Finding your community wherever you go? **Exploring how a group of women who identify as lesbian embody and imagine 'home'.**

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Abstract

Sexuality has received far less attention than other social markers of identity in research on imagining home. This paper discusses the findings from interviews and focus groups with nine women who identify as lesbian about how they embody and imagine home. The thematic analysis of the interviews and focus groups used emotionality as the theoretical lens for examining how concepts of home and sexuality are 'sensed', embodied and imagined by people of diverse sexualities. This study found that home involved the embodiment (and imagining) of physical spaces and locality (houses and landscapes) and the identification with communities of shared interest (lesbian communities and environmental movements). The significance of this study lies in its challenge to heteronormative assumptions that currently influence how home and sexuality are understood.

Keywords: emotions, home, embodiment, sexuality

Introduction

Home is multidimensional and emotional. Home can be an 'ideal' and a 'reality', both an 'actual' and 'remembered' journey, occuring across time, places and spaces (Mallett 2004, p.69). Home is a highly subjective phenomenon that relates to feelings, identity, belonging, connections and practices (Blunt & Dowling 2006; Marcus 2006; Tolia-Kelly 2004). An ideal 'home' can reflect a person's inner self and be a place where one goes to 'recharge' oneself, immersed in objects of our personality (Marcus 2006; Pilkey 2013). Thus, a home can be a space or a multitude of spaces (Ahmet 2013) closed or open, and of almost any magnitude – be it a community, a building, a forest, a city, a country (Waitt & Gorman-Murray 2011) or a culture (Webster-Kogen 2013). Also, identification with and connection to 'home/s' can be through sounds (Webster-Kogen 2013), smells, memories and objects (Ahmet 2013). Pilkey (2013) argues that material objects in the home can constitute a way of carving out an identity within a culture of exclusion and marginalisation, such that the person sees and feels themselves reflected in these surroundings, constructing their sense of identity or 'who they are'. Australian author Gibson (2004, p. 285-6) also uses the notion of 'melancholy objects' to discuss the emotional effects of objects and emotional transitions through objects, particularly in relation to grieving and the memory of grieving, such as photographic images and clothing as a way of 'reclaiming and rehousing (making homely) the remains of a life now gone' (Gibson 2004, p. 297).

Yuval-Davis (2006, p. 202) notes, identities are 'stories that people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)', highlighting the interplay between narratives of self and narratives of group/s. Belonging is a multidimensional and dynamic process. The notion of belonging has symbolic and political powers (Yuval-Davis 2011a). Belonging is constituted by people's social locations at the intersections of sexuality, age, class, gender and ethnicity. Belonging can be an embodiment of home, an emotional attachment to being

'at home' and an imagining of a safe 'home'. Yuval-Davis (2011, p.10) differentiates between belonging and the politics of belonging. Belonging involves identifications with and emotional attachments to a collective group, whereas the politics of belonging relates to the power involved in constructing social boundaries, which include and exclude particular categories of people, such as on the basis of sexuality (Yuval-Davis 2011, p.10-18).

Sexuality has received noticeably less attention than other axes of social analysis in research on home (Mallet, 2004). Researchers have shown how issues related to sexual identity can contribute to homelessness, focused on how homophobia in the family home and the wider society affects young people in particular (Dunne et al 2002), in the context of institutionalised heteronormativity (Gold 2005; Jackson & Scott 2010). According to Jackson (2006, p.108) the term heteronormativity is 'shorthand for the numerous ways in which heterosexual privilege is woven into the fabric of social life, pervasively and insidiously, ordering everyday existence.' For example, the heterosexual, nuclear family home is held up as the 'emblematic model of comfort, care and belonging' (Ahmed 2003; Fortier 2003, p.115). Home is variously conflated with the private domain: a house, the family, a haven and refuge, or rather, a prison for people who experience violence and abuse (Mallett, 2004, p.71). Indeed, feminist research into 'home' has explored heteronormative and patriarchal norms, symbols, relationships and interactions that occur within the boundaries of home as a house, such as the heteronormative 'happy housewife myth' (Johnson & Lloyd 2004; Blunt & Dowling 2006).

In this study, sexuality is not necessarily tied to normative and dichotomous identity configurations and provides for a more fluid and changeable concept of home. The study will contribute knowledge to a paucity of current literature about sexuality in the scholarship of home. The significance of this study lies in its challenge to heteronormative assumptions that

influence how home, homelessness and sexuality are understood currently. This paper focuses on nine women who identify as lesbian, and who are a sub-group of a larger research study that examines how concepts of home (and homelessness) are embodied and imagined by people across the sexual spectrum.

Methodology

The research was approved by the University of South Australia Human Research Ethics Committee. This project is significant in its contribution to empirical evidence in its use of emotionality as the theoretical lens for examining how concepts of home and sexuality are 'sensed', embodied and imagined by people of diverse sexualities. The analysis draws from a body of knowledge known as the sociology of emotion in which embodied emotions are considered a rich source of data for analysing the invisible power relations of social conditions and relations (Barbalet 2002; Jagger 1989).

