

1 The disciplinary basis of housing studies

INTRODUCTION

During the early postwar period, housing research was carried out largely within established disciplines such as economics or sociology, or in social administration or social work departments, and there were no academic journals devoted to the field. Today housing is emerging as a specialist field and the rapid institutionalisation of housing research provides the context for an evaluation of the relationship of housing studies to older, more established cognate fields such as urban studies and to the social science disciplines from which housing researchers often draw inspiration and concepts. It prompts the question of what exactly is this field of housing studies? And how can we begin to understand the place of housing research in the context of wider social questions, and in relation to other areas of the social sciences?

In this chapter I propose to conduct a general and fairly wide-ranging examination of the place of housing studies in the social sciences. My concern is both to maximise the benefit of advances in other areas of social science and to contribute to wider debates outside of housing issues narrowly defined. However, before we can consider the place of housing studies in the social sciences it is necessary to clarify what is meant by 'disciplines' and the sense in which the term is used in this discussion. I largely limit my observations to housing research in English-speaking countries, though my direct knowledge of housing research in Scandinavian countries and what I know of housing research from translated work in other countries suggest that similar principles are likely to apply everywhere.

ON THE NATURE OF DISCIPLINES

In general, the social science disciplines can be seen to be based on dividing

the social world into a number of dimensions. Sociology, for example, 'dimensions out' social relationships which are often conceptualised in terms of the abstraction known as social structure. Economics does the same for the market. Psychology dimensions out individual mental processes. Political science dimensions out power and political institutions. Geography dimensions out space; history dimensions out time, and so on.

Each discipline develops its own sets of conceptual tools for the analysis of its particular dimension. Theories are explicated and tested, and a characteristic mode of discourse is evolved through the generations, with its own major debates and controversies. The point about this is that each discipline is based on researchers being 'disciplined' into thinking in certain ways and in critically evaluating existing theories and concepts developed by others within that mode of discourse.

Disciplines are based on a process of conceptual abstraction. That abstraction provides the epistemological basis for the discipline and provides it with a selective frame of analysis. Disciplines are not normally defined in terms of a concrete field or subject of analysis (though, as we shall see, they may be). They are more usually defined by a frame of reference, even if some frames of reference prove in practice to be more amenable to theorising than others.

A good example is the sociological frame of reference, which, by abstracting out such a general dimension as social structure, provides wide scope for theorising. Geography, by contrast, appears to enjoy less scope for theorising since the focus upon the concept of spatial relationships is narrower and more restricted. The same is true for history in relation to temporal factors. The disciplines based on time and space within the social sciences are therefore much less theoretical and more empirical in nature, largely because the scope for theorising time and space as dimensions is limited. So although historians and geographers have attempted to theorise temporal and spatial dimensions respectively of social phenomena, the vast bulk of work in these disciplines has been devoted to describing social phenomena in terms of temporal drift and spatial configuration. In sociology, by contrast, much more effort has gone into developing the theory of social structures.

Having said this, however, it is important not to exaggerate the extent to which disciplines are logical and rational structures of thought. Not all disciplines are dimension-based, and some subject areas have succeeded in becoming established as disciplines: social work and social administration are examples of this. Disciplines are to a large extent the product of power struggles taking place both within universities and between the research world and funders: including, crucially, the state. Care must therefore be taken not to reify the concept of a discipline into a theoretically pure

phenomenon. It so happens that the discipline I am most concerned with in the context of comparative housing studies and the subject of theories of social change – sociology – has a long tradition of theoretical work and a wealth of concepts to draw upon.

What, then, is the basis of housing studies? It is neither a discipline in the sense that it abstracts out a dimension of society, nor is it an established 'subject-based discipline' in university power structures, even if it is rapidly becoming so. Before addressing this question it might prove instructive to consider briefly two closely related fields: urban studies and social administration.

