

# HOME TALKS ON THE BATTLEFIELD

## BROADENING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF HOME IN SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

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In his book *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors* (2001) Daniel Miller notes that in industrialised societies most of what matters to people is happening behind the closed doors of the private sphere. In this private sphere, the home has become the most important site in which people form their relationships with each other and the world outside. To gain insight into these various relations is difficult primarily because entry into subjects home's is often considered intrusive. Yet it is also the way, perhaps the only way, in which we can study how these intimate relationships are being developed (Miller 2001: 1). We – as social scientists – have to enter the home. For if we do so successfully, we can not only understand the relationships people form in their homes, both with each other and with the outside world, but we can also come to understand peoples' ways of acting in the world.

Our home is the site where we are raised, educated, and socialised as children. The place where we learn to love and trust, hurt and cry, what is wrong and what is right. Home is the foundation where our being in the world is formed: our beliefs, morals, behaviours, and emotional responses. Furthermore, it is a place where we develop our selves, create our agency, try out the person we want to be, or (re)connect with the person we “actually” are. Thus,

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our acting in the world is heavily based on the person we learned to be, are and try to become at home. As such, studies into people's home lives can help us understand why people do the things they do and for what reasons. Even if the connection to the home might seem irrelevant or unrelated, i.e. in the reasons why people in Syria riot or the voting behaviour of people in the Netherlands. Implicitly, home is working through these people's actions.

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In this article, I will thus stress the importance of home in people's everyday lives and the insights we can gain as social science researchers by studying it. Yet, I will do so from a different premise than most social studies into the home. For many of these studies, Miller's included, often bare in them the implicit conceptualisation of the home as linked to the house, i.e. a domestic setting. This becomes most clear in the first part of the article where I present a theorisation of 'home'. Yet, home does not have to be linked to the house to be meaningful to people. By equating home with the house, what home is and can be, becomes fixed to a specific place. In the second part of this article, I use my research into deployed soldiers and the way they relate to home as an example to challenge this notion of fixedness. In the final part, I then use the insights rendered from this example to expand our understanding of home and reflect on what this can mean for future research.

### THEORISING 'HOME': THERE IS NO PLACE LIKE HOME

The concept of home is too encompassing to summarise in a few pages, let alone in a few sentences. Theories of and on the home have filled numerous books. However, the more it has been studied and described, the more elusive it has become. This theorisation is therefore not exhaustive. It only outlines the major themes important in studies on 'home' to generate a general understanding from which I will build my own argument. Furthermore, although

studies on 'home' often present their theories as all applicable, they are heavily influenced by Western notions of home. I do not think that it is possible to make a divide between Western and Non-Western notions, as if they consist in a self-contained environment without influencing one another, and do not want to enforce such dichotomies with this article. However, I do think it is important to keep this Western presence in home conceptualisations in mind. For as anthropological studies have shown time and again, different countries and regions bring forth different expressions of culture. Expressions that work on and are enacted by the people in it, which creates various kinds of everyday lives. We can thus safely presume that these expressions can also produce different understandings of home and this understanding does not have to be similar to Western notions of home. Specific research into understandings of home across the world can further validate this claim. For now, I simply want to ask the reader to keep it in mind.

*Home and House*

In Western societies, the concept of home has become a collective designation for the home/house and the social unit of the family. Yet, even though home and house are often used synonymously, 'home' is connected more to the emotional ties we have to the material house and the social unit living in the house. The 'house' is a physical place in which we are bodily placed and from which we venture into the world. It is thus a field and concept more related to architects and engineers, while the home is a philosophical concept, a cultural-historical phenomenon, and a fact of everyday life. We live in houses, but we do not have to feel at home in them (Winther 2009: 50).

*Feelings, experiences and memories*

To feel at home, to *be home*, requires the undertaking of action by people. It begins by bringing a space under control, capturing territories and making places where events can happen (Winther 2009: 51). What we need is a chosen spot to which we can become attached through our thoughts, memories and daydreams. To

find this attachment, the primary experience of home is key. Before we are cast into the world, our primary house is our cradle (Bachelard 2004: 86, 88). The place in which our notion of home is nurtured and which eventually becomes the spectrum through which we regard all other places and their possibility to become a home. Furthermore, it is also in the primary house where we learn the actions to ‘make home’.

