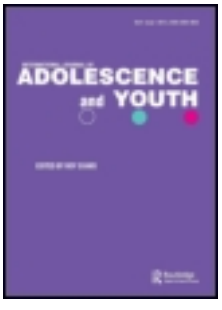

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A phenomenological exploration of the constructs of 'home' in Jewish emerging adults in gap-year programmes in Israel

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This phenomenological, qualitative study examines the construct of 'home' for Jewish emerging adults participating in a Jewish, semi-autonomous gap-year programme in Israel. Fifteen participants aged 18–22 were sampled from different gap-year programmes. Data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews including queries regarding participants' meaning of 'home' prior to embarking on the programme. Shared dimensions of home constructs included home in relation to a concrete place or places, and home in relation to significant others. Participants' emotional experience was predominantly referred to, including feelings such as acceptance, choice, comfort, stability and safety (regarding space), and love, acceptance, and commitment (regarding significant others). To a lesser degree, interconnections with time trajectories, serving to solidify definitions of home relating to space and significant others, were identified. Findings support a dynamic perception of the concept of home and reflect the reality of ever-changing accommodation with a frequent turnover of significant others in gap-year programmes.

Keywords: gap-year; emerging adults; Israel; home; qualitative study

Introduction

Numerous psychological, social and anthropological theories on young persons at approximately 18 years of age have been postulated (for example, Erikson, 1968; Sullivan & Sullivan, 1980). Research suggests that the late teens and early 20s are not only a transition period to adult roles, but also a distinct period of the life-course (Sherrod, 1996; Arnett, 2000). In line with this, three elements that distinguish persons aged 18–25 (termed 'emerging adults'; Arnett, 2000) from adolescence on one side and from adulthood on the other have been noted (Arnett, 2000). First, the emerging adults subjectively choose to describe themselves as neither adolescents nor adults. When asked whether they feel like adults, 60% answered 'yes and no', and yet they did not describe themselves as adolescents (Arnett, 2001). Second, demographically, this age group is the most varied of all age groups with regards to accommodation and education, with a high degree of instability and change. Finally, this age group is the most prone to engage in identity exploration, including themes such as love, work and worldviews.

In the past few decades, it has become increasingly popular for middle-class emerging adults to travel from their home community for a year, following their high school graduation and before starting their higher education studies (Simpson, 2005). This year is

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often called a 'gap year' because of the pause in the continuity of their education (Cremin, 2007). Gap-year programmes have been shown to greatly influence the mental constructs that shape the perceptions of their participants (Simpson, 2004). In the past five years, over 20,000 Jewish emerging adults (JEAs) spent a gap year in Israel (Israel Experience Ltd, 2009; MASA, 2009).

The gap-year programmes are intense semi-autonomous programmes (Goldscheider & DaVanzo, 1986). They are usually between eight months to one year long, and include a few elements (MASA, 2009). One element is a period of extensive Hebrew and Judaism studies conducted in different institutions. Another element is that of volunteering, typically held in development towns across Israel, or working with lower socio-economic classes. The last element is participation in different volunteer programmes such as in ambulances, quasi-army programmes, kibbutz, and fire-fighting. The programmes are typically characterised by frequent change in locations of living, hikes and trips around Israel, residing at host families or in shared rooms with limited personal space, and following the rules and discipline of the programme staff. The programmes differ in elements such as Jewish observance level, specific youth movement educational curriculum, and frequency of being hosted in Israeli families. A major theme running throughout the year on these programmes is that of the relationship between the young Jewish person and the land and State of Israel. Accordingly, while the JEAs come to Israel for various reasons (e.g. pleasure, seeking to leave home, participating in social action projects, volunteering, constructing worldviews), examining the place of Israel in their lives and considering the potential of Aliyah (Jewish immigration to Israel) may also be a motivator. Indeed, although in Israel as tourists and students, according to the Israeli Government's Law of Return of 1950, gap-year participants are potential future Israeli citizens.

