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Theory of Housing, From Housing, About Housing

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ABSTRACT *Four positions concerning theorising housing-related phenomena are discussed. (1) Theory of housing_(v1): It is possible and desirable to construct a theory of housing to which all housing-related research topics can be related. (2) Theory about housing: It is not possible, nor desirable to try to construct a theory of housing; one should rather apply theoretical resources developed in established disciplines and research fields in theorising housing-related topics. (3) Theory from housing: It is possible and desirable to theorise housing by scrutinising the nature of housing as a special activity and experience. (4) Theory of housing_(v2): It is possible and desirable to construct a theory about the invariable relationships between features of the housing system and features of society. Theory of housing_(v1) is shown to be questionable basically due to the fact that housing is not a research topic but a common denominator of various topics. Theory about housing is acceptable with the qualification that housing research can feed back to more general theorising. Theory from housing offers a limited perspective on theorising but it can serve as a necessary check to other theorising. Problems with Theory of housing_(v2) have to do with the balance between abstract generalisation and concrete empirical/historical analysis.*

KEY WORDS: Theory, Theorization, Housing, Housing research, Kemeny

Introduction

Housing is a rather many-faceted topic. In English language literature it is common to point out that the word “housing” is both a noun and a verb. Housing is a material object, a good that can be manufactured and demolished, produced and consumed, perceived and experienced, bought and sold. Let us call this housing_(M), the material side of housing. At the same time “housing” can refer to people getting “housed”, that is, getting access to housing_(M). Let us call this housing_(A), the sum of activities that people themselves and others in a society do to provide housing_(M) to the population. The “housing question” that preoccupied the radicals and the reformists in the early years of industrialization was the question of housing_(A), especially the disadvantaged part of the population, though the quality of housing_(M) was also at issue.

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In the English language one and the same word seems to refer to both the actions of social actors and the material products of these actions. There is also another word, “dwelling” that is both a verb and a noun and also has a rather similar double meaning. It refers both to the people being in and doing activities in their houses and apartments as well as the houses and apartments themselves. So there is quite a lot of complexity in the everyday language concerning what is summarily called “housing” – even if the third, closely related word “home” with its various complexities is not taken into account. In other languages similar double meanings are to be found, as with “logement” and “maison” in French, whereas still other languages make distinctions between different aspects of the housing complex, like “Wohnen” and “Wohnung” in German.

The linguistic ambiguity of “housing” and “dwelling” is not in itself a proof of the many-faceted nature of housing but I think it nevertheless is symptomatic of its complex nature. This paper approaches the complexity of housing in social research. The hallmark of good social research is that it attempts to theorize what it researches. In this paper, I consider what kind of theorization would be fruitful in social research on housing. I shall first discuss three different positions concerning theory in housing research and then add one more, a variant of the first position. The argument here is based largely on past discussions in *Housing, Theory and Society*.

The positions are about the possibility and desirability of different ways of theorizing in research on housing-related topics. What is a housing-related topic is by no means obvious. To me questions concerning neighbour relations are housing-related but not all researchers seem to think so. Of course these issues have to do with local community, and community studies are not always seen predominantly as housing studies. Some housing topics have multiple affiliations. This is a question I will return to later. An approximation of what is housing-related could be something like this: a topic of research is housing-related if its description entails a reference to housing_(M) or housing_(A) as well as environments in which these are embedded. According to this definition housing choice, home-making, homelessness, the history and organization of social housing, housing equity release, residential segregation, squatting, self-building, privatization of public rental stock, housing policy, neighbouring, neighbourhood community, et cetera are all housing-related topics.

The positions are formulated around a *modal* question of possibility and a *normative* question of desirability. Possibility has to be understood in a special, non-absolute sense. As theories are hypothetical constructions based on a mixture of the researcher’s imagination, concepts and ideas drawn from previous research and empirical knowledge, theories to cover all ranges of phenomena on all levels of generality are, in principle, possible. It is probably possible for an ambitious researcher to *try* to work out a universal theory attempting to account for the whole range of social entities, relations and processes in some field of interest. The real question is whether such an enterprise is worth the effort. So what is possible refers here to the likelihood of that kind of theorization to be successful. A claim that a particular mode of theorizing is impossible means that the likelihood of successful theorizing in that mode is judged to be low. What is possible and what is desirable are in fact two different dimensions: something that is desirable is not necessarily possible and vice versa.

