

## ENHR 2014 New Researcher Colloquium: paper Terlaak Poot

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Title: Homemaking by single person households in the northern part of the Netherlands  
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**ABSTRACT**

For over 30 years, the concept of home has been a popular, yet contested subject of research for scholars from different disciplines, e.g. architecture, philosophy, sociology, psychology and cultural studies. In line with this multifaceted, interesting subject, quite some studies have been devoted to the subject of homemaking.

However, when reviewing the literature on home and homemaking, a great deal of scholars seems to have overlooked to date the home situation, and thus the homemaking activities and practices of single person households, or so called 'solo livers'. This is remarkable because the number of single person households is increasing worldwide, as different recent studies show e.g. (Palmer G. , 2006), (Klinenberg, 2012), (Jamieson & Simpson, 2013).

The aim of this working paper – which is part of a PhD proposal in progression – is to address the homemaking process from the perspective of solo living people in the geographical setting of the Province of Groningen, in the northern part of the Netherlands. An underlying assumption is that by focusing on the homemaking of solo living people, i.e. on the individual level, this typical human phenomenon can be studied in its 'purest form'.

In the paper on homemaking in low-cost areas, Aziz & Ahmad (2012) connect the concepts of appropriation, attachment and identity as homemaking mechanisms, through which residents strive to achieve satisfaction and turn the surrounding area into their home. Aziz & Ahmad seek to identify specific behavioural components, called 'attributes', that belong to these three different concepts, in which they make a distinction between physical and social attributes.

This focus of this paper is on the concept of appropriation as homemaking mechanism and how this concept can be refined to serve as conceptual framework. .

*Keywords:* home; homemaking; solo livers; spatial appropriation; cognitive appropriation; social appropriation; material appropriation

**1 INTRODUCTION**

As topic for this study I have chosen 'homemaking'. Homemaking is a typical human phenomenon that seems to take place quite unnoticed and yet it is something that we are all involved with, on an almost daily basis; quite some different kinds of environments can become subject to homemaking activities, e.g. a house, an office, a hotel room, a cell or even a train compartment.

The word homemaking as such consists of two elements, a noun (home) and a verb form (making), thus implicitly referring to someone who is a homemaker, and who in fact, performs the act of 'homemaking'. In order to perform the act of homemaking, the homemaker needs a place, or a 'stage' to do so. Furthermore, she or he, needs to know how to perform homemaking. And finally, as homemaking has strong social connotations, the homemaker needs an 'audience'.

As will become clear later in this proposal, this study focuses on a specific and increasing group of homemakers, namely those people who are solo-living, which means that 'nobody else lives in the same living space or routinely shares everyday domestic life' (Jamieson & Simpson, 2013).

Some of the questions that came to my mind when I started doing my research in 2012, were: How can homemaking be defined? What is the relation between homemaking and culture? What are social aspects of homemaking? To what extent are people aware of their homemaking activities? The verb 'homemaking' suggests the involvement of what I would call 'homemaking skills': does such a thing as homemaking skills exist?

Questions such as those mentioned above stimulate the thinking process in all kinds of directions but they lack focus. And as a researcher you need a focus to get your message home. When reflecting on these questions and on my own experiences as a homemaker, I realized that my special interest, when it comes to homemaking, lies in the social and cultural aspects that are connected with homemaking.

Secondly, I became aware of the fact that being a solo-living person and an experienced homemaker myself, homemaking is quite a social 'thing'. Where social contacts and social interactions were abundant in the environment in which I grew up as a child and a teenager, I had to organize these social contacts and social interaction for which I felt a need, all by myself, when I became a solo-living homemaker, around the age of 25.

The geographical context of this study is Groningen Province, located in the northern part of the Netherlands with near 583,000 inhabitants from which 198,000 persons (30%) live in Groningen Town, the Province's capital. Groningen Province counts another 19 larger places, of which Hogeveen (22.000 inhabitants) comes second and Scheemda (5000 inhabitants) comes last (CBS, 2013). Besides these 20 larger places, Groningen Province is covered with dozens of villages and hamlets. So Groningen Town can be characterized as an urban, whereas Groningen Province is rural in character.

The population for this study, as stated earlier, consists of so called solo-livers, a specific social group, that is to say, women and men, of working age (15-64 yrs) who live alone and who run an independent household. This definition is based on Palmer (2006) and the word solo-livers is preferred over the word 'one person household', as the focus of this study is the exploration of socio-cultural aspects of homemaking: exploring, describing and explaining a certain phenomenon, determine the typical aspects of qualitative studies (Maxwell, 1996).

