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"Home" as an essentially contested concept and why this matters

DR JED MEERS*

ABSTRACT

This paper makes two interlinked arguments. First, that the "concept of home" – the focus of a burgeoning literature within housing studies – meets Gallie's conditions for an "essentially contested concept." The influential theory, drawn on throughout the social sciences, seeks to explain concepts for which disputes are intractable; they cannot be settled by empirical evidence or argument. Second, that this "essential contestability" is not just a theoretical label, it tells us something useful about how scholars can best employ the concept of home in their own work. The argument is put in three sections. The first provides a summary of Gallie's theory. The second argues that the concept of home meets Gallie's conditions for essential contestability. Finally, the third outlines the implications of the arguments put in the first two sections for scholars engaging with the concept of home.

KEYWORDS: Home, home-making, essentially contested concepts, home ownership.

Introduction

The core insight of Walter Gallie's theory of the "essentially contested concept" (ECC) can be summarised briefly: a certain class of concepts are defined by intractable disputes over their meaning. As Gallie puts it, there are "concepts the proper use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses" (1955, p.169). This thesis is referred to frequently in the social sciences (some, such as Waldron, suggest too frequently (2002, p.137)). However, notwithstanding that the "concept of home" is a prime contender for an ECC, Gallie's theory has not been used to date to interrogate the burgeoning literature on the home and consider the implications.

* York Law School, University of York: jed.meers@york.ac.uk

Drawing on Gallie's theory, I argue that the "concept of home" satisfies the criteria for an ECC and that this has significant implications for scholars using the concept in their arguments. The paper is in three sections. First, I provide a precis on Gallie's theory of ECCs. Second, I argue that the concept of home meets Gallie's criteria for an ECC aptly. Third, I argue that acknowledging the concept of home as an ECC has three implications: (i) it underscores that there is no politically neutral concept of home, (ii) that home scholars need to recognise researcher reflexivity, and (iii) it addresses criticisms of the lack of a unified theory.

This argument is not a criticism of the growing literature on the home. Rather it is a recognition that, while there has never been so much academic attention on the concept of home, there has also never been so much disagreement over what the concept entails. Some researchers have gone as far as to call for abandoning the "concept of home" altogether (Bevan, 2015, p.197; Coolen & Meesters, 2012, p.2) and others lament its conceptual "confusion" or the "chaotic" state of the literature (Heywood, 2005, p.132). Instead, I argue that recognising the concept of home is an ECC and heeding the implications, can help to address criticisms levelled at parts of the literature on the home and improve the ongoing conceptual debate.

What is an "essentially contested concept"?

Gallie's theory is that scholars make arguments about the value of certain concepts that can never be resolved. For a particular class of concepts, researchers are contributing to a dispute that can never be settled by empirical evidence or logical reason. As Gallie puts it, the ongoing arguments will never succumb to "a definite or judicial knock-out" (1955, p. 179). In his 1955 article outlining the theory, he uses examples of "art", "democracy", "social justice", and "a Christian life" (ibid, p. 180), to define ECCs by this intractability and presence of "endless disputes" (ibid, p. 169).

Seemingly endless disputes will be familiar to social scientists. However, Gallie's argument is more specific than diagnosing that a particular concept is subject to intense disagreement. Gallie's focus is not the concept itself, but rather on its disputants. He is not concerned solely

with intrinsic abstract features of a concept, but instead with the "continuous competition for acknowledgement between rival uses" (ibid, p. 186). As Garver argues, concepts only become essentially contested derivatively when "they are employed in essentially contested arguments" (Garver, 1990, p. 258). This leads Gallie to emphasise the practical purpose of the ongoing debate and that different uses of concepts can serve "functions" for disputants – for instance, arguments over the meaning of democracy serve diverse functions for "different political groups and parties" (Gallie, 1955, p.168). Likewise, recognition of an essentially contested concept can help to affect a "marked raising of the level of quality of arguments" in the theoretical debate (ibid, p.193). I will return to both of these functions in more detail below when I outline the implications of Gallie's thesis.

This focus on the ongoing dispute leads Gallie to make a series of empirical observations about how the concept is used in arguments. Scholars debating these ECCs will emphasise some features of the concept over others or adopt new features of their own to help convince disputants of their approach (ibid, p.184). For instance, in a dispute over democracy, one scholar may suggest that "equality of citizens" is its most important feature; another may underscore the "power" of citizens to remove their leaders (ibid, p.184-185). This leads to a series of sub-concepts and terms that Gray characterises as a "constellation of satellite concepts" (Gray. 1977, p.344). Gallie's observation is that the correct application of these sub-concepts will characterise much of the dispute over the ECC. Is the "home" defined in part by "security" or "territory"; if so how? Notwithstanding debates over these features of the concept, these scholars are in no doubt they are arguing about the same concept. Re-defining their focus more narrowly or using alterative terms does not resolve their dispute.