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## Our memories of our childhood home often be- comes a stylised projection

Yet, it is important to note that like many memories, our memories of our childhood home often becomes a stylised projection. The way we remember our childhood home is influenced by many things: temporality, context, and our understandings of our own identity, gender, self, etc. For example for a teenage girl, a handkerchief with the particular smell of her parental house might evoke clear memories of her warm childhood. However, at another point in time, after a falling out, the death of a parent or in her elderly days, the memories attached to the smell can be completely different. Instead of warmth, her memories can be about the falling out and other times she experienced anger towards her parents when she was younger. Rather than reminding her about her childhood, she might think instead of a particular person connected to the smell. Or the memories might simply be blurred together and the handkerchief is now only a reminder of a time when she was a child.

### *Identity, self and gender*

‘Being at home’ and ‘making a home’ often go hand in hand, both in our minds and our houses. We literally and figuratively pick and chose that which we want to be in our (notion of) home. A dominant way to ‘make a home’ in this consumer society is through the purchasing and the decoration of one’s house with material objects. Both these actions are based on the making of choices. Yet although not everyone has a psychological investment in the design and furnishing of their homes, our identities often do get wrapped up in our sofas and tables as well as the rest of our immediate surroundings through these choices. Our style

of decor inevitably carries some sort of social and personal significance (Shove 2006: 132), weaving our class, background, and taste into the material make-up of the home. As such, 'home' is also related to notions of identity and the concept of self. Furthermore, as home-related decisions regarding the decoration and use of home spaces are frequently influenced by sex, 'home' is also very much a gendered space. However, how this home is perceived depends on which writers you follow. Early writers on gender in the home claimed that men considered it to be a signifier of status and achievement whereas women viewed it as a haven. Second-wave feminists writers of the 1970's and 1980's, however, have identified home mostly as a site of oppression, tyranny and patriarchal domination over women. Yet, recent research has challenged this rather narrow view of home, as the female realm where reproductive rather than productive work occurs. Furthermore, this research has nuanced the notion of a divide of home spaces according to sex (Mallett 2004: 75-77).

*Inside and outside*

The making of home does not only take shape inside the house but also in relation to the world beyond our front door. Here, the distinction between public and private, and, the inside and outside world, is drawn (Mallett 2004: 71). Within this distinction, home is perceived to be a private place that belongs to us: 'our place'. It is a place with an inside (us) and outside (others). And since we can also decide who may enter and who may not, it is also a place of inclusion and exclusion. Furthermore, 'home' is perceived as a place where we can be comfortable, relax, take off our mask and walk naked (Winther 2009: 62-63). Hence, Goffman's (1973) designating the distinction between public and private as front stage and backstage. Home is seen as the backroom of everyday life where we do not have to constantly present our self to others. As such, home is a kind of shelter, which is secluded from the outside world. However, the secludedness of home also has a darker side to it. Its privacy can be used to hide practices of power, control and violence from the help and/or scrutiny of others. Home can so become a prison where domestic violence and sexual abuse take place (Winther 2009: 62). A person's childhood

memories therefore do not always have to be recollections of happiness and warmth and these memories too have their effects on how we ‘make home’ and ‘be home’, as well as, our further actions in the wider world. For example, writers on criminal behaviour point to the way people are socialised during childhood to explain why some people are more likely to resort to the committing of crime (McCord 1991, Farrington et al. 2001, Clinard and Meier 2011). A large part of this socialisation is done within the confines of our homes.

To recapitulate, home is place (the house), space (there where we are ‘at home’), feelings, emotions, a mental notion (an idea, ideal and memory), state of being (“I am at home”), practices (where we invent and develop ourselves), and the other half to the public domain. Furthermore, these notions are inter-related, which complicates this attempt to define home even more. At the same time, our understandings of home complement and contradict each other. Therefore, our understanding of home very much depends on the context in which we find ourselves.

