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Shirley S. Angrist
Carnegie-Mellon University

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SOCIAL RESEARCH ON HOUSING IN THE UNITED STATES:
DIRECTIONS AND THEMES

Shirley S. Angrist
School of Urban and Public Affairs
Carnegie-Mellon University

I shall present a selective overview of recent themes and directions in social research on housing in the U.S. I narrowed the topic by focusing on research centering on the family and on neighborhood. These topics offer ways to concentrate on "social" research and to narrow a rather broad topic.

My meaning of "social" research encompasses work not only by sociologists. It also includes the separate or collaborative work of other disciplines, especially psychology, anthropology, social psychology, architecture and urban planning. Research on housing has from its Post-World War II flowering been an interdisciplinary enterprise. And it continues to be so.

Several themes stand out in the last 15 years. A longstanding and overriding framework in housing research involves physical determinism - the assumption that the house, neighborhood, community or town influences and shapes how people live. This view has remained predominant (Schorr, 1963); but there are growing reactions against it to suggest that people select environments according to their preferences more than being shaped by those environments (Pynoos et al, 1973) and that people and environments interact to affect each other (Keller 1966). On the whole, physical determinism remains the strongest of the orientations: it takes a physical setting as given and assesses the impact on life styles, values and attitudes, or it involves design of housing environments which presume to create desirable social conditions. The deterministic view and reactions against it permeate each of the four research emphases which are described next.

(1) Defining Neighborhood and Territory

Not all researchers agree that "neighborhoods" exist. On one side, is the strong conviction that people operate with a cognitive or conceptual map of their neighborhoods - the areas where they live. Proponents of this view argue that real or symbolic barriers exist to define areas of influence used by residents for social services and in which they feel secure; this is the "defensible space" within which people function daily with a sense of physical safety (Newman, 1972). People use this territory or area as a neighborhood even if they do not feel positive towards it. It is at once the area containing necessary facilities (such as transportation) and which has a corporate identity known to members and outsiders. "Functionally it is the smallest spatial unit within which co-residents assume a relative degree of security on the streets compared to adjacent areas" (Suttles, 1972). This definition holds most for the lower social classes. It mirrors a widespread concern with housing and neighborhood as territories, and with human behavior as territorial akin to the ethological studies of primates. Thus the neighborhood is both a physical and social entity defined by geographic boundaries as well as the separation between friends and enemies.

The contrasting viewpoint is total skepticism about the utility of the neighborhood concept. Because of the decline in local self-sufficiency, and the increased interdependence in urban areas, there may not exist a simple territory or delimited area which provides social ties, facilities and a sense of identity (Keller, 1966). Except for primary schools or grocery stores, few facilities are close to home; people travel to find what they need. There are at least 3 aspects to defining neighborhood; cognitive, or the way people identify the area; utilitarian, the way groups use the area's facilities; and affective, how people feel about the area. Keller (1966) argues that neighbors (people with special role relationships) and neighboring (the exchange of help, limited sociability and practiced standards of upkeep) occur in some areas and not in others. Thus, a presumed neighborhood may lack the cognitive, utilitarian or affective components, it may even lack clear physical boundaries.

Despite such skepticism, my distinct impression of the literature is that social scientists, architects and planners still believe in the neighborhood concept; they do research, design housing and offer panaceas with that concept in mind.

(2) Poverty and Housing

A second major thrust of research centers on housing the poor - the working or lower classes. Here the concern has been what Oscar Lewis called "culture of poverty", the way of life of the lower classes. Evidence has accumulated to show that lower class groups, especially ethnic groups which are non-Anglo Saxon stress expressiveness, group integration and close interactions with kinfolk. For such a life style, the dwelling per se is less important than the neighborhood. Physical proximity permits mutual assistance and support among relatives (Gans, 1962). Streets, apartments, hallways and neighborhoods are an integral part of daily life (Schoor, 1963). Whether it is Italians in Boston's West End, or Blacks in public housing, or Chicago's Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, observers report this pattern. It may be part of the "defended neighborhood" as a safe and identifiable territory (Suttles, 1972), but it is also a way of life involving close social ties and rootedness in the extended family (Yancey, 1972). The middle and upper classes have mostly nuclear families and prefer the isolation and separateness of suburban living; they may be more sociable when an area is new but established middle class areas become more selective in neighboring (Keller, 1966; Michleson, 1970).

The concentration of the poor in government subsidized housing is a frequent focus of research. Public housing in the U.S. was originally a way station for the temporarily poor; it was the chance for the working poor to recuperate economically from periods of unemployment or bad luck. More recently, public housing contains the predominantly dependent families on welfare and in frequent need of social services. Social scientist discovered that housing alone could not break the cycle of poverty and create a good life (Rainwater, 1970). Some attribute the inadequacies of public housing to high rise buildings, poor physical designs and lack of social services (Yancey, 1972; Newman, 1972). Others point to the sociological determinants regardless of physical setting - problems are supposedly caused

by the unstable poor who prey on the stable employed poor, making their lives hazardous (Staff, 1971). Despite all its problems, public housing can accommodate only a small percentage of those eligible and eager to move in. And despite the dramatic negative picture of Pruitt-Igoe, other evidence shows that some housing projects are relatively successful (Angrist, 1974; Scobie, 1973).