Gallie's work is a staple of conceptual disputes in political theory and has been influential across the social sciences. Vincent goes as far as to argue that Gallie's coining of the "essentially contested concept" in 1955 was in part responsible for the "predominantly conceptualist focus" (Vincent, 2004, p.104) of disputes in political theory in the second half of the twentieth century and has now been "subsumed into the subconscious of political studies" (ibid, p.108). Although Gallie's work has had limited application to the literature on the "home" (on which more below), his theory has some provenance within housing studies more broadly. Clapham has drawn on the essentially contested nature of "neoliberalism" to inform his analysis of its contested interpretations in modern housing policy (2019, p.193), and Watt and Jacobs interrogate the essentially contested nature of "social exclusion" in the

context of neighbourhood renewal, to expose the "competing discourses" that inform policymaking (2000, p.15). Alexander et al even introduce a 2018 special edition of *Critique of Anthropology* as focusing on "redefin[ing] housing as an essentially contested domain where competing understandings of citizenship are constructed, fought over and acted out" (Alexander, Brunn & Koch, 2018). None of these studies draw on Gallie directly. However, other concepts adopted in the housing studies literature – most notably "citizen participation" in the context of planning processes (Day, 1997), and of "sustainable development" (Connelly, 2007) – have been subject to sustained analysis with direct references to Gallie's theory and associated criteria.

These studies tend to use Gallie's theory, or broader references to the "essentially contested" nature of a concept, to either help "map" competing, but simultaneously valid, versions of a concept within an academic literature (see, for instance, Connelly's analysis of "sustainable development" (2007)), or to raise practical concerns about how multifaceted literatures can be translated into practical, policy-led proposals (such as Day's analysis of "citizen participation" in planning decision-making (Day, 1997), heeded by other scholars' suggestions for more detailed guidance for administrators (Callahan, 2007)). Others simply (and, many would argue, inaccurately (Garver, 1990, p.251)) use the term "essentially contested" as a proxy for a heavily disputed concept.

The bulk of Gallie's original article details the "conditions" any dispute over a concept must satisfy to fit his definition of an ECC, and providing worked examples of these for the concepts of "a champion", "art", "democracy" and "social justice". There are seven conditions in total (Gallie, 1955, p.171-180). Rather than deal with these in the abstract, the next section argues that the "concept of home" is an ECC, and in turn deals with these seven criteria. In order to illustrate the points, research from across disciplines is used; however, as my own background is in socio-legal studies, this is the primary source of supporting material and illustrative examples.

The "concept of home" as an ECC

Any researcher engaging with the concept home is faced with the dilemma of how to distil workable principles from such a vast literature. Most studies start this process of structuring their analyses using influential literature reviews, particularly Easthope's (2004), Després' (1991), or Mallett's (2004), and situate new studies alongside the sub-concepts and themes they identify. For example, Fox's analysis of the literature leads her to five "dimensions" of home: financial investment, physical structure, territory, identity, and as a social and cultural unit (Fox, 2007, p.140-142). Hohmann instead settles on privacy, identity and space (Hohmann, 2013, p.145-228).

Researchers often caveat their choice of sub-concepts or organising principles by stating that a settled definition is impossible and undesirable. Hohmann argues that the concept of home is not "readily amendable to an objective definition" and to do so "would close down possible avenues of analysis" (Hohmann, 2013, p.4-5). Likewise, Carr et al recognise the problems inherent in "limiting the understanding of home", noting that "whatever approach to the meaning of home is taken", it can simultaneously serve contradictory sub-concepts: a "place of security and insecurity" or of "inclusion and exclusion" (Carr et al, 2018, p.4). Some have even criticised the utility of such an inductive approach, due to the "sheer amount and diversity of material" (Rapoport, 1985). A single account of the concept of home will never be settled upon and nor should it be.

The literature on the concept of home is a strong candidate for an ECC. It is surprising – especially given the preponderance of Gallie's theory in studies of "property" (Waldron, 1990, p.51; Cockburn, 2016, p.78) – that references to "essentially contestability" of home have only been made in passing. Most notably, Marotta suggests that the home can "be considered one of those 'essentially contested concepts'" (2011, p. 193), and Jacobs and Manzi have described conceptual distinctions within housing policy, particularly housing tenure, as "essentially contested" (2000, p. 40). Elsewhere, Veness has referred broadly to the conceptualisation of the home as a particularly "contested domain" (1993, p.324). This is the first attempt to apply Gallie's criteria to the concept of home explicitly and consider the associated implications.