The gap-year Israel programmes could be described as a 'semi-autonomous' experience because the participants are not living at home, and yet are still not responsible to maintain themselves independently. Their parents pay for the programme, but participants usually receive a monthly stipend for which they are responsible to pay for food and travel. On one hand they are treated as responsible adults, and on the other hand they are expected to follow the rules of the programme and respect the instructions and discipline of the programme staff.

According to Arnett (2000, 2001), the three major developmental tasks of emerging adulthood are: to learn to cope effectively with home-leaving transition; to develop a capacity for mature intimacy with friends as well as partners (Erikson, 1968; Fischer, 1981); and to advance in the process of individuation, while achieving a high degree of self-definition (Arnett, 2001; Dubas & Petersen, 1996; Sullivan & Sullivan, 1980). The nature of a semi-autonomous structure adds another complexity to the developmental tasks of these emerging adults (see Arnett, 2000, 2001). Living in semi-autonomy may postpone the acquisition of adult roles because, upon the return of most emerging adults, 're-launching' is required; that is, a substantial renegotiation of parent–child roles (Goldscheider & DaVanzo, 1986).

The construct of 'home'

Thoughts, feelings, and perceptions acquire meaning within a unique cultural context, which is subjective and idiosyncratic (Shwandt, 1997). These meanings construct persons' perceptions of themselves and of the world, and are woven into a *self-narrative* (Gergen, 1994), which becomes the basis of the individual's identity (White & Epston, 1990).

Research has shown a number of different meanings of home, ranging from a physical entity with decent material conditions, to a place of emotional and physical well-being

including love relations, control and privacy (Watson & Austerberry, 1986). The meanings of home has been also variously described as conflated with or related to house, family, haven, self, gender and journeying (Mallett, 2004). They are multi-layered (Bowlby, Gregory, & McKie, 1997), socially constructed, and affected by the life-stage of the individual.

According to the theory of place attachment (Altman & Low, 1992; Giuliani, 1991; Moore, 2006; Schumaker & Taylor, 1983), people develop bonds with certain places and engage in meaningful relationships with these places, which leads to their incorporation into one's identity. Following this notion, JEAs' aforementioned possibility of immigration may affect their mental construct of home during their gap-year in Israel. Indeed, the programme organisers, as well as the participants, openly discuss this issue during the year, thus affecting the perceptions and opinions of the participants.

The unique, complex meaning of home for the JEAs is the result of the coordinated actions with their parents, their culture, their history, and their personality (Gergen, 1999). Growing up as Jewish persons in different countries, and being raised with specific values related to the land and the State of Israel, has created a construct of Israel including a wide range of meanings: a country, a national or peoplehood homeland, an ancestral birthplace, or an occupying state. Living for almost a year within a different culture, value system, and language might challenge the construct of home for these participants in a way that might also change the meaning of the term. Today's new communication technology may also affect the construct of 'home', as easy and frequent contact of the modern tourist with his home can create a feeling of being simultaneously at 'home' as well as being 'away' (White & White, 2007).

The current study aims to examine which are the shared phenomenological essences expressed by the JEAs partaking in gap-year programmes. Accordingly, this research will phenomenologically explore the concept of 'home' as perceived by JEAs prior to their gap-year in Israel.

Methods

This analysis is based on interviews conducted between June 2009 and January 2010 in Israel. Participants were from a variety of Jewish backgrounds and youth movements, and took part in six different gap-year programmes. The inclusion criteria were: JEAs from western countries participating in a Jewish gap-year programme in Israel. The sample included 15 participants aged 18–22 (mean = 18.93) from five different countries: six participants were from the United Kingdom, five from the USA, two from Sweden, one from Germany, and one from Italy. Eight participants were female and seven were male. Participants were interviewed either within three weeks of the beginning of their programme ($n = 5$), in the middle of their gap year (after five months in Israel; $n = 4$), in the last two weeks of their programme ($n = 4$), or one year ($n = 1$) or two years ($n = 1$) after completing their programme. Participants' information is available in Table 1. Measures were taken to assure confidentiality, and all names used in this article are aliases. This research was approved by the ethical committee for experiments on human beings, faculty of social welfare and health sciences, University of Haifa (permit number 034/10).

