

# What role theory can play in helping us to understand housing phenomena?

## Michael Guest – May 2019

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### 1. Introduction

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In contemporary society, housing is viewed as a basic need for social and economic development. It is acknowledged that there are different perceptions of housing, which Steggell et al., (2001) argue include housing as an object, a product or a process. It may also be viewed as a resource or a status symbol. King (2008) argues that there can be strong emotional connections to a house based on a perception of a house not as a physical dwelling but as a home. The point being that housing phenomena are complex, and need to be underpinned by logical and in-depth understanding of the myriad of factors which drive the outcomes of housing interventions (Clapham 2005; Franklin 2006).

Steggell et al., (2001; 2006) take a relatively straightforward view of theory, arguing that theory is useful in understanding phenomena and supporting critical thinking processes. Zizek (2001) implies that theory is more complex, as theoretical dispositions are fluid and dynamic, influenced and influencing society politics, religion and social mechanisms. Kohl (2018) makes the point that there is divided opinion in housing research with one argument stating that there is a shortage of broader social science theories within the bank of housing studies, whilst the other argument is that housing research lacks theories from the general social sciences.

This raises the question as to the role of housing theory in housing phenomena, with Clapham (2018) maintaining that housing policy should be based on theory and Steggell et al.,(2006) conceding that few of these theories are directly tested. Ruonavaara (2018) makes a similar point, arguing that effective housing policy needs to consider outside influences.

The aim of this report is to explore the role that theory can play in furthering understanding of housing phenomena.

## 2. Housing Phenomena

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According to Franklin (2006, p.1), the production of the built environment is a human and a social act. King (2009) makes the distinction between housing viewed as dwelling which equates to being settled and having a sense of belonging within this space, and housing in terms of policy which determines the volume and location of housing, as units of space. It is suggested in the first view, there is a sense of ownership and emotional attachment to a dwelling, whereas in the second housing is viewed as an essential provision, without consideration of the human emotional attachment to such space. Thus in the context of this report, housing phenomena considers the policy and theoretical view, within which housing phenomena are influenced and shaped by regulations and resources. The built environment therefore is a product of interconnecting factors ranging from spatial contexts and ideological positions, to political interventions. It is shaped and controlled by economic conditions and societal attitudes. As such to understand housing phenomena it is crucial to understand the society in which they have been created (Franklin 2006).

The United Kingdom (UK) is experiencing a severe housing shortage, with suggestions that such shortages will continue for the next few decades. There are a range of different factors which contribute to this problem including government social, economic and housing policies (Wilson and Barton 2018). It is argued that housing phenomena such as this crisis are determined by housing policy, which in the context of this report refers to “any action taken by government” to influence the housing sector (Clapham 2018,p.164). Bengtsson (2018) argues that housing phenomena is also influenced by governance of the housing sector involving a network of public and private organisations, resulting in policy interventions at national and local scales. Bengtsson (2001) refers to housing policy in terms of social justice, with two schools of thought, the first is that held by Nozick’s theory of social justice that the state should provide housing for lower income whereas as the second is universal housing policy, where the state should provide policies ensuring that housing is available to all types of households. Practical examples of housing phenomena such as the housing crisis indicate it is difficult to consider housing phenomena as a theory in isolation of other social, social justice and economic theories, as changes in one area will undoubtedly affect housing provision due to path dependency.

It is argued that to understand the ways in which theory can influence housing policy, it is important to set out the mechanisms used to drive such phenomena. In the UK, the

governments and their agencies influence housing phenomena through measures such as regulations which seek to limit the action of private actors and social practices in the housing market (Clapham 2005) and regulate behaviour through the use of instruments (Clapham 2018). Aside from regulation, Clapham (2018) argues that government influences housing phenomena through direct provision, subsidy, and information/guidance as well as accountability mechanisms. The question is whether, as suggested by Steggell et al., (2001), these are/should be underpinned/informed by appropriate theory.

### **3. The Nature of Theory**

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According to Malnar and Vodvarka (1992), the word theory originates from the Greek for looking within and outside oneself to understand the nature of knowledge and reality, and as a means of interpreting social phenomena. Steggell et al.,(2001) and Ruonavaara (2018) take the view that theory provides an essential and systematic view of a phenomenon, as such theory is essential in developing effective research methods and interpreting the findings of research.