### *Methods*

Concepts of home are multifaceted, inter-related and context-dependent. This poses a specific problem for social scientific research on and of home. For how can we come to understand home from the perspective of our subjects if we as researchers are not even sure how to define it? Clearly, the theoretical approach to ‘home’ above has brought us as far as it can. I have therefore chosen to take a more empirical approach and get closer to the people I want to study: deployed soldiers. I do so by focussing in detail on the way they talk about home so as to let their words guide me to their understandings of home.

I am aware of the implication a focus on talk can have. What people say does not have to be true. For this research, I therefore choose to focus on sources in which soldiers talked about that which was important to them for themselves, i.e. diaries, letters and personal blogs. Although some of these were made public later on, they were not written for a public. They wrote down

what they found important in their dairies so as to remember what happened, to process and deal with being in a warzone, to pass time or to have a momentum that could be passed on to their loved ones in case of their death. These letters, dairies and its modern equivalent the personal blog (often shielded from public access through password protection) contain the most private thoughts of soldiers residing in war zones. Shielded from the public, like the home, these are spaces where soldiers can take of their mask and walk naked, or better talk naked. By relying on these sources, the way soldiers talk about home will come as close to their personal thoughts as possible. This increases the likelihood to come to a proper understanding of how they view home.

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The dairies, letters and personal blogs in this study were collected through an extensive literature study. Materials were included if 1. they discussed the experiences of soldiers during their time of deployment, 2. the reliability of the source was proven, i.e. the person telling the story was the actual writer, 3. the material was presented in its fullness without any editing, 4. in case of translation, the reliability of the translator was proven, i.e. when the original language in which the material was written was the translator's first language or when his/her competence of the language was stated, and 5. the location where the material came from or the manner in which the material was uncovered was stated. I then analysed them through careful reading. During these readings, I paid specific attention to three aspects: 1. phrasing, i.e. how soldiers talked about home, 2. context, i.e. when they talked about home, and 3. frequency, i.e. how often they talked about home. From these aspects, I was able to detect different ways in which home was understood. These can be found in the second part of this article.

The material included in the study are from different periods of time and speak of different wars. They start with the Civil War in the United States (1861-1865) and end with the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Furthermore, the material includes the view of people belonging to different societies. As such, the study

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## Home does not have to be fixed to the house to be meaningful

is not limited to a specific society or culture. Yet, the number of cases studied is also quite small (N=10). We need more in-depth research of personal accounts before we will be able to make more generalised claims regarding the understandings of home among deployed soldiers. This specific study was a beginning and with this article it will, hopefully, inspire others to carry on the research and expand our knowledge. However, in itself the study can already contribute to the debate on home. For in this debate, home is often implicitly linked to a domestic setting. This became clear in the theory outlined above: home as the house where the family lives; where we create and express our identity, self and gender through the decoration of the inner house; our corner in the world that lies beyond the front doors. Yet, as I already stated in the introduction, this does not have to be the case. In other words, home does not have to be fixed to the house to be meaningful to people. The cases of the deployed soldiers and their reflections of home will make this clear and help in understanding this elusive concept for further social scientific research.

### UNFIXING 'HOME': HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

Many diaries, personal blogs and letters of soldiers have been filled with descriptions of their daily life as a soldier at the front-line. They describe the day-to-day hardships of war, the looming danger of the enemy, the fear, and the violence. Within these descriptions, the deployed soldiers also talked a lot about home. Sam Avery, stationed in El Paso in Texas during the Mexican Border Campaign in 1916, talked about home in his letters to his father and his beloved Em. He described it mostly as that which he missed and hoped to get to soon. He often wondered how long it was going to take to get home and whether or not it would be in time to vote (30 October 1916) or to celebrate thanksgiving (20 October 1916) (Landers 2008). The Vietnamese doctor Tram during the Vietnam war mostly wrote in her diary about longing for home and wanting to be with her family. On 19 May 1970 she, for example, wrote: "I received a letter from Mom...Oh, Mom, each

line in your letter, each word is full of love, like blood flowing to nourish my distraught heart. Oh, does anyone understand how much I want to go back [to North Vietnam] and live with my family, even if it is just for a moment?”(Tram 2008: 212).

