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Comment on:

THE STRENGTH OF HOUSING NORMS by *Kenneth Tremblay, Jr.*

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Tremblay's recent assessment of housing literature in terms of normative theory provides a much needed, if somewhat preliminary, conceptual synthesis of the housing preference literature. His conclusion that "The most important finding of the present analysis is that we have little knowledge regarding the strength of the four major housing norms" (Tremblay, 1981, p. 36) suggests the need for normative theory to improve our understanding of the apparent preference for home ownership and detached single family dwellings. The qualities are highly valued by most U.S. citizens, though actual choice is often at variance with the value.

The point of this comment is to propose that the theoretical rationale needs to be expanded and to show that with a more fully developed conceptual framework, there may be several research strategies in addition to survey as proposed by Tremblay. A survey of the sort suggested by Tremblay would add more to the information already available, particularly if the conceptualization were to follow his theoretical lead. In addition, several other promising research approaches would be possible.

A Critique

Tremblay's conceptual point of departure is provided by Morris and Winter who propose that members of society judge their housing situation in terms of "housing norms" (Tremblay, 1981, p. 32). Four norms, according to Tremblay, that prescribe the kinds of homes in which Americans ought to live are "home ownership, detached single family dwelling, private outside space, and conventional structure type" (Tremblay, 1981, p. 32). He then postulates that members of society are most likely to act to change their housing situation whenever they find that their current housing situation is not in equilibrium with housing norms:

$$\text{Housing Change} = f(\text{disequilibrium})$$

Several major observations concerning Tremblay's paper suggest themselves. First, he does not return to this interesting proposition, probably because the literature does not provide enough information to do the type of "metanalysis" proposed by Glass (1981). Second, the empirical literature which was reviewed by Tremblay in actuality deals with statistical norms, and cultural implications can only be hypothesized. All of this is, of course, apparently evident to Tremblay as evidenced in his pessimistic major conclusion.

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Finally, normative theory is a complicated perspective involving values which are more or less shared, institutional means to which access is unequal, and varying degrees and processes of conformism (Merton, 1957; Jahoda, 1956; Hare, 1976, pp. 55-57).

We propose that his analysis actually provides a much more important conclusion, that in fact there is neither a strong empirical nor an adequate conceptual basis for predicting and interpreting individual decisions regarding residential mobility and choice of housing. Furthermore, Tremblay's focus on housing norms provides an excellent point of departure which should yield additional guides for the assessment of this area of housing literature.

First, let us explicitly draw a distinction between statistical and cultural norms and make the observation that what Tremblay has reviewed for the most part concerns statistical norms. In fact, the evidence generally supports the finding that people are more likely to prefer home ownership or renting, though not in all cases, and are more likely to prefer single family dwelling units, though again not in all cases.

Second, it is reasonable to infer from this finding that there are basic values at work which generate conformity to norms toward home ownership and occupancy of single family dwelling units. However, the exceptions indicate that there must be reasons over and above simple ranking of, and conformity to, norms to explain why so many people rent, and why multi-family dwelling units (condominiums, etc.) have become so much more popular in recent years.

Third, it should be noted that conformity to cultural norms varies, and that issues surrounding the forces to comply, forces sufficiently weak to induce compliance and, indeed, establishment of norms, may be more theoretically relevant questions than simply enumerating the existing norms we believe to be in existence as Tremblay suggests. Jahoda (1956) notes that there are at least four major processes involved in adherence to cultural norms and these include the following:

- Convergence: Based on acceptance of facts.
- Compliance: Based on influence (pressure).
- Conformance: Based on attraction to reference groups.
- Consentience: Based on changed beliefs.

Knowledge about these four processes should provide further insight into the likely prospects for degree of adherence to whatever norms for housing we perceive to be in existence at any given instant. Further, this knowledge should guide our expectations not only about expected degrees of adherence with these norms but also should aid in the location of the nature of persons or groups most likely to be in noncompliance. With this knowledge, we can either attempt a variety of strategies aimed at enforcing prevailing norms or we can prepare for the consequences of noncompliance.

