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HOUSING AS A FIELD OF SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH*

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THAT HOUSING is an important practical problem needs no argument. If practical problems are to be dealt with intelligently they obviously require the foundation of sound knowledge. The knowledge required to deal intelligently with housing includes not merely what all of the social sciences have to give but also the technical knowledge which architecture, engineering, art, law, administration, business and other professions can offer.

Housing is a social activity. As such, sociology has something to learn from it and it constitutes a subject matter for sociological study. Sociology also presumably has some knowledge to bring to housing problems. It is the purpose of this paper to indicate what this two-fold interest of sociology in housing is as a giver and a receiver of knowledge.

Sociology is clearly not the only discipline bearing upon housing, and, conversely, what housers can legitimately ask of sociologists will only give them a partial answer to their problems. What, then, are the principal aspects of housing to which sociological research might address itself, keeping in mind that there are many other disciplines and practical arts and professions which have other problems and which seek other answers in the field of housing?

The answer to this question must, it seems to me, be sought in the light of one's conception of the nature and province of sociology. This discipline is concerned with what is true of man by virtue of the fact that he leads a group life. What sociologists must discover about housing, therefore, is all those aspects which are factors in and products of man's involvement in social life. At first glance this may seem to be virtually everything, for the politics and economics of housing, as well as art, architecture and law, business, financing and administration, designing and planning, are also factors in and products of social relations. Upon further reflection, however, the sociological study of housing would turn out to have a fairly delimitable scope or, at least, distinctive emphasis. There are three clearly significant sociological aspects of housing I propose to discuss briefly: (1) Housing as a social value, (2) Housing in relation to the community, (3) Housing and Social Policy.

HOUSING AS A VALUE

In housing, as in the study of other social phenomena, it may be well to start with the central question of the social values involved. Hence, I would propose that the sociological study of housing begin with housing as a social value. Everyone in our society is concerned with the realization of this value, and the quest for the achievement of this value by each affects the similar quest by all the others.

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Considering the fundamental importance of the question of values, it is rather shocking to find how little we know about the various ways in which housing as a social value has been defined by different civilizations and by different groups in society. The content of this value ranges all the way from the quest for basic shelter to the striving to achieve residential accommodations with varying degrees of luxury, various amenities of life, status-giving qualities and other characteristics, such as the location of the home, the materials out of which it is to be built, the style of architecture, the nature of the furnishings and equipment, the nature of the community in which it is located and the characteristics of one's neighbors.

Surely we cannot proceed far in the analysis of housing as a social problem until we know more than we now do about the nature and the extent to which people's desires and expectations in respect to housing are realized or frustrated. After all, social problems arise only where there is some deviation from a norm or some conflict of values, or maladjustment in the effort to achieve these values, which affects a greater or lesser number in society adversely. We experience no feeling of frustration if there is no ambition of which we become aware and in the satisfaction of which we find ourselves blocked. The mere deviation from accepted norms or the frustrations of our desires, however, do not constitute a social problem unless at the same time there is a recognition that the ends sought are achievable and the means for achieving them exist or can be brought into being.

One of the ways in which we can approach the subject of housing, therefore, is to attempt to discover the specific content of the value it constitutes for different individuals and groups in our society. This can obviously not be judged merely by the kind of housing that people have, for the kind of housing they have is clearly restricted by other factors than merely their ambitions and desires or the pictures they carry around in their heads of the housing they would like to have, or the kind of housing that is possible in our present state of technological advancement. Fruitful housing research, therefore, might be devoted to the discovery of the housing ambitions of people and the manner in which and the degree to which these ambitions are frustrated among different economic and social groups in our society.

It will be immediately apparent, however, to the sociological student of housing that housing as a value does not stand by itself. It has a place in the hierarchy of values, and this place differs in different cultures and in different strata of society. One way in which we may estimate the place of housing as a value in the scheme of values is to ask what other values people are willing to sacrifice in order to achieve housing of a certain quality. European observers of American life have often been struck by the fact that many families in the low income groups in the United States are apparently willing to make a good many sacrifices in order to have an automobile, but relatively few to have a decent house. On the other hand, we have seen from the studies of immigrant groups that some, such as the Poles, will be willing to forego many other items in their standard of living to acquire real property. The popularity of building and loan associations among immigrant groups is perhaps merely another indication of the extent to which a house constitutes a value fairly high up in the scheme of values, and saving for such a house becomes an important family objective.

In this connection it is important not to mistake the actual state of affairs for the underlying attitudes of people. Just because people live in the slums does not mean that they wish to live in them or that they hold housing in low esteem as a value. It may simply be that they are not able to help themselves, and if better housing were offered at a price they could meet, or if other items in their family budget were less demanding, housing would rise to a more important place.