THE CASE OF URBAN STUDIES

The growing interest in theory within urban studies has led to considerable effort being made to identify the epistemological grounds of the field. The question of whether it is possible to theorise the urban has been considered in some detail by Saunders (1986). From a wide-ranging overview of the attempt to theorise the urban by major social theorists since Marx, Saunders concludes that the urban does not provide the basis for special theoretical focus, and that all previous attempts to find one have failed.

Urban studies is a problematic field because it is based on selecting out a dichotomous element in social structure, namely the 'urban' *contra* the 'rural', a fact recognised by Frankenberg (1966) in his concept of the 'urban–rural continuum'. At the same time, urban areas are an appealing focus for research because towns and cities in industrial societies appear to have concentrated in them many of the major social problems of modern society. More important, perhaps, is the underlying belief that the urban constitutes the essence of 'modernity' and that it is in the urban that the basic dynamic of social change can perhaps be found. There is therefore considerable interest in developing epistemological grounds for theorising the urban.

The search for an alternative way of conceptualising problems involving an urban dimension has continued. Perhaps the most convincing recent attempt has been that of Gregory and Urry (1985) in their reconceptualisation of regional issues by identifying the interface between social structures and spatial factors as constituting a theoretical focus. Such a redefinition would abolish the urban as a focus for theorising, but would integrate urban and rural into a regional studies based on the interaction between spatial and social dimensions (geography and sociology).

Gregory and Urry bring together a number of papers which, when taken together, represent different ways of integrating spatial factors into social theory. They are critical of the aspatial nature of social theory, and argue

that an integration of human geography and social theory provides the basis for a new and more comprehensive approach to explanation in the social sciences. As they put it:

The aim of this book is to minimise some of the academic space between human geography and social theory in order to establish a new agenda for theoretical and empirical work and so explore new and challenging 'common ground'.

(Gregory and Urry, 1985: 8)

However, the book is a highly programmatic statement. It provides no real basis for a new perspective, but rather signals its desirability. It is too early to say whether approaches of this nature are likely to result in the emergence of a new socio-spatial perspective in which urban and rural issues share the same epistemology. There is certainly considerable work now being done on issues of 'locality' (see Duncan and Goodwin, 1988) which highlights the influence of spatial distribution on social structure and which could ultimately bridge the gap between urban and rural studies. Even more promising is a recent attempt to develop an integrated socio-spatial approach to restructuring in locality studies that explains spatial change in terms of social, cultural, and political processes (Bagguley *et al.*, 1990). But all this is very tentative and it will probably be some time before it is clear whether or not a new perspective is emerging.

THE CASE OF SOCIAL ADMINISTRATION

Housing studies has a close – even intimate – relationship to social administration. This is because housing is itself an important area of concern to social administration and because much housing research has its origins in the research tradition of social administration. However, social administration has undergone something of a transformation since the early 1970s, with a rapidly growing theoretical awareness greatly exceeding that within housing studies (Forder *et al.*, 1984; George and Wilding, 1976; Gough, 1979; Mishra, 1981; Offe, 1984; Pinker, 1971; Taylor-Gooby and Dale, 1981). The kinds of issues that are grappled with in this book in terms of housing have been the subject of debate in terms of welfare within social administration since at least the mid-1970s. Part of that debate concerns the relationship of social administration to other subjects, to theory, and to the social science disciplines.

Mishra (1981: ch. 1) has delineated the principal characteristics of social administration: its national British focus, values of interventionism and piecemeal reform, supra-disciplinary (or field) orientation, and empiricism. This list will have a familiar ring to it for housing researchers. With the

partial exception of the ethnocentric focus on the British welfare state – which has anyway changed during the 1980s towards a much more international comparative focus in both housing and social administration – Mishra's depiction of social administration also applies to much of housing studies.

Mishra summarises succinctly the principal dissatisfactions that have emerged over recent years with the nature of social administration as a research area. He also points out that there is no consensus over the relationship between social administration and the social science disciplines: for example, Donnison defining it as simply a 'field' drawing on various disciplines while Titmuss saw social administration as an emerging synthetic discipline in its own right (Mishra, 1981: 20).

