

Problems in Housing Research and Comparative Housing Studies

Konut Araştırma ve Karşılaştırmalı Konut Çalışmaları Sorunları

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Housing research faces difficulties not only inherently from social sciences but also difficulties due to its multi-disciplinary structure. In this study, firstly, the challenges raised due to the multi-faceted nature of housing research is evaluated. Secondly, specific problems of the increasingly popular aspect of housing research, 'international comparative housing studies', are assessed in terms of the theoretical and practical issues. Finally, suggestions are provided for future housing research.

Key words: *Housing research.*

"Konut çalışmaları", hem sosyal bilimlerin bir parçası olarak bu alandaki genel araştırma zorluklarına, hem de konut konusunun çok disiplinli yapısından kaynaklanan problemlere sahiptir. Bu çalışmada, genel olarak konut araştırmacılarının bu iki başlıkta nasıl sorunlarla karşılaşabileceği incelendi; ayrıca küreselleşme ve Avrupa Birliği süreci gibi yakın dönem gelişmelerle konut çalışmaları içinde kendine geniş bir yer edinen "uluslararası karşılaştırmalı konut çalışmaları" özelinde hem teoriye hem pratiğe yönelik sorunlar ele alındı. Çalışmada son olarak, gelecek konut araştırmaları için bazı öneriler verildi.

Anahtar sözcükler: *Konut çalışmaları.*

Introduction

Housing is a complicated issue with socio-economic, cultural and demographic repercussions. It is considered by most to be a fundamental requirement. In every country, in every community, from the earliest times in history to the modern ages, from caves to the ultra-luxurious dwellings of high rise residences, there has never been a period when shelter has not been a priority. This can be attributed to the numerous roles that housing provides for; it is first and foremost a shelter that protects us from adverse natural conditions and other dangers of the external world, but it is also consumption good in the free market economy and forms a considerable part of our physical environment (Sarioğlu-Erdoğdu, 2010).

The most remarkable changes in the concept of housing occurred as a result of industrialisation and the process of urbanisation, after which fundamental changes in social and economic relations took place. These in turn led to a continuous change in living habits, and in the housing of people. Due to the increasing numbers of migrants and the subsequent demand for housing in many Western cities, new forms of housing provision were created, bringing their own socio-economic and spatial repercussions. Many countries developed policies to maintain control over housing stocks and provide adequate housing, or at least arrange access to housing (Sarioğlu-Erdoğdu, 2010).

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This paper reveals some of the findings of my PhD research at Groningen University entitled "Entry to Home ownership: A Comparison between Turkey and the Netherlands".

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Such policies are hard to design (Harsman and Quigley: 1991), since they are usually site specific, require modifications in time, and are closely linked to socio-economic circumstances, the political choices of administrations and the demographic features of populations (Myers, 1990). The features of housing, it being fixed in place; expensive to produce, buy and sell; durable with an extremely long life span; and a necessity and a need (Harsman and Quigley: 1991:2) make it “peculiar”, attracting the attention not only of households, but also of administrations. As Doling (1997:7) claims, among industrialized countries there are no examples of governments that do not facilitate access to housing only among free market alternatives.

As a result of globalization in general and the process of enlargement of the European Union in particular, international comparative research gained impetus among many European scholars. Boelhouwer et al., (2000:3) emphasise the significance by stating that since the end of the 1970s there has been a revival in international comparative housing research (Donisson and Ungerson, 1982; Ambrose and Barlow, 1986; Ball et al., 1988; Barlow and Duncon, 1992; Boelhouwer and van der Heijden, 1992; Kemeny, 1992, 1995; Harloe, 1995; McCrone and Stephens, 1995; Balchin, 1996; Kleinman, 1996; and Oxley and Smith, 1996).

