

**Addressing the continuing quandary of theory in housing research:
A systematic review of contemporary literature**

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Abstract

The housing studies field has been critiqued since the 1980s for under-engagement with theory. In this paper, we present the findings of a systematic literature review that investigates the extent to which contemporary housing scholarship engages with theory. By reviewing all research papers published in three leading housing journals in 2019 and 2020, we identify *references to* theory, and evaluate the extent of *engagement with* theory. In total, 313 papers were reviewed to assess current theoretical ‘frontiers’ in housing studies. We conclude that the theory-scape of housing research is more complex and nuanced than previously depicted, with contemporary scholarship engaging meaningfully with diverse theoretical frameworks of both ‘general’ and ‘housing-specific’ application. Our findings illuminate how housing studies is growing not only as an interdisciplinary field, but also as a well-theorized one.

Keywords: systematic literature review; housing studies; theory; research methods; interdisciplinary research

Introduction

Housing research has strongly positivist, empiricist origins, with a tendency to focus on producing practical and tangible outcomes for policy makers, housing providers and administrators (Allen, 2005; Bengtsson, 2012; O'Neill, 2008). Consequently, housing scholarship tended to eschew normative standpoints and questions of political philosophy, and was limited in its social critique (Lawson, 2012; 2018). In 1987, Jim Kemeny identified a problem of 'under-theorization' in housing studies, characterized by "tentative probings and theorisings, some of it quite half-baked and ill thought through" (Kemeny, 1987, p.249). By the early 2000s, Kemeny observed theoretical progress in the field, but characterized its development and application across core topics as uneven (Allen, 2005). These concerns persist in contemporary literature. Lawson (2018) notes an enduring tension between the "competing interests of theoretically orientated academic research and more instrumentalist evidence-based policy demands" (p236) and a lack of direct engagement with theory in some housing research, with "concepts and strategies ... used in an unexamined way, [which] can be said to be atheoretical and oblivious to both broader social structures and their contingent context" (p235).

In this paper, we examine and characterize the theory-scape of contemporary housing research, employing a systematic literature review in order to identify applications of theory, and evaluate the extent of theoretical engagements. In so doing, we are attentive to both theories of general application (i.e., within/across the social sciences) and those that are housing-specific (i.e., generated within housing studies). We also attend to the topics, geography and methods in our sample of housing research – key aspects of study design inherently connected to both practical relevance *and* theoretical engagement (Allen, 2005; Jacobs & Manzi, 2000; Mertens, 2020; Saegert, 2018; Tracy, 2010; Willgens et al., 2016).

What is theory – and why does it matter?

In general terms, theory can be understood as a way of categorizing ideas and phenomena, in order to build systematic knowledge of the world (Chijioke et al., 2021). Theory can take different forms depending on how and where it is applied: it may have predictive or explanatory value, or it may provide a framework for organizing information and connecting findings and conclusions across diverse studies, fields or disciplines (Blaikie, 2007). In the specific case of housing research, Somerville (2018, pp.242-243) defines theory as “concepts about the world of housing that facilitate explaining, predicting, or intervening.” Housing research that utilizes structuralist theories, for example, has a central concern for *explaining*: it seeks to identify “causal tendencies or mechanisms, [which] in combination with contingent relations and other necessary relations, help to explain the nature and development of housing-related events and experiences” (Lawson, 2012, p190). This explanatory focus can, in turn, inform *intervening*: “Having sought explanations for housing problems ... researchers should be able to suggest appropriate and feasible alternatives, which may require different structures and mechanisms to achieve more desirable outcomes.” (Lawson, 2012, p200). Depending on how it is used, then, housing theory can contribute to conceptual understanding, to problem-solving or to enrichment of social life (Saegert, 2018).

In a seminal paper, Kemeny (1992) advocated for theorization in housing studies to enable lateral thinking, broader consideration of social structures, and reflexivity regarding interrelationships between research and the social contexts within which it is embedded. Later, in conversation with Chris Allen (2005, p.104), Kemeny explained that “[t]heory forces housing researchers to lift their gaze from the nuts and bolts of housing issues and to make wider links.” Engagement with theory can enable deeper understandings of housing

phenomena, greater analytical power, and improved transferability or applicability of findings and conclusions to other research within and beyond housing – as well as influencing policy and practice (Bengtsson, 2009, 2012; Blessing, 2018; Lawson, 2018; O’Neill, 2008; Saegert, 2018). More generally, Tracy explains that a “richly rigorous” researcher with “a head full of theories, and a case full of abundant data, is best prepared to see nuance and complexity ... [and] better equipped to make smart choices about samples and contexts” (2010, p.841).

Given the importance of theory, as well as claims of under-theorization in housing research, our objective is: *to identify and evaluate the application of theory in contemporary housing studies*. In so doing, we seek to establish the conceptual ‘frontiers’ of housing research, and to ‘test’ assertions that the field is under-theorized – goals that can be supported by a systematic literature review (Xiao & Watson, 2019). The paper is arranged as follows. First, we provide an overview of current and longstanding critiques of under-theorization in housing studies. Second, we describe the review process used in this study. Third, we present our findings via a blend of tabulated summaries and descriptive text. Fourth, we reflect on the presence of theory in our sample and discuss its significance for understanding the field. We conclude that housing studies is rich and nuanced, with a complex landscape of theoretical engagement that is deeper and more diverse than has been previously documented.

Literature

Approaches to housing research

It is generally accepted that housing studies is a *field* of study, rather than a discipline in and of itself. O’Neill (2008, p.171) suggests that “in the wider social sciences arena, housing is seen not so much as a social world with a depth and breadth capable of spawning a disciplinary tradition but as a heuristic device for the study of society more generally.”

Similarly, Ruonavaara (2018, p.189) identifies housing as a common avenue of inquiry in social science research, rather than a contained or independent topic.

