Comparative housing research in the new millennium: methodological and theoretical contributions from the first decade

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Abstract

Comparative housing research encompasses a broad range of strategies and foci, which has promoted the exchange of information, catalysed policy development and encouraged theoretical debate. This presentation briefly outlines the different purpose (policy description, evaluation, strategic understanding and theoretical explanation), logical strategy (hypothesis testing, interpretation, model building and revision), multiple field of focus (locality, tenure, institution, household, individual, social relations, financial arrangements, organisations, welfare regimes, state's role and neo-liberalism) and diverse contribution to theoretical debates made by comparative housing research in the 2000s. It summarizes recent progress, emerging from a range of social science disciplines, which has contributed towards key debates concerning shifts in housing institutions and governance, divergent housing regimes and welfare systems, unitary, integrated and dualist rental markets, social exclusion and neighbourhood decline, forms of housing tenure and their rise and fall, organisational behaviour and networks, local responses to globalisation, the nature of home and socially constructed housing experiences. This presentation encourages researchers to reflect on these differences and developments and contribute towards progress in the coming decade of comparative housing research.

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Introduction

Comparative housing research encompasses a broad range of strategies and foci, which has promoted the exchange of information, catalysed policy development and encouraged theoretical debate. However, comparative housing research is a field which is often driven by policy demands and afflicted by epistemic drift and historicism. Furthermore, academic debate has become fragmented not only because housing differs significantly over time and space, but also because there are competing ways of perceiving and analysing forms of provision, which stem from a different range of ontological, epistemological and theoretical perspectives (Lux, 2007, Lawson, 2006, Matznetter, 2006, Kemeny and Low, 1998, Somerville, 1994).

Crucial to the nature of comparative research is the chosen ontology, which defines the analytical focus and ultimately the findings produced. For example, researchers may nominate specific tenures for comparison, the outcomes of different housing markets, institutional norms and relations, or networks between actors or compare entire housing systems or segments thereof. The preliminary conceptualisation of housing phenomena and the chosen research strategy, influence the choice of data, analytical strategy and ultimately the findings of any comparative study. This paper provides an overview of this progress in an effort refocus attention on both methodological concerns as well as theoretical progress.

Towards this goal, this paper provides a broad definition of comparative research before addressing key issues such as "why do we compare", "how do we compare", "what is the nature of causality" and encourages researchers to answer these questions through their own comparative endeavours. The paper finished by drawing on comparative housing research undertaken over the past decade which has presented at international forums.[1] Advances in empirical research, methodological criticism and theoretical progress are the focus of the final part of this paper.

What is comparative research?

Doling (1997) argues that all science, is comparative. Comparative typically refers to research across national boundaries, but of course can be of any scale. In order to compare developments in two housing systems, we need to be clear about what we are actually comparing. For example do we compare tenure outcomes, trends in levels of production,

[1] Including APNHR, ENHR, HAS, ISA RC 43, ISA RC 21, RSA and AHR.

housing costs or the content of policy; the organisation of provision or the relationships between key players and their mitigating circumstances? In other words, what level of housing reality or ontology are we really comparing: outcomes, mechanisms, contexts?

Further, beyond the level of comparison, is the question of territory and scale. Entire continents, regions, cities, suburbs, estates and their households can provide a focus for comparative endeavours. However, whilst comparative housing research at the cross-national scale is most common, the boundaries and scale of comparison is subject to considerable debate, especially amongst political and economic geographers who stress that the scale of comparison should reflect the boundaries of causal processes generating difference and change (Goodwin, 2001).

Pickvance (2001), like Doling, argues that in a strict sense all analysis is comparative and can be distinguished into four categories according to (a) whether they explain differences or similarities and (b) the assumptions they make about causal patterns. To take a housing example to explain Pickvance's four categories: If we find similar levels of home ownership in several countries, a *universalizing comparative analysis* would try to find similar causes in each country whereas *universalizing comparative analysis with plural causation* would acknowledge the possibility of different causes generating similar outcomes in different countries. Equally if we observe different levels of home ownership in different countries we might through *differentiating comparative analysis* seek to show that this is the result of variations in causal variables between the countries whereas *differentiating comparative analysis with plural causation* would acknowledge the possibility of similar causes generating different outcomes in different countries.