Gallie provides a series of "semi-formal conditions" for an ECC (Gallie, 1955, p.168), which I argue are met aptly by the literature on the home. Van der Burg provides a useful initial characterisation of these as dealing respectively with *fit* and *function* (Van der Burg, 2017). The first four conditions outlined by Gallie – (i) an appraisive character, (ii) internal complexity, (iii) various describability, and (iv) openness – all deal with whether the use of the concept *fits* the requirements of essential contestability (Gallie, 1955, p.171-172). The final three – (v) reciprocal recognition, (vi) an original exemplar, and (vii) progressive competition – all refer to the *function* of the ongoing debates on the concept (ibid, 1955, p.173-180). Each of these will be considered in turn below. In the interests of keeping the analysis succinct and avoiding repeating arguments, (ii) and (iii) are taken together, as are (v) and (vii). Table One provides a summary to act as a point of reference.

Table One: Applicability of Gallie's criteria for Essential Contestability to the "concept of home"

Criteria of Essential Contestability	**Satisfaction by the Concept of Home**
Fit	
1. Appraisive	Home ascribed some value, be it positive or negative.
2. Internally complex	Literature refers repeatedly to multiple internal elements of the home.
3. Variously describable	These elements are weighed in an indefinite number of ways.
4. Open character	Its meaning and significance has changed over time and is open to changing in the future.
Function	
5. Recognition of contestation	There are divergent approaches to the home in the literature and continuing academic debate on its best conceptualisation.
6. An original exemplar	Home studies shares a common analytical starting point which provides the implicit focus of modern conceptual debates.
7. Progressive completion	The multiplicity of approaches is positive and has led to the development of new conceptions in the home studies literature.

Condition One: The concept must be appraisive

First, in order to be considered essentially contested, the use of the concept of home must focus on some ascription of value, be it positive or negative (or both) (Collier at al, 2006). This criterion ensures that the concept is not being used as a purely descriptive label, as may be the case with object noun concepts, such as a "house", when researchers wish to label their findings. In other words, the conceptual debate should not focus solely on the semantics of the description: is this about the home or not? It should deal with an appraisal of something of value.

It is clear from the broad literature tackling home meanings that the "home," much like "democracy", is an appraisive concept *par excellence.* Perhaps the best illustration is Fox's influential formulation of the "home = house + *X",* with the conceptual challenge to "unravel [this] enigmatic '*X* factor'" (Fox, 2007, p.590). Much of the literature on the home is focused on exploring these "*X* factor categories" (Finchett-Maddock, 2016, p.81) of home, drawing on the now familiar coterie of sub-terms such as identity, security, territory and so on. In geography, recent contributions by Baker and Brickell (2014) and Nowicki (2014), on home unmaking and domicide respectively, go further by conceptualising the fluidity of this value and the nuanced ways in which it is "made, unmade and remade across the life course" (Nowicki, 2014, p.785).

These values need not be positive. Feminist perspectives have been influential in underscoring the darker side of home. Kreiczer-Levy describes the "inherent duality" of home, being a place of "empowerment and vulnerability" and "autonomy and subordination" (2014, p.142). In particular, domestic violence and the home suffer from what Johnson characterises as a "tight relationship" (2014, p.11), reflected in Suk's analysis of the gendered "uncanny character" of the home in the US Supreme Court decision *Town of Castle Rock v Gonzales* (2009, p.87-105). Here, the home becomes a place of danger and violence. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought with it a renewed focus on this "darker side" of home, with Gurney arguing that the crisis may lead us to "look at home in a different way" (2020, p.23).

However, perspectives that highlight the negative values accompanying the home very rarely advocate abandoning the concept altogether, instead emphasising the need to "extend its positive values to everyone", ensure that "home is re-configured as a universal value that is

equally available to all" (Fox, 2008, p.492), or simply to recognise that the value of home can be negative as well as positive. Whether ascribed with positive or negative connotations – or both – it is clear that theoretical disputes over the "concept of home" are appraisive in character.

Conditions Two and Three: The concept must be internally complex and variously describable

In addition to appraisiveness, to meet Gallie's criteria the concept must also be "internally complex" and "variously describable" (Gallie, 1955, p.171-172). Both of these requirements are satisfied at once if: (i) the debate surrounds a series of sub-concepts but the concept's worth is "attributed to it as a whole" (ibid, p.171), and (ii) the "existence of multiple meanings" is not *a priori* contradictory (ibid, p.172). In other words, the concept of home must be capable of being described in multiple ways simultaneously, in part because of the diversity and complexity of the concept's sub-features.