In 2003, during his deployment in Kuwait, the young American soldier Deal talked about his girlfriend and how he carried her picture in his wallet to “keep me grounded, let me know what I’m coming home to. What I need to come home to.” (Koppel 2003). While the American Lieutenant Colonel Bateman, in his blog entry on 29 January 2011, talked about home as being his source of strength during the worst days. The thing that pulls him to his feet again when he just feels like there is no point to it all. A strong pillar that consists of two cotton balls in a plastic bag soaked in his wife’s perfume whereupon he can lean. “The perfume is too strong right now [on the day he is packing his bag], but you know that over a year, it will fade until there is barely more than a memory wafting from that bag. But sometimes, that slightest scent, it is enough” (Bateman 2011).

The monologues described above are just a few of the many examples that could be found in the personal documents of the ten soldiers I studied. Each case was set in its own time and place, or better yet war and place, and they all voiced their experiences and the ways home was meaningful to them while away in a war zone in their own words. Yet similarities could be found too. Like Avery, at one time or another they all described home as something they missed and wanted to go back to. At one point, they all longed for their family the way Tram did. Furthermore, like Deal, photographs of their loved ones, their houses, cars, pets or favourite view out of the kitchen window kept them grounded. It showed them what they were fighting for and what they needed to get back to. Also, they all had really bad days, when only very personal and specific memories of home and the people in their houses kept them going, like it did for Bateman. These particular descriptions of home showed clearly that ‘home’ was very meaningful to these soldiers when they were many kilometres away from their houses.

‘Home’ is thus a flexible construction in our minds and hearts that can travel with us via material objects to our destinations outside our domestic houses. In these cases, the domestic place where their loved ones resided became tactile for these soldiers through these objects, which made it possible for them to experience and/or remember home and invoke a dialogue between their loved ones at the house and the war zone. As such, for a little while, they were able to experience and/or remember feeling and belonging to home in these violent places.

The importance of home outside the domestic setting, however, does not only apply to deployed soldiers. Thibaud (2003), for example, shows that people can extend their sense of home into the public by listening to music they were either listening to

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before they stepped outside or by listening to music they associate with their private home. Portable radios, walkman’s (and the contemporary mp3’s and iPods) provide a ‘sonic bridge’ or sound bridge through which we can experience the private sense of place of the home whilst in public (Thibaud 2003: 333), thus extending the boundaries of the home. Hodgetts *et al.* (2010) go even further in their study on homeless people and show that listening to music can also *create* a home. Homeless people often live their lives between sites such as parks, public toilets, and libraries. To build links between these places and their self, they use portable possessions like listening devices (Hodgetts *et al.* 2010: 286-7). These “can be used to construct a sound bubble that spans different physical settings and helps people smooth their transitions across locales, while providing a space for fantasy and self development” (Hodgetts *et al.* 2010: 287-8) enabling them to create a home for themselves in the public spaces of the city.

Both studies of Thibaud and Hodgetts *et al.* show clearly that the meaningfulness of home outside the house is applicable beyond the specific study of deployed soldiers. This, however, is only the first step to unfix the notion of home and to develop our understandings of home for further social scientific research. For the question that immediately comes to mind now is how does ‘home’

become meaningful when we are away from our house? If ‘home’ is not dependent on the physical and immediate surroundings of the domestic setting for its importance, then *how* do we come to feel, think and remember home? To answer these questions, I again turn to my research into deployed soldiers.

In the above monologues we can see that, when these soldiers spoke of home they did so in reference to material objects like letters, photographs or two cotton balls in a plastic bag. So when these soldiers found themselves in alien and hostile places, their thoughts, feelings and memories of home did not fall out of the sky but were “ignited” by these objects. These objects formed the spark that started the fire that made them write about home. They are the pinnacle in which the war zone, and, the domestic house and relations come together into one space where soldiers connected with home and felt at home. An in-depth discussion of these objects will show clearly how home becomes meaningful when we are away from the house.