The choice for this specific social group, the solo-livers, has been fuelled by two arguments. In the first place, the number of one person households in the Netherlands counted over 2,8 million as of January 2013, which is more than a third of the total number of households.

According to CBS|PBL - two Dutch governmental research institutions - the increase of households is twice as much as the population growth (October 2012); furthermore, CBS|PBL prognoses forecast that the increase of one person households in the Netherlands, will continue till 2025. As a result of this, the CBS|PBL expect that the average Dutch household size will decrease, i.e. from 2.2 members per household in 2012, to 2.1 members per household in 2025.

Secondly, a variety of researchers (Hall, Ogden, & Hill, 1997), (Smith, Wasoff, & Jamieson, 2005), (Palmer G. , 2006), (Haunstrup Christensen, 2009), have underpinned the impact of this worldwide, demographic phenomenon – i.e. the increase of one person households - and its consequences for housing and housing policy. For that matter it is quite remarkable that to date no Dutch qualitative

study has appeared considering the social, cultural, economic or political consequences of this demographic development.

The careful reader may notice that the CBS|PBL statistics are based on one person households, whereas this research focuses on solo-livers. So for reasons of accuracy the definition for solo-livers as given above has been compared with the definition of the CBS|PBL for one person households; CBS & PBL state that “an one person household is a private household consisting of one person”. Their definition has been matched with the definition for solo-livers, as formulated for this study and inspired by Palmer (2006), resulting in the following working definition for this study: “Solo-livers are men and women who live alone and run an independent household”.

In the following sections the concepts of home, house and dwelling, and home place will be described, as they are closely related to the main topic of this study, homemaking. Then follows a description of homemaking as sociocultural process and a working definition of homemaking will be provided. Finally the conceptual framework, based on the concept of appropriation will be introduced. As this proposal can be characterized as ‘work in progress’, the methods that will be used for implementing this study have not been fully developed yet.

## 2 CONCEPT OF HOME

The word home consist of only one syllable, two vowels and two quite softly articulated consonants; yet the word home can be characterized as an emotionally charged word (Moore, 2000), (Mallet, 2004), (Blunt & Dowling, 2006), (Murphy & Levy, 2012). According to Peil (2009), home ‘is one of the most powerful words in any language’ and he motivates his statement by referring to the etymology of the word, that suggests a common root in different European languages.

Brink (1995) puts what he calls ‘the modern word home’ in the series hjem – heim – ham: residues of these ancient words can still be recognized in modern city names like Trondheim (Norway) and Birmingham (UK). The Dutch words ‘heem’ and the Frisian word ‘hiem’, referring to the direct environment around a dwelling or farmstead, fit smoothly into Brink’s examples.

Due to its meaning and long semantic history, the word home could develop in different cultural settings and into different directions. ‘The semantic core is probably shared with most other people in the same cultural context, however the semantic picture will probably fade out at the edges. (Brink, 1995).

Over the last three decades, home as topic of study, has drawn the attention of scholars from a variety of disciplines such as archaeology, architecture, anthropology, cultural sciences, different disciplines within geography, linguistics, environmental psychology and social sciences. As a consequence of this, the concept of home has become susceptible to an overflow of different definitions and descriptions, due to varied scope of disciplines that study home as a subject.

An important contribution to the study of home has been provided by feminist studies (e.g. (Hochschild, 1989), (Blunt & Dowling, 2006), (Murphy & Levy, 2012), the concept of home, particularly in Western cultures is defined in – positive and most masculine based - terms of comfort, safety and place of refuge, different feminist studies show that home can be a place of domestic violence, oppression and alienation, for women and to a lesser extent, for children. Or, in other words, ‘the notion of a positive, universal experience of home is problematic’ (Murphy & Levy, 2012).

In line with the findings of (Peil, 2009) and (Brink, 1995), and considering the different perspectives

of the concept of home, it is hardly surprising that defining this concept is not an easy task. Several scholars point to the fact that the concept of home is conflated with or used as synonym for the more or less related words 'house' and 'dwelling' (Després, 1991), (Rapoport, 1995), (Moore, 2000) (Mallet, 2004) (Coolen & Meesters, 2012).