The first position outlined here has been critically scrutinized in previous discussions of theory in housing studies (see e.g. Allen 2005; Somerville 2005). I see it as a baseline position to which other positions largely juxtapose themselves. This I call

theory of housing_(v1), the subscript implying a second use of the term to which I will return below.

Theory of housing_(v1): It is possible and desirable to construct a theory of housing that encompasses all housing-related research topics.

So this is a kind of general, or even *grand* (cf. Mills [1980] 1959), theory of housing. Though I see this as a baseline in discussions concerning theory in housing studies, it is not easy to find a researcher who would pursue such a position. It is perhaps more a theoretical possibility to which other researchers have reacted. There is, however, another more modest way of understanding theory of housing which will surface later in this paper.

The second position is one that denies the possibility and desirability of a grand theory of housing. Housing should be theorized using the theoretical resources taken from elsewhere. King has called this the established view about theory in housing studies (King 2009). I shall call this theory *about* housing.

Theory about housing: It is not possible, nor desirable to try to construct a theory of housing; one can and should rather apply theoretical resources developed in parent disciplines and inter-disciplinary research fields in theorising housing-related topics.

The second position says categorically there cannot be any such thing as “housing theory” but this has been questioned in the debate. The third position, which I will call theory *from* housing, states that there *can* be theories of housing but they are not of the kind that the first position states. It is thus a reaction to the other two positions.

Theory from housing: it is possible and desirable to theorise housing by scrutinizing the nature of housing as special activity and experience; such a theory is different in scope and level from the one posited by the theory of housing_(v1) position.

This position has two rather different versions; “scrutinizing” can involve reflection on our everyday use and experience of housing or analysis of the specificity of housing as a research topic.

In the following, I will first discuss theory from housing and theory about housing and then come back to discuss the baseline position, theory of housing_(v1) – and also a more modest version of it, theory of housing_(v2). I will also present some arguments and observations about the nature of housing as a research topic and its implications for theorizing housing.

Before going further, though, I should clarify the framework for my discussion of theorizing. Housing studies is a multidisciplinary field of research comprised of research in sociology, psychology, economics, anthropology, history, planning, architecture, philosophy and other academic and professional disciplines. As my background is in sociology my discussion is focused on social theory. There is, however, one difficulty in this focus. Everyone educated in the social sciences knows the word “theory” and has some grasp of what kind of things it refers to, but the word is used in many different ways (see e.g. Abend 2008), usually related to each other but not

exactly the same. So a specification of what is meant by theory here is needed. Let us first assume that everything that social researchers want to theorize can be summarized with the terms “social entities”, “relations” (between them) and “processes” (involving entities in relations). Then:

Social theory: a discourse that consists of a set of linked (a) concepts and (b) propositions to be used for hypothetical (i) re-description, (ii) explanation and (iii) interpretation of all or some subset of social entities, relations and processes.

So the concepts and propositions provide (i) redescription of social entities, relations and processes relevant to the conceptual scheme designed (redescription), (ii) hypotheses of *why* and *how* these are as they are (explanation), as well as (iii) ideas about their meaning in the cultural and social context in which they exist (interpretation).

I believe this is a conception of theory many social researchers can accept as an approximation of what “theory” means. It is a moderately liberal conception that nevertheless excludes some other conceptions, for example, those that say that theory is just concepts and redescription (e.g. Corbin and Strauss 2008), as well as those that say that theory is just explanatory (causal) propositions (e.g. Merton 1968, 39). Moreover, it sets only three tasks for theorizing: redescription,¹ explanation and interpretation.

Not Theory of, But About, Housing

Jim Kemeny is perhaps the most well-known proponent of the view that there can be no such thing as theory of housing, just theories that are applied to housing phenomena. In his book from 1992, “Housing and Social Theory”, Kemeny criticized housing studies for neglecting the theoretical debates in the various social science disciplines and keeping itself in a special housing studies bubble into which outside influences reached only belatedly. For this reason housing studies tended to “reinvent the wheel”, that is, come up with “new” ideas that had been long ago discovered elsewhere. One reason for this was, according to Kemeny, how multidisciplinary work was conducted in housing studies. Researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds united around the “smallest common denominator”, the empirical issues at hand, concepts that all understood and accepted, general ideas that were rather commonplace. The problem Kemeny saw in multidisciplinary work in housing studies at the time of writing was that it was of the wrong kind. It was leading to a theory-poor research that is “adisciplinary” rather than multidisciplinary. Kemeny’s remedy to this malaise was for researchers to go back to their parent disciplines, search there for theoretical concepts and ideas drawn from the constitutive ideas of the disciplines, and catch up with the current theoretical debates. However, this “back to disciplines” programme did not mean that Kemeny was opposed to interdisciplinary research. On the contrary, he thought that such research would “in the long run” (i.e. after the return to disciplines) be enriching to housing research.