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through the different gap-year programme organisers. Six programme organisers were approached. The organisers provided lists with the contacts of potential participants. Participants were approached by telephone and received a brief explanation about the research. On this occasion, an in-person meeting was scheduled.

Table 1. Participants' characteristics.

Time of interview	Interviewee name	Gender	Land of origin	Age (years)
Beginning of programme	Rachel	Female	UK	18
	Miri	Female	Sweden	18
	Andy	Male	USA	18
	Jason	Male	USA	19
	Sally	Female	USA	19
Mid-programme	Ben	Male	UK	18
	Anna	Female	UK	18
	Lizzy	Female	Sweden	19
	Nana	Female	Italy	18
End of programme	Bobby	Male	USA	19
	Katherine	Female	USA	19
	Dana	Female	Germany	20
	Jeremy	Male	UK	19
Post programme	Jacob	Male	UK	22
	David	Male	UK	20

Interview strategy

A hermeneutic–phenomenological semi-structured interview was used. The interview guide included questions relating to the following issues: socio-economic and socio-environmental information, personal definitions of the emerging adult (regarding relationships with family and friends), and the meaning of 'home' prior to embarking on the programme. No predefinition of 'home' was given to the participants, allowing them to relate to whatever meaning they may have. When needed, more specific questions were asked to better understand interviewees' perceptions.

Interviews took place at the participants' accommodations or in its vicinity, each lasting 45 to 60 minutes. Prior to the interview, the aims of the research were explained in depth, both orally and in writing. Participants were informed of confidentiality issues and that they could refuse to answer any question and stop the interview at any time. Participants acknowledged receiving all of this information by signing the information sheet as well as informed consent. No honoraria were offered, although participants were offered having the verbatim of their interview sent to them via email. All interviews were conducted and recorded by the author. Additionally, notes regarding non-verbal communication, atmosphere, and thoughts were taken during the interview.

Analytic strategy

Data analysis focused on the shared themes that arose in the interviews, through the terms, concepts and descriptions used by the interviewees to depict their perceptions of their world (Shkedi, 2003). First, a careful review of the transcripts of the interviews was done in order to recognise the main issues and themes expressed by the interviewees (Moustakas, 1994). Second, through a process of open coding, categories of information were developed (e.g. 'what makes a home'). These categories were given names based on the interviewees' phrases (Creswell, 2003; Shkedi, 2003), such as 'home with the people you love', and 'home where you go to sleep'. Once the initial set of categories was developed, and the central phenomena were identified, axial coding was performed whereby the conditions, strategies and context of the surrounding conditions were mapped in relation to the central phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Results

The analysis of participants' recollections of their home meanings prior to embarking on the gap-year programme yielded three main categories: home in relation to a concrete place or places; home in relation to significant others; and no early definition of home. The first two categories are subdivided on the basis of the associated emotional experience, and the identity of the significant other, respectively, as follows.

Home as a concrete place

In describing home as a physical place, a multitude of feelings was expressed, including consistency and stability, comfort and security, a sense of freedom, and nostalgia. The different categories are presented below.

Consistency and stability

> A place where you can always go back to and know that it's yours, and can't be removed and you can always go back there … somewhere where you have your own space. A place where you have your personal space is where a home is. (Ben, 18-year-old UK male; interviewed in the middle of the programme)

> Home is a place where you lie down and sleep every day or most days. (Jeremy, 19-year-old UK male; interviewed at the end of the programme)

In Jeremy's phrasing, the two main elements defining home are: a place where one can relax enough, unwind and fall asleep; and a consistently present physical place. Similarly, Ben describes the safety and stability of a personal place, as well as having a sense of control over his home. The importance of home being a place of longevity and consistency is evidenced through his perception as a place he can always come back to.