These analytical concepts and notions of causality are fundamental to comparative research and underlie competing schools of thought such as convergence, divergence, path dependency, regime and regulation theory (including welfare regimes), competition theory and the variety of capitalism thesis.

Why undertake comparative research?

The aims of comparative research are to understand, explain, evaluate or change housing phenomena which take place in different contexts and scales. In practice studies are frequently policy oriented but they might be at a more general level related to a desire to understand how a housing market or system or part of that market or system operates. This could include understanding how different institutional arrangements' contribute to different housing outcomes. The aims could also be technique or theory-advancement oriented with comparative method being used to build new theoretical concepts.

Despite arguments calling for contextual sensitivity, a well argued selection of explanatory variables and a coherent methodological strategy, empiricism and narrativism continue to pervade comparative housing studies, either intentionally or unintentionally. Ideally, however, research aimed to reveal the complex, structured reality of housing systems and develop suitable conceptual tools to explain difference and change (Ploeger et al, 2001:1). Some researchers have argued for the application of non deterministic frameworks to facilitate more local definition of structures of housing provision. Not only researchers such as Ball (structures of housing provision) call for this approach, but also social constructivists such as Kemeny (unitary and dual rental markets).

Comparative studies for the purpose of policy transfer have had to confront arguments that "policies are the cultural products of history, time and place: they are rarely exportable" (Cullingworth, 1993:177). Beyond this 'pure' position, we know that knowledge of policy instruments and outcomes in one country does inform analysis of similar issues in another country. The rapid exchange of information concerning the regulation of national mortgage markets is testament to this. Thus with appropriate regard for the problems of "transferability" comparative housing research can provide a catalyst for policy developments elsewhere. New policy ideas may arise from the stimulus of information about how things are done elsewhere and exposure to different approaches can challenge insular beliefs about the causes of problems and the effects of policy instruments. Certainly, understanding differences and similarities between societies can improve understanding of the processes at work within societies (Oxley, 1991).

What kind of logical processes are involved in comparative research?

Methodological issues in housing studies, have been the most lively concerning comparative housing research at various forums (ENHR, 1990, UvA, 1999, Dublin, 2007), the proceedings of which have been published in various journals and on the web. Heated debate has arisen because of differences in the logic of research and conceptualisation of housing phenomenon. Implicit in the purposes identified in above are a number of different epistemological strategies incorporating either the *logic of induction, deduction or abduction and retroduction* (see table 1)– all of which are subject to criticism and some have been harnessed by particular ontological schools of thought, such as Post Modernism, Social Constructionism and Critical Realism. For a detailed discussion of ontological alternatives see Lawson (2006), Blakie (1993) and Somerville (1994). However, few researchers explicitly confront their differences, or justify their selection.

Table 1: Logic in comparative research

Epistemological strategy	Process
Induction (Durkheim)	a process of observing, describing and comparing housing phenomena in different contexts to produce generalisations grounded in reality. Social constructionists aim to gain a sense of environmental, institutional and cultural context without the blinkers of transnational theories or ethnocentricity.
Deduction (Popper)	a process of falsifying statements, through appropriate tests in different countries, to either corroborate a law or reject it. Positivists test their universal theories across observable outcomes in different cases.
Abduction and retroduction (Harré)	a process of abstracting, postulating, testing and revising causal models and structures, not always observable, in order to explain empirical phenomena. Realists retroduce then compare causal mechanisms between cases, to explain difference.

Of course beyond these simple definitions of logic are more nuanced and complex differences, unfortunately beyond the scope of this short presentation (but certainly within the scope of discussion). Here it is suffice to mention their key areas of concern: the nature of reality or ontological theory, the use of predetermined categories, the role of language, the

importance of lay accounts, use of local experts and the objectivity of the researcher. There are also debates concerning the limits of generalisation across time and space and the contestability of knowledge claims made. Indeed, there are differences in the claims made by researchers, some argue there are no absolute truths to be found, whilst others modestly seek to propose fallible and tentative theories, whilst some claim that there are regularities to be discovered which can be reliably claimed as universal truths (Blaikie, 1993:6).