## HOME TALKS AND PERSONAL POSSESSIONS

When we travel, we always bring various kinds of portable material objects with us. Depending on where we are going, why and for how long, it can range from listening devices, mobile phones, computers, and coffee mugs, to suitcases filled with clothes and toiletries or our entire house hold. For deployed soldiers the objects that are brought along on their travelling are things most of us do not pack when going to work or on vacation. Things like headlamps, survival cords, duck tape, hot pots, helmets and guns. They also brought things we all bring like a laptop, digital camera, sunscreen, toiletries, books and flip-flops. However, it was the more personal possessions that ignited the spark that made them think, experience and write of home.

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Personal possessions  
have become a material extension of us

Objects are apparently inanimate things within the environment that act on people, and are acted upon by people, for the purposes of carrying out social functions, regulating

social relations and giving symbolic meaning to human activity (Woodward 2009: 3). It includes everything that is culturally and/or naturally shaped (Tilley 2002: 258). A material object becomes a personal possession when an intimate relationship is created between the possessor and the possession. The object then not only belongs to us but it has become a material extension of us; a sense of our selves is locked up within it and without it we feel as if a piece of us is missing (Belk 1988: 139). Examples of such personal possessions that can be found among deployed soldiers are letters or messages from loved ones, photographs of the family, drawings from their children, a pebble from that perfect day on the beach, a handkerchief with the lingering smell of perfume, or a “specific seasoning that reminds you of home whenever you taste it” (Bateman 2011).

Due to the limited space available in this article, I cannot discuss every personal possession that each of the deployed soldiers in my study brought along with them to the war zone. Instead, I focus on the three objects that were mentioned the most in talk of home: letters, photographs and gifts.

### *Letters*

Letters are perhaps the oldest material possessions soldiers have carried with them. Most of these, however, have been studied for their textual content, i.e. as personal accounts of the war experiences of soldiers. Yet they can also be considered as objects, specifically objects of memory. Written in trenches, on leave, and in hospitals, the letters show the traces of the private mind of the writer with their yellowing paper, smudged pencil, educated hands, broken grammar and the odd sketch. As personal possessions, letters come into the hands of next of kin after the death of a loved one in a war. In many instances, they are one of the few material things left for relatives and as such become substitutes for the absent body. (In many cases, the repatriation of the body of the fallen is not possible or just not done, especially in older wars.) As such, letters are often turned into treasured or even sacred objects of memory and can therefore be seen as objects that can ‘speak’ to the owner and may contain the spirit of the past, initiating a dialogue between past and present (Luckins 2010: 21-23).

For soldiers in a warzone, letters from home can be regarded as objects of memory too. However, not as objects containing the spirit of the past, but as objects containing the spirit of home, that initiate a dialogue between home and warzone. In the personal documents, this dialogue was mostly about missing home and wanting to go back, like the aforementioned quote of the Vietnamese doctor Tram. "I received a letter from Mom...Oh, Mom, each line in your letter, each word is full of love, like blood flowing to nourish my distraught heart. Oh, does anyone understand how much I want to go back [to North Vietnam] and live with my family, even if it is just for a moment?"(Tram 2008: 212). In this quote, we can clearly see how the letter as an object of memory ignited a connection with home. The fact that Tram's mother wrote the letter, touched the paper, maybe even left her perfume linger on it, invoked memories of, and a longing for, home.

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For a little while,  
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them in the war  
zone

Another kind of dialogue that resulted from letters was the feeling of support from those at home during the hardships of war. An example of this is clear in the following, written by Sam Avery on 12 October 1916 while he was stationed in El Paso in Texas during the Mexican Border Campaign:

*"I have received quite a lot of cards and a letter from you and the rest and they did cheer me up a lot while on that march. We covered 84-85 miles in eight days, doing all our marching in the morning, between 8-9 to 11-12. First it was lack of water, then water that I couldn't get by my throat, heat, rain, cold" (Landers 2008).*

Both examples show how these letters served as objects of memory, which gave them a meaning beyond that of just a letter. As material objects, the letters were a piece of the domestic house that became tactile in the war zone. It connected the house with the war zone across the large distance and brought it into one space. For a little while, 'home' was with them in the war zone, which ignited all these feelings regarding home that are described above. They were containers of home and all the memories attached to this place through the loved ones that wrote the letters.