This paper discusses the findings from three one-hour semi-structured interviews (two face to face and one interstate telephone interview) and one two-hour focus group involving six women. The nine participants were recruited through snowballing via service and community networks. The women were aged from 49 to 68, employed in professional and trade occupations, had stable housing except for one, and seven had migrated to Australia from England and Ireland. The nine women identified as lesbian, with seven being in a current relationship. Noteworthy features of the sample profile were their age range (the majority being over 50 years old) and their migration status; two thirds were first generation migrants from England and Ireland, amidst conflict between Protestants and Catholics.

An exploration into the subjective construction of 'home' logically points towards using frameworks that allow women the greatest amount of control over the narrative (Waitt &

Gorman-Murray 2011). Following the works of Kuhn (2007) and Pink (2007) on visual methodologies, we asked women to bring along a visual representation of home or homelessness. Visual and auditory objects can 'place' a person within the space and the emotional connections that embed them within 'home'. By evoking narratives at a deeply embodied level, we sought to garner new research insights about home and homeless for women who identify as lesbian.

The visual artefacts that prompted women's recollections of deeply held emotional experiences of home varied widely. They included photographs of themselves or family members at significant times in their lives; certificates of (proud) achievement; craftwork they had created; books by particular authors; rocks that symbolised family members and histories; objects such as china, linen, and tea cosies that connected to warmth and comfort; symbolic objects from their childhoods; photographs and objects that related to an adventure or journey; and paintings of a once lived in community house. The woman who participated by telephone, and who had experienced homelessness, recalled how she constructed spaces from wooden boxes in a van in which she lived. These visual artefacts connected strongly at an emotional level to their individual histories and identities.

In this paper we utilised a thematic analysis that identifies patterns and 'meaningful essences' within the focus group and interview data, by dissecting data into small fragments for thematic coding (Braun & Clarke 2006; Morse 2008; Liamputtong 2013; Reissman 2008). The steps of a thematic analysis include: familiarisation with the data, producing the first set of codes, identifying themes, reviewing these themes, naming and defining themes and then documenting them (Braun & Clarke 2006, p.79).

Findings

The themes in the data supported notions in the sociological literature that home is multidimensional (Mallet 2004). Home embodies physical spaces and locality (houses and landscapes), and identifications with communities of shared interest (lesbian communities and environmental movements). These themes are discussed under the following headings: 'Finding home'; 'Making our own home', 'Coming out and coming home', 'Home as landscape' and 'Community as home'.

Finding home

Home embodied feelings of love and joy relating to notions of acceptance, belonging, trust and familiarity. 'Finding home' was a process that included being on an adventure and a journey, being 'transient' and then finding a place of safety and having a *'sense of control'* where *'you can make choices for yourself'*. Finding and making home involved creating a physical aesthetic environment in a house so that it felt like a comfortable, *'welcoming'* home, whilst acknowledging the privilege of living in and owning a '*lovely house'*. However, two women who participated via interviews and who tended to be highly mobile (including experiences of homelessness) said: *'I just feel at home wherever I am …maybe that is from being a migrant?'* and '*[I have] no concept of an ideal home'*. The seven women who were migrants discussed 'going back home' to visit their parents and country of origin. However, they emphasised the importance of relationships in Australia that transcended feelings of being *'homesick'*, including the historical tensions between Catholics and Protestants.

Making our own home

All of the women except one were over the age of 50. This age profile is important because the women identified historical, societal, generational and familial influences that contributed to being 'rejected' for 'who we are', leading them to 'make our own homes' :

> It wouldn't matter where I was, it's exactly how I feel about myself as to whether I'm at home or not…because certainly with the generation that we all are, or fit into, home in our childhood, rejected who we are, so it was that sense that we do have to make our own homes and that's really strong with us.

This finding resonates with sexuality literature on the policing of gendered and sexual behaviours in the heteronormative family home. The subsequent emotion of 'being strangers' in the childhood home can contribute to the mobility of women who identify as lesbian, 'seeking communities of belonging' elsewhere (Waitt & Johnston 2013, p.147-148).

Coming out and coming home

There was much consideration about whether women would 'come out' in different periods and contexts of their lives, as this disclosure often contributed to being marginalised and excluded. People *'sticking by them'* contributed to emotions of being 'at home' and of having a sense of belonging. In response to one focus group participant who discussed her *'absolute astonishment'* that a heterosexual couple she knew when she was married *'stuck with me'*, when '*coming out as a lesbian'*, another participant said:

> I think one of the things that we all have with this coming out is that we lose, so we actually expect to lose everybody that you've been close to…that's a really common thing that we all do when we sort of come out or change our lifestyle…

This support for and acceptance of their sexual orientation is extremely important because women recall serious incidents of abuse and exclusion in being 'outed', including their house

windows being broken and violence in the workplace: *'I've been outed at work and my boss at the time was just giving me the absolute hell'.* This lack of safety and feeling of exclusion infiltrated local community life: *'shop keepers didn't talk to us, they'd be really unfriendly, they knew who we were and they just did not speak, because we were lesbians and we were greenies'* (in Tasmania). This same woman described the fear she embodied after facing this discrimination, exacerbated by displacement from the security of her 'landscape' home *('the bush'):*

> *I just was shaking and curled up in a foetal ball shaking each morning until I could come out of that and get on about the day, and it wasn't like it wasn't alright to be here, I'd made a very clear decision to be here and all of that, but I'd lost my basic security which came from being near the bush. The bush gave it to me as well as … and home in control of my own home…it's just completely immersed in fear of some sort…it was in the body.*

This quote illustrates how emotions are 'spatial, discursive, embodied, practiced and narrated experiences' that are enmeshed with feelings of belonging as well as exclusion (Waitt & Johnston 2013, p.149).