While on the one hand a bulk of comparative housing studies has evolved, on the other hand, a group of studies criticising, analysing and categorising those comparative studies has also arisen (Harloe, 1991, Harloe and Maartje, 1984; Boelhouwer and van der Heijden, 1992, 1993; Oxley, 2001; Kemeny, 2001; Lawson; 2001 etc). This study is therefore partly a literature review of difficulties of carrying out housing research in general and in particular comparative studies, and partly a presentation of the theoretical and practical issues in international empirical comparative studies. It is an attempt to compile both theoretical and practical issues.

Housing research raises problems primarily due to its position as a branch of social sciences,^[1] but it also has its own difficulties in theory and practice.^[2] In this paper, the inherent challenges that are caused by housing research occupying a position in the range of social sciences are considered. Secondly, major difficulties in housing studies are evaluated by examining one of the most popular themes in the literature: international comparative housing research. Finally, suggestions for future studies that could minimize the issues raised are provided.

Problems in Housing Research

As a Branch of Social Sciences

Among the many significant topics in social sciences, housing is a striking example of a branch in need of a theory (Rapoport, 2000:145). To the author, there is clearly a vast amount of information in previous housing studies, yet a plethora of disconnected pieces of empirical research and the absence of a conceptual framework means it is hard to subsume this bulk of data into an easily comprehensible format.

As it is a branch of social sciences, the major issue with housing research is the difficulty in object-subject differentiation. This is true of most social science branches and is not specific to housing research. Generally speaking, the clear line between the ‘object’ and the ‘subject’ becomes blurred, making the application of theories such as those used in natural sciences inconsistent with social sciences. Sayer (1985)¹ explains this by claiming that social sciences are contextualizing in character rather than law-seeking. This is due to the fact that they are ‘open systems’ in which conditions cannot be sustained and repeated, as can be done in natural science laboratories.. Historically, social sciences developed later than natural sciences, meaning that there is a tendency among many social science scholars to to adopt the existing theories of natural/positive sciences into social sciences. There are many scholars who believe that natural and social sciences are vastly different, and the most determined critics of this school of thought mainly highlight the inherent differences between the objects of natural and social sciences Oxley (2001:101).

The generalizing tendency of the ‘grand theory’ understanding should not and cannot be applied to social sciences, since unique aspects also have explanatory powers, as do regularities in social sciences (Sayer, 1985).² Sayer also suggests that when it comes to social sciences, broad generalisations may be descriptively comprehensive, but their ability to provide an explanation is weak. Local studies are more explanatory, although they may be limited in coverage.

Somerville and Bengtsson (2002:134) argue that both social constructionism and sociological realism are unsuitable for application to housing research, criticizing the former for being too subjective and the latter for being too objective. The authors claim that

¹ Sayer, 1985, p. 56.

² Sayer, 1985, p. 62.

the discursive reality emphasised by social constructionism and the importance of revealing deeper layers of the social reality highlighted by realism cannot be denied in housing research. Their alternative proposal is, therefore, critical realism, in which the advantages of both approaches are included in housing studies.³

Oxley (2001:101) argues that scientific research does not necessarily lead to universally acceptable results by alluding to the difference between the terms “scientific” and “scientist”. He notes additionally that built on social and historical facts, social science is not necessarily a good predictor of the future. What happens in natural sciences should not be expected to occur in the same way in social sciences, and it is his opinion that researchers engaged in comparative housing studies should not be unduly concerned if they do not come up with grand generalizations, as this should rather be seen as a challenge.

The same assertion was also made by Gramsci (2003:158):

“Each research activity has its own method and generates a unique science; that is the method develops as the research and science develops and become integrated at the end. Therefore, to adopt a method which had been integrated formerly with a particular research activity, by looking at the good results of that method in that area of research, means knowing nothing about science.”

Put differently, social sciences, which employ theories from distinct disciplines, of which representation-ontology-model consistency has been formerly achieved, may not bring the same successful results. Those internally consistent representation-ontology-models⁴ do not make a “consistent whole” when used together with other disciplines. This creates a huge problem for social sciences, in which there is need for improvements in the *cliché* knowledge representation methods. Research on social sciences, and thus on housing, encounters several difficulties.