Mostly, these loved ones were family members. As such, the home as understood by these soldiers was not home as the house or domestic place, but home as the family.

### *Photographs*

For the soldiers in my study, letters mostly invoked feelings related to memories of home. Photographs, on the other hand, were more important to soldiers in their present state of being. These objects created experiences of home at a specific moment during these soldiers' deployment. However, before I turn to this, I first explain how photographs can also be perceived as objects.

Photographs are generally seen as a visual act, which absorbs image and object together, yet privileges the image over the object. As Barthes points out "...a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see" (1993: 6). However, every photograph is created and, as such, also exists as a material object. It is a three-dimensional thing that presents a two-dimensional image. They exist materially in the world in different ways: as chemical deposits on paper, as images mounted on a multitude of different sized, shaped, coloured and decorated cards, as subject to additions to their surface such as writing and locks of hair, or as drawing their meaning from presentational forms such as frames and albums. Photographs are thus both images and physical objects that exist in time and space and in social and cultural experience (Edwards et al. 2004: 1-2).

The importance of photographs are therefore based on both the image and the object. Photographs are made for a reason for a specific audience to embody specific messages and moral values (Edwards et al. 2004: 2, 10-12). These reasons can most often be found in the ability of photographs to capture historical, coherent and/or informational telling about our lives. As such, photographs are often linked to memory and remembrance. However, a photograph is also an object that can be touched. Furthermore, we can add writing, paint, framing, embroidery, fabric, string, hair, flowers, butterfly wings, or other images to the photograph. All of these can pull the subject of a photograph into the here and now

and make it an object of the present (Dillon and Batchen 2004). The deployed soldiers in the study experienced home through the photographs as such. This can be seen best in the aforementioned case of the young American soldier Deal stationed in Kuwait in 2003. The picture of his girlfriend in his wallet helped him to remain grounded and showed him what he was coming home to.

Deal's talk about the photograph demonstrates clearly that this picture is not so much a means to remember the moment in which he and his girlfriend were together at a certain place in the past. Instead it is more an object symbolising 'home' that reminds him of the place he needs and wants to go back to in the future. Furthermore, his comment that the photograph "is going to keep me grounded" makes clear that it helps him deal with that which he thinks to encounter during his time at the warzone. This, in turn, reminds him that where he is now is only temporary. There is a place, a 'home', where he belongs and will return to. Lastly, his statement that he needs to come home to his girlfriend shows that the photograph is also providing him with the drive and determination to keep on going.

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Photographs  
created feelings  
of home in the  
present

Another example of how photographs created feelings of home in the present can be found in Lieutenant Colonel Bateman's words on the photographs he takes with him during his deployment. He states,

*"And then there are the pictures: Pictures of your beloved from that Halloween a few years back when she dressed up as a librarian and accidentally gave you the erotic fuel to last you twelve months, even years later; pictures of your three daughters from that last perfect summer before the war when they were eight, six and four; a picture of your parents, and a picture of the house where you grew up 25 years ago. You pack these because these are the things that you can stare at and use to transport yourself away when you are "downrange" and it has been a very bad day" (Bateman 2011).*

Again, we see here how the experiences of home regarding photographs are situated in the present. Even though the photograph of his wife was taken a few years ago, the feelings Bateman associated with it are happening in the here and now. They are not feelings linked to a memory. Furthermore, he uses these photographs to transport himself away from the war zone to his family. This is also an action that he appropriates in the present.

There are also similarities with the letters. Like them, photographs too are able to invoke feelings of home because they are pieces of the domestic house that have materialised the home in the warzone. They connect the domestic with the war zone across the distance into one space where they can experience what it felt like to be at home in the present by holding the photograph and appropriating the image. Furthermore, we can discern a similar understanding of home. Both Bateman and Deal have photographs that display their loved ones: girlfriend, wife, children, and parents. The deployed soldiers who talked about home and had feelings of home through photographs, also understood this home as referring to family.

