

A Theoretical Note on:

HOUSING PREFERENCES AND HOUSING CHOICE: A Reply to Tremblay and Winter.

W. I. Griffith and Karl T. Flaming

In a recent comment on Tremblay's (1981) work on housing norms, Flaming and Griffith (1983) note a need for developing conceptual frameworks and theoretical rationale regarding literature on housing preference. Replies to the comment (Tremblay, 1983; Winter, 1983) indicate some disagreement with Flaming and Griffith regarding a need for more fundamental theoretical development. There was also some confusion concerning the applicability of experimental techniques. The purpose of this paper is to elaborate more fully the need for theoretical development and the ways in which experimental techniques may be employed.

Most would agree that purchasing a home is one of the major decisions made by individuals or families. It involves a large financial commitment (USBC, 1979). Therefore, information concerning housing preferences and housing choice is of great practical concern. Information regarding individual housing expectations and preferences is important to many including housing developers, builders, policy makers and planners. As Tremblay (1983) notes, the goal of his 1981 article was pragmatic. He hoped use of the information would predict the acceptability of housing alternatives.

The work on housing preferences attempts to discover relationships between housing preferences and a number of other variables such as: family size, income, education, age and political conservatism (Dillman et al., 1979; Hinshaw and Alott, 1972; Hohm, 1983; Michelson, 1966; Kemeny, 1977). However, simply knowing whether relationships exist between various characteristics of buyers and their preferences does little to explain how such characteristics shape preferences. Further, it is not clear that any consistent relationship necessarily exists between stated and actual choice. Presumably, there is some relationship between the two. It is crucial to understand this relationship.

W.I. Griffith and Karl T. Flaming are Assistant Professor and Professor, respectively, at Colorado University at Denver.

The comment by Flaming and Griffith (1983) did not intend to downplay the practical context of Tremblay's (1981) article. On the contrary, we would agree this is a significant consideration. Rather, we sought to suggest that the exclusive or heavy reliance on empirical pragmatism is not sufficient to develop information regarding preference and choice. Empirical findings, while momentarily practical, tend to outlive their usefulness as the empirical indicators change (e.g., age, income and family size). Therefore, creating a policy on the basis of such findings is likely to be problematic due to a lag in developing findings, making them public, convincing planners, planning housing and building it.

Flaming and Griffith (1983) simply point out that theoretical development would substantially enhance the empirical data. Neither, in itself, is sufficient to provide valid and reliable data to guide housing design and explain preference and choice. The impetus behind the Flaming and Griffith article (perhaps not sufficiently elaborated) is to note that there is a difference between housing preference and housing choice. While preferences may shape choice, choice may be a more critical issue to examine. This is so for two reasons: 1) choice may be the behavioral manifestation of preference and 2) it may help uncover the relationship between the two in a more theoretical fashion.

It is unrealistic to believe that housing suppliers will be guided strictly by the desires of housing purchasers. The primary goal of housing suppliers is to provide saleable housing for maximum profits. As long as individuals will buy, housing suppliers will continue to build units that people will buy, even if the units are not the favored preference of buyers. In addition, it is not unrealistic to presume that preferences may change over time due to a variety of factors including mortgage rates, housing costs, the availability of loan money, changes in lifestyle and a variety of other concerns. Therefore, knowledge about what choices people make, the availability of selections and how choices are made is critical, especially when viewed in terms of stated preferences. This is particularly true when one realizes that preferences may be stated in the absence of restraints (e.g., financing, availability, etc.), but decisions must be made with consideration of such issues. In addition, the satisfaction with a choice may be evaluated within the context of stated preferences.

It seems naive to believe that preferences are perfect determinants of choice. What holds more promise for the field of housing is how persons balance preference and choice, what other factors mediate between the two and how choices are made. Flaming and Griffith (1983) suggest (again, implicitly) that theoretical development concerning housing choice and decision-making could provide key insights into the role of preferences in choice and the importance of preference as a housing phenomenon.

Finally, although the preponderance of evidence suggests a preference for single family dwellings, such a preference may exist due to amenities usually accompanying such dwellings (Schlay, 1984). It is possible to construct dwellings with the amenities thought to accompany the traditional single family dwellings (except, perhaps, for private outside space). In any case, understanding not only the

preferences, but also their bases will provide great insights. To date, little theoretical work integrating recent findings has been attempted. It is this theoretical development which is not only timely, but essential.

