Interpretations of the meaning of home are wide ranging, involving ideas about dwelling, private setting, family and relationships, a place of belonging and valued objects and possessions, the significance of rootedness, connection and place of origin (Oswald and Wahl, 2005). While these meanings may be seen as predominantly supportive of individual wellbeing, they sit alongside concerns about isolation, domestic abuse and social exclusion. Here the complexity of the topic emerges and home in its broadest sense is a physical, social, psychological (Sommerville, 1997; Easthope, 2004), as well as political, environment where an individual’s life history with all its relationships contextualised in time and space becomes a part of unpacking meaning and exploring continuity and change.

Understandably, given the breadth of these interests, there is a large body of multidisciplinary literature on the concept of home including: sociology (Mallett, 2004), anthropology (Cieraad, 1999), social/emotional geography (Milligan, 2005), social policy and psychology (Gunter, 2000) and architectural studies and design (Rybezynski, 1986), each foregrounding different perspectives, with influential collections such as Chapman and Hockey (1999) and in relation to later life Rowles and Chaudhury (2005) and Rowles and Bernard (2013).

A life course perspective is central to the experience of home in a sociohistorical context and to the focus on meaning in later life within western developed countries. Bengston et al. (2005) highlight not only the importance of historical time and place, but also the way in which lives are linked across the generations, the timing of transitions in people’s lives when choices have to be made and how some people may be more able to control and plan these changes. Here home and moving home are important examples of such transitions reflecting intersectionality that is generational, gendered, racial, as well as related to sexuality, class and culture. To contextualise late life change, consideration is given first to home and locality in terms of country and culture, then to dwelling, family role and homemaking, and the relationship between home and gender.

Home and homeland

Rapoport reminds us that the meanings of home in relation to ageing in place ‘are not unambiguous’ (2005: 343). While a person’s dwelling can be central to their understanding of home, the meaning of the term extends to embrace a wider locale, encompassing issues of place from...
nation to neighbourhood—the many layers of attachment that demonstrate different aspects of self-identity and culture that become increasingly important where migration is central to globalisation and ageing. Here theorists demonstrate the complexity of the interface between person and attachment to place where mind and body may be situated separately (Heidegger, 1971; Massey, 1994). Rowles (1978) has shown how place attachment in later life may be constantly revisited through memory and ‘autobiographical insideness’, while Peace et al. (2006) have developed Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of ‘habitus’ recognising how ‘habitualisation’ and ‘routinisation’ connect person to place in the present. Empirical research continues to reveal different aspects of this dynamic. Wiles et al. (2011), in a qualitative study of two communities in New Zealand, report how people talk about home through community resources, engagement and warmth, knowing people, feeling safe, familiarity and security. There is a sense of being rooted, and the interface between home and personal identity is captured in discussion of autonomy and being one’s self.

This layered sense of home is central to the relationship between environment and identity in later life, where meaning can be captured in terms of community, neighbourhood, the natural world surrounding a person’s housing and the dwelling itself (Peace et al., 2006). Migrant participants in this British study show how their present home could be differentiated from their ‘homeland’. Harjit, aged 66 years in 2000, who came to the UK from India in the 1960s, says: ‘In many ways mentally and in my thinking processes I am more like British but culturally I am Indian, so I am in sort of limbo’ (Peace et al. 2006: 147).

This view of ‘being in limbo’ between two cultures is noted by other researchers (Dahya 1973). Leavey et al. (2004), researching older Irish migrants in London who arrived in the 1940s and 50s, discuss the ‘myth of return’ to the home country. They demonstrate how people become part of different cultures, with a commitment to settle rather than ‘return’ often proving the best outcome unless strong social ties make return realisable. Yet for the individual the meaning of home may display particular cultural strength, sometimes over-riding locale. This discussion demonstrates the importance of historical/political circumstances and employment and migration patterns between nations (Percival, 2013).

