



Introduction to the Special Issue: The View from Housing- The Contributions of Housing Research to Social and Behavioural Theory

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Decades ago, especially before the 1970s, housing studies was a rather empiricist and policy-oriented field of research. Since then things have changed a great deal. With the advance of critical approaches in urban sociology and geography from the late 1960s on, housing issues started to be seen through the critical lens of Marxist- and Weberian-inspired conflict theory (e.g. Rex and Moore 1967; Harvey 1973; Castells 1977). The development of theory did not stop with the 'new' urban sociology and political economy but evolved further in various different directions. One landmark in the advance of the theorisation of housing was Jim Kemeny's theoretically original book from 1982, *The Myth of Home-ownership*, which sparked a stream of research on the links between housing and welfare systems that to some extent continues even today (see Stephens 2020, as well as comments on the article).

Kemeny also published a book in 1992 titled *Housing and Social Theory* where he made a plea for housing researchers to keep track of the theoretical debates in their parent disciplines (e.g. sociology, political science, geography, economics). He felt that housing researchers had dropped off the wagon of theory development— and sometimes their new ideas were ones that had been discovered elsewhere a long time ago. New theories developed in parent disciplines were adopted late or not at all. Perhaps one sign of this is the somewhat belated discovery of Esping-Andersen's extremely influential theory of welfare state regimes (e.g. Esping-Andersen 1991) in housing studies. Since discovery it has inspired quite a lot of research on links between housing and welfare regimes, some questioning the original theory and its usefulness.

Over the more than 30 years that have passed since the publication of Kemeny's book, theory in housing research is probably stronger than ever. Empirical research with no links to theoretical ideas is difficult to get published even in empirically oriented housing journals. Housing researchers have increasingly drawn inspiration from new theoretical currents in the social and behavioural sciences ranging from actor-network theory to practice theory and 'new materialism', to take some fairly recent examples from the sociological side of the field. It is fair to say that nowadays housing researchers are well informed of the theoretical developments in their fields.

Did Kemeny think that housing research would be only on the receiving end of the relation between it and theory development? No, he wrote: 'Housing research needs both to draw more extensively from theories and debates in the social sciences and to contribute to such debates with studies of housing' (Kemeny 1992: 17). He was thinking of debates that had a broader or more general scope than just housing issues, like the nature of welfare provision in society or the action/structure *problematique*. Housing issues are arguably at the core of many general social issues, from new forms of stratification to intergenerational relations, as well as general questions about choice and constraint.

The suggestion that housing researchers should strive to contribute to general theories with their studies can be read as saying that they should first apply those theories to their subject matter and then draw from their empirical results theory-relevant conclusions that undermine or reformulate the theories applied. This is not the only possible reading of Kemeny's statement. Borrowing a term from an article about theory in housing studies, there is – or can be – also 'theory from housing' (Ruonavaara 2018).

This idea was developed philosophically by Peter King: instead of applying theories developed outside housing studies, researchers should *contemplate* housing as a phenomenon in order to get fresh theoretical insights about it (King 2009). David Clapham's version of theory from housing pointed out that housing has special characteristics that differentiate it from many similar topics, so that assumptions made elsewhere about people's economic behaviour, how they relate to the environment, the meanings they attach to



material artefacts, and their weak and strong social ties, et cetera, might not apply well to housing. He writes: ‘A pragmatic approach would be to study housing armed with theories drawn from the disciplines, but to be aware of the possibility that they will not fit and to be aware of the possible need for unique concepts’ (Clapham 2009: 5).

This special issue of Critical Housing Analysis is an attempt to respond to Kemeny’s call for a theoretical contribution from housing researchers. The call for papers formulated the task as follows: ‘The topic of this special issue is to look at how insights from housing research can provide new perspectives to theoretical questions that are broader in scope than just housing. Contributions can be based on findings of theory-relevant empirical research or on theoretical work on housing issues.’ We received six papers, three of which survived the review process.

