

*A Theoretical Note on:*

*CAUSAL MODELING AS A GUIDE TO HOUSING PREFERENCE  
RESEARCH*

Karl H. Flaming and W.I. Griffith

*ABSTRACT*

*This is a note about some of the theoretical issues raised in the exchange among Tremblay, Winter, Flaming, and Griffith in Housing and Society, Volume 10, Number 1. The theory of W.I. Thomas and causal modeling are suggested ways to improve the theoretical base of housing research.*

INTRODUCTION

A comment by Flaming and Griffith (1983) about Tremblay's (1981) work on housing norms suggested the need for further attention to the theoretical rationale. Replies by Tremblay and Winter indicated that the comment was perceived to be a rejection of normative theory, particularly as developed by Morris and Winter (Tremblay, 1983; Winter, 1983). While that was not the intent of the comment, it is clear that our thoughts on housing preference theory need to be further elaborated to eliminate the misunderstanding and identify issues where there may indeed be substantive differences.

*THE ISSUES*

There is agreement on a number of points. First, it is clear that there is need for further research based on normative theory where more emphasis is given to adaptive processes along the line suggested by Jahoda (1956). We will suggest in the following section that this may be pursued in at least two ways, (1) in terms of household adjustment theory proposed by Morris and Winter (1975; 1978), and (2) in terms of housing choice theory.

We see no reason to disagree with either Tremblay or Winter about the distinction between statistical and cultural norms. Indeed, Winter states our position when she says "obviously, typical behavior or typical conditions ought not to be taken as indicators of the norms" (Winter, 1983:58). We maintain that the evidence presented by Tremblay is of this type and should not be equated with cultural norms. Nevertheless, the earlier work of Morris and Winter does indeed address this issue and further research is obviously needed,

---

The authors are professor and assistant professor, respectively, at Colorado University at Denver.

particularly experimental work which would enable one to distinguish between the "words and deeds" of the subjects.

Tremblay's attention to outside space and to housing constraints is on the mark and our omission of these factors should not be equated with rejection of these as relevant to the understanding of housing choice or preference.

There are, however, several areas where we do take exception to the responses of Tremblay and Winter. A major difference concerns Winter's dismissal of either focused group or experimental techniques, simply because of the complexity of the phenomena. We accept her concern about fundamental theoretical and methodological issues. Experimental approaches in sociology are not only feasible, but necessary to advance the empirical basis of housing theory.

Winter's reference to her work with Morris is helpful, though not entirely pertinent, to our underlying concern. Our concern is with housing choice and preference as reflected by individuals, particularly in response to survey questions. The theoretical work of Morris and Winter focuses on household adjustment to inadequate housing. This is a perfectly legitimate sociological approach, one which is consistent with other family research (Hill, 1949; Rosenstock and Kutner, 1967).

Our general view is that the Morris and Winter theory is particularly relevant in terms of family responses to change and crisis and that its application to changing housing needs is certainly appropriate and indeed very interesting. Whether it satisfies the types of theoretical problems we have in mind remains an open question.

The "propensity to move" causal model tested by Morris and associates (Morris, Crull, and Winter, 1976) is more clearly in line with our earlier stated concerns. In that model,

the relationship of both housing satisfaction and the propensity to move to household and housing characteristics is explained by introducing the normative housing deficits as an additional level of intervening variables (Morris, et al., 1976:319).

#### *WHERE TO GO FROM HERE?*

One of the most frustrating problems facing housing researchers who specialize in survey research is the situation where data are secondary (e.g., survey data provided from an omnibus instrument). We have data from nearly a dozen surveys in which at least some of the items pertain to certain aspects of the respondent's housing. Typically, respondents are asked about plans to move (or past mobility) and/or about their housing satisfaction. Questions about housing preferences are not common, though on occasion older respondents are asked about their housing preferences if health precludes independent living. For example, in our data bank, which is probably fairly typical, questions on housing may be summarized as follows:

Housing and Society, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1984

1. Does the respondent plan to move?
2. How long has the respondent lived at the present location?
3. How satisfied are the respondents with their present housing?

Absent are items relevant to the issues raised in our comment regarding Tremblay's paper. Needed is theoretical direction to guide the selection of housing-related items in omnibus survey instruments. It is evident from Tremblay's own work that he shares our frustration and both he and Winter agree that more research is needed in this area.

Part of the reason for the lack of theoretical direction is the absence of the type of work suggested over two decades ago by Blalock (1963) in which he proposed the need to move from verbal to formal theory. Structural equation modeling is one of several avenues available to current researchers and is here recommended.

An alternative theoretical perspective is that of W.I. Thomas which argues that people behave in terms of their perception of reality. In other words, the actions of individuals involve a complex interplay of values, affect, and perceptions, and these, in turn, are reflective of the individual's social characteristics (e.g., age, sex, and social status).

A review of the earlier work by Morris, Winter, and their associates suggests that various aspects of the Thomas conception might be incorporated into the causal model. For example, Morris, et al., (1976) postulate a model of normative housing deficits, housing/neighborhood satisfaction and the propensity to move in which the exogenous variables include basic demographic and socio-economic factors. Valuable factors (e.g., "How important are ...") are not included. One can easily imagine additional items that might measure how respondents perceive their present housing conditions. Our own previous research in a related area of environmental research suggests that satisfaction items do not adequately measure this factor.

In summary, we believe that this note accomplishes several objectives. First, we do not intend to reject normative theory, but see the need for other theoretical perspectives and related research strategies. Second, we do wish to emphasize the need for experimental strategies. Finally, this note recognizes common interests in the "propensity to move" model of Morris, et al. (1976).

#### REFERENCES

- Blalock, H.M. *Theory Construction*. Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963.
- Flaming, K.H. and Griffith, W.I. A Comment on: The Strength of Housing Norms by Kenneth Tremblay, Jr. *Housing and Society*, 1983, 10, 50-54.

Flaming and Griffith

- Hill, R. *Families Under Stress*. Conn: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1949.
- Jahoda, M. Psychological issues in civil liberties, *American Psychologist*, 1956, 11, 236.
- Morris, E.W., Crull, S.R., and Winter, M. Housing norms, housing satisfaction and the propensity to move. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 1976, 38, 309-320.
- Morris, E. W. and Winter, M. A theory of family housing adjustment, *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 1975, 37, 79-88.
- Morris, E. W. and Winter, M. *Housing, Family, and Society*. New York: Wiley, 1978.
- Rosenstock, F. and Kutner, B. Alienation and family crisis. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 1967, 8, 397-405.
- Tremblay, K.R., Jr. The strength of housing norms: Evidence from sanctions, behavior, and preferences, *Housing and Society*, 1981, 8, 32-38.
- Tremblay, K.R. A reply to Flaming and Griffith, *Housing and Society*, 1983, 10, 54-57/
- Winter, M. A reply to Flaming and Griffith, *Housing and Society*, 1983, 10, 58-59