But does this mean that housing studies is just a Serresian parasite that just utilizes theory from other fields and never gives anything back?² This is not what Kemeny thinks. He writes:

Housing research needs both to draw more extensively from debates and theories in the social sciences and to contribute to such debates with studies of housing. (Kemeny 1992, 17)

But are housing studies capable of contributing in these ways? If one example is enough to prove this, Kemeny's own work is a good one. Kemeny argued in his 1981 book "The Myth of Home Ownership" that countries where home ownership dominates generally have a poorly developed welfare system whereas countries where non-profit rental housing is dominant or very significant usually have a well-developed public welfare system (see also Kemeny 2005a). This idea came to be called the Kemeny Thesis, and it was taken up, discussed and tested more systematically by welfare state researchers, especially Stephen Castles and his team (Castles and Ferrera 1996; Castles 1998; see also Conley and Gifford 2006; Stamsø 2010; Doling and Horsewood 2011; Stebbing and Spies-Butcher 2016). Generally the Kemeny Thesis has received support in the empirical analyses though not all have shared the interpretation that Kemeny (and Castles) provided for the relationship (see Delfani, De Deken, and Dewilde 2014).

However, in this case the contribution could have been even more challenging. Kemeny was disappointed about the reception of "The Myth of Home Ownership" (see Kemeny 1992, xiii). Commentators seemed to have focused only on the home ownership and welfare issue when that was only one part of the argument. The dominance of home ownership was not a separate feature of home-owning societies but a part and an expression of their privatized social structure. According to Kemeny, home-owning societies are, apart from a substantial home ownership sector, characterized by dispersed urban structure, women's domestic role, private car transport and still other features. The other type of societies that Kemeny called cost-renting societies were, apart from a substantial (publicly subsidized) rental sector, also characterized by compact urban structure, public transport, women's employment and other features. These societies had a collectivized social structure. This approach is well in line with Kemeny's emphasis on the *embeddedness of housing*: housing is an integral part of society that should not be seen as separate from the social structure (which for Kemeny is also cultural). My point here is that in this case the reception of Kemeny's work in a way disembedded housing from society by not recognizing the more "grand" theoretical hypothesis about different socio-cultural structures of home owning and cost-renting societies.

In the case of "Myth of Home Ownership", theoretical ideas raised from a comparison of a handful of housing systems fed ideas into research more generally interested in the nature of welfare states. Also the response from welfare state studies helped Kemeny to reorient his research on the differences and similarities of housing systems (see Kemeny 1995). It can be argued that the recent work on housing equity and its importance for welfare provision (see especially Doling and Elsinga 2013) is making similar contributions, though in this case one important theoretical impulse has come from outside housing studies, from the theory of asset-based welfare (see Lennartz and Ronald 2017). In this sense, this research is to some degree following the road seen desirable by Kemeny, first taking general ideas on welfare to theorize and investigate housing-related topics, and then returning with own findings to the general discussion. Or perhaps, the links are even more reciprocal; researchers have first picked up Kemeny's ideas, then discovered something related or linked to them in welfare state theory and then come back to housing issues.

It is perhaps ironic that in a discussion concerning the “Kemeny Thesis”, Peter Somerville criticized Kemeny himself for advancing a general “housing theory”. Somerville’s understanding of “housing theory” is somewhat different from what in the beginning of the paper was called theory of housing_(v1), the position criticized by Kemeny. Let us call Somerville’s interpretation of Kemeny’s thinking theory of housing_(v2)

Theory of housing_(v2): It is possible and desirable to construct a theory about the invariable relationship between features of housing systems (housing_(M) and housing_(A)) and features of society.