Given this status, a critical question concerns how theory can and should be applied in housing studies, in order to enrich analysis and draw connections with other areas of social scientific inquiry (Blessing, 2018; Clapham, 2009; Kemeny, 1987; Lawson, 2012; Saegert, 2018). The relative merits of inter- and multi-disciplinary approaches to housing research have been widely debated. Gibb (2009) argues that economics has been one of the most influential disciplines in housing studies, particularly in terms of applied economic theory, and suggests such contributions illustrate the usefulness of *multi*-disciplinary housing research. However, Clapham (2009, pp.2-3) contends that the “live and let live attitude” of multi-disciplinarity is “very difficult to justify”, because different disciplines working largely in isolation do not foster holistic understandings of housing. Instead, Clapham favours an *inter*-disciplinary housing field that is “more integrated ... [and] uses insights from a wide range of disciplines” (2009, p.4). For this review, we see housing studies as an interdisciplinary field that can borrow from and contribute to theorization and understandings in a range of disciplines (Bengtsson, 2009; Fitzpatrick & Watts, 2018; O’Neill, 2008).

Theory in housing studies

As one of the field’s founding scholars, Kemeny was among the first to identify a relative lack of theorization in housing research. He connected this lack to *epistemic drift* – “the process of de-conceptualization that takes place in respect of conceptual frameworks applied to concrete social phenomena” (Kemeny, 1992, p.16). De-conceptualization occurred as the focus of research shifted from wider social science problems and contributions, towards specific housing issues identified by administrators and politicians. One consequence was that

“concepts degenerate[d] from a theoretically grounded and dynamic explanation into a static and sterile descriptive category” (Kemeny, 2001, p.60).

In response to this shortcoming, Kemeny advocated for application of theory from other disciplines (e.g., sociology, geography, economics) to housing research so that it may become “theoretically adequate” (1987, p.253) and more holistic in its consideration of diverse aspects and meanings of housing. Allen (2005, p.96) notes that following Kemeny’s intervention, housing studies experienced a “turn – or rather return – to theory” (see also Blessing, 2018). For example, structuralist theories gained strength in housing studies at this time, applying insights from the urban political economy of Harvey and Castells (itself grounded in Marx’s historical materialism) to diverse issues including the production of housing, extraction of rent, and residential filtering (Lawson, 2012). Overtly theoretical work in the structuralist tradition has since declined, but gave rise to “tributary streams” of housing research that utilize concepts such as inequality, uneven development and state/capital relations (Lawson, 2012, p.193). Connections between such concepts and the theory from which they originated are often implicit and indirect, however, and critiques of under-theorization in housing studies endure (see Allen, 2005; Clapham, 2009; Lawson, 2018; Ruonavaara, 2018).

In direct contrast to Kemeny’s argument, King (2009) calls for *theory of* housing, rather than the application of theory from other fields or disciplines, on the grounds that housing is a sufficiently unique and distinct field of inquiry to warrant its own theory. Ruonavaara (2018) also engages in this debate around the appropriate form of theory in housing studies, exploring the possibilities of theory *of*, *from* or *about* housing. He suggests that creating definitive theory *of* housing is “questionable” because housing is not a research topic in and of itself, but is instead a “common denominator” of many different topics. Theory *from* housing would be limited in its contributions to general theorization, but could play a role in

cross-checking the application of other theories. Theory *about* housing is “acceptable”, provided it can contribute to advancement of theory more generally. Ruonavaara concludes that even if a “grand, total theory *of* housing” (emphasis added) was possible, it would not be sensible, and instead research efforts should focus on advancing theory *about* and *from* housing (2018, p.189). The critical importance of context in housing research also agitates against universalizing theoretical claims (Lawson, 2012).

Allen (2005) strikes an alternative note, and largely opposes the use of theory due to the potential for some (e.g., academic) knowledge to be privileged or deemed superior to other (e.g., residents’) knowledge. However, Clapham (2009) notes that this critique holds true for most social science research, and that respectful, ethical methods and appropriate use of theory can mitigate these problems, which are more commonly identified in positivist research (Hearne & Kenna, 2014). In a subsequent intervention, Clapham (2018) makes a helpful distinction between research that “break[s] new ground in theoretical and conceptual development” (p173) and research that applies theory to housing issues without pursuing novel development. In this paper we consider both approaches – and others, including writing about theorization or defining a concept – as a form of engagement with theory (as does Clapham).

Method(ologie)s in housing research

Methodological approaches can influence and enhance theoretical framing and contributions in housing studies. ‘Congruence’ of methodology and theory can bolster the clarity, rigor and overall quality of research (Tracy, 2010; Willgens et al., 2016). For example, the structuralist tradition reviewed by Lawson (2012) was characterized by a shared methodological and theoretical approach focused on structures and systems, and a deductive logic that built on “preceding explanatory developments and debates ... to generate explanations of causal

processes” (p190). However, as described above with regards to theoretical engagement, methodological choices and considerations are not consistently signposted in housing research, and have often been overlooked in the field (Allen, 2005; Jacobs, 2001).

In response, several possibilities to extend and advance the field have been proposed. Jacobs and Manzi (2000) consider the potential contributions of social constructionist epistemology to housing studies, with reference to work that has advanced knowledge (conceptual, theoretical or otherwise) even without a salient, tangible ‘real-world’ application. They identify how social constructionist research can enable scholars to expand the scope of the field and deepen understanding of (often complex) housing-related issues and experiences.