According to Barnard (2000) there are four key elements to a fully formed theory, namely questions, assumptions, methods and evidence. This suggests that a fully developed theory needs to define variables (what is being explored/studied); relationship (how are these variables related); rationale (why these relationship matter and have an impact) and the boundary conditions (who is affected, when and where does this occur). Steggell et al.,(2001) add that theories can also be considered at different scales of a problem with for example macro-theories which relate to broad perspectives such as policy and the impact of the economy on housing or as micro-theories which are related to a specific period or group of people such as the provision of housing at a local level. Arguably there may be a meso-level such as regional or local governance of housing. In each case, the most useful theories are those that are founded on an extensive knowledge of previous theories and validated using empirical research (Steggell et al.,2006).

That said, Aalbers (2018) points out the weakness in Stegnell et al.'s, (2006) suggestion that theory provides clarity and focus, on the premise that theory is underpinned by ontological and epistemological positions (Benton and Carib 2001). However, Aalbers (2018) points out that the conceptualisation of what constitutes theory is ultimately

dependent on the researcher's ontological and epistemological position. This raises a query as to how, given the complex character of housing phenomena (Franklin 2006), theory can play a role in housing.

#### **4. Role of Theory In Housing**

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Theory is an essential requirement for reliable research as it facilitates the systematic organisation and synthesis of information, enabling the identification of relationships between variables whilst guiding the discovery of new facts so that research can be progressed. Without theory, research would be chaotic, directionless and lack purpose (Creswell and Creswell 2017; Steggell et al., 2006; O'Neill 1999).

That said, King (2009, p.41) points out that theorising on housing phenomena is rarely attempted because there is a view that it is "not an academic discipline, lacking its own concepts and methodologies", as such it is not possible to theorize from housing phenomena; it is only possible to use existing social theories in relation to these phenomena. In other words, there are volumes of research on housing theory which draws on existing social theories; however, there is little attempt to create theory which explains housing phenomena. This is not a new assertion, it reflects the points made by Kemeny (1992) who argued that housing studies have been confined to a narrow empiricism. Thus, Kemeny (1992) advocates the need for researchers to engage with concepts and theories that are common in disciplines such as sociology and politics but which are lacking in housing studies. Kemeny (1992) suggests that to develop the role of theory in housing, it was necessary for researchers to approach the subject from parent disciplines of sociology, politics and economics, as this would facilitate a reconceptualization of housing in relation to issues which drive/affect housing phenomena (King 2009; Bengtsson 2015).

It is argued that there is a role for theory in housing, however there is a lack of consensus on the way in which such a role is effectively achieved. Lawson (2018, p.235) maintains that housing theory offers researchers and the community/society, "an important way of examining and understanding how housing issues arise and what can be done about them". Philosophical theories relating to the nature of housing are important to the conduct of research, because such discussions articulate both an ontological view of housing systems and an epistemological strategy on the optimal way to examine these

systems. The difficulty is that these views are not always clearly articulated or justified. In other words, theories can be parochial, ignoring the dynamic social relationships which affect the context of a phenomenon. Ruanovaara (2018) makes a similar point, suggesting that theory needs to explain, interpret and consider social entities to ensure a robust theoretical position.

As previously suggested, there are different approaches to the development of theory which is pertinent to housing phenomena, including deduction and induction. Deduction takes a top-down approach, moving from “theory to fact” (Stegnell et al., 2006, p.7) and associated with quantitative reasoning and analysis, starts with a theory and a hypothesis based on that theory. The facts are then tested to ascertain if there is support for the theory (Saunders et al., 2009). This approach is related to the Positivist view of reality and knowledge and is typically used to underpin housing economics (Aalbers 2018). However this approach can also provide a distorted view of housing phenomena, as there is no consideration of social impacts of such policies. In contrast in induction, the process is reversed, as it is process which moves from “the specific to the general, from fact to theory” (Stegnell et al., 2006, p.7). In this bottom-up process, qualitative reasoning and analysis are used to discover facts and arrange these facts into the patterns of a theory (Saunders et al., 2009). The difficulty is that neither reflect the complexity of housing phenomena, therefore have limited value in promoting the role of theory in housing.