Somerville sees in Kemeny’s generalization about housing systems and welfare states one instance of theory of housing_(v2). Such a theory is to Somerville wrong (or at least suspect), because housing is embedded in the “wider networks of social relations” to such an extent that ideas about general relations between characteristics of housing system and those of society become “virtually meaningless”. Features of housing systems as well as their meanings in cultural and social contexts are historically and culturally specific so that not much very general can be said about them. Somerville discusses the example of home ownership in Britain and Bangladesh; the meaning of this type of tenure is very different in these societies (c.f. Ruonavaara 1993). In his response to this critique, Kemeny admits certain crudeness in his thesis but considers Somerville’s emphasis on historical and cultural specificity exaggerated: “Taken to its logical conclusion, the argument leads to a conceptual paralysis and to research spiralling downwards in ever-increasing circles towards greater and greater detail and less and less generalizability” (Kemeny 2005b, 92). I will return to this point later.

There is Also Theory *From* Housing (In Two Versions)

In the previous section, I described the position that one of the leading philosophers in housing studies, Peter King, calls the *established view* on theorizing in housing studies: there cannot be a theory of housing. However, the grounds for the established view have not yet been explained. The established view is based on the idea that housing is a non-academic field that lacks its own concepts and methodologies – and therefore, researchers must be content with applying theories developed elsewhere to housing phenomena (King 2009). Another argument linked with this focuses on the interdependence of housing with other fields of society: there can be no housing theory as housing is so deeply embedded within society (see e.g. Allen 2005 or Somerville 2005). King thinks that, while both points are valid they do not justify the denial of the possibility of theory of housing.

King points out that the embeddedness of housing in a wider social context is no argument for not being able to theorize it. After all, most topics of interest to social scientists are embedded in a social context, so if embeddedness would be a reason for not being able to theorize some object of research, no other theories than those of the “social” would really be possible (King 2009). That is indeed a position not many would support. Successful special theories tailored for specific research objects, like social problems or social stratification, do exist. Moreover, there are powerful arguments for developing just such theories (cf. the contemporary renaissance of Robert Merton’s idea of “theories of the middle range”; see e.g. Hedström

and Udehn 2009). So King's counter-argument develops a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*: accepting Kemeny's embeddedness argument leads to a conclusion that is clearly not the case. I think King is right in this.

The other major argument for the established view is also on weak ground. Why should the fact that housing is not a discipline prevent researchers from theorizing housing? Social problems and social stratification are not disciplines, yet there are many theories supporting successful research programmes about both (cf. Clapham 2009, 5).

In King's view housing is indeed an object that can be theorized, but the theory is of a different kind from the one defined in my baseline position. It is not primarily a theory *of* housing but rather theory *from* housing. It is focused on the resident's perception, experience and activity as housed, as a user and consumer of housing. Its focus is a specific aspect of housing_(A) that King calls *private dwelling*: the "activity in which we use dwellings to meet our ends and fulfil our interests, to such an extent that this singular dwelling becomes meaningful to us" (King 2009, 42). Theory is derived from a close analysis of the activity and experience of residents, something that could be called a phenomenology of housing experience. King has pursued this line of analysis in several publications (see e.g. King 2004, 2008).

For an empirically-oriented researcher this suggests an approach similar to grounded theory (see e.g. Corbin and Strauss 2008). A grounded theory sees the patient and recurring "microscopic" analysis of empirical data as the way to generate theory. The researcher approaches the data with the intention of abstracting and generalizing conceptual categories from the observations she or he makes in the analysis. With repeated rounds of analysis the abstractions are refined and they start to form a system of linked categories that in the end provide a theoretical interpretation of the research object. However, how King describes his approach is nowhere near this description.

King is careful not to call his approach a method, and he maintains that it is not scientific. After all, the subtitle of his book "Private Dwelling" (2004) is *Contemplating the use of housing*, not *analysing* it. His approach is unashamedly subjectivist as his central point is that the experience and use of housing *is* personal and subjective. In that book he juxtaposes his approach to one that attempts to theorize the object. However, in the 2009 article I have been citing, King's view is somewhat different. He advocates there theorizing from housing as an approach that can provide us with concepts and ideas that are original, not imported from established disciplines outside housing studies. The problem with this kind of theorizing is, however, the same as a problem often associated with grounded theory. It produces concepts and categories but this is not seen to be enough for theorizing. Referring to King's ideas, Clapham writes: "A theory requires an understanding of the way that concepts relate together to help us to understand why something is as it is or why something happens" (Clapham 2009, 5). In terms of this paper: conceptualization is one part of theorizing and presenting propositions providing theoretical explanation and interpretation is the other part.