Convergence, for example, reflects perceptions of circumstances. In cases of housing concerns, convergence would be concerned with such things as interest rates, whether individuals in the housing market have knowledge of the rates, and whether they judge them to

be too high to make home ownership economically feasible.

Compliance is driven by pressure generated by others, so that a home may be purchased even with finance costs beyond the normal limits of housing costs. Here, we may be concerned with whether societal pressures or individual needs for home ownership are sufficiently great to propel persons into home ownership despite any economic realities which might otherwise dissuade them.

Conformance operates in group situations where membership is important. This may be illustrated when individuals select housing close to family or friends even if the nature of the housing they may get would, in other circumstances, be less preferable.

Finally, consentience is governed by altered beliefs, such as the belief that home ownership is no longer valued or feasible. In any case, information about these processes may give us added insight into the problem of how individuals make housing choices and how the norms elaborated by Tremblay may come to assume greater or lesser importance in any kind of a ranking scheme.

Theoretical and Research Implications

Normative theory suggests several strategies for analysis and research. Obviously, one might follow Merton's classic paradigm and examine changing values and perceptions especially as they apply to housing choice. Our concerns would then be on such issues as the degree to which housing values are changing. If they are changing, in what respects? To what extent are institutional means affecting values? For example, financing of housing (interest rates), changing tax structures, or changing family structure all may be influencing long held values. In addition, the issue of housing choice may well revolve around conceptions of the feasibility of ownership and the advantages of ownership which are perceptual variables, to some extent. It seems reasonable to focus part of our analytic concerns on the extent to which perceptions mirror reality with respect to issues concerning home ownership. As Tremblay notes, the literature provides little basis for answering these questions.

Therefore, a major part of our energies aimed at predicting and explaining housing choice among citizens must be directed at more than the establishment of normative priority as suggested by Tremblay. We must direct our attention further and examine variables surrounding perception, communication and individual concerns. We need to ascertain the beliefs of the public with respect to financing availability, feasibility of ownership and general positive outcomes associated with ownership. We need to ascertain whether individuals believe the advertisements on television or in local newspapers about the current housing situations. We need to know something about the individual preferences and need structures such as age and family size and strength of kinship bonds which may preclude persons from moving far from their present place of residence in the event that other family members are currently located in the vicinity. Finally, it seems reasonable to look at specific groups of persons, aggregated on some relevant characteristics such as age, ownership status, or number of children. Such an approach should yield more meaningful data on housing preferences.

Suggested Research Strategies.

Survey research is promising, though it may now be timely to encourage survey work which allows for more sophisticated analytic strategies. Consider, for example, the potential usefulness of using path analysis to examine housing choice in terms of the direct and indirect influences of changing demographic characteristics (age, sex, family composition), taking into account evaluative and cognitive factors. Clearly, structural equation modeling of these factors is now possible and would provide a much more adequate conceptual basis for developing surveys of attitudes about housing and residential choice. Certainly, it would provide the theoretical structure for survey design which appears to be missing in the housing field.

Experimental approaches are also possible, and in some cases clearly desirable. Recent advances in marketing research (e.g., focus group analysis) provide opportunities to test client responses to alternative products within a small group setting. Using that approach one would be able to ascertain preferences before actually purchasing housing and to assess the efficacy of various informational techniques surrounding convergence and consentience processes. Certainly, different processes of conformism could be tested using this approach and the results then applied to various empirical settings.

Finally, it should be noted that Tremblay's paper is suggestive of further conceptual work which should enhance the quality of future research. We feel that it has not gone far enough in focusing attention on more salient theoretical issues in determining housing choice among population groups in this country. We have here offered further suggestions which should contribute to the effort of better understanding housing choice and the issues that relate to it.

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