As part of the estimation of housing as a value in American civilization, special attention should be devoted to home ownership. On this subject fairly reliable quantita-

tive data are available. The difference in the degree of home ownership in rural and urban communities, in cities of different sizes and types, and among various income groups, racial and economic groups, has been fairly completely ascertained. It should be noted, however, to what an extent the actual facts deviate from the highly advertised ideal that every American family should own its home and what the factors are that account for this deviation.

It is clear enough that home ownership has much to do with the place of property and housing in the value scheme of different groups. But it should also be recognized that the desire for home ownership and the quest for security in life may be mutually incompatible. Historically, we have been a highly mobile people, as contrasted with most of the peoples of Europe. It is well, therefore, to ask, in the case of home ownership, to what extent it is a value which conflicts with economic security in general and particularly with the ability to take advantage of job opportunities as they may arise in other parts of the city or in other cities. The experience of industries in providing housing for their employees on a paternalistic basis is instructive in this connection. With instability in industry and employment, home ownership may actually become a handicap. The degree to which this is recognized by the population in general may become an important factor in understanding the trends as well as the differentiations in home ownership between different groups.

The mere nominal ownership of a home does not, of course, imply actual ownership. Often it may be, especially in the low income groups and in periods when the housing demand is very great, as it is at present, that families may make a down payment on a home without actually being able to acquire full ownership. In that case their home ownership consists merely in the privilege of occupying the home as long as they can meet the mortgage and interest payments and the taxes.

With the trend toward multiple family structures, especially in metropolitan communities, it becomes physically impossible for most families to own their homes, even if they wanted to, unless, of course, they were willing to associate themselves in some sort of cooperative housing enterprise. An analysis of the factors conducive to cooperative housing would constitute a special problem under the general head of research on housing as a value. There are, of course, a good many other aspects of sociological interest connected with housing cooperatives, such as the degree of homogeneity or heterogeneity of the cooperators, the influences that bring them together, and the elements contributing to the continuity of the arrangement and the success or failure of the enterprise.

Another feature of the analysis of housing as a value centers around the question of housing standards. It has been remarked that a civilization can be judged, at least to some extent, by the minimum housing conditions which a society will tolerate for its members. In the perspective of history, it should be observed that men have lived in shelters of various kinds. They have lived in caves and in mansions. The medieval castles were probably not as habitable as a modern slum home. Modern technology has made possible the continuous improvement in housing standards. We have become acquainted with the inter-connections between standards of housing and standards of health and well-being. More and more these standards have acquired social sanction, and because of the recognition of their relationship to health and safety have been incorporated in laws and ordinances. The extent to which these laws and ordinances keep pace with increased knowledge of the relations between housing and other aspects of social life and with progress in technology is in itself a subject of considerable sociological interest. It has been found that standards once accepted tend to develop around themselves vested interests, such as the organized building trades and material manufacturers, and that as a result instead of furthering housing progress they have become obstacles to such progress. This lag would be a particularly appropriate subject for sociologists to investigate.

In recent years a good deal of attention has been devoted by sociologists to the study of the internal arrangement and the equipment of houses. Social status scales have even been developed on the basis of physical facilities in the house. This, however, is merely one small aspect of the very much larger problem of the analysis of housing as a value. This justifies the search for the kind of housing design which would be compatible with the changing expectations and needs of members of the family. Thus, for instance, it would be important to inquire to what extent privacy for the individual members of the family is a value that people seek to realize. Similarly, it would be interesting to discover what adjustments people make in their housing in various stages of the family cycle, such as the kind of housing requirements that they have when the family is young, as over against when the children grow up and seek housing of their own. The relationship between size of family and size of housing units has become a problem of great practical importance in view of the declining size of the family and in view of the now accepted cultural pattern that only the immediate family should occupy the dwelling as over against the previously accepted cultural pattern in which the extended family is the unit to which housing must be adapted. It has been said, for instance, that the absence of a spare bedroom is the best defense against a host of invading relatives. The popularity of the kitchenette apartment, and of two- and three-room units as over against the larger dwellings attests to the changing structure of the urban family.

HOUSING AND THE COMMUNITY

The involvement of housing with community life is clearly a subject of long standing sociological interest. This connection between housing and community life arises out of the fact that at least in the urban community the house does not stand by itself but is part of a neighborhood, a local community and the metropolis. No individual house can be completely insulated against influences of neighbors or the trends prevailing in the community. Moreover, as more and more of the functions of family living become centered in community institutions, the nature of the functioning of and the accessibility to these institutions and facilities becomes important. The degree to which people—individuals and families—find opportunities for participation in formal and informal organizations operating in the community is perhaps as good a test as any of the adequacy of housing. Thus, for instance, a house, even from the standpoint of the property values involved, is judged by the community in which it is located and the people who inhabit that community, by the schools, playgrounds, parks, community centers and public utilities to which the inhabitants have access, and by the incidence of social problems, such as delinquency and crime and community disorganization.