Hastings (2000) advocates for the use of discourse analysis in housing research, citing benefits of the critical perspective this method can provide in the pursuit of understanding housing phenomena, as well as in researcher reflexivity regarding the use of language, positionality and the privileging of academic voices (see also Allen, 2005). Similarly, Jacobs (2001, p.127) argues for (enhanced) application of methods and methodologies drawn from the discipline of history in order to “sharpen [the] conceptual framework” in housing studies. Jacobs notes that while some historical methods have been adopted in housing research (e.g., oral histories, archival research, textual analysis, etc.), they have tended to be used in less-than-critical ways. He also calls for more theoretically-informed approaches to studying the history of housing. Similar arguments have been made vis-à-vis other fields, for example by Bengtsson (2009) regarding political science and housing, and Gibb (2009) regarding economics and housing. Further, Kimhur (2020) identified opportunities for application and extension of the capabilities approach in housing research – a theoretical and methodological framing originating in welfare economics and closely related to human rights. Calls to

broaden and advance housing studies highlight opportunities for contemporaneous methodological *and* theoretical development in the field.

Methods: A scoping-critical systematic literature review

Our systematic literature review sought to identify and evaluate how theory is being applied in housing research. The following subsections detail how papers were selected for inclusion, the specific review process, and key variables of interest.

Inclusion criteria

This review included all research articles (excluding obituaries, book reviews etc.) published in 2019 and 2020 in *Housing, Theory and Society (HT&S)*, *Housing Studies (HS)*, and *Housing Policy Debate (HPD)*. These journals were selected because they are generalist, international, and ranked as the top three housing journals in 2019 and 2020 according to the *Journal Citation Reports* database (Clarivate, 2021). These journals also have differing research scopes and objectives. The journal aims for *HT&S* specify “explicit engagement with theory” as a “critical criterion” for publication (T&F, 2022a). In *HS*, international applicability and theoretical or analytical developments are encouraged, but there is no formal requirement for theoretical engagement (T&F, 2022b). In *HPD*, emphasis is placed on practical contributions that “evaluate and inform” policy (T&F, 2022c), although this does not prohibit theoretical engagement. Together, these journals allow breadth and depth in our review of theory in housing studies.

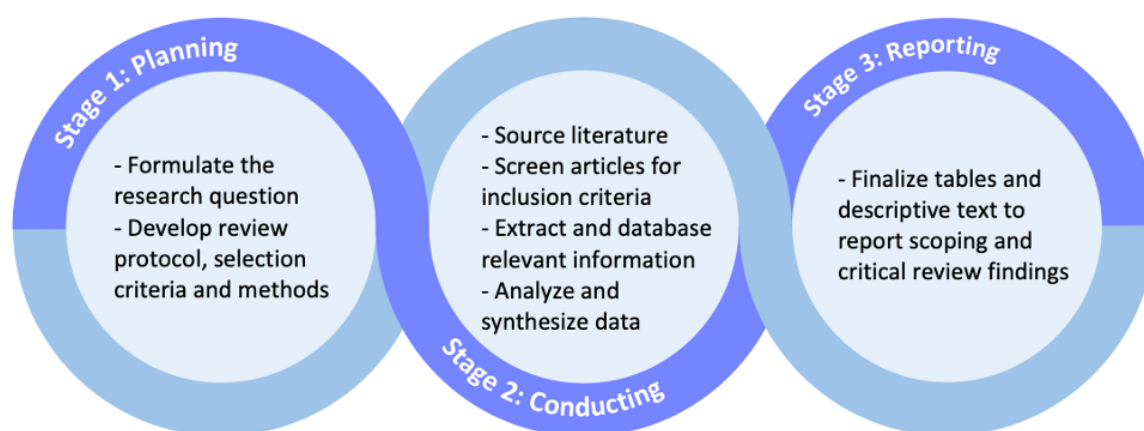
Systematic review process

Xiao and Watson (2019) outline 16 sub-types of systematic literature review, differentiated by their primary objectives and the type(s) of literature being reviewed, thereby enabling clarity regarding the review objectives, process and contributions. Their categorization also accounts

for and justifies subtle variations in methods, inclusion criteria, objectives and outputs, depending on the research question. To this end, Xiao and Watson recognize the value of formulating a hybrid approach tailored to the needs of a specific study: “Reviewers should not be constrained by or ‘siloed’ into the synthesis methodologies. Rather [they should] choose elements that will best answer the research question” (Xiao & Watson, 2019, p.102)

The systematic literature review presented in this paper draws on aspects of Xiao and Watson’s *scoping* and *critical* review approaches. The individual stages and steps required to operationalize this hybrid approach are summarized in Figure 1. A scoping systematic review is characterized by an interest in providing a “snapshot of the field” (p.99), giving an overview of a field’s conceptual boundaries, methodologies, types of evidence collected in previous work, and research gaps (etc.). This form of review lends itself to deeper analysis of each article: generating richer data about the field than would be gathered in bibliometric analyses, and broader data than would be gathered by review approaches that screen articles for ‘quality’ as part of (or subsequent to) the initial selection process (see also Pluye et al., 2016).

Figure 1: Process for undertaking a systematic review drawing on scoping and critical review approaches (informed by Xiao & Watson, 2019).



A critical systematic review approach can be integrated with this scoping approach. It can include all forms of literature identified; it is not limited by discipline or by the qualitative or quantitative nature of findings (Xiao & Watson, 2019). In this approach, each item is compared based on criteria established at the start of the review process. In our study, these criteria are the four variables of interest we identified in critiques (both recent and longstanding) of the housing field. The first variable centred on our primary interest, the *theoretical approaches* applied. We also included three supplementary variables – (i) the *geographical foci* of the studies reported; (ii) the *topics* investigated (e.g., dwelling quality, housing markets, policy); and (iii) the *research methods* employed. Our definitions for each of these variables are presented in Table 1. These four variables reflect the core elements typically expected of research papers (as identified in journal guidelines), and were selected because they enabled us to develop a broad perspective on contemporary housing research, ensuring that we did not examine theory in isolation from other key characteristics of scholarship. At the same time, the critical-scoping review approach allowed us to identify not only if articles *reference* theory, but also to evaluate the extent to which they *engage* with it.

