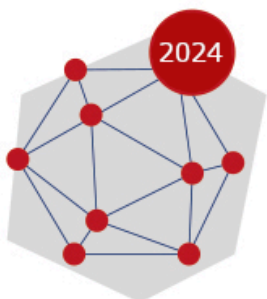


ECQI2024

**Participation, collaboration and co-creation:
Qualitative inquiry across and beyond divides**

Congress Proceedings



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UNDERSTANDING 'HOME' IN ALTERNATIVE CARE: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS OF PRACTITIONER'S EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This contribution presents the analysis process and the first results of the doctoral project 'The Home Dimension in Alternative Care'. The project was designed as a multiphase qualitative study (1). It aimed to explore how educators use physical space and the idea of 'home' in educating children in the Residential Care Homes (RCH). The project collaborated with two RCHs from the Lombardy region and a total of 12 professional educators. The analysis process follows the trajectories indicated by the phenomenological philosophy of research (2)(3). It focuses on the interpretative dimension that sees the researcher as a mediator of the meanings of the participants' lived experiences (4). Given the multidimensional and multilayered nature of meaning, the analysis process was also articulated on different levels and explored a wide variety of texts - including participant photography. Emerging themes were the result of a circular process that intertwined Van Manen's (3) proposal for textual analysis and the matrix developed by Hannes & Wang (5) for the exploration of visual material. To reduce the risk of flattening and ventriloquism, follow-ups were conducted with the research participants to share and discuss the initial findings. In this sense, the research journal (6) played a crucial role in developing a reflexive posture. In conclusion, the contribution will present the three macro-themes that emerged, which can be summarised as 1) Materiality, 2) Practices of 'making home', and 3) Meanings of 'home' in the lived experience participants.

Keywords: alternative care, research with practitioners, phenomenological-hermeneutic approach, visual languages, home

INTRODUCTION

The contribution presents the analysis process and the first results of the doctoral project 'The Home Dimension in Alternative Care'. The project was designed as a multiphase qualitative study (1) using a collective case study strategy (7). It aimed to explore how educators use physical space and the meaning of 'home' in educating children in alternative care, particularly in residential care settings. The project collaborated with two RCHs from the Lombardy region and a total of 12 professional educators.

The research object lies in pedagogical research: a horizon that embraces the human context is characterised by complexity. For this reason, we developed a research design of a qualitative nature. The following direction is given by phenomenological philosophy. More specifically, we were guided by the hermeneutic approach, which is appropriate for exploring the research questions. Hermeneutic research sees in Gadamer one of its main exponents and considers knowledge built in the established hermeneutic dialogue (2) between researcher and object of investigation. The project was designed as a multiphase qualitative study, presenting four main phases.

- Exploration of the relationship between 'individual meanings of home' and educational work (using interviews, N=12)

- Representation of one's 'idea of home' in educational work (through photography), N=54;
- Exploration of the relationship between meanings and practices of home-making in daily work in residential care services for the involved educational team (Focus group discussion using photographs and maps), N=3
- Sharing (and re-discussing) the first reflections that emerged with the research participants (Follow up with focus group discussion), N=2.

For further details on the research design and the research tools, see the publication (8). In the following paragraphs, the following analysis model will be explored. However, with the delicacy of the research object's horizon and the epistemological foundation underpinning it, it is crucial to refer to the ethical dimension of the research, which is not exhausted in the fieldwork phases.

Ethics and the Role of Research Journal in Knowledge Co-Construction

The brief consideration of the phenomenological philosophy of research above centers on the role of the researcher since this cannot be separated from the object of investigation. This recalls an attitude of strong vigilance and closeness to the phenomenon, strictly intertwined with a dimension of ethics and rigour in research. Quoting Baldacci and Frabboni (9), 'Rigour corresponds to diligence in following the game's rules. In other words, each game has its rules, and the moves one makes within its framework must conform to them. Rigour, in qualitative research, does not refer to the standardisation of procedures or the generalisability of results but rather to the production of reasoning supported by precise assumptions. It is founded on systematic reflection of the thought processes introduced and the ability to enter into communicative relationships, in which reflections and insights are circulated and dialogue within one's research community (10). Rigour, we might say, is closely linked to the ability to describe the why of one's methodological choices, tools, processes and so on.

Thoughtfulness and reflexivity are also linked to the ethical dimension of research. While recognising the importance of the procedural dimension of research (this project was approved by the ethics committee of the University of Milan Bicocca, Protocol Application No. 695), it does not end there. As already mentioned, the ethical dimension should first and foremost translate into the attitude of the researcher, which, within the ecological research paradigm, translates into caring for all research participants (11). This opens up a dimension of unpredictability, so much so that we can speak of an 'ethics in practice' (12) or situational ethics (13). This attitude requires constant training in reflexivity.