In the same way, home is closely associated with themes such as house, family, friends, heaven, refuge, self, gender and journeying (Després, 1991), (Case, 1996), (Lawrence, 1987) (Mallet, 2004), (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). Furthermore, home can refer to a dwelling, a street, a neighborhood, a city, a country, a continent and even to planet earth itself (Blunt & Dowling, 2006), or, in other words, these conceptions seem to also to underpin the 'multi-scalarity' of home.

According to Moore (2000) it is so hard to get a grip on the concept of home, because the central role of home in everyday life is increasingly gaining impact, coupled with, what Moore calls 'its rich social, cultural and historical significance. I agree with Moore (2000) that the definition of the concept of home, as formulated by Benjamin (Benjamin, 1995) is the most complete (but also the most complicated) one.

Benjamin defines home as thus: 'The home is that **spatially localised, temporally defined, significant and autonomous physical** frame and **conceptual system** for the **ordering, transformation and interpretation** of the **physical and abstracts aspects of domestic daily life** at **several simultaneous spatio-temporal scales**, normally **activated by** the **connection to a person or community** such as **nuclear family**'

When analysing this definition, at least 25 words / word combinations can be found - which are marked bold above - each of which could serve as a research variable: for that matter the definition of Benjamin can be considered as a summary of nearly all aspects that have been touched upon in the home literature. Operationally speaking, this definition forms a true challenge.

Benjamin, however, is one of the very first scholars who hints at the possibility of a solo-liver (a person) as activator (homemaker?) of the home as physical frame and conceptual system. Reviewing the home literature, the conclusion must be: Home is a multi-affective, multi-complex, multi-dimensional, multi-emotional, multi-experiential, multi-faceted, multi-layered and multi-meaning concept, on the one hand, but, particularly, a multi-challenging and multi-intriguing concept.

### 3 HOUSE & DWELLING & HOMEPLACE

At first sight, the western concepts of dwelling, house and home seem to be closely related and for that reason are used interchangeable, not only in popular speech, but also in scientific publications e.g Blunt & Dowling (2006). For each of these three words seem more or less to hover around the same meaning, namely the physical setting, i.e. the house or dwelling that functions 'as the primary anchor for the individual, from which a person explores the world' (Meesters, 2009). However, several authors Rapoport (1995) and Coolen & Meesters (2012) rightly observe that the conflation or confusion of these terms is undesirable from an analytical point of view.

The importance of formulating clear definitions and unambiguous concepts when conducting research, have been clearly and unquestionably stated by Rapoport (1995): 'It is essential that definitions and concepts be clear and as unambiguous as possible. They must be clear enough to

made operational (usable) and hence capable of being related to other variables (...) A term or concept is useful only if it is clear, well-defined, and only changes slowly and systematically as a function of the empirical and theoretical development of a field.'

#### *HOUSE AND HOUSING*

Western housing studies and housing researchers generally use the concept of house to refer to the physical structure that people live in (Coolen & Meesters, 2012). The word 'housing' itself is used to refer to the task of accommodating people by providing them with a house, or, in other words, 'to put a roof over their heads'. Housing people is a main issue on the political agenda of governmental and / or local authorities (Dowling & Mee, 2007), (Moore, 2007), (Dayaratne & Kellet, 2008), (Aziz & Ahmad, 2012), and as such, the words house and housing, are quite neutral in meaning. In this study, the concept of house is used in its western sense, referring to the physical structure (Lawrence, 1987), (Dupuis & Thorns, 2002), (Fox O'Mahony, 2012).

Although I largely agree with Easthope's critique (2004) regarding the distinction between the concept of house and home, as a researcher I have to deal with today's researching reality regarding the concepts of house, dwelling and home. For that matter, the concept of house will be used in this study in its Western sense of physical structure (cf the terms 'shell', (Dupuis & Thorns, 2002) and 'hull' (casco) in Dutch). Connecting 'the state of the art' with the perspective of this study, the following working definition will be used in this study for the concept of house: 'House' is the physical setting, functioning as the immovable anchor point, allowing its users to use it both as a means for dwelling and as a place for homemaking.

#### *DWELL AND DWELLING*

According to Heidegger (1971), to be a human being, means to be on the earth as a mortal and it means to dwell. In most languages the word 'living' is used in the sense of 'dwelling'. It is a quite common use, to ask someone the following question 'Where do you live?'. In fact, this question refers to the physical setting where one actually is living, that is to say, where she or he is dwelling (Illich, 1984). Even when you are at your office, or on the tennis court or in the swimming pool, this question can still be asked, because as a human being, you cannot stop dwelling.