Table 1. Overview of variables and analytical process.

Variable	Definition	Sections where commonly identified
Geographical focus	The location(s) of data collection or case studies presented.	Keywords, Abstract, Introduction, Methods.
Topic	The main research topic, subject or focus of inquiry (distinct from location or theory).	Title, Keywords, Abstract.
Methods	Data sources and/or means of data collection.	Abstract or Methods where possible; alternatively, Findings and References.
Theory	Theoretical or conceptual basis used to frame findings and/or connect the study with broader literatures.	Variable combinations of all main sections.

Determining application of theory in the papers proceeded as follows. First, we made an initial identification of theory by reading the title, abstract and keywords for each paper. Second, if theory was not initially identified in these opening sections, the remainder of the paper was scanned for presence of theory. Third, each paper that referenced theory was explored more deeply, in order to evaluate the extent of engagement. This was achieved by

recording all sections in which the theory was applied. For the purposes of this analysis, ‘application of theory’ included description or definition of a theory, use of a theory to interpret data/findings, and drawing connections between conclusions and broader literatures, etc. Theory was recorded as being present in a section provided it exceeded a fleeting mention (i.e., more than just 1-2 sentences).

Throughout this process, we also distinguished between *housing-specific theory*, which is predominantly or exclusively applicable to housing, and *general theory*, which has broader applicability or has been borrowed from other disciplines. In so doing, we drew upon a distinction made by other authors (e.g., Aalbers, 2018; Ruonavaara, 2018), which is consequential in that it speaks to the origins of theory, within or beyond the field.

All papers were catalogued in a Microsoft Excel database. The process of recording details for all variables of interest took 20-40 minutes per paper, largely depending on structure and clarity, for a total of ~120 hours of information extraction and databasing activities. These details were subsequently coded, enabling categories to be developed for reporting in frequency tables. A balance of tabulated overview and textual description is used to summarize and contextualize review findings, as is conventional for both the scoping and critical systematic review approaches (Xiao & Watson, 2019).

Findings

Geography of housing studies

Table 2 summarizes the geographical foci of the 313 papers in our study. Across the three journals, 109 studies were focused on the US (34.8%), 58 (18.5%) on Europe and 49 (15.7%) on the UK. In general, Anglophone and higher-income countries were more strongly

represented, although Canada accounted for just 13 papers (4.2%). Also of note is a predominance of US-focused research in *HPD* as compared to the other two leading housing journals (76.2% in *HPD*; 17.1% in *HS*; 10.6% in *HT&S*). Across all three journals, South/Central America and Africa together accounted for just 16 papers (2.9% and 2.2% respectively). Eighteen papers (5.8%) were literature reviews (or similar) without a geographical focus.

Table 2. Overview of the geographical foci of papers reviewed.

Geographical focus	HT&S	HS	HPD	Total
United States	7	25	77	109
Europe	23	33	2	58
United Kingdom	16	32	1	49
Oceania	11	24	0	35
Asia	2	20	11	33
Canada	2	11	0	13
South/Central America	1	5	3	9
Africa	1	2	4	7
None	8	6	4	18
Total papers reviewed*	66	146	101	313

*Note that columns and rows sum to greater than the total number of papers reviewed, because some papers considered more than one case study location.

Topics in housing studies

More than one third (109; 34.8%) investigated aspects of housing experience (see Table 3). Many explored residents' relationships with their dwelling. Mackay and Perkins (2019), for example, investigated how people's idealized relationships with their dwelling play out through DIY home improvement plans. Nózka (2020) explored sense of home and residence as experienced by people who are homeless. Some authors adopted a broader scale of inquiry, investigating residents' experience of (and satisfaction with) neighbourhoods (e.g., Jaramillo et al., 2020; Yoon & Lee, 2019). Other papers in this category explored new migrants' housing experiences during resettlement (e.g., Balampanidis, 2020; Iglesias-Pascual, 2019; Peters, 2020), multi-generational living (e.g., Burgess & Muir, 2020), and thermal comfort practices (e.g., Roberts & Henwood, 2019).

Table 3. Overview of the central topics in papers reviewed.

Topic	HT&S	HS	HPD	Total
Housing experience	30	53	26	109
Social and affordable housing	15	33	19	67
Policy	9	25	29	63
Urban change and spatial features	5	23	15	43
Housing markets	6	22	14	42
Community social characteristics	4	16	18	38
Financing	2	7	26	35
Homelessness	10	13	8	31
(Un)affordability	5	9	21	35
Dwelling characteristics	8	10	8	26
Household composition	5	7	4	16
Housing studies (theory/methods)	7	5	4	16
Landlord-tenant relations	3	6	2	11
Other	8	27	10	45
<i>Total papers reviewed*</i>	66	146	101	313

*Note that columns and rows sum to greater than the total number of papers reviewed, because some papers spanned several topics.

Social and affordable housing was also a frequently recorded topic, with 67 papers (21.4%) exploring the definition, provision, management, growth/loss or experience of non-market housing. Granath Hansson and Lundgren (2019, p.149), for example, argued that ‘social housing’ has tended to be a “floating signifier ... with no agreed upon meaning”, and proposed a definition to offer greater clarity. Lang et al. (2020) reviewed and analyzed the meaning and purpose of collaborative housing – a community-driven subtype of affordable housing. With interest in built form rather than definition or provision, Raynor (2019) explored innovation in social housing, using an example of transportable, modular-construction units in Melbourne, Australia. In a US context, Glaster (2019) considered how social housing policy could be reformed to improve residents’ experience of neighbourhood.