This latter view is endorsed by Carrier and Kendall (1977). They attempt to define the subject matter of social administration in terms of 'welfare activities whose manifest purpose is to influence differential "command over resources" according to some criteria of need' (Carrier and Kendall, 1977: 27). This definition is broader and more general than traditional definitions in terms of statutory welfare, such as put forward by Titmuss, for example, in that it focuses on the distinction between private market and welfare provision in its widest sense.

But even this distinction does not provide the basis for a new synthetic discipline of social administration, and an even more general and wide-ranging approach is in the process of emerging: one in which welfare is not seen as limited to a public–private distinction but is defined as a basic characteristic which can take many forms and which constitutes the subject focus of social administration. This approach is emerging out of the debate over the supposed monopoly role of the state in welfare provision: a position that has come under increasing attack in recent years. The growing importance of other forms of provision – by the market, employers, voluntary agencies, and informal networks, sometimes known as 'welfare pluralism' (Johnson, 1987) – has if nothing else drawn attention to the need for a broader definition of welfare. Rose (1986a, 1986b) argues that welfare is provided in many forms but principally by households informally, by the state, and by the market, and that the 'welfare mix' of these three types of welfare varies both over time and between countries.

This point will be returned to in Chapter 5. For now we need only note that social administration is gradually evolving a conceptual approach to the subject of welfare. The process is still in its early stages but it is clear that, by moving away from a narrow statutory definition of welfare in which existing practices and laws define and delimit what is and is not a legitimate subject for social administration, the way is opened up to develop a definition of welfare in terms of a more general social dimension.

What form this will take remains as yet unclear. But one possibility could be to base it on the Marxist concept of the reproduction of labour, involving some concept of 'mutual aid', irrespective of the providing agency, whether it be state, employer, voluntary, private, neighbourhood, or family.

SUBSTANTIVE FOCUSES: HOUSING, HOME, AND RESIDENCE

The cases of urban studies and social administration suggest that both in different ways have the potential to develop conceptualised dimension-based approaches to the respective subjects. Of the two, social administration is the most promising and is in some ways more relevant as a model for the conceptual development of housing studies. The solution of attempting to develop a disciplinary focus in terms of the interface between space and society, which may well work for regional studies, is clearly inappropriate in the case of housing studies. 'Housing' is a substantive focus – a focus upon dwellings; it is not one pole of a dichotomous concept, as is an urban focus, and so cannot be integrated with a polar opposite in the way that urban and rural dimensions can be combined to create a socio-spatial regional dimension. It would seem more appropriate to develop a conceptual basis for housing by refining the concept of housing in a parallel manner to the refinement that has been taking place of the concept of welfare in social administration. How might this be done?

Housing studies is clearly about housing. But this tells us little. Housing, after all, in its simplest and crudest sense, is the bricks and mortar or other building materials that comprise the constructions within which people live. But as a field within the social sciences, housing research equally clearly involves the examination of the social, economical, political and other relationships that centre on housing. We might, therefore, by way of providing a starting point, provisionally define housing studies as the study of the social, political, economic, cultural and other institutions and relationships that constitute the provision and utilisation of dwellings.

This amounts to conceptualising housing in terms of that dimension of society concerned with 'shelter', as is sometimes done (Abrams, 1964). Such an approach would define housing studies as the focus for the social relations that directly and indirectly involve the activities of planning, constructing, managing, and use of shelter. Yet this is hardly satisfactory since housing is so much more than shelter. Indeed, it is the very narrowness of a 'bricks and mortar' approach to housing that needs to be avoided. It is no coincidence that housing studies is so called. It reflects the planning and social administrative origins of the field, and it is precisely this focus that needs to be modified, or at least broadened.

There is clearly dissatisfaction with the focus of housing studies. One

attempt to broaden the scope of housing studies has been that of Saunders and Williams (1988) who want to redefine housing issues in terms of 'the home', thereby focusing upon the household – rather than the dwelling – and the social processes that are associated with it. However, Saunders and Williams' argument explicitly comprises part of a wider concern to focus upon consumption rather than provision issues. This is a complicating factor in their concern to put the home at the top of a research agenda which has more to do with substantive issues than epistemological ones.