As a Separate Branch

In addition to the problems related to being a branch of social sciences, housing research has its own problems as well. The problem in defining the housing

issue is mostly related to it being “relative” in three aspects (Tekeli, 1996).⁵ The first relativity is associated with the primary mechanisms involved in the provision and control of housing - these being the market, the planners or the state. The three primary actors in housing may define housing problems in different ways and thus ideal solutions would differ. In some instances, priorities of these three mechanisms could prove contradictory.

The second relativity stems from the fact that the function of housing is different for households and the state. Thus, the problems in housing may be related only to some of its functions, rather than them all, as it may be seen as a shelter, a consumption good, a means of investment through speculative value increases, a mechanism to provide security to people in society, a means for the reproduction of societal relations, a cultural artefact in transformation of the physical environment, and so on. Furthermore, the problem is exasperated as a particular function may change over time.

The third relativity is that solutions developed for housing may bring benefits to some while causing problems for others in the same society, which further increases the complexity of the topic. This relativity issue underlines the difficulty in comprehending housing as a multi-disciplinary scientific branch and furthermore, addresses the need for the development of proper theoretical frameworks for housing research.

Housing therefore is difficult to theorize, as numerous factors from different contexts need to be taken into consideration. These include social, economical, spatial and cultural factors. It makes a great deal of difference, for instance, if housing is assessed as a consumer good or as a social need. To make a whole out of so many varying contexts requires development of specific methodologies and proper ways to analyze them.

In the next section, the difficulties mentioned above are addressed through a discussion on one of the most popular housing research themes: international comparative housing studies. Before that, however, the increasing interest in comparative studies is evaluated.

International Comparative Housing Research and Associated Problems

Comparative housing research is as old as housing research itself (Ball et al., 1988).

“Seeing how they (other countries) do it ‘over there’, plus strong doses of national pride and rivalry, have always led politicians and researchers

³ Such an understanding was preserved in Sarıoğlu-Erdoğan's (2010) study where a mid way between contingent and general was adopted for the international comparison of Turkey and the Netherlands.

⁴ See Tekeli (2001) for more on knowledge, representation and harmony in the planning discipline.

⁵ Tekeli, 1996, p. 1.

to venture to other lands to read potted summaries of different housing systems.” (Ball et al., 1988:7) (Parenthesis mine).

One of the major studies in comparative housing research is the study of Esping-Andersen (1990) where the author categorized the welfare regimes of housing into three groups.

Ambrose and Barlow, 1986; Harloe, 1995; Barlow and Duncan, 1992; Boelhouwer and van der Heijden, 1992; Kemeny, 1992, 1995; Harloe, 1995; McCrone and Stephens, 1995; Balchin, 1996; Kleinman, 1996; and Oxley and Smith, 1996, can be considered major studies. Most studies have focused on European countries (Balchin, 1996; Kleinman, 1996; Oxley and Smith, 1996; McCrone and Stephens, 1995), the USA in some cases (Ball, et al, 1988; Harloe, 1995; Kemeny, 1992); Eastern countries such as Japan and South Korea in recent years (Ronald and Jin, 2010; Hirayama and Ronald, 2006), exclude Turkey as one of the cases.

In their book *Housing Policy*, Donnison and Unger-son focus primarily on British housing although European housing systems also are discussed to some extent. McLeay (1983) states that interconnections among social and economic policies and policy analysis and recommendations are well documented in the book.

The reasons for this increasing interest in comparative study are severalfold. Oxley (1991)⁶ categorizes them as follows:

- To increase knowledge and provide insights into others
- To develop ideas for new policies
- To collect material to reject or support new judgments
- To research housing in broad terms in order to understand the system better
- To determine the relationship between housing and other variables
- To investigate the operation of professional groups in housing
- To examine theoretical techniques employed by researchers in other countries
- To obtain new ideas and formulate new hypotheses, and
- To test hypotheses.

Any scientific activity requires observation/research and the making of categorizations as its initial steps. In most comparative housing studies, the initial aim is to

understand the housing system of the other case. This could involve categorizations, juxtapositions, collecting materials and increasing knowledge.