Within this framework, the research journal has been a fundamental tool. The researcher's journal has a long-standing tradition in literature. This tool addresses the need to keep track of all the elements, events, or phenomena on the cognitive, emotional, affective, social, and ethical levels throughout the process crosses through the project in all its phases (11). In this case, the researcher used field notes, audio recordings, and photographic documentation by an external observer. The journal supported the practice of self-understanding and aided the researcher in documenting her positioning in the knowledge-building process. In this regard, engaging in a dialogue with the research diary was a very interesting exercise. The researcher revisited the diary in its entirety, re-reading its sections and then questioning them, highlighting particularly resonant passages and overlaying transparent sticky notes to emphasise how certain concepts or interpretations had evolved and, in other words, continually re-engaged in an epistemic dialogue with her research subject. This dimension of ethics, rigour and constant reflexivity also ran through the analytical process. During the analysis process, the researcher finds herself reading and interpreting the voices, representations, and lived experiences of participants. This also pinpoints the dimension of responsibility in research, in guaranteeing transparency, proximity to the phenomenon under investigation, as well as an adequate degree of depth that can capture the multidimensionality of its meanings.

THE ANALYSIS PROCESS

With this reflexive posture and sensibility in mind, the analysis process follows the trajectories indicated by the phenomenological philosophy of research (2)(3). It focuses on the interpretative dimension that sees the researcher as a mediator of the meanings of the participants' lived experiences (4). Given the multidimensional and multilayered nature of meaning, the analysis process was also articulated on different levels and explored a wide variety of texts – including participant photography (14) (15). Emerging themes were the result of a circular process that intertwined Van Manen's (2016) proposal for textual analysis and the matrix developed by Hannes & Wang (5) for the exploration of visual material.

To explore the phenomenon in its multilayered complexity, the analysis followed the thematic analysis model proposed by Max Van Manen, as elaborated in his renowned work, "Researching Lived Experience" (3). The thematic analysis examines themes embodied and represented within the evolving meanings and images of work (3 p. 78). Initially, the researcher underlined statements or phrases that appear particularly essential or revealing of the phenomenon or experience being described. This phase aims to establish an initial framework for the phenomenon. The second step looks for connections between the identified themes (3 p.93). Once this is completed, the researcher can sketch and outline interpretive considerations of the studied phenomenon, drawing from the identified themes, relationships, and connections, thereby identifying semantic pathways and traces within the collected material. The NVivo software was chosen to assist the researcher in analyzing the gathered material and ensure the rigorous execution of this research phase. This was particularly functional for archiving collected materials and facilitating the intricate tasks of coding and analysis.

This outlined model of analysis is primarily addressed (but not reduced) to textual material. However, this project produced a substantial amount of visual material, in particular photographic material taken by participants (16). In this sense, the researcher aimed to grasp better and enhance photographic data's epistemic value. This aspiration stems from a desire to move beyond viewing photographic data as subordinate to or merely accompanying textual data. As Hannes and Siegesmund state: 'We argue that visual data can do more than just illustrate ideas or concepts, particularly in the process of research where participants contribute to the data collection phase. Visual images record the tacit meanings of the person who makes them, and they can, with the help of a researcher skilled in qualitative reasoning, form another stream of textual analysis.' (17 p.278)

At the same time, how is it possible to undertake a path of visual material analysis without having a specific expertise and/or an artistic background? Despite the human basic visual literacy (e.g., the human perceptual ability to recognize colour or patterns), this might not suffice when embarking on a research journey with images. For this reason, the researcher approached the fundamental theories of design and colour (18) in order to understand how to recognise visual elements of image. However, this challenge is not solely tied to understanding the inherent characteristics of visual data in its composition. Images are inherently intertwined with historical, political, and economic dimensions influencing their outcome (19).