As with appraisiveness, the concept of home meets these requirements aptly. Any researcher engaging with the "meaning of home" literature will be familiar with the coterie of sub-terms often used to signify its constitutive elements – territory, identity, privacy, security and so on. Lawrence's account of the thirty "dimensions" of home across three categories – cultural, social, and psychological – is an archetype example of internal complexity (Lawrence, 1987). It is this effort to create "taxonomic generalisations" that Gurney describes as the "list fetishism" that dominates much of the earlier theoretical work on the home (Gurney, 1990, p.28). However, even as scholarship has increasingly been "moving away" from "lists" (Moore, 2000, p.207-210), the academic debate is still dominated by disputes over "internally complex" and "variously describable" sub-features or processes of the home, such practices of home-making or unmaking (Baxter and Brickell, 2014), or the or the different layers at which the home is conceptualised as operating within, such as Blunt and Dowling's distinction between the home as both a "material and an imaginative site" (Blunt & Dowling, 2006, p.61).

Importantly for Gallie's criterion, these constitutive elements are incommensurate. Easthope's "place identity" (2004, p.129) does not trump Rubinstein and Medeiros' "concept of identity" (2005); Fox's "territory" (2007) does not correlate directly with Hohman's "space" (2013). Though often describing similar aspects of home, these compound elements are infinitely describable and consequently can give rise to rival versions of the concept which prioritise and define these differently. However, despite the diverse nature of these internal elements, the worth is attributed to the home is as a whole. The home is a "composite concept" (Lewin, 2001, p.353). This is not to say that these sub-concepts are not individually important or subject to different weighting by theorists, but rather that any one of these sub-terms which form the subject of so much of the academic debate over the home cannot be spliced for analysis on its own. They work in tandem to create something of value which is more than the sum of its parts.

The consequences of this various describability can be seen in studies drawing on the concept of home. An example is the use of Rohe et al's significant work into the social benefits of homeownership (2012), a prominent influence on much socio-legal work on the home . Fox and Stern both draw on this same study in favour of almost diametrically opposed assertions. Throughout *Conceptualising Home,* Fox refers to Rohe et al in support of the argument that home-owners gain greater satisfaction from their homes and neighbourhoods than those living in the private rented sector and that home-ownership supports "social, psychological, emotional, and financial health" (Fox, 2007, p.197, 237). This same study is used by Stern to support his argument that there is an absence of such evidence (Stern, 2009, p.1117-1119). The same study – and some cases, the same page of it (Fox, 2007, p.199; Stern, 2009, p.1117) – is drawn on to support two different arguments rooted in the concept of home; one arguing residential protection is too weak in protecting the home, and another arguing it over prioritises the home. Of course, variations in the interpretation of key concepts is an evergreen problem within the social sciences, but this is aggravated in the case of an essentially contested concept due this internal complexity and various describability.

Condition Four: The concept must be "open"

The next criterion is "openness." This focuses on the interaction between the concept and the context, the way in which any concept of home advanced must be capable of "considerable modification in light of changing circumstances" (Gallie, 1955, p.172). The concept's proper

use in one setting does not guarantee its proper use in another future setting. In this way, the concept is "radically context dependent" (Boromisza-Habashi, 2010, p.277) and capable of sizable modification to meet ongoing changes. Gallie provides the example of "art." At any one point in time, "no one can predict or prescribe" what may in the future be regarded as of artistic worth (Gallie, 1955, p.182).

Some, such as Somerville, argue that there is remarkable consistency across the literature, suggesting that "all types of study have revealed the same recurring meaning of home" (1997, p.277). However, as Heywood argues, although this "degree of perceived consensus is partly reassuring" (2005, p.533), it does not follow that the meanings attributed to the home are static, complete or not capable of considerable modification over time. Even if the same words are often used – as Somerville suggests, "family", "safety" "privacy", and so on – it does not mean their meanings over time are fixed. The literature highlights continually the way in which the home is "shaped by wider cultural processes" (Atkinson & Jacobs, 2016), and in the burgeoning body of work examining this in the context of migration, the way in which meanings can and do differ across space over time. As Taylor argues in her work with Cypriot refugees living in London, "home is continually being made and remade as actors circumstances and contexts change" (Taylor, 2015, p.152). Indeed, Boccagni argues that the openness of the meanings attributed to the home over time, or as he describes it the "temporal bases of home", require more longitudinal research, particularly with migrant populations (2017, p.66).

More broadly, the analysis of home is not sealed hermetically at the micro-level, but instead has been conceptualised as relating to grander societal shifts or abstractions. As argued by Duyvendak and Verplanke, "one cannot separate questions of how people inscribe space with meaning from social struggles involving class, race, gender and sexuality" (Duyvendak & Verplanke, 2013). In their introduction to the edited collection *Queering the Interior*, Gorman-Murray and Cook underscore the "evolving" nature of the concept of home, which is inevitably coloured by "whatever ideas and configurations of the "normative" are circulating at a particular time" (2017, p.1). In the spirit of Gallie's article, these recent studies underscore that the concept of home is far from static, but is instead capable of considerable modification – it is an "open" concept.