Some other comparative studies look at how this knowledge is used in policy development.. The aim is to determine problems and learn lessons from other experiences and to then develop solutions accordingly, mostly by policy exchange.

Comparative studies could also provide theoretical insights. Depending on the researcher’s attitude, for instance, statistical/mathematical techniques could be employed and hypotheses could be tested. Thus, comparative studies could teach different techniques from all other countries. With regard to the levels of investigation, reasons specified by Oxley could also overlap. Several rationales could be included in one study.

Accordingly, numerous research centres in the world carry out comparative housing research,⁷ aiming to provide insights for the a generation that wishes to create better policies in urban development/rehabilitation. These centres help to create a clearer picture of the current situation and may inspire change, and the results of such comparisons can add to the existing theories.⁸

International comparative housing research carries the inherent difficulties of general housing research, while also generating its own specific problems. In the following sections, the issues involved in carrying out comparative housing research are given from both theoretical and practical perspectives, and in the final section several suggestions related to this are offered for future studies.

Theoretical and Practical Issues in Comparative Housing Studies

Lawson (2001:29) says that although the purpose of comparative housing research is clear, epistemology and ontological bases are generally not made explicit. She further states (2001:30):

“The attractiveness and curiosity of international research often overshadows the difficulties of tackling more complex issues such as the focus of comparison, rationale for case selection, the time period

⁶ Oxley, 1991, p. 74.

⁷ Delft University of Technology, Netherlands; the University of York, UK; De Montford University, UK, etc. In European Network for Housing Research (ENHR) for instance, there is a specific working group focused on comparative housing research.

⁸ <http://www.tudelft.nl/live/pagina.jsp?id=15c423d2-70cd-42e8-a714-7be6d0fa9879&lang=en> (Accessed on 23.March.2009)

to be analysed, the uniqueness of institutions and the path dependency of housing and urban phenomena. At the methodological level, there are a number of coherent 'packages' of ontology and epistemology that help to clarify the comparative research strategy. These include positivist deduction, interpretive abstraction, and realist retrodiction. Conscious selection of such a package is important, as the choice determines the object or level of comparison."

These criticisms are relevant in many aspects; however, there have been several significant studies that should be mentioned here, including those which categorize the existing approaches (Oxley, 1991; 2001); develop alternative methods (Sommerville and Bergsson, 2002; Kemeny and Lowe, 1998;) and attempt to integrate existing theories into housing - the use of regulation theory in comparative housing research (Goodwin, 2001) is a case in point. Kemeny (2001) also points out the need for more theoretical approaches in comparative housing studies by focusing on the neglect of housing in comparative welfare regimes. Oxley (2001) studied the aims and methodology of recent European comparative housing studies. In this sense, Oxley (2001) may serve as a theoretical framework for all housing researchers.

As the benchmark comparative housing studies chose European countries as cases to focus on, forthcoming studies on those comparisons were naturally Eurocentric.

In their paper, Harloe and Maartje (1984) present an overview of the comparative studies of that era and point out that dominant pluralist and convergence approaches are not sufficient to examine housing in a dynamic perspective. Later, in 1991, Harloe goes on to study the need for developing housing theory in his paper 'Short note: Towards a theorized comparative housing research'.

Oxley's article (1991) is relevant in the sense that almost all the classifications are referenced to, or are developed from, his categorizations. In 2001, he further advanced the study by categorizing comparative housing research into four levels, from zero to high - depending on the information provided, the methodologies implemented and the questions asked. At the zero level are studies with no systematic comparison, which attempt to explain policy developments or institutional arrangements in an individual country to the audience (Oxley, 2001:93). The low level studies are mostly descriptive and cover several countries, while the mid-

level pieces of research supposedly draw lessons from other countries in terms of policy and practice. Finally, there come the high-level comparative housing studies, which include systematic methodologies and analytical approaches, coupled with an explicit theory and a high level of empiricism. These are generally carried out to provide answers to more specific questions.