**Home and housing**

Despite this discussion of home as locale, it is common for many to equate home with the dwelling in which they live, and Heywood et al. (2002) see housing as ‘the link between structural and individual concerns’ (30). Cultural diversity in housing tenure may also influence meaning. Does financial ownership intensify the importance of home? In the UK, Saunders (1990) saw homeownership as a form of ontological security marking out personal territory and vital to housing policy. Ownership is dominant in English-speaking counties, as well as in Southern Europe. Elsinga and Hoekstra (2005), using European Community Household Panel data, test the value of tenure difference across chosen countries with diverse tenure profiles for all age-groups. Through statistical analysis they show that homeowners demonstrate greater housing satisfaction than housing tenants in seven out of the eight countries. However, satisfaction does not necessarily equate with meaning, and they call for further research to address personal, cultural and political circumstances regarding homeownership and attitudes to ‘rental with security’ at a time when the social rental sector is changing across western developed nations.

Dupuis and Thorns show that in 1996 over three-quarters of the New Zealand population were homeowners, with highest rates among older people. Their empirical research with late middle-aged and older homeowners also demonstrates how ‘home is synonymous with
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home ownership’ (486), a notion of security embedded in the values of a generation hit by the Depression of the early twentieth century. The home is seen as a family centre, an intergenerational hub where assets can be passed through inheritance. Yet four types of insecurity associated with ownership are noted: the variability of external economic forces; the need for housing maintenance; the need to downsize due to personal vulnerability; and issues of asset testing in relation to care needs. These issues have resonance in countries where owner-occupation and long-term residence lead to a wish to maintain independent living in mainstream housing (Heywood et al., 2002). Research based in England concerning potential housing options for those 55 years and over shows that only a small percentage actively move each year, a number that decreases with age; people 75 years and over being more likely to ‘stay put’, a population comprised predominantly of older woman (Pannell et al. 2012: 16).

The work of Tomassini et al. (2004) and Stula (2012), who have considered changes in living arrangements for older people across Europe and the USA determined by socio-economic, cultural as well as demographic factors, provides comparable material. Across the 27 EU countries they show that older people are still most likely to be receiving care and living with family members in southern European countries. While rates of people living alone in later life have increased for all these countries since the 1970s, the 1990s onwards has seen some stability or decline in this trend due to: changes in longevity between genders and maintenance of coupledom; increases in intergenerational co-residence; increases in divorce and remarriage; and a decline in childlessness for certain generations. While solitary living remains highest in north-western European countries, changes in living arrangements are central to this discussion.

Home, gender and relations

Feminist writers from a diversity of backgrounds have challenged the positive ideology of home, seeing it as a site of enclosure and place of entrapment, as well as a refuge, one in which patriarchal male domination remains central (Oakley, 1985; Madigan et al., 1990; Bowlby et al., 1997; Scicluna, 2013). The debate concerning the interplay between public and private lives has grown over the twentieth century as women have become central to the non-domestic workplace while still taking on the major share of domestic activity, nurturing and caring roles (Milligan, 2005). In discussing this conundrum, feminist theorist Iris Marion Young comments: ‘It is difficult even for feminists to exorcise a positive valence to the idea of home’ (Young, 2005: 123). She makes the case for an emancipation of the concept of home by women. Drawing on the work of Heidegger, she highlights women’s role in the preservation of identity through home-making and says, ‘The preservation of the things among which one dwells gives people a context for their lives, individuates their histories, gives them items to use in making new projects, and makes them comfortable’ (p142). Through her work Young adds value to the meaning of home not seen in earlier feminist debates.

These views of preserving self-identity have resonance with earlier discussion of older women’s attachment to home (Peace, 1993), but in later life this is not just a women’s issue (Young, 2005). Home is a place for kin to come back to, an intergenerational space where older people may give on-going support through (great) grand-parenting, and somewhere the oldest generation may ground the lives of others through a social history that gives meaning. However, in times where the social unit is diverse (de Medeiros et al., 2013), often living at a distance, and where older people may need care from predominantly female non-familial carers, public and private lives begin to merge across settings and we must ask what makes kin special in relation to home? The final sections consider issues for living in later life and implications for the meaning of home.
The embodied home?

