

## **Home life could be simpler: Perceptions of home among married couples while staying at an eco-lodge**

### **Introduction**

Individuals relate to their homes in a myriad of ways. It was suggested that the home is not merely an object or a building, but as a diffuse and complex condition integrating memories and images, desires and fears, past and present (Rullo, 1987). The home can also be perceived as a set of rituals, personal rhythms and routines of everyday life (Pallasmaa, 1995). Moreover, home makes a meaningful contribution to a sense of power and security. Home is typically understood as a space that offers freedom and control (Darke, 1994), enables creativity and regeneration (Allan & Crow, 1989), and represents a comfortable, secure and safe space (Dovey, 1985). Positive perceptions of home result in it being a place that offers a respite, a place to "let go", alone or within familiar and trusted relationships (Darke, 1994; Saunders, 1989). However, negative or ambivalent perceptions of home also exist (Manzo, 2005). Morgan (2010) suggested that all the above feelings are integrated into a sense of "place attachment" which is defined as the experience of a long term affective bond to a particular place and the meaning attributed to this bond.

Findings of research suggest that women and men differ in their perceptions of their homes. Men consider their homes as representations of their status and achievements, while women view home as a protected haven (Somerville, 1997), embedded with positive emotions (Gurney, 1997; Saunders, 1990). Lewin-Epstein, Stier and Braun (2006) reported that in Germany in comparison to Israel, the wives are more likely to be in charge of performing traditional housework chores such as doing laundry, cleaning, preparing meals, and shopping.

Yet, while German couples invest more time in these errands, in both countries, on the average, the time spent by the wives in handling these chores is almost thrice as much as compared to the husbands.

The theorizing and research findings discussed thus far originate from the study of place attachment and gender relations. It is suggested here that in order to expand our understating of the perceptions of home it would be beneficial to also consider these perceptions when individuals are on vacation. The reason is that as tourists, they experience other modes of living arrangements that might affect or alter their perceptions of their homes. The question is: what brings about the altered perception? According to Langer's (1989) mindfulness-mindlessness theory, if certain environmental conditions (physical and social) exist or are created in a given situational context, some people at least will become more mindful, that is, will actively process available information of their surroundings. Extending this logic, such alternations in perceptions of home are more likely to occur when holidaying in places which are considerably different from one's home, such as eco-lodges.

### **Eco-tourism and eco-lodges**

The decisions taken by tourists when choosing their destination, especially in the case of ecotourism and sustainable tourism sites, reflect the working of complex processes, influenced by socio-demographic and value-oriented factors (Hedlund, Marell & Gärling, 2012). Reichel, Uriely and Shani (2008) point out that tourism in the post-modern era is marked by a search for 'other' tourist attractions, those emphasizing experiences which are real and natural and taking place in the countryside, such as those taking place in desert tourist ventures.

Thus, such choices represent a search for sites that provide an opportunity for experiences which are novel and allow learning, as well as being different from those typical to the urban stressful daily living (Mehmetoglu, 2007).

An exemplar of such sites is the eco-lodge. While eco-lodges emerged early in the 1980's, they have rarely been discussed in the academic literature, with studies aimed mainly at identifying their economic aspects, as well as the characteristics and motivations of the patrons of and visitors to these lodges (Beaumont, 2010; Kwan et al., 2008). Kwan, Eagles and Gebhardt (2008), defined an eco-lodge as "a nature-dependent tourist lodge that attempts to meet the philosophy and principles of ecotourism, including environmentally responsible principles of design, construction and operations" (p. 698). Kahn (2003) found eco-tourists to express lower expectations of service in comparison to conventional tourists. Reichel et al. (2008) asked Israeli, Anglo-Saxon and French tourists traveling in Israel to name their preferred choices of sites to be developed in the desert area of the Negev in Israel. It was found that the tourist, regardless of their nationality, preferred first and foremost, sites which are marked by a "serene and relaxing atmosphere" (p. 33), while only a small number "preferred a wholly natural site, with minimal development" (p. 34). These studies, conducted from the perspective of tourism, provide interesting insights into this aspect of eco-tourism. The premise suggested here indicates that attitudes towards sites of eco-tourism in general, and eco-lodges in particular, should be also be assessed with regard to the tourist perceptions of his/her own home. The reason is that a visit to such sites is determined by the wish to get away from the daily aspects of home living (Mehmetoglu, 2007).

Thus, this study aims to assess the perceptions of home compared to an eco-lodge and attempt to determine whether staying at an eco-lodge has any impact on the way visitors to them perceive their homes and whether there is a gender difference in the perceptions of husbands and wives.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Thirty seven married couples aged 35 to 52 ( $M=40$ ;  $SD=14.65$ ), married for five to thirty years, with children, living in their homes from five to 26 years, and residing in various cities in Israel, holidayed between two to four days at an eco-lodge located in a remote Israeli desert resort.