While it may be impractical, as Winter (1983) suggests, to apply experimental techniques to the more traditional housing research, it is certainly not difficult when assessing choice. Theories and theoretical development easily accommodate the application of experimental techniques. In fact, true theoretical development as elaborated by Popper (1964) and Salmon (1967) even necessitate such tactics.

Winter (1983) suggests that she cannot see how such techniques would be applicable, realistic and useful. However, if we are attempting to determine how choices are made and to make *a priori* predictions of those choices, the applicability and realism become less problematic. For example, the use of focus group or small group interaction techniques holds much promise.

Consider the following example. Prospective housing buyers are brought in to discuss their preferences with real estate agents. These preferences are noted. For those who actually complete a purchase, preferences and choices are compared, as well as the factors involved in the actual choice. These could include housing costs, locations, loan qualifications, size and amenities. We could also look at individuals who did not complete a purchase and determine whether such an outcome was the result of an inability to match preferences with practical purchasing demands.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to develop an experiment designed to test housing preference or choice, it is possible to apply it to basic models of choice (Gray and Tallman, 1984; Lindenberg, 1981). These models of choice, especially the satisfaction-balance model, can be adapted to suit many interests, including housing. In fact, for those who doubt the utility of such theoretical models and their utility in more empirical instances, it is useful to note that the satisfaction-balance model has been successfully applied in empirical instances relating to deviance and deterrence (Stafford et al., 1984). The real advantage of such theoretical models is their generality and the fact they are not bound by or confined to a single issue.

In summary, if housing researchers wish to provide useful data not only for the present, but for the future as well, it is time to venture beyond the atheoretical tactics most generally employed. The inclusion of experimental or quasi-experimental strategies to assess the decisionmaking mechanisms of home buyers is necessary. It is also crucial to determine the relationship between preference and choice and to identify specific variables related to choice or preference in a more direct and systematic fashion. Such strategies are not intended to replace, nor should they, more conventional housing research strategies. Rather, social science researchers should endeavor to use all the means available to understand a phenomenon as important to society as housing.

REFERENCES

- Dillman, D.A., Tremblay, K.R., and Dillman, J.J. Influence of housing norms and personal characteristics on stated housing preferences. *Housing and Society*, 1979, 6, 2-19.
- 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.
- Gray, L.N. and Tallman, J. A satisfaction-balance model of decision-making and choice behavior. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 1983, 47, 146-159.
- Hinshaw, M. and Alott, K. Environmental preferences of future housing consumers. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 1972, 38, 102-107.
- Hohm, C.F. Expectations for future home ownership. *Housing and Society*, 1983, 10, 25-35.
- Kemeny, J. A political sociology of home ownership in Australia. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, 1977, 13, 47-52.
- Lindenberg, R.J. Rational repetitive choice: The discrimination model vs. the Camilleri-Berger model. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 1981, 44, 312-330.
- Michelson, W. An empirical analysis of urban environmental preferences. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 1966, 32, 355-360.
- Popper, K. *The Poverty of Historicism*. New York: Harper and Row, 1964.
- Salmon, W.C. *The Foundations of Scientific Inference*. Pittsburg, PA.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1967.
- Schlay, A. Taking apart the American dream: The influence of income and family composition in residential evaluations. *Western Social Science Annual Meetings*, San Diego, 1984.
- Stafford, M., Gray, L., Menke, B. and Ward, D. Modeling at the deterrent effects of punishment. *Paper presented at Western Social Science Association Meetings*, San Diego, 1984.
- Tremblay, K.R., Jr. The strength of housing norms: Evidence from sanctions, behavior and preferences. *Housing and Society*, 1981, 8, 54-58.
- Tremblay, K.R., Jr. A reply to Flaming and Griffith. *Housing and Society*, 1983, 10, 54-58.

Griffith and Flaming

USBC, United States Bureau of the Census. *Statistical Yearbook (100th Edition)*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979.

Winter, M. A reply to Flaming and Griffith. *Housing and Society*, 1983, 10, 58-59.