Clapham is surely an empirically-oriented researcher and his version of theory from housing makes at least an implicit reference to grounded theory-like theorizing: "There is a need for concepts *grounded* in the experience of the relationship between people and the house in which they live" (Clapham 2009, 8; italics added). However, before moving to Clapham's version of theory from housing, some specific features of King's version have to be discussed. So: what social entities, relations and

processes do researchers theorize when they theorize housing? I guess King would answer: the activity and experience of people using housing. King is well aware that this focus “limits the field of housing studies” (King 2009, 48) and leads to “the risk of being disconnected, of not being properly *embedded* in the field” [of housing studies] (King 2009, 50). He adds that his focus is something that can be profitably looked at alongside of “the more established approaches” (King 2009, 51). So in this case theorizing from housing is applicable to a rather limited set of housing-related topics. Most housing researchers do not deal with the activity and experience of private dwelling but with what King calls, in my view misleadingly, housing policy: “the concern for the production, consumption, management and maintenance of a stock of dwellings” (King 2009, 42). It can be inferred that King thinks that “housing policy” is something that is dependent on theory developed outside housing studies – unless it can apply insights about phenomenology of dwelling. So King thinks that Kemeny is right about the mainstream housing studies: they indeed are in need of theoretical enlightenment coming from outside housing research.

Clapham has presented another version of theory from housing based on an idea of a proto-theoretical focus on the phenomenon of housing itself (2009, 5).³ He accepts King’s idea of theorizing from people’s experience of housing but also points out another way of theorizing from housing: “one needs to make the case for housing to be different enough to justify a theory of its own” (Clapham 2009, 5). Clapham illustrates the point by making reference to economics. Economists have pointed out that housing is a commodity that defies all the standard assumptions of mainstream economic theory, and he suspects that this would be the case in other disciplines as well. The uniqueness of housing would make a kind of theory of housing possible but this would not be a particularly strong theory:

To cut housing theory making off from other fields and disciplines in general is to run the risk of seeing housing in isolation from wider social processes and structures. 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)

Here theorizing from housing is seen to require a cautious stance towards reliance on general theoretical assumptions about people’s economic behaviour, their relation to their environment, meanings they attach to material artefacts, their weak and strong social ties, choice behaviour, et cetera. Housing *may* be special, and the specificity can be approached by contemplating the housing experience or by analysing conceptually the nature of housing with regard to the topic investigated.

Clapham sees theorizing from housing as a bottom-up approach that can be contrasted with top-down approaches (drawn from other disciplines and fields). There is, in my mind, also the possibility of turning the top and bottom the other way round: theoretical contemplation or grounded-theory analysis of housing might lead to a meta-theoretical starting point to be fleshed out by other kinds of theories, applications of general theories or middle-range theories developed for other topics. What the meta-theoretical starting point could be is rather clearly but quite generally stated by Clapham: the relationship between individuals and their housing and its environment (Clapham 2009, 5, 8).

But is There Such a Thing as Theory of Housing_(v1)?

The discussion so far has been based on an idea that there, indeed, have been attempts to construct a theory of housing to which all housing-related research topics can be related. Here, my interest is in social theories that are about entities, relations and processes. The double meanings of “housing” definitely refer to both social entities, relations and processes, and so does the research on housing-related topics. The question now is whether these entities, relations and processes can be theorized as one whole. To simplify a bit: can there be theories of housing that speak of the same subject matter with different paradigmatic assumptions, like there are theories of, for example, social problems or social stratification. In research on social problems there are functionalist and constructionist theories. In research on social stratification there are Marxist, Weberian and Bourdieuan theories. The point here is that, while quite different, these theoretical approaches concern, more or less, the same, relatively well-defined object of theorizing. In the case of social problems the object consists of those personal problems that are seen in a society as worthy of political intervention. In the case of stratification the object is the division of people in social positions with differing economic rewards, social power and prestige. In these examples the different theories attempt to theorize the same *theoretical object*. The question is now, does housing constitute a coherent theoretical object. That would need a conceptualization that covers all kinds of housing-related topics.