### **The setting**

The site, located in a large natural reserve in a remote part of the Negev desert, is surrounded by sand dunes and hills. The topography limits access to the Internet and cell phone connection, and no television or radio broadcasts are available on the site. All of the site's buildings, five round and closed shaped eco-lodges and the main building were constructed out of local materials, mud, stones and recycled wood. The eco-lodges' walls are very thick and maintain a cool internal temperature, negating the need for air-conditioning. The eco-lodges provide the visitors with minimal necessities for several days of stay, including beds, armchairs, kitchen supplies and a bathroom. Each lodge also includes hammocks on a big balcony with a vista of the open surroundings of the desert as well as a place to barbeque. The family operating the site (a married couple with their young children) resides in the main building which eco-lodgers are invited to visit.

**Data collection**

During January to May 2013 married couples visiting the eco-lodge were asked to answer an open-ended questionnaire anonymously, and separately. All agreed to participate, and following completion were debriefed and thanked. The questionnaires were handed to participants on the night prior to their leaving, while visiting the main building. Completion took an average of ten minutes and participants discussed the following three questions. First: Please describe in your own words the meaning of "home" for you. Second: Please describe in your own words the experience of residing in the eco-lodge and third: In your opinion, has staying at the eco-lodge had any impact on the ways you perceive your own home? A content analysis was performed to trace any emerging themes and to investigate whether or not women participants differed from their male partners in their perceptions of their homes and the eco-lodge. In addition, participants were asked to name their place of residence, number of years they were married, their age and gender. Inter-rater reliability based on Cohen's Kappa was 0.94. Discrepancies were resolved by discussion.

**Results**

Prior to presenting the findings in length an explanation is given about the category "Other" which was noted in tables 1 and 3. This category includes thoughts and perceptions which were too idiosyncratic and unsuitable to fit into any of the clearly defined categories.

The themes elicited and examples of them are presented below.

Table 1 presents the meanings attached to one's home for the entire sample and for men and women separately.

(Table 1 here)

Husbands and wives were found to discuss seven main meanings and feelings that they attached to their homes, four of which were dominant and were discussed to a similar degree by both groups. 64% of the participants were found to discuss home in relation to their family and friends, pointing out that "*home is where I meet family and friends, the people that I love and feel comfortable with*". Home as a convenient and a comfortable place in which to rest was noted by 55.4% of the participants. The common reply was that "*home is the place where my bed and my armchair are; the place where I feel comfortable*". A similar number (55.4%) referred to their homes as an expression of the self. In this respect participants noted that "*my home mirrors the person that I am; it is the place where I can express freely myself*". Half of the participants related to their homes as providing security, stating for example: "*I feel safe at home*". The only significant difference was found with regard to the perception of home as requiring constant maintenance. This aspect was discussed by the wives only (16.7% of them,  $\chi^2=7.89$  (df=1) ( $p < .001$ ) who stated that "*Home is cleaning, cooking, taking care of the children*". "*Home is a lot of work*". "*Maintaining home takes a lot of time and energy*".

Table 2 presents the findings obtained from the question inquiring into the perceptions of the eco-lodge.

(Table 2 here)

Six modes of references were detected for the perceptions of staying at the eco-lodge, with no apparent differences between husbands and wives. These revolved mainly around the issues of positive feelings related to the stay (98.6% of all participants), where participants stated: "*Being here feels good*". The following themes were mentioned to a lesser degree: The eco-lodge as affording a closer contact with nature (48.6% of all participants) with comments such as "*Sitting in the balcony of the eco-lodge, and looking on the dunes lets me feel that I am one with nature*". A little more than a third of participants (35.1%) suggested that the stay at the eco-lodge elicited thoughts regarding alternative modes of living. In this instance, common remarks were "*I look at the way the family running the eco-lodge conduct its daily living and it makes me wonder how my family life would be if we were to adopt this alternative mode of home arrangements*". Also discussed were the physical attributes of the eco-lodge. Observations by a quarter (25.7%) of participants recognized that despite the simplicity of living arrangements, all necessities are provided. The following examples serve to illustrate this point: "*Everything at the eco-lodge is basic and simple, but you don't feel you are missing anything. Your needs are met to the full*". A small number of participants (10.8% and 6.8%) either expressed a negative stance towards the eco-lodge as it exposed to natural elements. for example "*I really did not like the possibility of being in proximity to snakes and other desert creatures*", or stated that the stay of the eco-lodge enables to feel detached from the

hassles of daily life: *"It really felt nice to be away from it all; not listening to the radio or constantly being on the phone"*.

Inspection of table 3 reveals that participants' reflections about the stay at the eco-lodge may influence their perceptions of their own homes. These revolve around three main themes, with one clear difference between husbands and wives.