An overview of the papers in this issue

Bo Bengtsson’s and Martin Grander’s article ‘The Influence of Interest Organisations on Swedish Rental Housing’ (2024) seeks to rethink and reformulate the idea of corporatism from its regular uses in relation, mainly, to labour market policies. Generally, corporatism refers to the kind of political regime where interest organisations are formally represented and influential in the formulation of government policies. The authors write that in Sweden, ‘once an archetype of welfare-state corporatism’, corporatist structures were largely eliminated from government policies. However, Sweden has a unique system of rent setting, where organisations of property owners and tenants negotiate yearly rent levels, and these organizations also are involved in the preparation of legislation on housing. The authors apply Philip Schmitter’s definition of corporatism to the Swedish system of rent negotiation and conclude that it is indeed corporatist – but quite different from the policies to which ‘corporatism’ usually refers. This leads the authors to a revised definition of ‘corporatism’ that better fits ‘welfare sectors where the state policy is implemented via markets and not only formal representation’.

Tomáš Hoření Samec’s article ‘Theorising Housing Precarity Governance from a Relational Perspective: Affective Attachment of Debtors’ (2024) utilises as a springboard of theory development a review of literature on affects and emotions concerning housing and a Czech case study of overindebted people who have experienced foreclosure. Their situation is examined through the lens of *affective attachment* to the housing market. The author uses this concept to refer to the feelings people attach to their situation in the housing market. In the case of people in precarious housing situations, these tended to be fear, distress, and the feeling of being lost. The empirical observations about affective attachments are then linked to the (Foucault-inspired) perspective of the governance of vulnerable populations. The emotional attachments of the overindebted can make them see themselves as failing and morally inferior to people who have managed to pay their debts, leading them to try to repay their debt at all costs. The paper seeks to open up a perspective ‘for a better understanding of how (self)control and (self)discipline among vulnerable people could be performed by morally modulated affects and emotions’. The author sees this perspective as relevant for analyses of other fields, such as the labour market, education, and health.

Mateusz Tomal’s article ‘The Endowment Effect and Housing Studies: The Role of Multiple Reference Points’ (2024) develops the theory endowment effect with the help of an online lab-in-the field experiment. The endowment effect refers to the phenomenon that people tend to value goods they own more than similar goods they could buy. Because of this the minimum price the seller of a good is willing to accept in a transaction is higher than the



price that the buyer is willing to pay. This general theory is applied to housing market transactions with a special focus on the reference points that both parties take into account when determining the acceptable price for selling or purchasing the good. In housing, location, initial purchase price, market value, the absence of a real estate agent's commission as well as social phenomena such as society's norm of homeownership and social comparisons figure as reference points. The article investigates the multiple reference points in housing and suggests that the results 'are central not only to housing research but also to the wider body of academic work analysing the endowment effect'.

Conclusion

Our call for papers resulted in three quite interesting but rather different articles from researchers representing different disciplinary backgrounds. Bengtsson and Grander's article (2024) contributes to the theory of corporatism, which to a large extent belongs to the jurisdiction of political science (though sociologists like Kemeny have also used it). Hoření Samec's article (2024) focusing conceptually on affects, emotion, and governance carries the imprint of contemporary sociological theorisation, where such concepts abound in varying research contexts. Tomal's article (2024) represents behavioural economics and its typical mode of actor-centred theorising. The three articles somewhat differ in what they are contributing to. Two of them seek to contribute to a relatively well-defined theory (Bengtsson and Grander 2024) or a theoretical problem (Tomal 2024), whereas the third one (Hoření Samec 2024) seeks to develop a novel perspective utilising different theoretical elements. A variety of backgrounds and approaches was something we had hoped for in our call for papers.

Hopefully these three exemplars of using the view from housing to develop theoretical insights that have relevance beyond housing will inspire other researchers to consider the wider implications of what they have discovered about housing.



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