Comfort and security

Feelings of comfort and security are derived not only from the physical place, but also from the human and physical environment:

> A home is where you live and where you think you are connected to something. Home is a feeling and feeling safe, you know the system and how it works … where you're comfortable and you know people and how things work, and they know you … (Miri, 18-year-old Swedish female; interviewed in the beginning of the programme)

> Home is where I live … when I can find my way there, know where to go … knowing places and not being confused where you should be … that you know the place and you understand the culture, the systems, how to take the buses … (Miri)

> Something familiar, where you feel safe and comfortable where you know things, where you want to be. All those things. (Anna, 18-year-old UK female; interviewed in the middle of the programme)

Miri relates to the neighbourhood and surrounding area of her physical house as part of her 'home'. She must understand where to go; she must be oriented and able to get around in that area in order to feel comfortable and safe; to feel at home. She talks about the 'system', which includes not only the culture but also the surroundings and routine of that location. For her, the physical environment and the local culture of the place are major factors in defining home. Like Miri, Anna mentions that at home you 'know things'. To that she adds the value of having the ability to choose.

The importance of safety is also present in the following description, as well as that of care and nourishment.

> It's a place … that you know you are spoiled and people take care of you. My mom at home … everything I needed she always took care of me, even today. It's a place where you can be safe, but sometimes you just want to escape from there. Not just home, but when I felt bad … I always saw it as the best place. (Nana, 18-year-old Italian female; interviewed in the middle of the programme)

A sense of freedom, privacy and lack of external restraints

> A physical and an emotional place … of feeling alright, that you can think there and do whatever you want. You can stay there for three days and no one will tell you. I had my room and my space and I could stay in my room for three hours and no one would bother me … every time I wanted something … I just stayed in my room. I felt good at home. (Nana)

Nana describes the feeling of being 'alright' with the freedom to do or think 'whatever you want'. For her, home is where freedom is unrestricted, highlighting the importance of privacy as a major component in defining home.

In one description, the definition of home included a few physical locations. For Jason, home was any place where he enjoyed himself and spent a certain period of time:

> A place of living. A place where I live. I don't necessarily feel that home is one place. I have a home in Spokane [a town in NY state], my parent's house. I have a home at camp. I have a home … now I have a home here [in Jerusalem]. I don't see it as … people say, 'oh I'm going home', that usually means going back to where you live permanently. I also see a home as somewhere you enjoy being, and you live a certain period of time. (Jason, 19-year-old US male; interviewed in the beginning of the programme)

Nostalgia

> It was the feeling when I came back … its just nostalgic … you just know it. I know every inch in my house. I feel comfortable in every place in it. In other people's house, even here [in the Jerusalem flat], there are places that I still don't feel that comfortable in because I haven't been there much. Whereas in my home I've been every place and I feel comfortable and I can sit down and be relaxed anywhere … what makes the home, when everyone came home, someone would be making cup of tea for someone, dogs jumping up at me and going to the garden, that kind of things that expand it … home was the fact that I can go to any part of it and feel at ease there. (Ben)

Ben adds here that the intimate knowledge of the house is that which brings forth the sense of being comfortable in it.

Home in relation to significant others

Some participants described home in relation to significant others, mainly family and friends. In some descriptions, the term family referred to one's nuclear family; and in others, it included one's friends. These categories are presented below.

Family (nuclear)

A common element in defining home was family, whether in relation to the time spent with them or the house in which the family lived:

> The main thing is the family … home is also a feeling, with your family around and also remembering experiences, parties you've had at home both when you're older and younger … pictures of those families events. (Jeremy)

> Home for me is … I don't know … is spending time with my family. (Kathy, 19-year-old US female; interviewed at the end of the programme)

Family is seen through the prism of time, whether memories of time spent, as in Jeremy's words, or as seen in Kathy's words – it is not just being with one's family members, it is spending time with them, having experiences with them. The shared experience of time with members of the family and significant others is what defines home in relation to family.