Condition Six: The sustainment of an exemplar

These initial characteristics were described by Gallie as the "formally defining conditions of essential contestedness" and have the potential to be broad in reach, arguably applying to most social concepts (Gallie, 1955, p.180). These two final conditions focus on the *function* of the debate. The first of these is that the debate over the concept should be (i) rooted in a common exemplar, or shared analytical starting point, and (ii) the ongoing debate on the concept should advance understanding of this exemplar.

All this criterion demands is that there must be some common focus among the contested uses of the concept, however broad. This shared focus, a "common problem" which the studies are seeking to address, ensures the debate is about one contested concept, not a number of separate concepts suffering from over-aggregation (Van der Burg, 2017, p.11). Without this shared focus, the disputing parties could resolve disagreements by adopting different terms and recognising they are not part of the same dispute, or as Evnine puts it, "simply choose new names and go on their own separate ways" (2014, p.118).

Disputants in the literature on the home do not doubt that they are dealing with a "concept of home". Their shared focus is on conceptualising the value of a "home" as something more than just the physical environment of property. This is perhaps best articulated by Rapoport, and later Fox, in their formulation of *Home* = *House* + X (Rapoport, 1995, p.29; Fox, 2002, p.590). The point is that this "X-factor" warrants a conceptualisation of the home on its own terms, rather than through other theoretical interests. The literature clusters around approaches to assessing the value of this X-factor: its influences, components, importance, or construction/destruction.

This conceptual treatment of "home" as something related to, but distinct from, the physical property stretches arguably back as far as Engel's 1872 polemic, "The Housing Question", where he laments the driving of families from "hearth and home" by factory owners in the 18th century (Engels, 1970), aligning with modern studies on forced displacement informed by a conceptual analysis of home (Fox & Sweeney, 2016, p.1). Gilman's influential *The Home: Its Work and Influence* – published in 1903 – is the first detailed examination of the conceptual treatment of the home. As she describes it poetically, her focus is on what "the

sweet word means" and what is "vital to the subject", as if "bravely pruning a most precious tree" (Gilman, 1903:13). Her organising concepts of "shelter, quiet, safety, warmth, ease, comfort, peace and love" (Gilman, 1903:16) and analysis of the "exclusive confinement of women to the home" (Gilman, 1903:323) would not be out of place in a modern study. Later sociological studies have been particularly influential, such as the sociology of Dennis Chapman and – to a lesser extent – Robert Merton (1948) and Alfred Schuetz (1945). Chapman's "Home and Social Status" (1955) focuses throughout on how "the home is thought of in terms of social and emotional function" (Chapman, 1955:41) with a conceptual analysis of the "creation" of new homes (Chapman, 1955:39). Merton's formative work on the sociology of housing acknowledged how individuals are "linked to neighbourhoods and to society via the homes we inhabit" (Atkinson and Jacobs, 2016:19). He was particularly interested in the home and social networks, and how the home can act as a site of projection (Merton, 1948:163). Another strand of research can be seen within architectural studies, where researchers made sizable efforts from the 1940s onwards to "tie together the somewhat divergent thought patterns of architecture and sociology" (Riemer, 1943). Polikoff's question – "whose meaning of home?" – sought to assess the way in which the built environment should reflect the "soft domain" (Polikoff, 1969:102) of home meanings.

Gallie's requirement of a "exemplar" does not require any particular antecedent study, nor does it suggest that earlier studies occupy some kind of privileged position. For the "concept of home" to satisfy this criterion, it is enough to observe that there is this shared focus that anchors the conceptual dispute and that the debate cannot be resolved through the adoption by disputants of alternative terms.

Conditions Five and Seven: Recognition of contestation and progressive understanding

The penultimate feature of essentially contested concepts – referred to elsewhere as "progressive competition" (Collier et al, 2006, p.220) – underscores that ongoing theoretical debates are valuable in leading to a better understanding and realisation of the concept, notwithstanding its essential contestability (Gallie, 1955, p.180). This has been characterised as akin to the "marketplace of ideas" metaphor, where continuous competition between conceptions weed out those which are "less defensible" and in turn, improve the quality of the ongoing debate.