Whilst inductive and deductive methods are quite well known, a retroductive strategy is less often explicitly defined and involves two stage proces of abduction from concrete phenomena and retroduction to provide contestable but competitive explanation (Danermark et al, 2002, Sayer, 2000). The first step involves interpretation and recontextualisation of the housing phenomena under consideration, using a plausible, justifiable set of explanatory ideas and concepts. This new interpretation is known as a postulate, or hypothetical conceptual model, which aims to explain what is actually going on. This model is tested and revised in the second retroductive stage, using methods such as contrastive and counterfactual questioning, in order to provide a more competitive explanation (Lawson, 2006:262-263)

In what way is causality important to comparative housing research?

This section is relevant to those who share the view that the pursuit of explanatory causes is a valid and feasible goal of research. Pickvance claims that the dichotomy between universalising and differentiating analysis is far too simple and stresses the importance of invoking *plural* causation to explain difference. Pickvance (2001) cautions that attributing cause is a difficult undertaking, pointing out the difference between deep-level structural causes and numerous contingent causes that are often interrelated. Moreover, he emphasises that structural and contingent causes are hard to keep apart.

If comparative housing research is to move forward with its divergence thesis, it must address the complex nature of causality over time and space. Towards this end a useful strategy involves the process of abstraction, taking apart complex empirical phenomena to reveal contingently defined interrelated relationships and processes, and reconfiguring these interdependent explanations to propose a more complex description, understanding or theory of explanation. This requires intimate working knowledge of the phenomenon to be analysed and compared. To aid this process, a number of researchers argue for methods used by ethnologists and social anthropologists (Haworth et al, 2004), whilst others stress the use of local experts rather than more distant gatherers of information (Balchin, 1990, Bourne, 1986, Harloe, 2005).

Further, given the slow and sluggish nature of housing provision (Bengtsson, 2008) explanations for difference and change need a historical, in depth case study approach rather than a static outcomes level correlation of similarities and differences. It must be sensitive to the embedded interdependencies of housing provision and in particular the dynamic and open nature of state structures operating within open markets, as well as housing consumption norms and aspirations, in order to produce more nuanced and accurate explanations for difference. Towards this end, this paper agrees with the arguments of Mahoney and Rueschemeyer:

"From the perspective of the comparative historical tradition, the universalizing programs of the past …have tended to generate ahistorical concepts and propositions that are often too general to be usefully applied in explanation. In viewing cases and processes at a less abstract level, by contrast, comparative historical analysts are frequently able to derive

lessons from the past experiences that speak to the concerns of the present. Even though their insights remain grounded in the histories examined and cannot be transposed literally to other contexts, comparative historical studies can yield more meaningful advice concerning contemporary choices and possibilities than studies that aim for universal truths but cannot grasp historical details." (2003:9).

Finally, causal analysis requires the establishment of some association between explanatory variables and an outcome variable, either within or across cases, at different spatial scales and over time (Mahoney, 2003:363). This perceived notion of causality must be coherently aligned within the selection of explanatory and outcome variables investigated via methodological strategy. Again, there are a variety of theories about the roots of causality, which have been summarised in Lawson (2006). Regardless of the roots, both Mahoney and Hall (2003) argue for a *method* of process tracing, which avoids mistaking correlations for causal processes. As small N cases rely more heavily on the selection of strategic variables, they must be clearly justified, tested and revised.

Directions in comparative housing theory in the 2000s

Comparative research has a rich history, both within housing studies and in the disciplines of sociology, political science and economic history (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, 2003). Comparative housing researchers have stressed the existence of structures of housing provision (Ball, 1986, 1988, Ball and Harloe, 1992); critiqued the presence of a dominant constructivist ideology (Kemeny, 1983, 1992, Winter, 1994); and searched for underlying causal mechanisms of difference and change in housing systems (Dickens, Duncan, Goodwin and Grey, 1985, Basset and Short, 1980).

Indeed, past comparative historical analysis of different housing systems has contributed a rich source of empirical data, methodological discussion and theoretical debate. Arguments have been put forward explaining differences and similarities; examining the changing role of housing consumption in daily life and its relationship with the development of different welfare states inspired by welfare regime theory (Esping Anderson 1990). Important criticisms have been made regarding the bluntness of large scale, albeit historically informed comparison, stressing the importance of and locally embedded nature of causality affecting national housing systems (Matznetter, 2007, Lawson, 2006).

