Theoretical issues in comparative property research: Universalism versus particularism

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Introduction

- Why compare? – the value of internationally comparative research
- Universalism
- Particularism
- Middle-way approaches
- Commensurability, context and theory
- PRS as an example
Why Compare?

- Extend knowledge of property markets – have more information
- To understand a system, a process or a market better by contrasting operations in different places
- To challenge insular ideas through exposure to an extended body of evidence
- To gain new ideas
- To improve the application of policy – policy transferability?
- To develop new theories
- To test hypotheses about the relationships between phenomena
Universalistic Approach

• Assumes that similar concepts apply in all locations, and that the same terminology describes identical phenomena, e.g. in tenure based studies
• Approach is convenient for quantitative studies
• The search for “harmonised data”
• Similarities are considered to be more important than differences
Particularistic Approach

• Opposite of universalism
• Sometimes called a “culturalist approach” (Hantrais, 2009)
• Phenomena are bound to cultures that give them specificity
• Extreme version: international comparisons are impossible because the phenomena one is seeking to compare are different in different countries
• Differences are considered to be more important than similarities
Middle Way

• Focus on neither differences to suggest each country is unique or emphasise similarities to suggest everywhere is the same
• Places phenomena within historical and cultural contexts
• Sensitive and qualitative approach
• Often attempts to discern patterns and typologies
• Allows for commensurability
Commensurability

• The idea of commensurability accepts that a given concept or phenomenon is not identical between countries but has several elements in common
• These elements in common provide a basis for comparison
• Finding commensurability promotes the probing of definitions
Context

• In a middle-way approach, context is essential
  e.g. historical, geographical, institutional, housing market contexts
• Comparisons need to be set in context for them to have meaning
Theory

- Middle-way analysis needs theoretical underpinning

- Theory can come from multiple disciplines but it should be explicit
An example: comparing private rental systems

See Haffner et al, 2010

• Uses a middle-way approach to compare the PRS between countries
• Acknowledges the problems of definitions
• Finds commensurability in allocation – by reference to needs
• Considers the market context and the relationship to social renting
• Develops and applies a theory of competition between private and social renting
## Housing Tenure: Selected Countries

% of stock

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Private Rented</th>
<th>Social Rented</th>
<th>Owner Occupied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>England (2015)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands (2014)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France (2014)</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>57.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany (2014)</td>
<td>50.4</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>45.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA (2014)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia (2011)</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>68.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sources:**

What counts as private rented housing?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Ownership</th>
<th>Allocation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1          | Private ownership by individuals and companies | By market forces  
Market rents                                                        |
| 2          | Private ownership by individuals and companies | Not by market forces  
Linked to employment or family relationships                          |
| 3          | Private ownership by individuals and companies | Not by market forces  
Social allocation criteria linked to receipt of a tax concession or soft loan  
Rents limited  
Incomes of occupants limited  
Concessions, rent limitations and allocation conditions often time limited |
| 4          | Non-profit organisations and public bodies    | By market forces  
Market rents                                                                |
Concluding remarks (1)

**Universalism**: quantitative approaches to comparative analysis have to assume some equivalence in phenomena if not complete universalism. Can be a starting point for more quantitative analysis or complementary qualitative analysis.

**Particularism**: in its extreme form needs to be rejected if comparisons are to be accepted as worthwhile.
Concluding remarks (2)

- There is not one \textit{middle way} approach, but many
- Find what is commensurate
- Apply context
- Apply theory
- Be cautious – BUT: sing the praises of good comparative analysis.
Methodology in international studies: some references


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