Relatedly, 63 papers (20.1%) were concerned with housing policy. Topics within this category were diverse, reflecting the inherent breadth of housing policy and the varied jurisdictions under consideration. Many papers investigated how policy affects housing-

related experience, provision or built form; a smaller number also explored how changes to real world phenomena could feed back into changes in policy. Several papers explored policies that have contributed to, or sought to mitigate the effects of, financialization (e.g., Aalbers et al., 2021; Heeg et al., 2020). A number of papers profiled a specific housing policy, act or regime. For example, six were written about the *Fair Housing Act*, US legislation intended to protect people from discrimination in accessing housing. With similar specificity, Bierre and Howden-Chapman (2020) documented how rental housing conditions are regulated in New Zealand. Others undertook broader-scale, comparative work, such as comparing trajectories in urban housing problems and policy in Auckland, Singapore and Berlin (Wetzstein, 2019).

The fourth most common topic category was ‘other’ (45/577; 7.8% of topics recorded). Examples included urban riots, housing activism, neighbour disputes, social work, bank closures, construction sector practices, and domestic violence, among others. These topics had varying degrees of relevance to housing, but all speak to the breadth of the housing studies field and the importance of housing to diverse aspects of society and everyday life. Sixteen papers specifically considered methodological or theoretical issues within the housing studies field (i.e., without an empirical focus on a specific housing topic), none of which presented a systematic review.

Methods in housing studies

A diverse range of methods was identified, indicative of the inter-disciplinarity of housing research (Clapham, 2009; Gibb, 2009; Ruonavaara, 2018) and the array of topics investigated. The most common methods were conventional in nature: interviews and focus groups (126 instances; 27.5% of 458 methods recorded), followed by (predominantly qualitative)

document analyses such as media and policy reviews (18.3%) (see Table 4). Quantitative methods were also commonly used, with quantitative modelling, inferential statistics and descriptive statistics collectively comprising 34.0% of all methods recorded. Contemporary methods such as community engagement and photo-based approaches, which have been increasingly popular in other fields and disciplines (Mertens, 2020), were least commonly recorded in this sample. Methods recorded as ‘other’ included social experiments, GIS mapping and oral history analysis.

Table 4. Overview of methods used.

Method	HT&S	HS	HPD	Total
Interviews, focus groups (etc.)	33	68	25	126
Document analysis	20	37	27	84
Quantitative modelling	1	24	36	61
Inferential statistics	9	25	17	51
Descriptive statistics	6	17	21	44
Literature review	12	10	6	28
Observation/participation	8	12	5	25
Community engagement	0	3	6	9
Visual or photo-based	4	3	1	8
Other	5	8	9	22
<i>Total papers reviewed*</i>	<i>66</i>	<i>146</i>	<i>101</i>	<i>313</i>

*Note that columns and rows sum to greater than the total number of papers reviewed, because some papers used multiple different methods.

Theory in housing studies

Across the 313 papers in our sample, we recorded 346 instances of theory being applied. Use of theory was recorded where its application went beyond a fleeting mention (as described above), and each theory applied in a paper was recorded once. We also classified theories into two categories: housing-specific theory or general theory (see Table 5).

Table 5. Overview of the ways in which papers engaged with or contributed to theory.

	Form of theory	HT&S	HS	HPD	Total
Housing-specific theory	Residential mobility (incl. pathways)	4	15	3	22
	Sense of home	6	8	0	14
	Housing preference/satisfaction	3	5	1	9
	Home-making	5	1	0	6
	Gentrification	0	4	1	5
	Housing comfort	2	3	0	5
	Housing market mechanisms	1	3	1	5
	Other	8	17	7	32
General theory	Economic and financial	2	16	13	31
	Governance and power	11	11	1	23
	Social incl/exclusion, community	8	10	3	21
	Political economy	6	8	3	17
	Emotional	8	7	0	15
	Urban planning	2	5	5	12
	Vulnerability, precarity, insecurity	0	5	5	10
	Assemblage	1	6	0	7
	Materiality	3	4	0	7
	Bourdieu, social capital	2	3	1	6
	Other	25	54	9	88
Writing about theory	Defining a concept/topic	4	4	0	8
	Describing theory in housing studies	2	0	1	3
	None	3	27	56	86
	<i>Total papers reviewed*</i>	66	146	101	313

*Note that columns and rows sum to greater than the total number of papers reviewed, because some papers engaged with multiple theories.

The most-commonly employed housing-specific theory was residential mobility (including housing pathways), with 22 uses recorded (22.4% of engagements with housing-specific theory). Most papers in this category relied solely on residential mobility theory (or theories). Firang (2019), for example, investigated the housing careers of Ghanaian immigrants in Toronto, while Dantzler and Rivera (2019) explored the residential mobility intentions and realities of public housing tenants in the US. Others used residential mobility alongside another theory. For example, Sissons and Houston (2019) employed residential mobility theory in tandem with a generalist form of lifecourse theory to document how residents' tenure choices and transitions from renting to homeownership changed in the face of increasing house prices. It is clear that residential mobility theory has become a powerful investigatory and explanatory tool.

Engagement with sense of home as theory was recorded 14 times (14.2%), and theories relating to housing preference/satisfaction were recorded nine times (9.2%). More than one

quarter (32; 32.7%) of the 98 engagements with housing-specific theory were categorized as ‘other’ – a reflection of the diversity of theory available to housing scholars. Theories in the ‘other’ category included ethics of dwelling (Mosteanu, 2020), domesticity (Martella & Enia, 2020), housing commons (Aernouts & Ryckewaert, 2019; Vidal, 2019), energy cost burden (Ray et al., 2019), neighbouring (Cheshire, 2019; Moreira de Souza, 2019), and housing regimes (Blackwell & Kohl, 2019; Stephens, 2020).