Grammatically, the English word 'dwelling' is a gerund, i.e. a non-finite verb form in English, formed from, in this case, the verb to dwell, by adding -ing. The English gerund is used to stress the fact that the action as expressed by the verb, is actually – being – performed, e.g. she is biking, meaning that the person is on her bike right now and moving. A gerund can also function as a noun.

In fact, such nominalized verb forms refer to the act that is expressed in the original verb, e.g. a dwelling -> refers to the very action of dwelling. To date these two uses of the word dwelling, both as verb form and as noun, seem to have been overlooked by most scholars. Based on the specific notions of Heidegger and Illich, for the sake of uniformity and because of the specific use of the gerund form to 'dwell' and 'dwelling' (as verbal forms) and 'the dwelling' (as a nominal form) refer all three to the dwelling action.

#### *HOMEPLACE*

A few words must be said here about the concept of home place: in the previous section it has become clear that the multi-faceted concept of home is not easy to define: the same complexity applies to the word 'place'. Lawrence (1987), Cuba & Hummon (1993) hint indirectly at such a word as 'home –place' in the titles of their respective articles, but they do not refer explicitly to it in the main text.

According to Hargreaves (2004) 'place can be seen as a nexus of significant features and / or processes which combine in a social context to make somewhere feel like an extension of home'. Manzo (2003) following Hayden (1997), states that 'place is one of the trickiest words in English language'. However, the words home and home-place are used interchangeably by some authors: the concept of home-place thus causes a squared complexity.

However, in this study the conception of Easthope (2004) will be followed, in her conception of homeplace; Easthope concludes that the concept of place ties the physical world with the social, cultural and emotive worlds of people. "Place" provides the missing link between what she calls the 'false Cartesian dichotomy of "mind" and "body" and between "home" as a social, cultural and emotive construct and "house" as a physical structure.

#### **4 ASPECTS OF HOMEMAKING**

In the literature on home and homemaking as reviewed for this proposal, three aspects stand out. In the first place, homemaking can be characterized as an ongoing process. Moore (2007) referring to Heidegger (1971) concludes that "we (as human beings) are all in the process of homemaking". According to Dayaratne & Kellet (2008) homemaking is an act with no specific beginning or end and Blunt & Dowling (2006) refer to the creation and recreation of home through everyday practices.

Secondly, homemaking comprises a great variety of homemaking practices, ranging from literally building a house of solid materials to create a 'proper home' (Dayaratne & Kellet, 2008), to cleaning, cooking and decorating, watching television or welcoming visitors (Blunt & Dowling, 2006), (Dowling & Mee, 2007), (Mee, 2007).

Finally, the significance of home as a specific sociocultural setting (Rapoport, 2000), (Fox O'Mahony, 2012) is reflected in homemaking activities. However the literature suggests that the social aspects and social activities related to home and homemaking, seem to have gained more attention than the cultural aspects, though there are some exceptions to the rule e.g (Rapoport, 2000), (Coolen & Ozaki, 2004), (Chevalier, 2012).

Different authors point at this omission and underpin the importance of taking into account the cultural aspects and cultural context in home studies, e.g. (Després, 1991); (Moore, 2000), (Moore, 2007), (Rapoport, 2000), (Fox O'Mahony, 2012). An explanation for the omission might be that the concept of culture is not easy to define (Rapoport, 2000) and that the concept of culture is 'hardly operationalizable' (Després, 1991).

All human behaviour and activities – and thus social activities and thus homemaking - are firmly rooted in a cultural context (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005): the one cannot exist without the other. Furthermore, culture is a 'collective phenomenon' (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005), as it is shared amongst people who live or have lived within the same social context. In the home literature studied so far, Fox & Mahony (2012) are among those few authors who combine the social and the cultural aspects of home, by explicitly referring to home as a sociocultural setting. These observations have led to the following central question to be examined by this study:

*What role play socio-cultural factors in the process of homemaking for solo livers?*

## 5 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of appropriation will be used in this proposal in order to operationalize the concept of homemaking. The English word 'appropriation' is rooted in the Latin word 'appropriatio' in which the accusative preposition *ad* and the adjective *proprius* can be discerned: *proprius* can be translated as not *common with others, one's own, special, particular, proper*; *ad* can be translated as *to, towards, near*; this preposition has both spatial and temporal connotations and is purposely directed at an object (Palmer L., 1977).

According to Schneider (2007) 'in a more general sense most cultural practice is 'appropriation', because it is part of what he calls 'a historical and spatial continuum'. Lupton & Noble (2002) point out that appropriation always takes place in 'a sociocultural context' and that an object is 'invested with personal meaning' through appropriation.