### *Gifts*

Another kind of personal possession that, again, ignited feelings of home for deployed soldiers in my study was the gift. While almost all presents are gifts in the Maussian sense, the 'gift' referred to here follows the way Cheal used it in *The gift economy* (1988). A 'gift' is defined as a present wrapped and tied with a bow, or more broadly, objects given from one person to another consciously and with some degree of ceremony as 'a present' (Carrier 1995: 18). However, such a ceremony implies that the giver and receiver of the gift are both present in a physical sense. This is not the case for deployed soldiers because when they receive a gift from their loved ones at home they are both many kilometres apart. Therefore, what is important here is the extending of emotional bonds over a great distance, as well as, the exchange of parts of self to one another to maintain and secure these bonds. Objects transacted in gift relations are inalienable, which means that the gift is in important ways bound to people within the relation (Carrier 1995:

24). Therefore, Mauss was right to state that to give something is to give part of oneself (2005: 16). This is illustrated clearly in the following excerpt from the diary of the Japanese soldier, Toshihiro Oura: “I lay down in the sand, and I pulled out the handbook my father had bought for me and which was now all in pieces from a bomb fragment. As I looked at the map of my homeland, which was dear to me, I thought I would like to go to a hot spring with my parents when I get home” (McCall 2010).

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When these soldiers hold their gift, they hold a piece of home

By looking at the book, which was a gift from his father, Oura immediately thinks of his parents. Part of his father, within the broader social group of the family, is attached to the book and by giving it to his son, he gave a part of his self with it. As such, feelings of home are ignited through the piece of self that is attached to the given object. When one thinks of the object, one immediately also thinks of the person who gave it. Again, we see a relation between home feelings and the family here. However, gifts do not necessarily have to be given by family members. Tram, the Vietnamese doctor, often mentioned that she received gifts from fellow soldiers. “Nghia came to visit, but I was away...he left a letter and gifts for me” (Tram 2007: 86) and “The ... gifts show affection from a dear friend. These are merely tokens of fondness from [fellow comrades]” (ibid: 56).

Similar to the other objects, these gifts also connected the domestic house and/or loved ones through its material form, across the distance, with the war zone. With the spirit of the giver attached to the material object, the gift is able to spark the remembrance of being at home with the people we love. When these soldiers hold their gifts, they hold a piece of home in their hands. For a little while, the domestic house and/or the people they love are with these soldiers in one space and they are reunited with them in their hearts and their minds. Yet, the soldiers will have to wait until they can return from the war zone to be reunited with them physically in their domestic houses.

Yet, the understandings of home that come about through gifts in this study are less clear. Of course, each case regarding the understanding of home should be studied and analysed separately for these understandings are context and person-dependent. This applies not only to gifts but also to letters and photographs. Yet, due to the overall presence of reflections of home surrounding home as related to the family in the previous objects, I believe a more general statement could be made. In regard to the gifts, however, this does not seem to be possible. More research into all three objects will provide us with necessary information to help make and underpin more general statements.

Through the studies of Thibaud and Hodgetts et al. I previously showed that the meaningfulness of home outside the house is not limited to this specific study. The same, however, is unlikely to apply in regard to how this home becomes meaningful. As I already stated in the theoretical outline, our understanding of home and the way it becomes meaningful to us is context-dependent. I mentioned the importance of our personal childhood upbringing and our socialisation in a specific cultural world. Yet as deployed soldiers travel to and in war zones, they also become part of new dimensions of space and place. These new settings have their effects on the feelings ignited from the material object and our understandings of home. The problems resulting from being far from home, the tyranny of distance (Ley 2004) and the tyranny of time (Ooi 1993), the differences between cultures, the vulnerability that comes with being in an alien place, and the partiality. Furthermore, they do not only find themselves in an alien but also (often) a hostile setting. Therefore, the particular understandings ignited through these specific objects is only applicable to this study. However, I also mentioned that we all travel with material objects and it thus stands to reason that a focus on personal possessions can also uncover how home becomes meaningful for other groups of people.