There are indeed, frameworks that link together those entities in what King calls housing policy – “production, consumption, management and maintenance of a stock of dwellings” – thereby covering much of the field of housing studies. I shall look at one such theoretical approach, developed by Michael Ball, Michael Harloe and others focusing on what they called “structures of housing provision” (see especially Ball 1986). Theoretically, that kind of work focused on developing the structures concept for the analytical redescription of the elements of housing provision and the social relations that were embedded in the structure these elements constituted. The resulting frameworks attempted to map all the elements of the housing provision chain: promotion, finance, construction, distribution, consumption, management, et cetera, as well as the social relations inherent to these elements. Explanations of the development of the structures were usually drawn from a Marx-inspired theory of capitalism (see e.g. Harloe’s explanation of the dominance of home ownership in Britain; Harloe 1981). The provision thesis was criticized by Kemeny for not actually being able to produce a coherent (Marxist) theory of housing provision but rather just putting the focus on the production aspect of housing that the thesis proponents thought had been neglected by the established consumption- and policy-centred approaches (see Kemeny 1987).

Answering to the various critics of the provision thesis who allegedly had got the whole idea wrong, Ball and Harloe (1992) emphasized that the thesis is actually *not a theory*, and specifically not a theory of housing, but a meta-theoretical framework for different kinds of analyses of issues of housing provision. This suggests that on the most general level of analysis one should always start from mapping the structure of social relations of housing provision but after that the researcher is free to theorize the structure as she or he wishes. This is perhaps not the original idea of the proponents of the housing provision thesis but indeed, the practice that at least some of them adopted. For example, Harloe’s (1995) *magnum opus* on social housing, “The People’s Home”, ends with theoretical reflections that are drawn not from some

ideas inherent in the housing provision thesis, nor from Marxist theory of capitalism, but from welfare state theory. So: the housing provision thesis is theory in the sense that it provides a conceptual dissection of the housing system, but theoretical explanations and interpretations have to be drawn from other theories. It hardly qualifies as a theory of housing v_1 or v_2 in the sense discussed here. Moreover, the housing provision thesis is not a good candidate for a theory of housing v_1 or v_2 because it has next to nothing to say about the micro-level of housing, the questions that King and also Clapham consider central.

Theories concerning the housing provision process on a macro-sociological scale are, in fact, rather rare. More often housing researchers theorize questions that are relevant to some more limited aspect of the housing provision chain. For example, there is a lively research field concerning the development of social housing organizations employing the concept of *hybridity* to refer to a process where providers of non-profit rental housing increasingly engage themselves in commercial provision of housing (see e.g. Blessing 2012). The hybridization theory is quite specific and concerns only one stage of the housing provision chain (distribution) and a specific aspect of it. This I think is true of any stage of the housing provision chain: each of them prompts detailed special questions for which any theory of housing systems alone is too general to provide theoretical insights.

The Real Reason Why the Idea of Theory Of Housing $_{v_1}$ is Problematic

In the previous section, I have raised doubts about whether too much of theory of housing $_{(v_1)}$ is something to be concerned about. There might not be many such theories but that does not in itself mean that such theorizing would be impossible or undesirable. However, I think Kemeny and others sharing the received view may have a point, but why this would be so is for a somewhat different reason from what they have presented. It is not because housing studies is not a discipline with its own concepts and theories. Studies of social problems or social stratification are not disciplines either, but in these research areas concepts can be formulated and explanatory statements made. As King pointed out, theory of housing $_{(v_2)}$ cannot be ruled out because housing is embedded in society. All topics in social sciences are embedded in society.

The basic reason for being suspect about theory of housing $_{(v_1)}$ is that housing itself is not a research topic but a common denominator of a number of research topics: housing policy, housing provision, housing organizations, housing choice, housing mobility, housing tenures, uses and meanings of housing, housing inequalities, and more. There is no one “theoretical object”. Rather there are many theoretical objects linked with housing, and theorizing them is more or less connected with theoretical debates elsewhere. There is little hope for uniting all of these into a single theoretical framework although brave attempts are now and then made (see McNelis 2016). It is sensible to theorize the different housing topics with different concepts and ideas, drawing theoretical resources from disciplines and related research fields. And I would not rule out philosophical contemplation, conceptual analysis and grounded theorization of the housing phenomenon from the resources available in theorizing about housing-related topics.

In many cases, the issue is that research on housing can just as well be seen as belonging in some more general field. For example, a great deal of recent research on home ownership in Europe and Australia has focused on housing equity: how

equity is made use of by owner-occupiers (Naumanen and Ruonavaara 2016), how equity is distributed between different social groups (Norris and Winston 2012), to what extent households perceive housing wealth as providing security at old age (Naumanen, Perista, and Ruonavaara 2012), whether governments are starting to reformulate welfare policies towards housing asset-based welfare (Doling and Ronald 2010). These questions have centrally to do with housing and therefore, they can be seen to fall into the scope of housing research. However, some of these questions can just as well be seen as belonging to more established and more general subfields of social sciences, such as economic sociology, as well as to research on inequality: the behaviour of households with regard to housing equity and the unequal distribution of housing assets. The question of whether there is a trend towards housing asset-based welfare provision or not is equally a part of a more general analysis of trends in welfare provision, falling within the purview of social policy (in my own country a distinct discipline from sociology) or political sociology.