Oxley's (1991:76) standpoint is that housing research may be necessary at all levels, but not all of them should be known as comparative. Moreover, he states that comparative housing research still requires a range of analysts, including explorers, empiricists, theorists and scientists (Oxley, 2001:91).

In their study, Boelhouwer and van der Heijden (1993), denote that there can be different types of research approaches in comparative housing studies, such as convergence theories, provision-oriented and institutional approaches and policy orientation. Kemeny and Lowe (1998:161) also make a categorization in comparative housing research. To them, at the lowest level are the "juxtapositional analyses", taking a particularistic approach in which almost no generalizations are made from the empirical study. On the other side of the coin are "convergence analyses", in which universalistic and global approaches are applied, and are mainly focused on similarities rather than contingencies in the search for a theory. In between these two ends of the scale can be found "divergence analyses", by which both the regular and contingent aspects of housing are taken into account in the analysis. To the authors, using the last example as a mid-range theory, both the above and below scales can be comprehended and historical and cultural issues may be included, making the theory robust.

Ronald (2007), in his article "Comparing Homeowner Societies: Can we Construct an East-West Model?" studied Japan, and Lux (2010) defines difficulties in international comparisons in the context of transition countries.

In addition to theory-based issues, there are practical issues in carrying out comparative housing research. In the first place, different approaches arise among scholars. European and American scholars, for instance, follow housing issues with different points of emphasis. In studies of tenure choice for instance, European researchers attempt to explain moves with microlevel analyses that are based on household characteristics. In such analyses, housing supply is considered an exogenous factor, as in many European countries there are extensive government interven-

tions in the housing sector. American researchers, on the other hand, consider housing according to market dynamics, and emphasize economic modelling (Strassmann, 2001).⁹ This is primarily because housing is site specific and context dependent. Yet, it highlights not only a theoretical difference where distinct researchers highlight different aspects of housing but also a practical issue as cross-country comparisons between the two continents would be difficult to carry out in some cases.

Further difficulties arise as available comparable data especially for cross-country comparisons may appear insufficient. Considering that methodologies employed are highly dependent on the available comparable data, this would prove to be a major issue.

Likewise, in most cases researchers rely on national data sources which are not specifically prepared or carried out for housing purposes. This can create limitations in the research possibilities.¹⁰ In mobility studies of housing research, for instance, as Dieleman et al. (1994:9) state, two primary streams of investigation may be possible: cross-sectional or longitudinal approaches and data, and the results of both types of analysis are complementary rather than contradictory. In general, cross-sectional models of mobility and choice highlight household status and the characteristics of the previous rental dwelling as important factors in housing and tenure choice. In contrast, longitudinal models focus more on events or triggers, and the changing economic context within which choices are made (Dieleman et al. 1994:p. 9).

Another problem stems from the fact that an inherent characteristic of housing is that it is highly context-dependent. “What is compared with what in the corresponding country?” should be a major question in international comparison. In Turkey, there has never been state-subsidized built and maintained public rental housing. Therefore, renting in Turkey means “private renting”. If this difference is not made addressed at the start, then comparisons may be misleading.

Suggestions for Future Studies

In order to overcome the difficulties mentioned, several methods could be followed.

- *Not to solely employ the methods of natural sciences, instead to use them as a means (rather than an end) of developing insights*

- *To compare genuinely comparable things (in terms of data and variables)*

- *To evaluate the cases and results within the con-*

texts

In theory, difficulties mainly arise when considering how to measure/evaluate housing. In fact, it is not something to be evaluated only in numeric values. Consider for instance, the average per person per room ratios for distinct countries. Although, the ratio appears to be a solid fact measuring average space within a dwelling unit, it is not possible to associate it with the consideration of sufficient space, sufficient room numbers or satisfaction with housing as it already involves preferences. Households in which three generations live in the same dwelling unit may be a extremely difficult and challenging situation for a European family, whereas in Turkey almost 15% of urban households are formed of three-generations living together. Such a comparison should certainly involve an awareness of residence habits which are culturally and socially accepted within the society being studied. When this socio-cultural feature is included in the study, rather than making generalizations from this and drawing direct conclusions, the aim should be to understand and evaluate (in this example the household-dwelling matches).