Moreover, the shift in focus away from dwellings and towards the households that inhabit them, which is a consequence of a focus upon the home, avoids rather than resolves the conceptual ambiguities surrounding the relationship between dwelling and household. These ambiguities are reflected in the way in which the words 'house' and 'home' are often used interchangeably or are closely coupled as in 'house-and-home'. I have argued elsewhere that the concepts of 'household' and 'dwelling', basic as they are to housing researchers, are confusing and unclear because they are each defined in part in relation to the other (Kemeny, 1984). This issue lies at the heart of the problem of what constitutes the substantive focus of housing as a research field and is a recurring theme throughout the book.

Focusing upon the home therefore unnecessarily limits the scope of housing research. A broader concern is desirable; one which embraces locational factors and ties housing studies into macro issues of the nature of social structure. If there is any one dimension of social structure that is central to the way in which it is organised, it is housing. Housing comprises such a major aspect of the organisation of daily existence that it very naturally acts as a focus for the study of a large number of social issues, and particularly those relating to comparative social structures. This can be simply illustrated by taking two major dimensions of housing and showing how they affect social structure: the spatial organisation of housing, and the way in which households pay for it.

The spatial impact of housing is most clearly demonstrated in terms of the impact of dwelling-type on urban form. It makes an enormous difference, far beyond the narrow issue of shelter, whether urban areas are predominantly made up of detached houses or high-rise flats. The knock-on effects will be major, if not determinant, on, for example, the organisation of urban transport which in turn will affect profoundly patterns of sociability, uses of public and private space, and differential accessibility by such dimensions as age, gender, and class. Other substantive bricks-and-mortar focuses – for example, the way in which school buildings are organised, or the spatial organisation of hospitals and other forms of medical care – also have some impact on social structure but they are much less profound and far reaching than different ways of spatially organising housing.

The other dimension – the economic organisation of housing – is equally far reaching in its consequences. The main way in which this is manifested is in terms of different forms of paying for housing by households. The most obvious and dramatic difference in this respect is that between owner occupation and renting, which, under normal financing arrangements, dramatically affects the manner in which housing costs are paid over the household life-cycle. It is clearly of primary importance to patterns of consumption if housing costs are concentrated at the beginning of the family cycle, as they are in owner occupation, or spread out over the whole cycle fairly evenly, as they are in renting. The organisation of housing finance and the extent of owner occupation in different social groups is therefore of major importance to spending patterns at different ages and among different social groups, as well as having considerable impact on the extent of resistance to taxation.

Both of these dimensions of housing – its major spatial effects on the social organisation of urban areas, and its high cost as a percentage of total household expenditure – combine to give housing a uniquely important place in the analysis of social structure. This is a fact of which housing researchers are clearly aware. However, awareness is one thing; understanding the theoretical – as against the practical – implications of this and organising research in those terms is another.

It is therefore particularly handicapping that housing remains so under-conceptualised and that we have barely begun to think about a definition of housing that relates it to social structure. This is why some concept of ‘residence’ would be useful as a starting point. It would begin to focus attention on the wider social structural relationships within which narrow issues of shelter are embedded, but which currently tend to get ignored or lost. Housing is not just about dwellings, nor even just about the households that live in them. Nor is it limited to the interaction between households and dwellings in, for example, the home. It also includes the wider social implications of housing. A case could therefore be made out for reconceptualising housing in terms of ‘residence’ to capture its broader social issues.

‘Residence’ as a concept directs attention to the dwelling as home, *but within its locational context*. A peculiarity of the English language is that the word ‘residence’ has become something of an anachronism in everyday usage. The word is still used in some research contexts (as in ‘residential mobility’), but in everyday terms the verb ‘to live’ has come to add to its meaning of ‘to be alive’ that of ‘to reside’. Many languages distinguish in everyday talk between ‘residing’ and ‘living’. It is not possible, as it is in English, to say that one ‘lives’ in a town when one really means ‘resides’ in it. This lapsed use of the word ‘residence’ in English is unfortunate,

because ‘residence’ carries many social connotations, particularly concerning the ways in which individuals or households tie into wider circles of locality, and beyond.