In contrast to popular housing-specific theories such as residential mobility and sense of home, engagements with theories of general application tended to be less focused on human experience or emotional attachment. The most common general theories were economic and financial in nature (31 instances; 13.1% of 237 general theory engagements recorded). Eleven of these papers employed financialization as theory (distinct from financialization as research topic). Smyth (2019), for example, used financialization theory in considering the future of social housing and conceptualizing the nature of housing policy in England. Reyes (2020) employed financialization theory in combination with political economy and governance to investigate the levels of government and institutions involved in advancing housing financialization in Mexico. In the UK, Humphry (2020) used economic theories of individualization and residualization to understand tenants’ experiences, and providers’ management, of post-Olympic village dwellings as social housing. Other economic theories included basic (Been et al., 2019) and neoclassical (e.g., Prentice & Scutella, 2020) economic theory, consumer choice theory (Flambard, 2019), stakeholder theory (Wang et al., 2020) and microeconometrics (Brunet & Havet, 2020).

Theories of governance and power (23 instances; 9.7%) and social inclusion or exclusion (21 instances; 8.9%) were also relatively frequently recorded. More than 10 engagements were

also recorded for four other categories: emotional theory, political economy, urban planning, and vulnerability/precarity. Further, 88 engagements with general theory were recorded as ‘other’ (37.1%) – the most frequently recorded code for this category. This speaks to the ways in which a plethora of theories from other fields and disciplines can be developed and applied within housing studies. Examples included path dependence (Aguda & Leishman 2020; Soaita & Dewilde, 2019), lifecourse (Maroto & Severson, 2020; Sissons & Houston, 2019), actor network (Becerril, 2019; Bradley, 2020), organizational (Kleit et al., 2019), time (Li et al., 2019), modernity (Goodchild et al., 2020) and policy mobility (Thompson, 2020) theories.

In eight papers, theoretical contributions took the form of developing a definition of a concept or topic – for example, a typology of tiny houses (Shearer & Burton, 2019) or a definition of social housing (Granath Hansson & Lundgren, 2019). In three papers theory itself was the object of inquiry, in descriptions or critiques of theory in housing studies. Lang et al. (2020), for example, systematically reviewed collaborative housing research with a view to conceptualizing this as an independent field. In contrast, Kimhur (2020) focused specifically on capabilities theory as a particular approach that holds promise for housing studies.

Extent of engagement with theory in housing studies

In addition to categorizing papers – and the housing studies field – in terms of theories mentioned or referenced, our analysis also enables an examination of *how* papers engage with theory. A total of 179 papers (57.2%) used theory in all major sections (Introduction, Literature, Findings, Discussion and Conclusion, or equivalents), including the majority of papers in *HT&S* (84.8%) and *HS* (63.0%) (see Table 6). By contrast, only 30.7% of papers in *HPD* engaged with theory in this substantive manner.

Table 6. Overview of the extent of engagement with theory.

Engagement with theory	HT&S	HS	HPD	Total
All major sections	56	92	31	179
Limited (2–3 main sections)	4	20	8	32
First half only	3	4	6	13
Second half only	0	2	0	2
None	3	28	56	87
Total	66	146	101	313

Forty-seven papers (15.0%) engaged with theory to a lesser extent. Of these, 32 (10.2%) engaged with theory in a limited fashion, i.e., connections to theory were made, but these were more subtle and limited to 2-3 main sections, rather than comprising a substantial portion of the paper. This was most common in *HS*, which encourages but does not require theoretical engagement. In another 13 instances (4.15%), theory was only used in the first half of the paper (Abstract, Introduction, Literature, Methods – or equivalents), generally to connect the work to other literature, rather than to frame/explain findings or to advance the theory itself. On the other hand, two papers (0.6%), both in *HS*, used theory only in the second half (Findings, Discussion, Conclusion – or equivalents), as a way of explaining findings. Papers that lacked theoretical connection in any section, or made only fleeting mention of theory without elaboration, were recorded as ‘none’ (87 papers; 27.8%). This was most common in *HPD* (55.4%) and least common in *HT&S* (4.5%).

Discussion

Kemeny’s criticisms of early housing studies were centred on under-engagement with theory and “de-conceptualization” of the field – a multi-faceted process he summarized as *epistemic drift* (1992, p16). More recent commentaries have also signalled persistent under-theorization, in terms of the application of theory from other disciplines, and/or the generation of unique concepts within housing scholarship (Allen, 2005; Bengtsson, 2012; Clapham, 2009, 2018; Lawson, 2012, 2018; Ruonavaara, 2018; Somerville, 2018). In our review, however, a clear

majority of contemporary papers engaged meaningfully with theory: 179 of 313 (57.2%) utilized one or more theories in all main sections. Moreover, almost three-quarters of papers (226/313; 72.2%) applied theory in some way, including those where it was used in a more piecemeal or partial manner. The application of theory to explain findings, connect to broader literature or form conclusions – even if that theory does not frame the study design and inform the research in its entirety – is still a form of engagement. In short, we observed significantly more application of theory in contemporary literature than long-standing critiques of the field led us to anticipate.

Diversity of theory in housing studies

Our findings illuminated the sheer diversity of theory being utilized in contemporary housing research. The most common general theories ranged from economic and financial theories, to governance and power, social inclusion/exclusion and political economy. Housing-specific theories were also varied: residential mobility, sense of home, housing preference/satisfaction and home-making all appeared frequently.

Moreover, for general and housing-specific forms of theory alike, *other* was the most common code recorded (at 37.1% and 32.7%, respectively). The ‘other’ category encompassed an array of theories recorded up to five times each, including many recorded only once. This illustrates the sheer diversity of theories available to, and utilized by, researchers to frame or explain housing phenomena. Often, authors engaged with more than one theory in a single paper, including pairing general and housing-specific theories, and sometimes utilizing this combination to propose a new conceptual model or bespoke explanatory framework. This indicates a ‘buffet’ of potential opportunities for theorization in

housing studies, with no (or very few) hard limits on the types or origins of theory that could be used – either alone or in tandem – to explore and explain a wide range of housing issues.