When considering the home environments of older people, Rubinstein (1989) outlined three psychosocial processes—social-, person- and body-centred—linking person to place. Embodiment is person-centred, where self-identity is captured in the environment, reinforcing a desire to remain in a place. In contrast, body-centred processes through physical and cognitive changes can influence the need for alterations to the physical and social environment which may, or may not, affect the meaning of home. Mainstream housing is not inclusively designed, leading to environmental dissonance (Stula, 2012; Imrie, 2013; Maguire et al., 2014). While many people spend their lives adapting their housing to make it more ‘homely’ (Care and Repair, 2012; Heywood, 2005), financial resources, individual capacity for building work and resilience in coping with others working in the home lead to this environment being more, or less, functional as people age. The home may display little of the ‘ideal’ setting noted by others, and rather than creating valued privacy a lack of accessibility can lead to isolation and withdrawal.

Where an older person living alone no longer cooks, formal home carers may take over the ‘deserted kitchen’; while for others assistive technology may became more important. This extends the discussion to the social interface with the older body. Twigg’s (2006) work on the reality of the ‘social’ bath assisted by others is exemplary, demonstrating how this essential area of personal care has gone uncharted. While the domestic home can provide a powerbase for personal control and refuge to conceal embodied change, personal autonomy may diminish in different ways. The alliance of belonging and agency is central to the work of Oswald and Wahl (2013) in understanding environmental experience, and yet the balance between independence and inter-dependence is also of key importance. Home carers (formal/informal) can redefine home space, particularly over time through the routinisation of activities. Person-centred care demands new consideration of aspects of home life, as Brown (2003) reports in the development of hospice at home in the USA, showing how public and private actions and spaces become blurred. Yet, while some older people may die at home, for many the much quoted wish to ‘live in my own home for as long as possible’ often noted in UK research indicates an acknowledgement of the possibility of change in where and how you live (Peace et al., 2011).

Re-creating and maintaining home?

Moving home and locality in later life can emphasise the differences between individual, familial and communal lifestyles. Here alternative forms of living may range from downsizing mainstream housing to home-sharing to co-housing to co-living with access to communal facilities. Further, in the final years of life a sizable number of people over 85 years of age, predominantly older women, move to care/nursing homes where their growing need for health and social care is recognised (Tomassini et al., 2004). Research shows that where people ‘anticipate’ their need to move to what may be a more supportive setting and positively manage change, they may re-establish aspects of home life. For others ‘forced’ to move in situations outside their control, the outcomes can be less good (Oldman and Quilgars, 1999).

In reflecting on older people’s housing situations Heywood et al. (2002: 84–5) state: ‘The meaning of home is not qualitatively different in later life. What is difficult about so many moves in old age is that there is a danger they will be seen by others as signifying a loss of status and independence’. This is an important statement that leads to the question, ‘Can the ideology of home be re-created throughout later life and in any place including non-domestic and age-segregated communal settings?’ Comparison between aspects of domestic and institutional life provides a context for this discussion where privacy, familiarity, autonomy and choice are seen alongside
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degrees of formality, living with strangers and limitations in personal freedom, which is not necessarily a continuum that ranges from positive to negative (Heywood et al., 2002).

In many countries, living in different environments identifies diverse personal circumstances. For example, commenting on the developing interest in co-housing in the UK usually aimed at relatively fit, self-reliant people aged from their mid-50s onwards, Brenton (2001) says: ‘The CoHousing Community should be seen as a cluster of friends and neighbours in their own homes, loosely associated with each other for a common purpose, rather than that of sheltered housing’ (2001: 177). As they age, she suggests, members will experience similar options for care as all other older people. Housing Associations in the UK are now building on individual co-housing initiatives to assist development as already seen in the Netherlands, Denmark and the USA (Pati, 2011).