The concept of residence could therefore usefully form the substantive focus of housing studies in place of either ‘dwelling’ or ‘home’, to provide a broader contextual perspective. The central feature of a focus upon residence as the basis for housing studies must be its clear social structural orientation. It embeds housing issues in their locational and wider social contexts, thereby shifting the emphasis away from the bricks and mortar implications of ‘housing’ towards social dimensions. It highlights the social organisation of housing, both in terms of its location and its form, and the interplay between these. It includes issues of urban form, limitations which it places on restructuring, the relationship between housing and welfare, and the entire gamut of institutional and organisational arrangements that impinge directly and indirectly on issues of residence. Residence as a dimension of social structure can thereby be seen as a key dimension of the social organisation of modern society. It also constitutes an intermediate, meso, level between large-scale macro societal processes and individual level micro interaction.

INTERDISCIPLINISM, HOUSING AND SOCIAL THEORY

In a review of the disciplinary basis of social medicine, Turner (1990) divides academic specialisms into a hierarchy of increasing complexity, with disciplines combining at a simple level into *multi-disciplinary* studies in which different disciplines are drawn on in an *ad hoc* manner and then, more interactively, into *inter-disciplinary* studies in which theories and approaches from different disciplines are integrated with one another in innovative ways.

The atheoreticity of housing studies suggests that it is characterised by the dominance of a multidisciplinary approach, drawing on several disciplines but not integrating them with one another in new ways. This is a useful starting point but an oversimplification. I want to argue here that in practice, although deriving from multidisciplinary interests, housing studies has created its own adisciplinary or nondisciplinary mode of discourse.

A genuine interdisciplinism requires a prior firm anchoring in the individual disciplines before any adequate interactive analysis across disciplines can be developed. This suggests an initial widespread splintering of the field into a number of purely discipline-based housing studies: a housing sociology, a housing economics, a housing geography, a housing ethnography, and so on, each with its intellectual basis within its

own parent discipline and oriented to the problems, theories, and debates within the discipline. Only then would it be possible to develop a genuine interdisciplinary housing studies. There are, then, two contrasting moments: a return to individual disciplines, followed after a period of development of disciplinary perspectives, by a process of synthesis in which new integrative approaches and theories are developed. Each is an essential component in the epistemological construction of housing studies as an integrated field. The end result should then provide a clearly interdisciplinary basis but – and this is crucial – one that is derived from explicit disciplinary concerns.

The extent to which housing research from within different disciplines is carried out with reference to internal disciplinary issues rather than with reference to researchers from other disciplines varies between disciplines within the field of housing studies. But most housing research is not discipline-oriented. There is a remarkable lack of grounding of housing research in the social sciences.

The isolation of housing studies from the major debates in the social sciences is well illustrated by the case of housing and sociology, but could equally well be illustrated from other disciplines, notably political science or anthropology. Sociology underwent an explosive growth during the 1960s and early 1970s which contributed to the flowering of theoretical and conceptual work in the discipline. Very few of these debates are reflected in housing studies. The widespread influence of Parsonian structural functionalism during the 1950s was not reflected in housing research. Nor was the reaction to this that took place in the 1960s, with the emergence of symbolic interactionism and the re-emergence of Marxism. Nor were the methodological debates of these years, notably over qualitative versus quantitative research, which was rife in sociology, at all evident in housing studies. In particular, the extensive critical literature on the use of official statistics in sociology would have been directly relevant to housing researchers.

But what about the major debates in the social sciences that have a direct bearing on housing issues as defined by housing researchers themselves? Astonishingly enough, the same is true of these. Two of the most glaring examples are probably the neglect by housing researchers of theories of state power and theories of social change. Both of these will be considered in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4 respectively. But most housing researchers have neither been interested in drawing upon the ideas of sociologists and political scientists in these terms, nor in critically testing them in their own field studies. Despite growing interest in theoretical issues there remains a strong tendency for housing researchers to bury

themselves in their own empirical and policy issues with almost complete disinterest in such 'abstract' questions.