We also noted just how diverse research *topics* are in the field. The most common topics, recorded more than 40 times each, were housing experience, social/affordable housing, housing policy, urban change, and housing markets. It seems that little, if anything, is off-limits to contemporary housing scholars – consistent with the inter-disciplinary nature of the field and its intellectual contributions, and the importance of housing to everyday experience and society at large. These diverse housing topics were ‘mixed and matched’ with a range of theories; there did not appear to be an orthodoxy that dictated particular approaches to particular empirical interests.

This diversity of theory and topics in housing research could, perhaps, be viewed as a limitation of the field. It may create a sense of fragmentation or a lack of cohesiveness, with few core theories being used to unite housing scholars and scholarship. On the other hand, this diversity means housing scholars have tremendous intellectual freedom in framing and interpreting their research. Selection of theory can be based upon the interests of the research group or community, the methodological approach, and/or the specificities of the research problem and findings (Tracy, 2010; Willgens et al., 2016). In this sense, the opportunity to choose from diverse theoretical approaches enables researchers in the field to be flexible, nimble and responsive to context. Moreover, diversity of theory may be difficult to avoid in a field as multi-disciplinary and wide-reaching as housing studies, which O’Neill (2008) observes is not particularly suited to following or generating specific disciplinary traditions so much as to facilitating understandings of society more broadly.

We also observed key differences in levels of engagement with theory across the different journals. Most papers in *HS* and *HT&S* were well-theorized (81.5% and 95.5% respectively), whereas a majority of those in *HPD* were non-theoretical (55.4%). These differences likely result from variation in journal scopes and expectations described at the outset of this article. Of note is that the scope and aims of *HPD* are reminiscent of the ‘historical’ housing studies critiqued by Kemeny, and many articles published in this venue are quantitative and/or less-theoretical work that prioritizes policy recommendations and practical relevance. As such, we contend that while Kemeny’s arguments may still apply to *HPD*, and to some individual papers within *HS* and *HT&S*, the weaknesses he identified in early housing research no longer hold true for the field at large.

In a sense, these three journals reflect what is possible when theory is required in housing research (*HT&S*), what engagement occurs when theory is encouraged but not explicitly required (*HS*), and what happens when practical contributions and policy recommendations are valued ahead of theory (*HPD*). This complexity is consistent with the breadth of practical, academic and conceptual contributions that the inter-disciplinary field of housing research is well-positioned to make (O’Neill, 2008). Indeed, we acknowledge that papers along a full spectrum of engagement with theory, from entirely theoretically-charged pieces through to atheoretical outputs that generate toolkits or other tangible recommendations, all have an important place in the field.

Geography, methods and theory in contemporary housing studies

The diversity of theories and topics we observed did not extend to the two other variables considered in our analysis: locations and methods. First, the geography of contemporary housing scholars’ gaze is somewhat limited. Most papers investigated housing issues in high-

income ‘developed’ countries (264/313; 84%). This may be partly, but not entirely, related to the fact that all three journals are English-language (only) publications, and *HPD* in particular is dominated by US-focused publications (77/109; 70.6% of *HPD* papers reviewed). Such a skew towards high-income countries does not reflect the diversity of global housing issues, representing both a shortcoming of the field, and an opportunity for housing researchers to broaden its scope. Expanding the geography of housing studies may also create opportunities (and needs) for more diverse research approaches and methods.

Second, the methods most commonly applied in our sample of housing research tended to be relatively traditional in nature – e.g., surveys, quantitative databases, interviews and focus groups. These approaches appear to be ‘tried and trusted’ and have proved effective in studying diverse housing phenomena. However, this is a limited set of methods from which to draw, and more novel approaches, such as visual or photo-based approaches and community engagement projects, remain relatively rare (17/458 methods recorded; 3.7%).

Most papers provided details of their research methods (usually data collection, and sometimes also analysis) in a designated methods section. However, some papers did not include a methods section at all, leaving us to determine the methods used by examining the findings sections and reference list. Very few articulated a deliberate, overarching methodological approach, let alone epistemological foundations.

The relatively narrow scope of methods used in these papers, combined with the almost complete absence of more conceptual methodological or epistemological reflections, is relevant to our analysis given (potential) interconnections with theory. Well-executed methodological approaches in housing research can enhance conceptual framing and

contribute to theorization (Jacobs, 2001; Lawson, 2012). As such, our findings support arguments made elsewhere that housing scholars could, and should, draw inspiration from the methods (and methodologies) used in other fields/disciplines (Bengtsson, 2009; Gibb, 2009; Jacobs, 2001; Jacobs & Manzi, 2000; Kimhur, 2020).

Gaps, shortfalls and conspicuous absentees

Our review identified impressive diversity in topics and theories that have been incorporated into papers in leading housing journals, including a range of theorization ‘styles’ from explicit, intensive engagement, to implicit connections (as detailed in Table 6). There were, however, several topics and theories that were conspicuous by their absence or under-investigation.

In light of the international emergence of human rights-based approaches to housing, including in France (Houard & Lévy-Vroelant, 2013), Scotland (Stewart, 2018) and South Africa (Meth & Charlton, 2017; Turok & Scheba, 2018), we found it curious that connections to human rights (and indeed other forms of rights) were seldom present within our sample. Indeed, writing from a Canadian context, where the right to housing has been foregrounded in policy since the adoption of the *National Housing Strategy* in 2017, we were surprised to observe that human rights featured within our sample just six times as a *topic*, and twice as *theory*. The capabilities approach appeared twice, and ‘rights’ that were not human rights (e.g., property rights, tenant rights) also appeared three times as a topic. Given the close intersection between legal studies and human rights, engagement with housing and human rights may be more common in specialized venues (i.e., law journals). However, the lack of engagement with human rights in housing journals is problematic, as it signals that

‘mainstream’ housing studies is not engaging with the ethical foundation of housing as a human right as deeply/frequently as it could (and arguably should).