Home as landscape

Home was connected to the landscapes of women's countries of origin, urban places in Australia (such as a community house in the city) and living in *'paradise'* in the country, being self-sufficient and growing their own food. Migrant women stated that they preferred the physical landscapes in their country of origin to the Australian landscape:

> *The landscape in Ireland it just touches me here* [the heart], *it hugs me, it gives me a sense of my spiritual groundedness, and so that's really important to me too, but of course so is the people in it…*

However, in spite of deep connections to the physical landscape and people in their country of origin, the women expressed a greater sense of home in connecting with their lesbian community in Australia. Two women interviewed described their connections to the rural landscape as 'home' ('*the bush*') and one woman born in Australia enjoyed the sense of space here and felt that England was '*too compact*'. Drawing on dominant representations of gay and lesbian communities being connected to large cities (Gorman-Murray 2013, p.95; Wienke & Hill 2013), one woman who was living in a rural location explained:

> *It's just made it hard to choose where to be because where I'm comfortable in my gay community is in the city but that's not where I'm comfortable living my life…so my connection to my earth and my home I guess is bigger than my connection to my gay community.. [but] ..can't be totally me – you've always got that little bit of a lie happening or not telling the whole truth kind of – when they ask about past relationships.*

As she had not 'outed' herself as lesbian, there was always a tension, a *'bit of a lie happening'*, indicating that homophobia and fear in rural contexts constrain women from 'outing' themselves, which then affects their sense of home, being 'totally themselves' and their sense of belonging in heterosexual rural communities. This constriction is counteracted by being at home in and 'coming home' to the lesbian community.

Community as home

The notion of community is contested. Consistent with sexualities literature, the majority of the women conceptualised community as their collective sexual identities, intertwined deeply with the notion of self (Gorman-Murray, Pini & Bryant 2013) and belonging. The women particularly emphasised the importance of home as a safe and supportive community: 'being

able to live completely as I was as a lesbian woman'. That is, there is a community that you 'live' in, which you choose:

> *I've lived within the lesbian community, and it's about choosing where, what community you live within as well as who you do it with. I think that that's part of sexuality. If you hang around with straights all the time, but you have a lesbian girlfriend on the side, that's living within a straight community but doing your sex with somebody else.*

Considerable support was gained from other lesbian women, such as receiving financial assistance to purchase land, being able to 'couch surf', and living in a shared community house in relationships that feel like 'home'. The majority of the women discussed how 'home' interweaves with a community in which you can be yourself, and how physical location and place is not 'home' unless it nurtures, connects and grounds you:

> *Home is not a place. Although place is very important… for me it's also about the community, it's the community…it's not just one thing, you kind of weave in and out of yourself, of your place, of the physical location and other things that you're connected to will connect you to other things.*

The women also spoke of being connected to heterosexual communities of shared interest in which they had not 'outed' themselves but in which they felt included and 'embedded in the community', such as 'people close by' including neighbours and environmental and political movements. One woman stated getting support from friends who were lesbian but not having a sense of connection to a collective community:

> *Friends …two, three, not big and no sense of community; very intermittent, they have no relationship with each other so it's one on one.*

This exception implies the value of theorising around sexualities, home and community to problematise binary categories of homosexuality/heterosexuality and essentialist dominant notions of 'a unitary lesbian and/or gay identity and community' (Rowntree 2014, p.354; Sullivan 2003, p.38). This problematisation enables exploration of how diverse social locations related to age, class, migration experiences, mobility, and geographical connections intersect in the women's lives, shaping their narratives of home and community.

Conclusion

This study explored experiences and imaginings of home from the perspectives of nine women who identify as lesbian. This small sample is not representational, and therefore the findings cannot be generalised to all women who identify as lesbian in Australia. Like Gorman-Murray (2013) and Waitt & Johnston (2013), we note a complex interplay between homecoming, place, emotions and sexualities. In the main, we found that home is embodied and imagined as 'coming out' and 'coming home'. These findings resonate with literature that connects the 'coming out' narrative with establishing a sense of identity that signals 'who one really is' (Plummer 1995), and who one wants to become (Rowntree 2014). The process of 'coming out' relates to a process of 'coming in' to an embodied sense of home, arguably challenging heterosexual spaces and 'making the world a little queerer' (Bjorklund 2013, p.170; Brown 2008).

Word count: 2912

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