(Table 3 here)

While close to 42% of all participants (41.9%) pointed out that the stay at the eco-lodge led them to the conclusion that it is possible to conduct a simpler home life, this stance was voiced almost three times as much by wives than by the husbands (61.1% and 23.7%, respectively,  $\chi^2=10.63$  (df=1) ( $p < .001$ )). Common were remarks such as: *"Being here made me think of our lives. We began our joint lives wishing to conduct them as simply as possible, and we found ourselves in a constant chase after the purchase of the latest kitchen appliances and electronic devices"*. *"Here [at the eco-lodge] everything is simple, yet we miss nothing. All that we need is here, and it requires much less time cooking and cleaning"*.

No gender difference was found in the case of a "Positive stance towards one's home" a sense that was heightened amongst 27% of all participants by the shortcomings of living in an eco-lodge as result of contact with sand, insects and heat. Those echoing this state of mind suggested that the *"staying here at the eco-lodge helped me realize my appreciation of my home and how convenient life in it is at"* Finally, the third theme, detected among 23% of the participants, suggest that in comparison to their state of mind at home, they felt more tranquil when staying at the



eco-lodge. No disparity was found between husbands and wives. *"I found this place to provide much needed relaxation, one which I rarely find at home"*.

## **Discussion**

To an extent, the situations in which individuals find themselves influence their perceptions of home. The current study assessed how married couples perceived their homes after vacationing at a remote eco-lodge, which provides only basic necessary accommodation. This assessment was guided by the assumption that such an alternative experience could bring to consciousness thoughts and reflections regarding their homes. Findings indicate that when staying at the eco-lodge, husbands and wives perceived their homes in manner which, to a large degree, is similar to studies reported in the literature, namely, as a place in which to relax and enjoy themselves in the company of their loved ones (Darke, 1994; Saunders, 1989), and as a secure and comfortable place (Dovey, 1985), to which they are attached (Morgan 2010). At the same time, at least some of the wives, expressed a negative view of their homes, since it is perceived as requiring constant attention, thus reflecting the unbalanced housework load detected among Jewish-Israeli couples (Lewin-Epstein et al., 2006). The perceptions of the stay at the eco-lodge suggest that it is considered, by and large, as a positive experience, both by husbands and wives. It brings the eco-lodger closer to nature, and affords an appreciation of the simplicity of the eco-lodge. The need of city dwellers to experience nature first hand is strongly detected (Weaver, 2001). It is suggested that staying at a natural, yet safe environment of the eco lodge, as well as meeting the family who regularly live there, enhanced the potential to be more mindful and actively process available information of their surroundings (Langer, 1989).

It also elicited the possibility of being open to reflect on alternatives to the current home. Moreover, the limited connectivity to modern communication in the eco-lodge (TV, Internet), enabled the couples more time and the quiet to reflect on their thoughts and feelings towards home and life as they were less exposed to their everyday noises and stresses. People stated that they felt more positively connected to self and expressed positive feelings in relation to the eco lodge as well as their homes. Yet, a more complex picture emerged when eco-lodgers were asked to discuss whether their stay at the eco-lodge had influenced their perceptions of their homes. Almost in a ratio of 3 to 1, wives, rather than their husbands, stated that they came to view the possibility of running their homes in a simpler manner, as a viable option, following the stay at the eco-lodge. Again, and to a far larger degree, the difference in unequal gendered burden of running the home (Lewin-Epstein et al., 2006) is manifested. This difference gains even more weight when considering that less than a third of participants, husbands and wives alike, noted that the stay at the eco-lodge led to more positive perceptions of their home on the one hand, and a feeling of being more connected with oneself, on the other hand. These positive feelings can be attributed to the relaxed atmosphere of the eco lodge and the state of mind which elicited positive feelings.

Thus, the overall findings suggest that the wives are more positively influenced by their stay at the eco-lodge, as it brings to realization that other modes of living arrangements are feasible and that over consumption requires considerable home keeping (Kasser & Kanner, 2004). Life in modern society is characterized by a mode of consumerism and the need to maintain the home with all its paraphernalia in order to keep up with modern standards (Kasser & Kanner, 2004).

The current research suggests that couples and especially wives who, while staying in an eco- lodge, experienced an alternative home, one which is characterized by greater simplicity and is less influenced by consumerism. They found it attractive and raised the possibility of adopting such a life-style in their city homes.

A clear limitation of this study is the small number of participants, yet, it discloses hidden aspects regarding the perceptions of individuals and their homes, and suggests some venues of future research. Most notably, there is a question as to whether or not the wives will change their home arrangements to an easier one after visiting an eco-lodge, or return to their known ways of being and how their family members would react to such efforts. Secondly, there is a need to look at the influence of additional socio-demographic and personality variables as influencing the perceptions of home when staying at different accommodations, considering that service expectations are lower in eco-tourists (Kahn, 2003). Thus, it would be of value to consider the possibility that those wives who found the experience of the eco-lodge influential, are directed by lower service expectations, and thus, more prone to view the eco-lodge as an example of how it is possible to run their homes in a more satisfactory manner, by getting rid of unnecessary and luxurious artifacts.

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