Also related to housing the poor is the matter of crowding or density. This is a minor research emphasis. In 1963, Schorr concluded that crowding effects are applicable mainly to the lower social classes and include problems of fatigue, lack of privacy, family friction, higher use of the outdoors, and lack of parental control over children. But more recently, Michelson (1970) suggests that social pathologies have little to do with crowding within dwelling units although they may be related to neighborhood densities - in any case, personal and cultural factors intervene so that the relation is unclear.

(3) Uses of Space

A third emphasis in the literature is largely descriptive and based on observational data. The focus is on how people use space. Sommer (1969) indicates that individuals behave in terms of both cultural and personal definitions of space. People avoid getting too close to strangers and when this becomes unavoidable they "freeze" or avert the gaze to impersonalize the contact. Privacy or the lack of it is a focal concern especially in group or public settings. People use territoriality and distancing to insulate themselves from others or to order interactions.

Related to Sommer's concept of "personal space" is the "behavior-setting" framework developed by Parker (1968) and followed by other researchers (Lawton, 1970). The focus is on intimate ties between social context and physical setting; people are seen as behaving or carrying out functions in definable spatial contexts. This has the character of identifying and describing activities common in an institution, a town, a family or a group, to reveal how people use space for various functions, and how physical setting fosters or hinders such functions.

(4) Satisfaction with Housing

The fourth emphasis reflects an interest in ascertaining people's preferences in housing and the conditions which lead to greater or lesser satisfaction with living arrangements. Housing is a "bundle of attributes that members of a household consider when they choose a residence or when they express dissatisfaction with their living arrangements" (Synoos et al, 1973). The concern has been studied mainly through survey data. The urge to know what people of various ages, stages and classes prefer has yielded at least two surprises- first, that regardless of income level everyone prefers the best: the ideal home for most people is a single family dwelling because it is thought to permit privacy, it is best for raising children and for pursuit of one's own interests. Even those living in very different housetypes agree on the single family dwelling as the ideal (Michelson, 1972a; Scaeff and Sawhey, 1972). The other surprise is the privacy of the house over the neighborhood and community services as a reason for moving (Newman,

1974). More specific preferences of various age groups include: the elderly's greatest satisfaction in living with like-aged people but with access to lively activity and to the young (Michelson, 1970; Steinfeld, 1973); the desire for access to goods and services by adults without children (Hall and Wekerle, 1972; Michelson, 1970) and the preference for direct access to the outside by parents with young children.

Satisfaction with housing has become a measure of how well-off people feel and how effective housing is in serving their needs. Recent work centers on satisfaction with mass housing, both public and private, as it relates to management techniques. This stems partly from concern for managing poor, indigent and rent delinquent families and partly from concern over how to operate physically safe and economically viable mass housing in urban areas. Compared to variables such as tenant demographic characteristics, the most significant variable in explaining overall tenant satisfaction is the quality of management (Ahlbrandt, Brophy and Burman, 1974). Tenants feel better off in their housing when they see good maintenance and perceive management as interested in their project (Angrist, 1974). Housing with good management has not only higher resident and staff satisfaction but also better maintained buildings and lower total operating expenditures (Sadacca et al, 1974). Even in a study of new towns and less planned suburbs, the single best predictor of neighborhood satisfaction was maintenance level (Lansing et al, 1970). These studies shift the focus from the physical environment as causal in social pathologies to the social environment, emphasizing the key role of management in maintaining tenant satisfaction with housing.

Conclusions

My review of the literature was selective not exhaustive. Any my presentation of four research themes is only one way to organize that body of literature. Recognizing these limitations, I want to draw some conclusions that cut across the research themes.

- (1) Physical determinism, the idea that people are shaped by their housing and neighborhood environment remains controversial. Strong proponents present evidence to conclude that houses, neighborhoods and communities can be designed to minimize crime and other social pathologies. Critics find the evidence weak and far from causal. Modified views are that housing can foster the good life but not create it.
- (2) The key research methods are observation and surveys. There is heavy reliance on what people do in a given setting and on how they feel about the settings in which they live and function daily.
- (3) The research is not narrowly tied to one discipline but is increasingly interdisciplinary overlapping sociology, psychology, architecture, physical planning and human ecology. Current usage reflects this blend of disciplines in terms such as "environmental psychology" and "environmental design".
- (4) American urban problems and rural nostalgia permeate the research: these are the concerns with how to lower crime rates, to increase feelings of

physical safety, how to ascertain and design people's ideal housing arrangements, how to protect the individual and the family in a hazardous world, how to obtain the good life.

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