In contrast Bartlam et al. (2013) provide evidence of the meaning of home within recent British purpose-built retirement communities. While providers will market accommodation as being a ‘home for life’, variation between people’s capacity for independent living and their need for support and care over time can lead to further moves that should be recognised. In addition, through longitudinal research they identified: the complexity of relocating former home owners; the importance of settling new villagers; and the need to develop integration within the locality through sharing facilities. On-going transitions impact on the re-creation and maintenance of a place that can be called home. Means (1997) also demonstrated the importance of life transitions for older people living in a variety of housing types, including sheltered housing, commenting on how changing circumstances such as the death of a spouse, or ill-health, could impact on attitudes to how they defined home.

The meaning of home may relate to certain people and certain places, which may either be impossible to re-create, or take time to re-establish in a totally different form. For people moving to care/nursing homes at a time of great frailty this may be particularly true. Such settings, which offer communal living with degrees of institutionalisation, have been criticised for failing to address ‘the complex interaction of economic, social, organisational, interpersonal, and biographical factors which influence the lives of older people’ (Baldwin et al., 1993: 80). Here the UK is used as an example where despite incidents of poor practice (Guardian, 2013), a more person-centred lifestyle and ‘homely’ environment continues to be promoted in care homes to support residents who continue to become more physically and cognitively frail (Darton et al., 2012). For example, the majority of residents have a private bedroom that can be personalised with furnishings and possessions; for some the companionship of communal living is central to wellbeing, while relationship-centred care is encouraged, enabling relatives and friends to maintain their own roles and reinforce the self-identity of the older resident (Nolan and Allan, 2012; Milligan, 2005).

One could argue that these experiences aid the person in re-creating their own personal home environment within an age-segregated communal setting. Yet experiences are diverse and evidence varies. In 1987, Willcocks et al. commented about care homes, ‘in reality, the ideal of providing a “homely” setting is a genteel façade behind which institutional patterns, not domestic ones, persist’ (1); Peace and Holland (2001) found small care homes for up to three residents more akin to guest houses; while Varley (2008) considered the value of home to her father’s perception of self while living with dementia as lost on moving into a care home. These views do not support the re-creation of aspects of the domestic home, and Johnson et al. (2010: 209), revisiting the care homes included in Townsend’s seminal British study ‘The Last Refuge,’ comment that, despite improvement, ‘these features reflect not only the changed function of residential care but also an increasing concern with risk and safety’. This phrase seems to deny residents ability to re-create the freedom of the domestic home.
Conclusion

This discussion ends by reflecting on whether the meaning of home alters as people get older. While everyone copes with change across their lives, for those in their third and fourth ages psychosocial processes and individual needs, though variable, may offer some common awareness of issues relating to autonomy, choice, vulnerability and mortality (Baltes and Smith, 2003), all of which may impact on a person’s understanding of what home means to them. The meaning of home remains ambiguous as place or dwelling, or both, across the life course. At the beginning of this chapter the complexity of understandings was noted. Home is seen to be an especially powerful concept in terms of essence of being, where attachment can relate to personal identity, and where people say that it is where they want to be in later life. It can be understood as a refuge for the self, where personal space defines privacy and autonomy that is sometimes delegated to others (Leece and Peace, 2010). Yet despite this there is recognition that home may not always be a refuge.

As a concept it brings together characteristics that are physical, social and psychological to which the individual gives personal meaning through the life course narrative and current embodiment. In later life, whatever age or level of interdependency with others, the concept of home enables retreat for the self where the past can be remembered, the present leads to the preservation of identity that is supportive and the future remains concealed. Indeed, home can be seen as the receptacle of continuity and change for individuals and their kin. As a concept it is the ultimate synergy of person and environment for twenty-first-century living in the developed world. You ‘feel at home’. Perhaps it is somewhere that, when you lose the essence of it, you give up on life as you have lived it, whatever your situation.

References

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