

*Theoretical issues in comparative property research:
Universalis 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

	Private Rented	Social Rented	Owner Occupied
England (2015)	20	17	63
Netherlands (2014)	7	33	60
France (2014)	21.9	17.4	57.7
Germany (2014)	50.4	4.2	45.4
USA (2014)	35	1	64
Australia (2011)	4.7	23.4	68.1

Sources:

England: DCLG (2016) Live Tables on Dwelling Stock, Live Table 104. Netherlands, France, Germany: The state of housing in the EU 2015 (2015), Housing Europe. USA: US Census Bureau, 2010-2104 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Australia: Australian Bureau of Statistics

What counts as private rented housing?

Categories	Ownership	Allocation
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 **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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