Two areas of conceptual debate in the literature demonstrate this well. First, the longstanding feminist contributions seeking to highlight the home as a "site of struggle" and which argue against "uses of the concept" that neglect the often negative elements of the home for some women (Suk, 2011, p.4). The fervent disputes between Saunders, and Munro and Madigan (among other scholars) on the meaning of home are a good example; leading to the former's confrontational assertion that "either the academic feminists have got their theories wrong or millions of women are too stupid to recognise their own best interests" (Saunders, 1990, p.308; Munro & Madigan, 1993, p.29-45, based on claims made at Saunders, 1989). Summaries of the debate by Gurney (1997) and Darke (1994) highlight how these disagreements between those advancing conceptions of the concept of home has served to deepen the literature's assessment of negative home meanings. See, for instance, Brickell's appraisal of feminist arguments over the home (2012, p.226-228), and her subsequent use of these ideas, with Baxter, to develop conceptual arguments on "home unmaking" (Baxter & Brickell, 2014, p.136-138).

Second, the conceptual work by numerous scholars to turn over the coin by exploring the meaning of home for those who are homeless. These studies generally compare the results of empirical work with individuals who are homeless with "specifications of 'home' in the literature" finding they often appear "rather different" (Tomas & Dittmar, 1995, p.510) or, as Parsell has argued in this journal, some familiar dimensions from the literature (here, feeling, control and family) are experienced as an aspiration or ideal (2012, p.170). Somerville's influential study highlights how what he describes as the "dimensions of meaning" of the home – a range of those familiar sub-concepts, such as shelter, privacy, hearth and so on – differ for homeless households in order to "stimulate debate and guide future research" (Somerville, 1992, p. 532). This continuous debate around the "values inherent in the concept" demonstrates its capacity for continual improvement and increased understanding, even if the debates themselves are inherently irresolvable (Van de Burg, 2017, p.12).

The existence of these debates themselves serves to satisfy the final criterion considered here: the recognition of debate. This criterion requires that those utilising the concept of home "are aware that others are doing their own evaluations by their own criteria" (Markoff, 2016, p.126). This does not mean that those using a concept of home within their analysis need acknowledge explicitly the conceptions against their position, but rather that their use of the

concept may not be "consensual among scholars" (ibid, p.130). Given the sources discussed above, this is clearly the case for debates over the concept of home.

Why the home as an essentially contested concept matters

Having argued that the concept of home can be considered essentially contested, this section explains why it matters. The label "essentially contested" does not mean anything in its own right. Instead, arguing the concept of home meets Gallie's criteria is a "theoretical tool" to help explain the use of the concept and to recognise its limitations (Ehrenberg, 2011, p.40). Nor is it a criticism of the literature on the home or individual researchers working within it. As argued above, for a concept to be "essentially contested" is not *prima facie* a negative thing, but is rather a recognition of features that define debate over the concept.

So why does it matter that the concept of home is essentially contested? Here, I suggest two insights that Gallie's theory provides for the increasing numbers of scholars drawing on the concept of home in their research (that there is no politically neutral concept of home, and the need to recognise researcher reflexivity), followed by a defence it offers to critics of the literature (to address criticisms of the lack of a unified theory). Each will be dealt with in turn.

There is no politically neutral concept of home

The home is a heavily political concept. Harris et al argue that a longstanding insight of the literature is that "home and acts of homemaking are intrinsically political" (Harris et al, 2020, p. 1290). bell hook's contemporaneous analysis of the South African apartheid regime's efforts to attack "black efforts to construct home place" and the home as site of resistance, is a powerful reminder of the high stakes political nature of the home and the political forces that act on home spaces – an argument that is reflected in a broad-ranging literature (bell hooks, 2015). A key implication of applying Gallie's ECC thesis however, is that the political nature of conflicts over the concept of home apply not only to those actors scholars engaging with the concept of home so often analyse – be it renters, home owners, homeless people, the Government, and so on – but also to ourselves as scholars. Put another way, there is no politically neutral concept of home, whether it is put forward in an academic article or not.

Writing in 1988, Saunders and Williams raise a similar point when they refer to the home as a "political battleground" (1988, p.91). Importantly, they include scholars themselves in this battle, suggesting that:

> "Precisely because the home touches so centrally on our personal lives, any attempt to develop a dispassionate social scientific analysis inevitably stimulates emotional and deeply fierce argument and disagreement (Saunders & Williams, 1988, p.91)

The political nature of "concept of home" disputes can be seen in the literature, perhaps most notably when interrogating the ideal of home ownership. For instance, Blandy and Hunter's criticism of Fox's *Conceptualising Home* that "'home' is seen almost exclusively through the lens of owner-occupation" (Blandy & Hunter, 2009, p.481); or the polemicised nature of Saunders' arguments as outlined above and summarised at greater length by Gurney (1997, p.374-375). More recently, Feldman's seminal work *Citizens Without Shelter,* argues that historic disputes over the meaning of home in America emerge "not out of an innocent context but out of the politically contested development of the modern American home ideal" (Feldman, 2004, p.130).