Another potentially critical dimension arises from the notion of interpreting images. An image is more than just a symbol; it is a tangible object, and the interaction we feel with it (19 p.22) is like a tangible object that invites us to interact. The focus on the composition of the image is not merely limited to its aesthetic dimension. Alternatively, the possibility of grasping this aesthetic dimension makes it possible to identify a new layer of meaning. Grasping the perspective from which the subject is portrayed offers information on the positioning of the subject about the object of its investigation. Again, the choice of whether or not to include details of space in the image opens up new possibilities for interpretation, as does the choice of whether or not to modify an image. In this context, the visiting program at KU Leuven was pivotal, during which an initial introduction to the framework developed by Wang & Hannes (5) was possible. The matrix was conceived as a tool for analyzing material produced in photovoice processes but is highly flexible and potentially applicable to projects rooted in

or informed by photography. The matrix is not a rigid tool for image interpretation but rather a support for developing best practices. Indeed, it can serve as a valuable guide for justifying one's choices in photovoice projects and, more broadly, in projects utilizing visual languages. This tool comprises three overarching areas, also referred to as 'sites': Production site, Photography site, and Audience site. Each of these three areas is explored through three 'modalities': technological, compositional, and social. These approaches are not to be understood as separate. They are part of the same circular process, built on a dialogue that made it possible to identify the three macro-themes of analysis that will be presented in the final conclusions. The visual analysis of the material offered a new layer of meaning interwoven with the textual one, just as the captions of the images, interviews and focus groups informed the reading of the photographs. In presenting analysis themes, direct quotes and images taken by the participants were included. However, it must be declared the 'imbalance' between textual material over visual material. This decision is also related to ethical and privacy reasons. In that case, an attempt was made to describe the image or to justify its non-inclusion.

CONCLUSION: PRESENTING THREE STRUCTURING THEMES

Considering this, and having in mind the research question '*How educators use physical dimension and the idea of home in education children in alternative care*', three major themes—deeply interrelated—arise and structure the investigated phenomenon:

1. *The Physical Dimension of Home*: The physical description of the investigated contexts characterized the initial phase of the analytical journey, but it did not end there. The analysis highlighted primarily the lived dimension (24) (25) of space: how are these spaces traversed, lived in, and imbued with meaning by their inhabitants? What roles and functions do these spaces assume in the educational trajectories within the setting? This perspective resonates with Palmieri's (23) notion of attending to space from an educational care perspective, seeking to understand how these spaces can be "lived in" and claimed by individuals or remain as spaces of others. With this theoretical premise in mind, the researcher explored the physical dimension from three dimensions: a 'macroscopic' one, which can be identified with the architectural variables of the contexts (to which has been added a specific reflection on the territory in which the service arises and develops); a 'mesoscopic' one, that is, focused on the domestic spaces that make up the services; a 'microscopic' one, with a specific focus on the objects that seem to take centrality in the educational practice and in the lived experience of its inhabitants.

2. *Meanings of Home in the Lived Experience of Professional Educators*: attention was given to the metaphors presented by participants and the connotations that make 'home' a specific experiential territory of possibility and learning (22). In educators' experiences, home is where they can exercise freedom, make mistakes, and reveal their most authentic selves. Participants frequently used metaphors in the literature, such as 'safe harbor,' 'swallow's nest,' or even 'beanbag chair' (understood as a soft chair where one can lounge comfortably). Narratives also referred to a more sensory dimension connected to their understanding of home, like warmth and light. Interestingly, elements of discontinuity characterized the lived experience of a home compared to the community experience, including educator turnover, external regulations affecting actions, and the sometimes limited ability to truly make a shared space one's own.

3. *Home-making practices*: The notion that 'inhabitants create home' recurred in educators' words. Thus, it is challenging to speak of a singular way of 'making' given the diverse inhabitants. However, focusing on educational actions, the dimension of hospitality emerged as crucial for 'making home.' There was also a strong emphasis on the educational importance of orderliness and education through aesthetics (21). In one of the investigated settings, with children aged 4 to 7, the fundamental practice for 'making home' was providing security through predictability, from creating rituals to establishing small traditions. There was also a recurring theme of personalizing spaces as a mechanism of ownership and belonging.

Even if presented separately, the three themes are not understood as watertight compartments, as they are linked by a bond of interdependence. For example, a specific reflection on the kitchen – as a place where certain types of actions take place, where precise educational experiences are initiated – intercepts reflections on the meanings of home assumed in the experience of professionals and becomes the territory of certain practices for 'making home'.

In conclusion, the project highlighted the importance of questioning the lived dimension of space, which is composed of practices and meanings. While recognising the importance of establishing structural and architectural standards that prevent the risk of institutionalisation, it is essential to reflect on the lived experience of living 'the home' offered in the RCH. Reflecting on the intentional and non-intentional dimensions that compose the educational pathway in the RCH means recognising the 'home' as the place where the educational action comes to life and as a pivotal educational actor. This vision of dwelling is linked to a perspective founded on the rights of childhood, "a right to be understood, not only as the satisfaction of the basic needs to live and survive but also as the possibility of seeing all emotional, intellectual and expressive potential recognised and being able to expand in well-kept and non-random environments, conceived [...] also involving those who inhabit them every day." (20 p.15)

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