Clapham (2018) agrees, adding housing research is based on some form of theory, however the real problem is lack of clarity of theoretical assumptions and concepts. Clapham (2018) highlights the importance of theories of the policy process itself in determining research approaches, suggesting there are different forms of action available ranging from rational, political to structural models, each of which is linked to specific research approaches. For example, a rationalist approach to policy is based on research of social issues, which in turn should be progressed using positivist empirical research including but not limited to cost-benefit analysis. In contrast the political model should be founded on a social constructionist approach including discourse analysis, whilst the structuralist model focuses policy based issues relating to class and gender, which necessitate a realist approach (Clapham 2018). However, Darcy (2018) suggests that this approach is overly focused on the Positivist view of research. The real debate therefore is whether there is a specific type of theory which has a role to play in housing theory.

Allen (2018) notes that it is difficult to apply housing theory to housing phenomena because of definitional difficulties as suggested Ruonavaara (2018) and Clapham (2018). However Allen (2018,p.200) adds that this assertion could be applied to all forms of theory, not just housing, on the premise that all objects are embedded in society, and as such it is impossible to “isolate them from the societal features that shape them” (Allen 2018, p.200). Bengtsson (2018) contributes to this discussion, suggesting that theory related to housing is typically focused on adapting general social science perspectives to the special characteristics of housing, which in turn give rise to different theories of housing each of which reflects the different disciplines underpinning such theories. The difficulty is the quest for a single theory on housing, when in reality theories should reflect the multifaceted nature of the externalities which affect housing phenomena. It is argued that such a position is in keeping with the aforementioned views expressed by Kemeny (1992).

Ruonavaara (2018) also argues for a grand theory on housing, taking the view that housing must be theorized in terms of its embeddedness in society and societal mechanisms, considering a range of perspectives such as those of political economy and cultural economy, as well as class relations, provided researchers use social theory to situate housing in its wider political economic and social context and develop theories based on the experience of housing from a variety of political and economic as well as social contexts.

## **5. The Role of Theory in Housing Phenomena**

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It is argued that housing policy is in place to drive housing phenomena whilst housing research and theory is to influence policy and other social scientists (Aalbers and Christophers 2014). Somerville (2018) makes a similar argument, that it is important to distinguish between “grand theories of housing”, which are based on generalized relationships between housing and wider society, and more specific theories of housing, attempting to found theory on historically and geographically specific housing processes and systems (Somerville 2018, p.244). It is also possible to develop theories which seek correlations between variables and those which seek to make sense of the human experience of housing phenomena. The reality is that housing is highly diverse, which reduces the viability of grand theories. At the same time such grand theories can be useful in formulating general social theory to explain housing processes (Somerville 2018,

p.245). King (2010, p.13) acknowledges that there is a gap between theory and practice in housing, adding the need for rigorous development of theoretical positions otherwise such theories are not “applicable in a policy context”.

According to Blessing (2018, p.211) there is a clear divide between theory and the practical issues which affect housing phenomena. For example, social scientists who have never left academia have the ability to “develop brilliant concepts and theories to elucidate housing phenomena”. In some cases this can provide a useful objective view of a problem which is illusive to those caught up in the practical issues of the day. Clapham (2018) agrees that theorists are generally academics, many of whom are reluctant to engage in policy-making, as this could prejudice the purity of theoretical enquiry. At the same time, it is conceded that experienced policy-makers and practitioners in housing phenomena have a sophisticated understanding of such issues which could generate robust concepts and theories. The inference being that there is a missed opportunity in housing theory, with little opportunity to develop shared concepts specific to housing (Blessing 2018, p.213).

## **6. Conclusion**

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Housing phenomena are complex, with a wide range of interdependent variables which influence housing policy and outcomes. From a policy perspective, it is clear that phenomena such as housing strategies, supply and demand are failing in the UK and there is a perception that governments lacks control in this sector. At the same time, there is a view that theory can be useful in understanding concepts and in explaining the links and relationship between variables which affect such outcomes. This would suggest that theory has a role in housing phenomena. However, this report finds that there is a lack of consensus on the nature of that role, which it is submitted, is due to the complex mix of social, political and economic factors which drive both housing phenomena and academic research.

There appear to be two main theoretical positions: the first is that theory should focus on individual aspects of housing and the second is that as there is no single theory which can reflect the intricacies of housing phenomena, there is a need for an all- encompassing approach drawing on existing social, political and economic theories. It is also noted that there is a clear divide between the development of theory and the application of such

theories in housing policies and strategies. That said, it is concluded that theory has an important role in housing phenomena through its continued exploration of the variables which drive housing phenomena, as ultimately this does increase understanding of the complexity of these issues.

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