The above examples are from research topics that I am familiar with but other good examples can be drawn from other topics falling under the wide umbrella of housing studies. Research on housing movements in present-day Spain (Di Feliciano 2017) can draw from social movement theory as well as theories of neoliberalism –and hopefully contribute to them. The lens can be turned the other way round, too. A study of the decline of local community in the working class suburbs of Helsinki, Finland, during the twentieth century (Anttila 2015) utilizes theories of local community that are not strictly about housing – but it would be awkward not to allow that research at least partly under the umbrella of housing studies as it deals quite centrally with neighbour relations, a housing topic to me. This fluidity of affiliation in terms of research specialisms suggests that boundaries of theorization may be just as fluid: sometimes a housing topic is theorized by a framework that employs housing-related terms, sometimes with one that does not do so. For the business of redescription, explanation or interpretation of a topic it makes little difference what discipline or specialty the theory is affiliated to.

The nature of housing as a *non-topic* is the basic reason for being suspicious about theory of housing_(v1). But suspicion is not a statement of what is impossible, it is a judgement about what strategy of theorizing is worth pursuing. It is actually a normative statement. The paper began with defining three, or actually four, stylized positions about theory in housing studies, each saying something about what kind of theorization is possible and desirable in social studies of housing. My concluding discussion will alter the terms of the arguments presented. The question of possibility is discarded, and the normative question will be raised as central. And as often is the case, there is no definite answer to this normative question.

Conclusion

The question about whether there *can* be a theory of housing or not boils down to whether it is possible to develop a “grand theory” of housing that could be applied to all the diverse topics investigated by housing researchers or whether those diverse topics should be theorized with the help of theoretical ideas developed in the mother disciplines of housing researchers (like sociology or geography) as well as the various multidisciplinary research specialisms that are more general than just housing studies (like e.g. planning or welfare state research). This debate is to some extent similar to what was in the past discussed in historical sociology. There was

a long-standing debate between those who advocated a historical sociology building on universal social theories (like rational choice theory) and those who saw an approach based on historically grounded theorizing as more valid (see Mahoney 2004 for a review of the questions debated). Part of this debate was framed in terms of whether general theory is possible or not (in historical social science). The debate on the theory of housing can be seen as one about the possibility of certain kinds of theory. I see this way of framing the question as misleading.

In the case of universal theorization in historical sociology the cost of parsimony and generalization required for such “grand” theorization is the inevitable lack of attention to historical detail and specificity. Taking seriously the time and place of social processes is, however, what an historical approach in sociology attempts to do. The benefit of non-historical general theorizing, if and when successful, is of course simplicity and explanatory power. Historically grounded theorization also has its merits and drawbacks, and they are just the mirror image of those of general theorizing. I have called the choice between theoretical generality and attention to historical specificity the dilemma of historical sociology (see Ruonavaara 2009).⁴ Whether you emphasize theoretical abstraction and generalization or attention to historical detail and specificity has consequences for the style of theorization.

The debate on theory in housing research can be seen as quite similar to the one described above. It is, in fact, a question of what style of theorizing is likely to be successful at what theories are supposed to do. There are two kinds of grand theory of housing that have surfaced in my discussion. The first is defined in the introduction: a *theory of* (everything in) *housing*. I have raised serious doubts about the fruitfulness of such a theory based on the very nature of housing as a non-topic. Moreover, I am not sure anyone has really attempted to construct such a theory. The most recent explicit attempt to create a theory of housing on the basis of the idea of functional collaboration and multidisciplinary does not seem to be as comprehensive as this and in this stage of development it lacks substance (McNelis 2016). However, there was also another understanding of what theory of housing could mean, one that the critic of “housing theory”, Jim Kemeny, was perhaps inappropriately accused of representing. What I called theory of housing_(v2) presents theoretical hypotheses about general causal connections between features of a housing system and other social phenomena. An example would be a (probably now outdated) theoretical hypothesis that an increase in working class home ownership decreases working class political radicalism. Being at present a resident in a somewhat gentrified working class neighbourhood with owner-occupied detached housing where the labour organizations’ club house used to be called Little Moscow, I might be suspicious of whether the hypothesis is historically true. Are there not many intervening factors concerning the local housing markets, the specific nature of urban home ownership in Finland, the local political culture, et cetera that make it so that the alleged relationship was not there? This is precisely the point that Somerville makes. And Kemeny’s answer is one that points to the historical sociology’s dilemma: researchers have to ignore some of the specific features of the empirical world if they are to generalize at all (and theory is always general to some extent).