Similarly, we noted that housing issues related to aging populations and the experience of aging were infrequently included in our sample. Just six papers focused on the experience of aging as a topic or specifically included seniors as participants. This seemed a remarkable minority: significant issues related to aging, including older population structures, multigenerational households and aging-in-place, have important implications for housing supply, demand and experience – as highlighted by the handful of papers in our sample that did engage with these matters (e.g., Bates et al., 2020; Burgess & Muir, 2020; Filipovič Hrast et al., 2019; Yoon & Lee, 2019). As with the case of human rights (above), it is possible that aging-plus-housing matters have been more extensively covered in gerontology journals, however we contend that they also merit investigation from an explicit housing studies perspective.

Gentrification was also under-represented as topic or theory in our sample: just four papers engaged with gentrification as both theory and topic, two as a topic only, and one as theory only. This was surprising given the pivotal role this process has taken in restructuring contemporary urban centres. Indeed, Skaburskis and Moos observe that gentrification is “perhaps the most important change in the structure of cities in the past half-century” (2015, p220). Moreover, gentrification theory originated within housing studies and remains distinctly housing-oriented – while being interconnected with a range of other important urban and social issues (Ellen & Torrats-Espinosa, 2019; Hyra et al., 2019; Lees & White, 2019). It is possible that issues such as gentrification, while clearly relevant to housing studies, have been more frequently examined in urban studies or planning journals.

Another pertinent – indeed, pressing – issue that was under-represented in our sample was climate change and energy efficiency. Just four papers explored these issues, generally in terms of energy efficiency targets and heating/cooling costs or best practices (e.g., Fijalkow, 2019; Goodchild et al., 2020). Energy costs are a significant expense for private households and social/affordable housing providers alike (Arman et al., 2009; Makantasi & Mavrogianni, 2016; Tsenkova & Youssef, 2011), and contribute to energy poverty (Das et al., 2022). Further, greenhouse gas emissions associated with maintaining thermal comfort in homes are significant, especially in older dwellings that are ill-prepared for climate change – a problematic feedback loop with consequences for the resilience of housing systems and for residents’ health (Arman et al., 2009; Gianfrate et al., 2017; Makantasi & Mavrogianni, 2016). In the current academic and atmospheric climate, this topic is laden with important technical and ethical dimensions, both of which ought to be incorporated more widely into research presented in leading housing-specific publications in the future.

Reflecting on our review approach

Our scoping-critical systematic literature review approach was designed to identify and evaluate contemporary research interests in housing studies. It has enabled us to investigate – and largely dispel – long-standing critiques of under-theorization in the field, as well as explore interrelated criticisms regarding methods and methodologies. Such quantification of approaches to research in housing has not, to our knowledge, been pursued previously.

The level of detail sought during our review process necessarily limited the window of publication dates for our selection criteria. Including all research papers across two years in three journals yielded 313 papers, each of which was analyzed across four key variables. This

enabled relatively deep and detailed analysis of the *contemporary* housing field, providing a sense of the current theory-scape, but did not seek to capture longitudinal trends or evolution of theory in the field (e.g., since Kemeny's initial critiques).

For logistical reasons we limited the sample of papers in our review to those published in the three leading housing-specific journals. The field's interdisciplinarity means that housing research (theoretical or otherwise) could also be found in journals that fell outside the parameters of our review (e.g., in gerontology and legal studies). This limitation was mitigated by the fact that all three journals are generalist and international in scope, meaning our sample canvassed a wide spectrum of disciplines, topics, theories and geographical foci.

Conclusion

In this paper we systematically reviewed 313 journal articles in light of long-standing critiques of under-theorization in housing studies. Although our findings revealed no clear theoretical orthodoxy that might unite the field or constitute a 'theory *of*' housing (Ruonavaara, 2018; see also Fitzpatrick & Watts, 2018), we observed a tremendous diversity of theory being developed and applied. This theory-scape is more complex and nuanced than criticisms of under-theorization suggest. Our findings indicate that housing studies might be viewed as a 'magpie-like' field, drawing on many different (metaphorically shiny) forms of theory without a set of core theoretical frameworks.

Engagement with theory can enable ideas to be adopted from one field and applied to another, enhancing depth of understanding and transferability of findings/conclusions (Bengtsson, 2009; Lawson, 2012, 2018; O'Neill, 2008; Saegert, 2018). Moreover, theory is not static. Diverse and evolving applications of theory in housing research can contribute academic rigor

at the scale of individual papers, as well as to theoretical advancement at field, disciplinary and even interdisciplinary scales. We can see the advantages of theorization in the many and varied forms of both housing-specific and generally-applicable theory in our sample – particularly, but not exclusively, in qualitative research. Clearly, housing studies is generating its own theory, as well as borrowing from and contributing to wider interdisciplinary debates and theoretical development.

In a minority of papers (less than one quarter of our sample), engagement with theory was limited or non-existent. We do not interpret the absence of theory in these cases as a *weakness* of individual studies, or of the field more broadly. Rather, we see them as a largely benign form of *difference*. While engagement with theory has become a majority/mainstream pursuit in contemporary housing studies, less-theoretical papers clearly have contributions to make: in our sample they were almost always focused on practical solutions, policy recommendations or other tangible outputs – recalling the norm observed in earlier housing studies (Allen, 2005; Kemeny, 2001). However, these papers sit within a field that is now otherwise well-theorized, and to exclude theory is, at minimum, to miss opportunities for making intellectual connections.

Diverse theoretical framings represent abundant possibilities for housing researchers. Our findings offer cause for optimism and appreciation of the diversity of theory that has been (and can continue to be) applied in housing studies as a theorized *and* practical research field. We welcome and applaud the variety of theory and topics in contemporary housing studies, and challenge housing scholars to diversify the locations of their investigations, and their methods and methodologies, correspondingly.

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