This is a consequence of the "appraisive" nature of ECCs, their "internal complexity" and "various describability" outlined above. Disputants will, as Gallie puts it, prioritise the value of the concept in different ways; no single conception is the "correct" one. As Spicer argues when addressing "democracy" as an ECC, disputes will continue indefinitely into the future:

> …not only because different conceptions of democracy are appraisive and, as such, reflect different values and conceptions of the good, but also because these disputes have roots, not in the halls of academia, but rather in the real-world contestations of practical politics (Spicer, 2019, p.740).

I argue that the same implications Spicer identifies for the EEC of "democracy" apply to the ECC of "home". This leads to two practical consequences. First, again drawing on Spicer, scholars drawing on the concept of home should be "self-conscious" and "self-aware" of the political ideas that are implicit in arguments that draw on the "concept of home" (Spicer,

2019, p. 741). Second, researchers should make these explicit in the course of putting forward arguments wherever possible. Spicer goes further in his analysis of "democracy", arguing that scholars "will inevitably be formed by their own historically situated values" when disputing the concept (ibid, p. 744). I deal next with other issues of researcher reflexivity that the arguments above raise.

Home scholars need to recognise researcher reflexivity

Gallie's ECC thesis highlights how the words researchers use to describe constituent elements of the concept of home – such as security, identity, territory, practices of homemaking and so on – are liable to be interpreted differently by those reading and using their research (Ehrenberg, 2011). As an example, Hamzah and Adnan have drawn recently on the literature on the home to inform their analysis of interviews with home owners in Malaysia (Hamzah & Adnan, 2016). They conclude that policymakers should recognise more explicitly the importance of "family and community" within the home (ibid, 2016, p.321). The weight policymakers attribute to this, however, requires them to evaluate those constituent elements of "family" and "community" in the same way Hamzah and Adnan do, and so-doing, they may well arrive at different conclusions. Fox's account of the "undoubtedly" central role of "policy considerations" when adopting arguments rooted in the concept of home speaks to this same problem of translation (Fox, 2007, p.524).

As a concept that satisfies Gallie's conditions for an ECC, the home's "various describability" makes it a universally accessible concept. As Duyvendak argues, home is a "familiar sentiment to us all", meaning that "everybody can participate in the debate" (Duyvendak, 2011, p.27). Writing on the home is, as Stock puts it, "thick with layers of emic meaning" – as a "powerful experience-near concept" (Stock, 2017, p.3) , which is itself a commonplace word used day-to-day, researchers do not have a monopoly on its meaning.

This problem of "academic knowledge production" has informed disputes within housing studies more generally. The debates about the nature of "housing studies" between Allen and Flint (Allen, 2009, 2011; Flint, 2011), and particularly the privileging of "knowledge" about dwelling by housing researchers over "ordinary people who live in houses" (Allen, 2009, p.55) are instructive of some of the wider issues around class and academic habitus that arise when making claims about the meaning of an ECC. If scholars using the concept of home

need to engage with the concept in the same way as – to borrow Allen's formulation – "ordinary people who live in houses do", is it "epistemic arrogance" to suggest that they have a greater claim to understand the concept's meaning (ibid, p.62)? This is a longstanding concern. In Kemeny's seminal contribution on the concept of "residence", he is careful to underscore that the need for reflexivity "permeates the book", as housing research is "a socially embedded act in which involvement and detachment interfold in complex ways" (Kemeny, 1992, p.26).

I argue that there are two implications of this: one on the use of language and another on research methods. On the former, researchers using the concept of home as a theoretical tool should present their arguments in a way that recognises the concept's essential contestability. This point on "self-consciousness" of engaging in an ECC dispute is put forcefully by Garver:

> Self-consciousness to participate in an essentially contested argument means making a partial claim while recognising the partial character of that claim. Since it requires intellectual and moral maturity to overcome self-righteousness and think of one's disputes in this way, the idea of essentially contested concepts deserves not only analysis but promotion (Garver, 1990, p.254).

In practice, this can be as simple as adopting language that avoids constructing a particular conception of home as exhaustive, and acknowledging that conclusions drawn about the concept of home (especially those that draw on defining constituent elements, such as "security", "identity" and so on) are open to alternative interpretations. In line with the work on "citizen participation" referred to above (Day, 1997; Callahan, 2007), when drawing conclusions rooted in an ECC that are intended to inform policy, recommendations should be as specific as possible and avoid relying on simply re-stating constituent elements of the concept.

On the latter, researchers should adopt a reflective approach to their collection and interpretation of data on the home. Reflexivity is already commonplace in many recent studies drawing on the concept home. For instance, in Zeffert's analysis of the concept of home in international law, she recognises that her own "understanding of home must take into account the multiple and ambiguous meanings of this concept as well as the

discrepancies between those meanings and what they actually produce" (Zeffert, 2017, p.53-54). The ethnographic tradition within studies of the home also underscores reflexive approaches, as demonstrated in Hoolachan's work (2016, 2020). Duyvendak's call for scholars to be "reflective" about their use of the concept of home (and her criticisms of "disturbingly unreflective" uses) makes similar arguments for projects that are not empirically led (Duyvendak, 2011, p.26-28).