The extent to which housing studies has ignored the larger debates within sociology and political science is on reflection quite amazing. How is it possible that the enormous and stimulating outpouring of early postwar social science research made little or no impression on housing researchers, and why, in the face of such a flowering of the social sciences, did housing studies remain an intellectual backwater?

The reason would seem to be that debates in housing studies have been nested within issues deriving from the field itself and oriented towards internal debates. This is precisely the danger with multidisciplinism. It too easily becomes nondisciplinary, or adisciplinary, resulting literally in a lack of discipline in the organisation of research. Instead of handling housing issues within established disciplinary modes of discourse, the temptation is to pick a little here and a little there from different disciplines and to avoid having to draw on or even acknowledge established debates, concepts and theories in any discipline. Instead, the social construction of housing studies takes place around empirical and policy issues in abstraction from theories of any kind. The analysis thereby gravitates to a mode of discourse that represents the lowest common denominator to the social sciences with a resultant focus upon policy and empirical work and a neglect of theory (Kemeny, 1988). The end result of this subject-fixated approach is that abstracting 'housing' out of social structure and focusing upon it leads to a failure to integrate it into the wider social processes of which it is a part. Housing studies therefore tends to become a specialism, divorced from wider social issues. It becomes a sterile and limited empirical focus, concentrating on analysing the housing market and housing policy.

My own experience as a housing researcher reflects the way in which this takes place at the individual level. I came to housing studies after many years as a general sociologist with a long-standing interest in questions of social power and the debates and issues surrounding pluralism, élitism, ruling class theory, and corporatism. Yet I made no attempt to use this knowledge in my housing research. Instead, I naturally slipped into what might be termed 'the dominant mode of discourse' within housing studies, and subconsciously pigeon-holed my sociological experiences as not relevant. This, I suspect, is the case with many housing researchers who have discipline-based social science backgrounds. It is all too easy to recognise that housing researchers with different disciplinary backgrounds to oneself are unlikely to be aware of the debates that have taken place within one's own discipline. Thus, for example, a political scientist, rather than going into the intricacies of the Miliband–Poulantsas debates on

political power and the state for the benefit of a housing researcher with, say, a geography discipline background, finds that it is simpler to reduce to the lowest common denominator and leave aside specialist disciplinary issues. This is just another way of saying that housing studies has developed its own discipline-neutral mode of discourse which dominates the literature, and into which researchers from different disciplines have a tendency to slip almost unawares.

One of the consequences of this 'debate-blindness' and lack of awareness of existing literature is that apparently new issues are sometimes developed into major debates even though they have in fact taken place outside of housing studies, sometimes long ago. Some of the eureka-like 'discoveries' that have taken place in housing and urban studies therefore have a *déjà vu* quality about them to those familiar with such issues from a discipline in another context.

Two recent examples of this in urban and housing research have been the interest in 'realist' methodology, associated with the work of the philosopher Bhaskar (1975), and the rediscovery of the individual in urban studies, as traced by Thrift (1983). These appear to be akin to the reinvention of the wheel, since both have extensive literatures which could have been drawn on. In the former, the vast qualitative methodology literature deals with the insights of realism, going back at least to Cicourel (1967), and Glaser and Strauss (1967). The latter, in particular, and the concept of 'grounded theory' appears to be very closely related to the concept of 'realism'.

In the second example, that of the rediscovery of the individual in urban studies, there are many microsociological approaches dating back to the early 1960s if not before that could be drawn upon, such as exchange theory, reference group theory, and symbolic interactionism, not to mention the extensive micro-macro literature that has emerged since the mid-1970s (Collins, 1981; Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel, 1981). The reason why none of these appears to have gained ground in urban studies seems to be that one of the leading theorists in this field – Giddens (1979) – happened to be drawn into issues of space as a result of contact with geographers of the Swedish school of time-geography (Carlstein, 1981; Hägerstrand, 1970, 1974; Lenntorp, 1976). As a result of this, his work was brought to the attention of urban geographers. It so happens that Giddens is very dismissive of microsociological perspectives – and in particular of symbolic interactionism – in developing his own theory of agent-structure dynamics (Giddens, 1979). But the result of this particular citation network has been the great prominence given to Giddens' highly programmatic theory of structuration and the little or no awareness of the large existing literature on the agent-structure problematic in sociology, particularly the

work of Randall Collins and of symbolic interactionists (for a discussion of this see Kemeny, 1987b).