However three theories have dominated comparative studies of social housing during the 1990s: Harloe's theory of converging phases of development, Esping Anderson's theory of welfare regimes (which originally excluded housing) and Kemeny's divergence thesis, which has more recently focused upon the competitive position of private and non-profit landlords. Harloe's convergence model perceives systems of housing as oscillating between mass and residual forms of provision linked to normal and abnormal phases in capitalist development (Harloe, 1995). For Kemeny (1995) divergent systems emerge partly as governments role in and response to different types of rental markets (dual, integrated, unitary), where different rental models (cost rent, market rent etc) and competitive market conditions are of strategic explanatory significance.

Following this brief review of developments in the last decade of the last century, we now turn to recent progress in comparative housing research which has emerged in the 2000s. Some of these studies continue with the approaches of the nineties, others can be considered as new.

There have been recent advances in comparative housing debates concerning welfare regime theory, path dependency theory, competition and rental market theory, as well as a greater appreciation of the importance of local contingent conditions amidst global financial forces.

Esping Anderson's ***welfare regime theory*** continues to influence comparative housing research and has generated a number of country cases studies (Hoekstra, 2005, 2003 on the Netherlands, Matznetter, 2002 on Austria) and less examined regions of Europe (Allen et al, 2003) . In addition to more nuanced categorisation of cases, theoretical progress has attempted by combining welfare regime theory with other types of development regimes (Matznetter, 2002, Lee, 2002). Most recently Schröder (2008) attempts to integrate welfare regime typologies with variety of capitalism thesis (mentioned below) but ignores housing in the process!

The structures of provision framework (Ball, 1998) has been embroidered via explicit application of Critical Realist ontology and notions of causality, comparing ***contingently defined emergent relations*** underlying different modes of housing provision through comparative historical analysis. Beyond research postulating explanations for the dominance of Australian home owner ship and the Netherlands' social rental as a solution for low and middle income households during the 20th century (Lawson, 2001, 2006), Lawson has recently extended this approach to explain the radical transformation of housing and urban development in Seoul, Korea 'from Hanoak to Highrise'(2008) and compare the different role and market position of limited profit housing in Vienna and Zurich (2009 forthcoming).

Social constructionists continue to emphasize both the discourse and wider structural features which explain how relations of power, interest groups and inequality are exercised and has provided valuable criticism of positivist research methodologies and overly structural theories, which impose their own values and motives on foreign cultures and interpreting their policies and social organisation from deterministic standpoints (Haworth et al, 2004). They argue that social structure, including policy, are the products of conscious human agency and therefore highly malleable. Ethnographic methods to interpret different accounts of values, assumptions and traditions must be used in different cases. Ronald (2008) has recently compared the different role of home ownership ideologies which have evolved in Anglo-saxon and East Asian countries. A central concept is 'home ownership ideology', which implies that housing practices are not benign but support particular alignments of social-power relations. Discourse analysis has also been used by Sorvoll (2009) to explain shifts in political ideology affecting housing policy in Denmark, Sweden and Norway over the last thirty years between social democratic parties and governments. A more pragmatic use of discourse analsysis if made by Dekker and Varady (2009) to derive lessons for policy makers dealing with social housing regeneration on both sides of the Atlantic. Quilgars et al (2009) raise a number of important issues involved in cross national qualitative research.

The divergence and socially constructed line of reasoning continues to be influenced by the arguments of Kemeny (1995) against the dominance of Anglo-Saxon model of residualisation of the social rental sector and that profit and non-profit providers of rented housing can either be in competition with one another (unitary rental market) or not (dual rental market). This thesis has inspired a range of case studies (Amman and Mundt, 2009, Elsinga et al, 2008), comparative studies (Kemeny et al, 2005) and has prompted debate on the nature of competition and level of regulation affecting different segments of the housing market.

New theoretical directions which have influenced housing studies during the 2000s are considered below.

An emerging comparative approach using theories from industrial organization involving the ***concept of market competition*** (Oxley et al, 2007) and will be employed to compare the role of social and private land lords in two housing markets in the UK and NL (Lennartz et al, 2009).