However, the alternatives are surely not between theorizing universal relations between variables and not theorizing at all. In his book “Political Psychology”, Norwegian social scientist Jon Elster criticized approaches that sought to advance social science through construction of universal theories “such as historical materialism, Parsonsian sociology, or the theory of economic equilibrium” (Elster 1993, 2).

Instead of theories with an illusionary claim to universality, researchers should use their energies in enriching the repertoire of *causal mechanisms* that are not as universal as general theories but are more general than empirical descriptions. There are many definitions of mechanism around nowadays, but what the concept generally refers to are patterns of actions and interactions between entities that regularly produce an outcome of interest.⁵ Mechanisms are portable, meaning that they can be detected in many different situations but they are not universal. Researchers cannot always specify the contexts in which they are triggered, and often they can discover them *ex post facto*. Theorizing in terms of mechanism is a middle-way between universal theorizing and empirical historical description (see Bengtsson and Hertting 2014).

What is interesting is that Kemeny's account of the Really Big Trade-Off between home ownership and welfare state *does* include elements of a hypothetical mechanism that produces the outcome (see e.g. Kemeny 2005a), though these are not systematically developed into an account of the mechanism. The following is how Kemeny elaborates the relationship between home ownership and welfare states. In societies dominated by home ownership, young households have to use a considerable part of their income for saving or paying for a mortgage, and this makes them unhappy tax-payers that are not in favour of extensive public spending. In this environment, politicians pursuing residual welfare policies have good chances of succeeding. Extensive home ownership also contributes to limited pension spending. When most households in old age are debt-free home owners there is little need for subsidizing the housing consumption of the elderly and also the level of pensions can be kept lower. Though the premises of the account can be questioned (see Somerville 2005), a rudimentary social mechanism can be detected from Kemeny's account. In my view this kind of theorizing holds great promise for housing research (though the point will not be developed further here).

So, while the debate that I reviewed and discussed revolves around the question of whether there can be a grand, total theory of housing, the more accurate formulation would be: is it sensible to try to construct such a theory? My answer is that it is not sensible. Theorizing *about* housing and *from* housing are ways to move forward. We need meta-theoretical statements about what housing from the scientific perspective *is* and here conceptual analysis and contemplation of housing experience can help. In researching various housing-related topics, we need also to employ theoretical resources developed elsewhere. However, the answer to the question can only be about what seems to be probable at present, as the process of theorizing is ongoing and developing, and we do not know the future pay-off of each theoretical strategy.

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Notes

1. Theories re-describe because of the *double hermeneutic* (Giddens 1984) of the entities, relations and processes in the social world. Entities, relations and processes are all described and interpreted in one way or another by members of society before the social scientist enters the stage. Her or his concepts and ideas may be different from those of other members but what she or he has to take into account is that other members of society do have their own descriptions and these are highly

- influential for the way they behave. The researcher's description is therefore a distanced analyst's re-description, closer or further from the descriptions of other members of society (who also engage in a constant process of re-description).
2. Some recent strands of social theorising have found the French philosopher Michel Serres' concept of "parasite" illuminating (see e.g. Pyyhtinen 2014). The term "parasite" refers to any entity that is engaged in asymmetric exchange relation with its environment: it only receives but does not give anything back.
 3. "Proto-theoretical focus" needs to be understood here as referring to a focus that is not based on a well explicated theoretical framework typical of exemplary research. Clapham's view is that there is no research without some kind of theory. This is because you cannot approach any research topic without some concepts and statements about it. These may come from everyday thinking or administrative discourses but nevertheless they are in a very weak sense theoretical – if the definition of theory in the beginning of this paper is accepted.
 4. This might not be a dilemma for just historical sociology but also for many other kinds of social research.
 5. Ruonavaara (2012) presents a heterodox view of how mechanism accounts should be constructed.

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