Addresses criticisms of the lack of a unified theory

Finally, when considering the usefulness of describing a concept as "essentially contested", Ehrenberg asks whether it can serve to "obviate the apparent problem of a lacuna in the concept?" (Ehrenberg, 2011, p.228). Many of the criticisms levelled at academic output on the home set their sights on the concept's "value, use and existence" (Bevan, 2015, p.195). As cited frequently by Fox (2007, p.27, 145), Merritt's derision of the home as a "chimera" or an "entity which is purely phantasmal" (Merrett & Gray, 1982, p.65) is indicative of a concern that it sits as a questionable "nebulous sub-division" of what should otherwise be a focus on property or some other more useful term (Bevan, 2015, p.195). However, to argue that the lack of a unified concept of home is a problem is to misunderstand the nature of the theoretical arguments at play. As an essentially contested concept, there can never be such a unified front; a clear definition of the concept is unattainable.

As argued by Dow, the general assumptions of social scientists engaging in concept formation are unsettled in the context of an "essentially contested concept" (Dow, 2015, 66-67). Usually, the focus of conceptual debate is to "operationalise a particular concept, by translating it into specifying indicators". The goal is to purge "that which is ambiguous, contingent, and value-laden" so the concept can "function as [a] tool of social science research". As an essentially contested concept, the meaning of the concept of home "resist[s] any fundamental determination" (ibid, 67). Critiques that target this lacuna – attacking what Stern describes as the "amorphous" mythology of home (Stern, 2009, p.1106) – neglect that a comprehensive and stable account of the home is not the target of the conceptual debate over an ECC.

Conclusions: The home as an ECC

This paper has argued that the "concept of home" – like the concepts of "democracy" or "art" – is a prime example of an ECC. The use of the concept in academic debate meets the criteria laid out by Gallie's influential 1955 article aptly. However, applying the label of "essential contestability" is far from an end in of itself. Instead, I have argued that there are two key implications for scholars using the concept of home in their arguments and a third for addressing criticisms of the literature on the home more broadly. The recognition of the concept of home as an ECC underscores that there is no politically neutral concept of home (whether advanced in academic work or not) and that researchers should adopt a reflexive approach to their work, presenting their arguments in a way that recognises the concept's essentially contested status. The recognition of the concept as an ECC can also serve to obviate the criticisms of those who argue the literature suffers from the lack of tangible definitions or a unified front.

Looking ahead to the ongoing theoretical dispute, Gallie's theory calls for a clearer recognition that scholars can offer simultaneously valid, if divergent, interpretations of the "concept of home". The theory of an ECC seeks to explain why competing interpretations of a concept may be "regarded as legitimate and defensible" (Van de Burg, 2017). For instance, a number of scholars have drawn on the concept of home to support their analysis of a particular form of housing benefit penalty in the UK (the so-called "bedroom tax"): Nowicki's focuses on the rhetorics of home and everyday practices of home making (Nowicki, 2017), and Moffatt et al focuses instead on home's importance to a sense of community (Moffatt et al, 2016). These uses of a concept of home do not exist in a zero-sum competition with each other; all can usefully offer different interpretations that hold logically on their own terms. Setting one's own interpretation against others should be useful exercise. As Gallie argues:

> Recognition of a given concept as essentially contested implies recognition of rival uses of it as not only logically possible and humanly "likely", but as of permanent potential critical value to one's own use or interpretation of the concept in question (Gallie, 1955, p.193).

Gallie's work implies that empirical consequences flow from this "critical value" and recognising a concept as an ECC in a dispute. These are difficult to predict. For the concept of home, such a recognition may lead to methodological implications (such as the focus on research reflexivity above). It may result in greater reflection by scholars on whether conceptual engagement with the "home" is truly necessary and fruitful for their project at hand, or whether another concept may fit their aims better. It may lead researchers to re-consider the translation of their research findings, not just to policy-makers but also to other researchers, particularly by avoiding restating the same variously describable sub-terms and elements that provide the focus of the essentially contested debate.

This paper has argued that recognising the "concept of home" as an ECC both underscores the value of the continuing debate and would help to improve it. As Gallie argues, ECCs are subject to an "indefinite number of possible descriptions" for an "indefinite" length of time (Gallie, 1955, p.187). It is hoped that the implications outlined in this paper help to advance ongoing debates over the concept of home and to inform its use in conceptual arguments that will continue – infinitely, never to be resolved – into the future.

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