In another description, the combination of the family and the physical house is what defines home:

> I suppose it would've been where my house is and where my family is. (Jacob, 22-year-old UK male; interviewed post-programme)

Family (including friends)

For Andy, who defined home in relation to family, the term 'family' includes friends and close ones:

> Home is where my family are. [Q: what is family for you?] Someone who I truly love and truly loves me. Who would do anything for me as I would do for them … So I have family in San Antonio, friends that I've gone to hell and back with. And related family that are in Chicago now. Anywhere where my family is my home. I don't need a specific connection to a thing or a place, it's just the people that are in it. (Andy, 18-year-old US male; interviewed in the beginning of the programme)

Andy defines loyal friends who he went 'to hell and back with' as deserving the term family, in an equal status as related family. Those friends who were there for him during those rough experiences had 'earned' the right to be considered family, and therefore are included in his definition of home. It is the shared experiences over time that cemented their definition as family.

The construct of 'family' can also change with time, beginning with the nuclear family then evolving to incorporate new people and experiences, as apparent in the following description:

> When I was little, home was living at the house with my family and my dog. And then after I learned about camp, this whole amazing life, I was like wow, I can get homesick at camp and get camp-sick at home, so isn't camp my other home? That became my home. After camp, you stay at everyone's home for weekends because you miss everyone so much. And you're like these are my new homes too with the family I created, so I decided that home is where your family is. Even your family is new friends, like the people now that I'm with, so home is wherever your family is. (Sally, 19-year-old US female; interviewed in the beginning of the programme)

In one description, friends and beloved ones were described as a constituting element of home, without referring to family in specific:

> Home is being with the people you love … Being with my friends, that was home. (Dana, 20-year-old German female; interviewed at the end of the programme)

No early definition of home

One participant (Lizzy) recalled no early definition of home. Yet, alongside her negation of the term, she relates the concept of home to a place and (a lack of) significant others.

In relation to a place:

> By then, it was something that was really not important for me. Something that you want to escape from. I'm not really sure I would've believed in the concept of home. [You wouldn't have a definition?] No, it wouldn't be important, I wouldn't care, I just wanted to be just me

> free without anything tying me to anything … No definition … (Lizzy, 19-year-old Swedish female; interviewed in the middle of the programme)

In relation to her family:

> I probably would have said that I don't really have a home. Also with family. I also say now I don't have a home and I don't have a family. I have parents and I have brothers and I have a place to stay but it's not really a home or a family … Because I never saw my parents, it wasn't important to me. I didn't care. I didn't want that. I was never home. I came home at 2 in the morning slept a few hours, woke up, went to school and from there went to the city with Bnei Akiva [a religious Jewish youth movement] and came home very late, had dinner, left again. I was never home, and when I was home I was sleeping. (Lizzy)

Lizzy emphasises her need to be free of restrictions and having no definition of home. She indicates she does not have a feeling of family, but in her words she does relate to home as a place where she would come late to, eat and sleep; physical functions that are available thanks to others who share that space and provide those comforts. Those others, her parents, are not considered 'family', but do contribute to some sense of a home.

Discussion

This research examined how JEAs construct the concept of 'home', as evidenced by their recollections of the term prior to their gap-year in Israel. The construct of 'home' was described in relation to a few elements; namely, a concrete place or places, and significant others (i.e. family, friends). One participant reported no early definition of home.

Home is a multidimensional concept (Hollander, 1991; Mallett, 2004) involving a material and an affective space that is shaped by everyday practices, past experiences, social relationships, memories, and emotions (Blunt, 2005). The following analysis of the data draws on the phenomenological theory typology of dimensions (Becker, 1992). Specifically, relating to dimensions of space, significant others, and time. It is noteworthy that the dimensions describing home were interconnected for the participants (e.g. home was defined as a space characterised by a significant other), and that the emerging constructs were most probably affected by and described in relation to the reality of living in a semi-structured programme.