The concepts of ***path dependence and institutional layering*** (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, 2003) compliment and enrich the divergence approach to comparative historical analysis, by strengthening the critique of convergence theses, such as globalisation and demanding more careful consideration of local regimes and causal processes (Terhorst, 2008, Heijden and Terhorst, 2007). This has led to the development of theories explaining the very different housing regimes present in five Nordic countries (Bengstsson et al, 2006) and establishment of an ENHR working group on historical explanation in housing Annaisson (2008), Bengtsson (2008), De Decker (2008), Gomez-Nielsen (2008), Lawson (2008) and Ruonavarra (2008) provide illustrations of this approach. A special edition of *Housing Theory and Society* (end 2009) will consider its use in comparative research.

In recent years ***network theories*** (Di Maggiohave focused attention on the actors, institutions and organisations engaged in housing provision (Brandson, 2001, which has focused on the management of non-profit organisations, social landlords and their social task. These studies make no claims about underlying social structures or power relations, but examine social constructed networks between agents engaged in housing related activities. Czischke (2009) focus on the missions, values and activities of social landlords in Finland, England and the Netherlands, whilst Mullins and Sacranie (2009) examine different reasons for the adoption of Corporate Social Responsiblility techniques amongst social landlords in North West Europe via organizational case studies. Another application of organizational comparative research has involved action research to increase the neighborhood focus of social landlords in the Netherlands and the UK (Van Bortel et al, 2009a, b). Other concepts that stem from governance theory in public administration, and place multiple actors and their decision making process in context, inductively building theory from a range of local data source, are concerned with *contextualised agents and their decisions*, viewed as players in policy games within defined arenas, actors in interdependent networks and organisations governed by norms and rules have also become an object of comparison (Gilmore, 2009, Rhodes and Van Bortel, 2007, Ciszchke and Guis, 2007).

The pervasive ***globalisation thesis***, based on the increasing mobility of (manufacturing) capital and financial markets across international boundaries and the undermining of national rules of regulation and their capacity to steer investment, has also influenced comparative housing research (Smart, 2003). A weak globalisation variant, giving more autonomy to national governments, has informed comparative research on the different experience of home ownership across Europe, using statistical data and qualitative case studies (HOSE project, Doling and Ford, 2003). It has also inspired other European research on the security and insecurity of home ownership (OSIS, Boelhouwer etal, 2005)[2] and the uneven role of ownership in increasingly asset based systems of social welfare (Hegadüs, 2009, DEMHOW)[3].

Focusing on financial markets, a primary object of globalisation, Sassen (2009) explains how housing has become a new channel for extracting household incomes, via mortgage instruments which are packaged and sold internationally as RMBS, with profit extracted from

[2] http://www.osis.bham.ac.uk/
[3] http://www.demhow.bham.ac.uk/

the sale of financial products, rather than fulfilment of mortgage obligations. Wainwright (2009) and Aalbers (2008) return to the work of Harvey (1982) concerning ***capital switching,*** not only to explain this process of financialisation but also the very foundations of the global financial crises. Recent developments in comparative political science and economic geography concerning the 'variety of capitalism thesis' (Boyer, 2004, Hall and Soskice, 2001, Brenner, 2004, Goodwin, 2001) have also been used to argue why some mortgage markets have been more resilient to the problem of default and repossession, than others (Aalbers, 2009).

Of lesser fame, but no less importance are explanations for difference between so called 'national' housing systems, researchers have also paid attention to ***dynamic state structures at the urban scale*** in the development of long term housing solutions using a variety ideas from locality studies, regulation theory, structural relational theory as well as the glocalisation and variety of capitalism thesis Indeed, whilst national level analysis is common there are critics of this approach, especially amongst political and economic geographers, who argue for recognition of the regional and local origins of national housing policies (Lawson, forthcoming, Matznetter, 2007). Furthermore, there are recent comparative studies which attempt to comprehensively apply ideas encompassing market structures and contingent dynamics, historical processes of industrialisation (Fordist, post Fordist, regimes of accumulation), evolving state roles (market promoting, regulating or replacing) and welfare regimes (bismarkian, Beveridge, conservative, neo-liberal, social democratic) (Dalton, 2009, Schröder, 2008, Hoekstra, 2005, Smart, 2003).