Relying solely on statistical techniques, for instance employing regression models, is not be sufficient when applied to housing, as one unit increase in the number of rooms cannot lead to one unit increase in the utility of a household. Such methodolgies should be used wherever possible, but must not be evaluated independently of other relevant data such as that which is contextual and historical. One way is to adopt different levels of investigation, using statistical techniques, historical data, socio-cultural features together in order to understand housing.

Practically, issues that include the availability of comparable data for housing research are beyond individual researchers’ ability to overcome. Fortunately, there are ongoing studies such as “The European Community Household Panel” of Europa and Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union situated in Luxembourg.¹¹

However, institutional and contextual differences can not be eliminated simply by more comparable data becoming available. Even when such a database

⁹ Strassmann, 2001, p. 10.

¹⁰ In study of Sarioğlu (2007b) and Balamir (1985), data problems in housing studies in Turkey were evaluated.

¹¹ http://europa.eu/abouteuropa/index_en.htm
<http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/eurostat/home>

exists, the researcher should be confident he or she is comparing like with like in the case countries. This is possible when contextual characteristics are well-known to the researcher.

Concluding Remarks

Despite the difficulties in theorizing housing, it is still possible to develop housing theory. Once it is accepted that social sciences differ from natural sciences, expectations that a “grand theory” understanding will be developed will certainly diminish. What fits perfectly into natural sciences is not necessarily scientific from the perspective of social sciences (Sarioğlu-Erdoğan, 2010).¹²

Secondly, although many housing research studies may be devoid of theory, as Oxley (2001)¹³ argues, comparative housing research can be scientific. Therefore rather than avoiding it alternative modes of research and different methodologies should be developed.

In addition, it can be argued that the use of empirical research in comparative housing research study is necessary, but is not adequate in itself, and that the research should also include qualitative/historical/cultural data. In doing so, problems stemming from *purely* quantitative of *purely* qualitative research methodologies in housing research can be overcome. The sum of all the research findings will combine to provide a better explanation to the research questions (Sarioğlu-Erdoğan, 2010).¹⁴

To cope with these difficulties in housing research, a realist distinction between the necessary and contingent could be followed, which may be accepted in preference to adopting a midway approach (critical realism and divergence analysis). Therefore, not only the historical context of case studies could be revealed, but also the semantics of the topic could be included as significant aspects.¹⁵

Housing is an inherently complex topic which has explicit and implicit relations to economic, social, demographic and cultural contexts. Therefore, it should be considered accordingly. Studies should involve macro and micro factors and adopt different method-

ologies, analyses and data sets when necessary. In doing so, the use of various techniques - from historical to descriptive analyses, and from empirical to qualitative analyses, will be required.

The above discussion did not intend to imply that it is impossible for housing to develop as a science – rather the aim was to demonstrate the difficulties and the problems in housing research in general and in comparative studies in particular in order to attempt to solve them. In stating this, Oxley’s argument (2001) is strictly followed - the difficulties should be considered as challenging.

The recommendations provided should be taken as guidelines, not as overarching solutions to the problems discussed. Each research needs its own theoretical and methodological framework, which only the author himself can define.

To sum up, the questions put forward by Oxley (2001)¹⁷ as essential when conducting comparative work: “*What is being compared, and for what purpose?*” can have clear answers when the difficulties of housing research and comparative studies are recognised from the very beginning. This paper addresses the need to develop such frameworks in housing research and to establish guidelines as initial steps.

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¹⁴ Sarioğlu-Erdoğan, 2010, p. 157.

¹⁵ In Sarioğlu-Erdoğan (2010) “general hypotheses” of the previous studies are employed in order to formulate “case specific propositions” which are developed from the juxtapositional comparison highlighting the contingencies in the case countries.

¹⁶ Oxley, 2001, p. 103.

¹⁷ Oxley, 2001, p. 89.

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