In modern civilization, place of work and place of residence have become progressively divorced. Nevertheless, convenience of access to place of work and shopping center, as well as to other facilities serving the routines of modern living, continue to be matters affecting the desirability or undesirability of a house.

The social status and the standard of living, the racial and ethnic composition of their neighborhoods are issues to which people in our society are sensitive. Only in the slum, where the inhabitants consist of those who cannot afford to live or are not tolerated anywhere else, are the resistances to invasion by lower income and status groups reduced to a minimum.

In view of these facts, sociological research in housing might well be concerned to a much greater degree than it has been with the structure of communities and their relationship to the general pattern of the city; the analysis of different types of communities; the tracing of the process blight; the phenomena of invasion and succession of different population groups in specific areas of the city; the factors underlying the flight from the city and the emergence of suburban communities and, in turn, the fate of these suburban communities as the cor-

rosive influences extend outward from the central city; the attitudes underlying the resistance to the invasion of strange racial and ethnic groups, the methods used to block this invasion and the alternative methods that might be use for building sound communities in which people of various economic strata and racial and ethnic characteristics can live together amicably; the relation of community institutions to housing and the relationship of place of work to place of residence and the role of transportation in the general pattern of living.

These are problems with which in the past the human ecologist, the demographer, the student of community organization and the city planner have been primarily concerned. A more definite focussing of sociological interest upon these issues would be of immense scientific as well as practical significance.

As in the case of the analysis of housing as a complex of values, so in the study of the relationship of housing to the community the question of values cannot be left out of consideration. To know what is good housing involves also knowing what is a good community. This implies that in the analysis of communities, too, a basic prerequisite is an understanding of the wishes and expectations of people and of the possibilities of realizing them under the available or expected state of knowledge, social and economic organization, and technological resources. In the light of such knowledge it is possible to formulate minimum standards for communities and for the individual house. Indeed, at least in the urban community, it is futile to attempt to set up minimum standards for housing without at the same time considering standards for communities.

HOUSING AND SOCIAL POLICY

A third major aspect of the housing problem to which sociologists might well address their research is that of the formation of public policy. There may have been a time when individuals or families could solve their housing problems mainly on the basis of their own resources and their own decisions. This is becoming less and less true. Even in the case of rural housing, where individualism still has an important place, the meeting of the housing needs and expectations of people is increasingly conditioned by factors over which the individual or the household has little control. The general trend of agriculture, soil conservation programs, credit policy, the relationship to roads, to schools, to markets and to service centers, are becoming increasingly important. In the urban community, the social matrix in which individuals or families solve their housing problems—even in unplanned communities—is increasingly complicated and inescapable.

To begin with, sociologists perhaps more immediately than others might recognize the fact that we do not have a housing industry as we have an automobile industry, and that an individual cannot enter the housing market quite in the same manner as he enters the market for other commodities as a producer or consumer, as a buyer or a seller. A variety of specialized interests and specialized skills is involved in housing activities, over which the individual has little or no control. The housing industry, if we can speak of it as an industry at all, is loosely organized, and the sociologist might profitably address himself to the nature and functioning of this organization.

Moreover, housing is beset at many angles with a public interest which expresses itself in a complex set of public regulations, such as building codes, zoning ordinances, safety and sanitary regulations, to mention only some formal ones, besides the informal regulations set by fashions and neighborhood and community pressures. Besides, the provision of housing involves a variety of more or less organized and articulate interest groups: the real estate fraternity, the mortgage bankers, the architects, the city planner, the materials manufacturers, the building trades laborers, the public officials, the more or less organized property owners, taxpayers, tenants, and a great many more. These interest groups develop into pressure groups whenever public decisions are to be made. What happens in the case of each

issue depends in large measure upon the power relationships between the pressure groups and their influence upon such bodies as Congress, State Legislatures and City Councils.

This is particularly apparent in the case of the struggle that goes on in connection with public housing and the determination of the scope of public responsibility for housing, especially of the low income groups, for whom private housing enterprise has not been able to make adequate provisions. Whether or not and to what extent public responsibility exists for achieving a minimum housing standard for all of our people depends again upon the acceptance of certain social values, and hence, here too the problem of values is central. It is around the recognition of certain of these values that housing movements organize themselves, and if the housing movement in various counties in the Western world, including the United States, has gained its peculiar character through the emphasis upon public responsibility, it is due to the fact that, like other social movements of a reform or revolutionary nature, it has set itself the goal of achieving certain social objectives toward which there either exists a public apathy or against which there operates the organized resistance of special interest groups. We shall not achieve an adequate solution of the housing problem, nor shall we make satisfactory progress toward that goal, without a better understanding of the collective behavior of these various groups within the housing movement. Sociologists have both much to learn and to contribute in this connection.