The literature suggests that the following four interpretations of appropriation are commonly used as theoretical concepts: 1) appropriation in the sense of taking possession of space, which can be seen as an expression of *spatial* appropriation; 2) appropriation in the sense of learning, acquiring skills and knowledge, which can be seen as an expression of *cognitive* appropriation; 3) appropriation in the sense of social interaction and acquiring social contacts, which can be seen as an expression of *social* appropriation 4) appropriation in the sense of acquiring and using objects, which can be seen as an expression of material appropriation.

Each of these theoretical concepts regarding the concept of appropriation, seems to be suitable to study and analyse the sociocultural process of homemaking as these concepts make it possible to 'dismantle' the concept of homemaking into four smaller categories, i.e. 1) spatial aspects of homemaking; 2) acquiring 'homemaking skills; 3) social aspects of homemaking; 4) material aspects of homemaking.

According to De Haan (2005) the process of 'appropriation of a physical setting, the self or the social are expressed in spatial form'. He distinguishes social appropriation from material appropriation. As examples of acts of social appropriation De Haan mentions matching pre-defined boundaries and functions with 'proper' social usages and practices; spontaneous encounters and social redefinition of places. De Haan (2005) suggests furthermore that 'material appropriation is perhaps the most visible and pervasive human act of spatial transformation', involving the spacing and placing of material objects and boundaries; material appropriation is also 'a meaningful act resulting in a specific spatial constellation.'

In the paper of Aziz & Ahmad (2012) the domains of appropriation, attachment and identity are related, as important homemaking mechanisms; by means of a literature review, Aziz & Ahmad seek to identify specific behavioural attributes that belong to these three domains. They make a distinction between behavioural attributes that are related to what they call physical settings and those that are related to social settings.

In fact, both De Haan and Aziz & Ahmad follow a more or less similar line, as they describe two modes of appropriation, one from the social perspective and one from the material (De Haan) or physical (Aziz & Ahmad) perspective. Although the findings of these authors have been very helpful in order to develop the conceptual framework for this study, both De Haan (2005) and Ahmad & Aziz (2012) seem to blend in their respective papers spatial, material and physical aspects of appropriation, which is problematic, as the spatial, the material and the physical refer to three

totally different categories, i.e. the spatial as the medium for moving and placing, the material as expressed in tangible objects and the physical as related to bodily aspects.

Miller (1998) states that studying objects contributes both to an understanding of artifacts and social values and contradictions, “Objects and things are employed to become the fabric of cultural worlds (...) through dwelling upon the more mundane sensual and material qualities of the object, we are able to unpick the more subtle connections with cultural lives and values that are objectified through these forms”.

Chevalier (1998)) uses the term ‘creative appropriators’ referring to how people succeed in creating their own interior décor through objects. Chevalier, in her article on the material cultures of home (Chevalier, 2012) underpins the prime interest of material culture for social science, as it expresses subject – object relations, or, in her words, ‘the way we mediate our relationships with others’ which ‘has practical, social and symbolic dimensions found everywhere.

The concepts of appropriation as described previously in this section, have fuelled the development of the content of the conceptual framework for studying homemaking, whereas it’s design has been inspired by a comparable framework in a study by Coolen (2006) resulting in four dimensions of appropriation, *spatial appropriation, material appropriation, cognitive appropriation and social appropriation (fig. 1)*

<i>SOCIO CULTURAL FRAMEWORK</i>	<i>EXAMPLES</i>
Spatial appropriation	Use of space; spatial routines
Cognitive appropriation	Acquiring homemaking skills
Social appropriation	Social interaction; social control
Material appropriation	Decorating, placing objects

Fig 1: *Socio cultural framework homemaking*

*Note by the author:*

This is the ‘state of the art’ of my proposal. I am still reflecting on useful methods and techniques to be applied. For a start, I have organized two focus group sessions on homemaking recently, one with 17 persons and one with 7 persons, as a very first form of data collection.

Furthermore, I asked some students of mine to apply a more varied of data collection methods and analyses – not just interviews or enquiries as such – e.g. combining open or in depth interviews with mood boards, ‘tour de homes’ or photographs taken by the respondents themselves. Finally, a student of mine has successfully applied a laddering method of questioning, when she studied a neighbourhood in Amsterdam where residents live, who mainly have a Moroccan or Turkish background.

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