within this routineness that we find a sense of comfort in the predictability of home. It is a place where, although individual members may change, the actual running of the home varies very little. Home offers us a form of shelter and dependency away from a more independent lifestyle, though this may be a gender specific experience.

Creating these feelings of order and security within the home still remains primarily the responsibility of the woman, particularly as the mother figure. Even in homes where both partners are employed full time, pressure remains greater upon the female partner to maintain a comfortable and orderly environment.⁷ We must not assume though that the primary responsibility placed upon women to maintain a safe and tidy home always results due to a

lack of male participation in domestic tasks (or, at least, the less desirable ones). Help offered with domestic work by the male partner may be refused, as the female resents intrusion into her domain by the male, and she may feel that the job will be best done by her (Mason, 1988).

Women may experience a sense of autonomy in the control and planning involved with running a home. Autonomy may be experienced in control of consumption of the household, and this view is supported by Gullestad (1993). Saunders (1989) regards control over spending as a major power resource within household units. Indeed, he equates it to power resources in other social settings, such as the workplace. However it must be remembered that for many women the chore of running and maintaining a home proves tiresome and, whilst for some it provides opportunities of autonomy this still remains clearly within the domestic sphere, thus reinforcing traditional ideologies about women's roles and ownership within the home, and possibly maintaining overall dependency upon the male partner.

Freedom within the home may similarly be experienced differently according to gender. This especially applies to the issue of leisure time and activities. Ideally 'home' equals relaxation and leisure, but for women it may also be a place of work and duty. This can be most clearly demonstrated on special occasions, when other members of the home are relaxing, women remain primarily responsible for tidying, serving and cooking (Hunt, 1989). Mason (1988) expands on this idea in her research on the home and marriage in later life. The home ideally, especially in retirement, is about leisure, but whose leisure? Being at home for women does not necessarily mean having free time. Mason argues that the women in her study were producers of the home, and that this was done on two levels: firstly, for husbands and secondly, for public scrutiny. "The

⁵ Commentaries on this can be found in Oakley (1976), Oakley (1979).

⁶ For a consideration of the issue of privacy in different cultures see Rapoport (1969).

⁷ Gregson and Lowe (1994) provide an informative account of the pressures placed upon women in the home as a result of traditional ideologies.

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distinction between the two is akin to that between reproduction and social reproduction.” (Mason, 1988:117).

Care must be taken not to generalise about feelings of security created by the home, and credit must be given to feminist literature on the home for reminding the reader to question the origin of images of the home. There may exist a difference between individual's perception of what home should be and what it actually is. Somerville (1989) supports this view by focusing on domestic violence within the home. Often theories about home, such as that of Saunders and Williams (1988), have no means of dealing theoretically with contradictions within the household unit. Somerville (1989) argues that this may explain why issues such as domestic violence and child abuse, are dismissed as being due to the “internalisation of the general crisis of British society” (Saunders and Williams quoted by Somerville, 1989: 117). In viewing home as a haven or sanctuary, such theories are failing to appreciate that, in reality, the experience may be a much different one. For whom the home is a haven must be questioned and this is an issue that McDowell (1983) would agree with. In continuing to class the home as such a retreat, is research on the home failing to challenge traditional ideologies about the home?

4. A PLACE OF CREATIVITY AND SELF-EXPRESSION

Our homes not only provide us with a form of shelter and escape, but also act as arenas which allow us to express individual personality and taste. They serve as a vehicle within which to be creative when other areas of our lives may deny this. As a result, our values and identities are created and objectified in home decoration. This idea is expanded upon in Gullestad's (1993) research on home decoration in Norway. Despite the research being conducted in Norway, It may be used to draw

parallels with British homes. Through the arrangement of our homes, individuals express themselves as gendered human beings belonging to specific social classes and reference groups. Home decoration and home improvement is therefore part of the construction and reconstruction of social groups, and is both highly gendered and highly shared as a focus of attention for both sexes, and as a cultural symbol (Gullestad, 1993).

Decoration of the home, as with other domestic chores, is often a gendered task; women frequently are primarily responsible for deciding how the home will be decorated and the possessions within it, whilst men are responsible for the actual decorating (Allan and Crow, 1989). This common arrangement would seem to reflect traditional ideologies on the home being the woman's domain, with the female partner (because of her sex more associated with art and creativity) creating a 'homely' environment and the male partner concentrating on the physical labour.⁸ In principle the home as a whole may be designed as a gender-neutral place, but in practise it is largely a female universe. Male partners engaged in physical labour may experience quite a contrast between their own appearance and the polished surroundings of their home (Gullestad, 1993). What must be emphasised here is the existence of class differentiation, with the contrast between men and women being greater among the working-class.