As much of comparative housing research is necessarily conducted and funded by governments responding to nominated housing policy concerns, comparative housing research is often prompted by *housing problems* acknowledged by governments in order (be seen to) propose ***policy instruments*** building on experience elsewhere. During the 2000s policy 'issues' have included measures to promote home ownership, financing arrangements for social housing providers, the social task and regulation of social landlords, success and failure in social inclusion, the redevelopment processes affecting large estates and efforts to promote more energy efficient dwellings spurning a range of international studies (Lawson and Milligan, 2007, Scanlon and Whitehead, 2007, Norris and Sheils, 2004). Most recently there has been a focus on appropriate regulatory and relief responses to rising levels of mortgage default (Stephens, 2008, Lawson, Parkinson and Wood, 2009).

Beyond policy research, comparative studies of *tenure* have also dominated comparative housing analysis, typically owner-occupation (OSIS, 2003) but also social renting (Whitehead and Scanlon, 2007, CECODHAS, 2008). Comparative research on tenure is often involves collecting and presenting information on tenures which vary from country to country. Of course several forms of tenure including condominium living, shared ownership and social home ownership do not fit cross national definitions and some forms are specific to particular countries (Ruonavaara, 1993). However, beyond descriptive research, tenure has provided a launch pad for theoretical debate concerning questions of welfare provision (Castles, 1998, Kemeny, 2001) and competition (Kemeny, 2001, Haffner et al, 2009).

Where to now?

Comparative research needs explorers, empiricists, theorists and scientists. The explorers discover, describe and report. Yet how and what they report filters subsequent interpretations and deductions and should be critically reviewed. Today, there is less of a need for explorers as 'territory' becomes known, but there are always changes in policies and structures to report

on and for some countries (as argued above) there is still a shortage of housing system information in the international realm on countries from non-English speaking backgrounds. Whilst English is inevitably a vehicle for expanding knowledge in comparative housing studies, it is also filter and barrier.

The first part of this paper argued that comparative analysis demands a disciplined approach to conceptualisation and research strategy. It is important to clarify not only the logic but also the nature of causality in housing and urban analysis and phenomena. For those in the policy field, these challenges demand recognition of the limits of cross national generalisation and the constraints of universal housing 'solutions' and policy transference.

Clarifying the aims of comparative research - to explain, predict, provoke fresh thinking etc needs to be probed more thoroughly by researchers, with methods useful to the purpose. Policy transfer, and policy ideas possibilities, is an area of growing interest (Lawson, Parksin, Wood, 2009, Gurran et al, 2008, Gillmore and Milligan, 2008, Berry and Whitehead, 2004). However, studies need to put forward a more dedicated methodology – which is currently underdeveloped.

Despite the developments outlined in the second section, a good deal of comparative housing research is vulnerable to the criticism that it is under-conceptualised with broad and often poorly structured descriptions rather than insightful analysis. Further the strategy employed is often confined by the short timelines and policy purpose of the study.

There are related debates about the nature of housing studies – is it a discipline or a field over study (see latest special issue of HTS) and how should we conceptualise "housing" as a phenomenon and "model" abstractions that are called "housing systems". All of this can proceed independently of comparative analysis. However there is a case for a clearer interaction between ideas from this body of thinking and ideas currently applied to comparative methods. One way forward, is the two stage retroductive model outlined in this paper.Unfortunately, there is very little interaction indeed between debates on comparative methods in social sciences (eg Hantrais, 2009, Mahoney and Rauschmeyer, 2003, Smelser, 2002) generally with contemporary housing studies. There is a two way lack of engagement here: social science comparative methodologists ignoring housing and housing ignoring social science comparative methodologists.

This presentation encourages researchers to reflect on choices in research strategy, interact with cross disciplinary methodological debates and consider alternative theoretical developments in comparative research and contribute towards progress in the coming decade of comparative housing research. The key question must be addressed at an individual or research team level: where, as academics do we want to go with comparative research? Provide data, offer policy assistance, provide strategic evaluation, critique directions in housing provision or try to answer for fundamental questions that contribute to knowledge and understanding of the different housing situations we confront. There are also challenging and interesting directions which can pursued between East and West (Ronald, 2008), whilst appreciating the importance of local contingent conditions amidst globalising forces.

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