HOUSING AS A SOCIAL PROBLEM

The problem of housing illustrates the nature of social problems in general, and from its analysis students of social life can learn a great deal concerning the role of norms, the complexity of the factors and the method of analysis of social problems in general. They can learn, too, something about the division of labor between the various social sciences and the arts and technical and professional specialties that enter into a concrete social issue.

In emphasizing three aspects of the housing problem, as I have done above, I do not mean to imply that there are not many other aspects of housing from which sociologists might learn and to which they might contribute understanding. I have selected these three merely because in the miscellanous approaches to the housing problem that have been in evidence, these are three factors that seem to me to have been particularly neglected. It would, of course, be possible to formulate the sociological interests in housing in a more or less systematic manner, corresponding to the basic branches of sociological knowledge, starting with human ecology and demography, running through social organization, and ending with the social psychological aspects of the subject matter. All of these aspects are, of course, represented in the problem complexes that I have emphasized. It would, for instance, be perfectly appropriate for a sociologist to delve deeply into specific problems connected with housing, such as the relation of housing to family life or the relation of housing to delinquency, family disorganization, community disorganization, and other deviant forms of behavior, or to single out the grossly neglected problem of the housing of the unattached persons in our society, or of the problems represented by the attitudes involved in the acceptance of second, third, and even tenth-hand housing as a respectable form of behavior in a society which frowns upon the wearing of secondhand clothes or the acceptance of other handed down personal commodities.

As sociologists we have the skills and the insights, the systematic framework and the background by virtue of our scientific training to view the problem in the perspective of a systematic science. What I wish to emphasize, however, is that in the case of housing we confront, as sociologists, a genuine problem of social concern which should challenge us to mobilize our knowledge and to perfect our methods of analysis. We will not make a contribution of value to society if we merely mechanically apply the conventional concepts of our discipline to the problem. I suggest we look at the problem and then see what we have in existing knowledge and

methods of approach that appear relevant to gaining a better understanding of it, noting to what extent our knowledge and methods are inadequate, and perfect the knowledge and methods so as to make them more adequate. In the long run this might make us more useful in the world and at the same time give us a more realistic science.

NEW METHODS OF SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON HOUSING PROBLEMS*

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THIS PAPER is limited to a discussion of method. Results of using method will be cited only as they illustrate the validity of method or some unsolved problems of method.

Two methods of observing the sociological aspects of housing will be considered: (1) observational study using the questionnaire method and sociometric scales to obtain quantitative records of observation; and (2) observational study under conditions of control by use of a projected experimental design and by use of an ex post facto experimental design.

OBSERVATIONAL STUDY

Svend Riemer is one of the pioneers of observational study of the sociological aspects of housing. I shall refer here merely to his most recent published study, "Maladjustment to the Family Home" in the *American Sociological Review* of October, 1945.[1] In this study, 900 questionnaires were distributed through the PTA of Seattle in the fall of 1941 to a random sample of their membership. Three hundred questionnaires were returned and supplied information on 134 items. Riemer does not tell us how representative these 300 returns were of the sample of 900 families. But his breakdown analysis supplies some interesting information about the frequency of complaints. These complaints are examined from two frames of reference: (1) complaints about eight family functions, such as how housing interfered with meals, hygiene, sleeping, housework, child care, leisure, social life, and location; and (2) complaints about housing as it interfered with the convenient use of five types of rooms, dining-room, bedroom, kitchen, bath-room, and living-room. These two classes of complaints are each broken down by degrees of crowding, family size, market value of home, age of home (presumably age of structure), income, status (by occupational group), and age of housewife. The importance of this study lies in its realism, concreteness and in the use of percentages of specific complaints to all possible complaints.

The most recent scale to measure the quality of urban housing is *The Appraisal Method* of the Committee on Hygiene of Housing of the American Public Health Association.[2] This scale concisely describes and evaluates each dwelling unit, its occupancy and its environment, and discriminates by magnitude of weights between degrees of housing quality. Allan A. Twichell, technical secretary of the Committee, states, "The object is to measure housing needs of a city in such fashion as to serve policy-making purposes of all agencies concerned with housing and planning; and, by providing information of wide value to stimulate a joint attack on fundamental housing problems. The procedures are intended primarily for use in selected areas known to

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[1] Vol. 10, No. 5, pp. 642-648. See also Charlotte Kilbourn and Margaret Lantis, "Elements of Tenant Instability in a War Housing Project," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1, February, 1946, pp. 51-66.

[2] *An Appraisal Method for Measuring the Quality of Housing: A Yardstick for Health Officers, Housing Officials and Planners*, Part I. Nature and Uses of the Method, American Public Health Association, 1945, pp. 71.