We live in a transforming world. One where borders and nations and the relations between private and public, tactile and virtual space and place morph. Furthermore, we have become people who live almost constantly 'on the move': physically, mentally and

especially virtually. We can be mobile and in the world even when we are located in bed through our internet-connected phones or iPods (Winther 2009: 53-55). Unlike before, modern technological improvements and changes have made it possible to cross greater distances faster and more frequently. For deployed soldiers it has become possible to stay in touch with their families more regularly via blogs, emails and calls over the internet. They can also exchange homemade films via YouTube or DVDs and send each other up-to-date photographs. Furthermore, families at home can send packages with gifts, food, books and other personal belongings to their loved one at the war zone faster and more frequently due to the advances in global transportation. These soldiers are thus no longer solely dependent on that one letter from home to stay in touch and keep the domestic house and family near, nor do they have to wait as long as before. However, although the home has become nearer to the space of the war zone and has the potential to invoke stronger feelings of being at home through the various existing material objects from the domestic house, these men and women still cannot go home physically until their tour is up.

These spatial and temporal advantages are also influencing us. By one means or another we are constantly in transit; as professional commuters between places, travellers staying in hotels, refugees between countries, children of divorced parents, international students, flight attendants, surfers on the web, users of mobile phones, and as members of virtual communities. With this development of mobility, it has become possible to have feelings of home in many different places (Winther 2009: 53-55) and to extend this feeling beyond our front doors.

## CONCLUSION: HOME SWEET HOME

In the beginning of this article I asked the question: how can we – as social scientists – understand home? The simple answer to this question, as has become clear throughout my argument, is that such an understanding is very difficult. Home is an elusive concept that is defined by people on a context-dependent basis as well as on a person-to-person basis. Another reason why it is so

difficult to come to an understanding of home is due partly to a conceptual rigidity that fixes home within the domestic setting of the house through its sole focus of research on the house. My study into deployed soldiers shows that home is also meaningful to people in the world beyond our front doors. And this is not limited to deployed soldiers alone but applies to everyone who is travelling away from their house.

By unfixing home, the possibility opened up to get a good look at how home becomes meaningful to people. Normally such a study would be nearly impossible, as the notion of home is often taken for granted by people within the house. Furthermore, due to the unclear distinctions between what is the home and what is the house, it is also quite difficult for people to set these apart. With its focus on *how* home became meaningful for deployed soldiers many kilometres away from their houses and in hostile situations, this study provided an extreme case scenario that highlighted the importance of personal possessions in the experiences of home. Like Thibaud's sound bridge, these objects worked as material bridges that linked them to those that were most important to them – their family – and sparked experiences of homeness through the exchange of memories, thoughts and feelings and the extension of emotional bonds. This is how these deployed soldiers understood home. It stands to reason that similar understandings of home apply to other travelling groups like commuters, flight attendants and international students. What I expect will differ in regards to these groups is the intensity and magnitude of their experiences of home, as the context is less hostile for them.

Knowing this, how should we proceed to extend our understandings and imagination of home in the social sciences? First, I suggest that we become more critical of the various definitions already brought forward in theories of home. The fixedness of home is not the only implicit notion present in the conceptualisation of home. For example, the negative connotations of the isolation and the seclusion of home is another. I did not state this emphatically, but, predominantly, social scientific work stresses only the positive dimensions of home. Second, I suggest that we be more creative in our research into notions of home. We should

not only find opportunities in extreme case scenarios but also in “unlikely” scenarios that have to do with our agentic behaviour. For example, studies into political voting behaviour, sport performance, job choice, affiliations with political and extremist groups and other (virtual) communities, the extent of corrupt behaviour in regard to land deals in South East Asia, the desire to travel the world, etc. Third, I suggest the undertaking of multiple in-depth studies into deployed soldiers and other groups. I am aware of the need and drive in current social sciences to always contribute new knowledge and to avoid too much study into that which has already been done. However, if we do we can study understandings of home on the most personal level and then use our results to start mapping these understandings on a larger level. Thus, we can make it possible to come to more generalised, macro-level claims, but without losing touch with the notions of home. This will help to keep our critical position. As such, we can extend our imagination of what ‘home’ in the social sciences might encompass in the future.

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