Home in relation to space

The dimension of space can be experienced as a physical or an experiential dimension. While the physical space is divided into measurable units, the experiential space is subjective and changes with time (Becker, 1992). In the current study, participants' descriptions of home as a concrete place included physical spaces such as the actual house and neighbourhood, and in one description referred to a few physical locations. However, descriptions were mainly focused on the 'personal space', which could be understood as an experiential space. In other words, when participants described home in relation to a physical space, it was usually associated with an emotional experience. The most common feelings evident in participants' description associated with home were of acceptance, choice, comfort, stability and safety, and themes of consistency and stability, comfort and security, a sense of freedom, and nostalgia were identified. Participants' home construct emphasised their choice to be where they want to be, without unwanted intrusion or limitations. Themes of control and stability were previously reported in studies relating to homelessness. In a study of seven Swedish women aged 26–36 who experienced homelessness (Peterson, 2000), the perceptions of home included home as a place where

you exclude others, where one has control over one's immediate environment, and where one is able to protect one's individual autonomy. Similarly, in a study of 208 US youths aged 14–24 (mean age 20 years) defined by mainstream society as homeless (Kidd & Evans, 2010), descriptions of home included a sense of control relating to control over access to one's home, over what occurs in the home, control as stability of residence, and in a sense of ownership and privacy. Although the current population under study differed from that in the above studies in that participants did not report experiencing homelessness, the feeling of stability and control may be similarly accentuated in their descriptions in light of the reality of gap-year programmes in Israel that are characterised with constant moving in the accommodations.

Home in relation to significant others

Some participants described home in relation to significant others, be it nuclear family members, pets and/or close friends. This construct was described as a dynamic one; in one description, the significant others associated with home grew from nuclear family (and pets) to include newfound friends and schoolmates. Indeed, it has been previously argued that the constituting elements of a place include the particular social relations that occur in it and the social effects of this interaction of place and relationships (Massey, 1994). The feelings associated with this category were those of love, acceptance, commitment and dedication.

Home in relation to time

The dimension of a subjective experiential time (Becker, 1992) showed interconnections with the other two dimensions (i.e. space, significant others). The dimension of time was connected to the dimension of space in that the stability of the physical space, with many memories connected to that place, enabled that sense of home to emerge. The dimension of time is evident in one description, in which the memories connected to the space were reported to create a sense of nostalgia, which cemented the space as a home.

The relation between the time dimension to that of significant others, particularly friends, was evident in participants' descriptions of the shared experiences over time that solidified the friendships to resemble family relations.

One participant had no early definition of home. In line with that, previous research has reported defining home by its absence in Israeli runaway girls aged 13–21 (Peled & Muzicant, 2008).

Conclusion

The concept of home, as evident by the recollections of 15 JEAs of it prior to embarking on the programme, was described in relation a concrete place or places and significant others. Participants' emotional experience was predominately referred to including feelings such as acceptance, choice, comfort, stability and safety (with regards to space), and love, acceptance, and commitment (with regards to significant others). To a lesser degree, interconnections with time trajectories, serving to solidify definitions of home relating to space and significant others, were identified.

The common focus on the emotional experience rather than on memories in participants' descriptions seems compatible to the reality of gap-year programmes; a reality of ever-changing accommodation with a frequent turnover of significant others.

In line with this, the concept of home has been shown to be an alterable, dynamic concept, which changes over time and adapts to new life events (Leith, 2006). It would be interesting to see if the meanings of home in graduating JEAs who duly begin their higher education studies in their native countries.

Notes on contributors

Assael Romanelli, MSW, is a family therapist, currently working at the Community Mental Health Center, Hertzog Hospital, Jerusalem, Israel and in private practice. He combines action methods and psychodrama in his therapeutic work. Mr Romanelli has worked in the field of informal education and was the director of an international educational program in Israel.

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