The desire to create certain atmospheres in particular rooms lead to a variety between rooms which is possible to link with the gendered division of domestic responsibilities. The kitchen has

⁸ A debate exists around whether males doing occasional housework tasks, such as decorating, can be regarded as a change in the sexual division of labour. For a discussion of this see Gullestad (1993), Hunt (1989).

traditionally been viewed as the realm of the mother, but as Craik (1989) argues the kitchen has changed from reflecting the managerial power of women to becoming just a sign of motherhood and femininity.⁹ What must be challenged is the extent to which the modern kitchen, designed as a functional workspace, segregates the housewife from the social centre of the house (Craik, 1989, Madigan, et al, 1990). The location of the kitchen in modern architecture, often positioned at the rear of the house, can be traced back to the divisions between front and back of the house, public and private, male and female of the Victorian house (Madigan, et al, 1990). Indeed, it may be the case that today, even more so, the kitchen is defined as a female space due to the limited size of many modern kitchens. It would appear that they assume only one user, an idea that Madigan, et al (1990) support. However it can be challenged whether this is occurring across all modern housing or only at the cheaper end of the market, whilst more expensive housing boasts larger kitchens designed to be more integrated into the dwelling.

In considering the design of the home, the issue of privacy is again raised; women rarely have a space of their own despite their central role in the dwelling, which contrasts with their often marginal role in the public sphere (Craik, 1989). As Whitehorn says:

“Women have real difficulty in knowing what if anything is their own territory. In one sense a woman controls the whole house: but in another she may feel she owns nothing personally but her side of the wardrobe.” (Whitehorn quoted by Madigan, et al, 1990: 632).

It would seem that the home, particularly for women, is a place of many contradictions and conflicting meanings. On the one hand there are feelings of affection reciprocated towards the home as a nurturing

⁹ For further details see Craik (1989).

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environment, and on the other hand a sense of resentment at the demands of the home (Allan and Crow, 1989, Darke, 1994). To generalise, many of us identify the home with the fantasy 'good mother'; a place that unconditionally accepts and protects us so that we can venture into the judgmental 'outside' world again (Darke, 1994). Yet Darke (1994) explains that in addition to this idea of home as the nurturing mother, there are feelings of resentment over our dependence on home. For young adults, especially males, the home is rejected or escaped from in an attempt to rebel against the order and routine of home. Women cannot so easily do this, as they themselves may become the mother (Darke, 1994). This is why women experience "at one and the same time irritation at the home 'demanding' that we clean it, and guilt at the fact that we haven't cleaned it enough." (Darke, 1994: 22).

Darke's writing does at times appear to be too extreme in her attempt to explore the conflicting meaning of home for women. Although her research was designed to focus on women, rather than men, and the meaning of home, in common with other studies greater insights may be gained by a consideration of both men's and children's experiences of home together with further research on the meaning of home across class and ethnicity. Especially at a time when increasing numbers of women are entering the labour market and we are witnessing the rise of the 'house husband'.

What is needed in research on the home is a way of balancing the practical needs of women in their existing position and the political ideals to which feminism aspire. Architects need to ensure that design does not trap individuals in existing gender roles while recognising that physical design will not, in itself, change social relations (Madigan, et al, 1990). An increase in the number of female architects alone will not achieve this, as gendered space within the home is about relations between men and

women. The knowledge that people need to transform their dwellings is legal and social rather than architectural (Madigan, et al, 1990). This is particularly true in Britain, where the majority of new houses are the responsibility of private sector developers rather than architect-designed, and consequently reflect the power of the developer to influence the marketing and image of the home.

CONCLUSION

The concept of home in contemporary British society is comprised of many complex and contradictory issues, which due to the personal and private nature of home life prove difficult to research. The need to gather more empirical evidence about the role of the home in people's lives is not easily resolved, and raises not only the problem of access, but also issues surrounding interpretation of information and representation of dominant cultural values. What must be examined in research into the home, as with all other research, is the social position of the researcher and how this may effect their findings. Much of the literature on the social meaning of home in 'conventional' families is written by those belonging to less conventional homes, such as feminists, lone-parents and bachelors (Madigan, et al, 1990). Whilst their research must be valued for its role in highlighting the heterogeneous nature of the family and home, it must be questioned how much these researchers can gain meaningful insight into unfamiliar social settings.

The home, and the gender relations within it, are not static, and what is required is more balanced research that recognises the dynamic nature of the home environment and which further acknowledges and explores the gendering of both images of the home and the space within it. Power relations within the home, associated mainly with gender and age differences, need to be investigated in more depth in order to

gain a greater understanding of the social significance of the home (Somerville, 1989). The home must be recognised for its role in maintaining existing ideologies surrounding gender and for representing, and promoting, ideals. As McDowell (1983) and Madigan, et al (1990) would agree, whilst the home continues to be regarded as a haven, the likelihood of gender-based urban social movements and a true understanding of gendered experience within the home is greatly reduced.

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