No doubt other examples could be found in reverse, where urban and housing sociologists reinvent wheels long existing in other disciplines, or struggle to develop concepts in apparent unawareness of the prior existence of a substantial body of literature which could usefully be taken as a starting point, however inadequate and underdeveloped it might be.

All this is not to dismiss multidisciplinary work as inherently inferior. Rather, it is to point to the dangers of multidisciplinism slipping into nondisciplinism and abstracted housing empiricism, and losing touch with the mainstream disciplinary concerns within the social sciences. Multidisciplinism within housing studies has become 'nondisciplinism' because of the prevalent tendency to fail to work out of clearly discipline-based concerns by taking the issues and theories of one's own discipline and linking them into housing issues. Multidisciplinary housing studies must therefore be very firmly grounded in debates from the disciplines in order to provide the theoretical foundation which enables concepts and theories from different disciplines to be fruitfully combined.

This is a fate that befalls many specialisms with a subject-based focus. Turner (1987), for example, argues against the way in which medical sociology has developed in precisely these terms. Medical sociology deals with the interweaving of issues of health and sickness with other aspects of social structure. Turner argues that the field has become too narrowly focused upon the study of medical institutions and practices: the aetiology of disease, doctor-patient relationships, hospital organisation, health service provision, etc. He argues that instead of delving further into the sociology of institutional medicine it would be more fruitful to embed broad issues of health and sickness into a wider study of society, including ideologies, power, and occupational structures, and to treat medical issues as part of a discipline-based sociological approach, or what he calls 'medicine-in-sociology' (Turner, 1987: 1). Turner then goes on to show, chapter by chapter, how this might be done, linking in a very convincing manner the study of medicine into wider social structure through the discipline of sociology. Turner thereby 'reclaims' medical sociology as a part of sociology, and ties it into the central conceptual and theoretical issues of social theory.

What Turner achieves for medical sociology is one solution to the atheoretical nature of housing studies. Reconceptualising housing studies as part of separate disciplines, such as sociology, can, and I would argue should, be a first step in decomposing housing studies prior to rebuilding it along truly interdisciplinary lines. In the chapters that follow I intend to begin the work of just such a reconceptualisation in terms of sociology.

EMPIRICISM AND THE PROBLEM OF EPISTEMIC DRIFT

The problem that Turner (1987) grappled with concerning medical sociology is similar to that of defining the core of housing studies – despite the fact that the former is an intradisciplinary field while the latter is multidisciplinary – in that in both cases there is a clear tendency for the subject matter to descend to the lowest common denominator. In medical sociology Turner was concerned to raise the focus from the narrow one of medical institutions to broader issues of health and sickness. In housing studies the descent to the lowest common denominator of bricks and mortar is a comparable problem.

This phenomenon of the downward drift of subject focus can be described in terms of a concept borrowed from another context, namely that of 'epistemic drift' (Elzinga *et al.*, 1985). This was coined to describe the way in which discipline-based concerns became subtly redefined by an almost imperceptible exertion of long-standing influence upon academics by policy-makers. Transposed to the issue of the descent to lowest common denominators in medical sociology and housing studies, epistemic drift can be seen as the process of de-conceptualisation that takes place in respect of conceptual frameworks applied to concrete social phenomena when researchers are under the pressure of policy-making concerns. The result is that the focus of the field shifts from issues embedded in wider problems within the social sciences to very specific ones defined by the shifting and unstable current policy concerns of administrators and politicians.

Epistemic drift can, and often does, take place in several directions simultaneously. Epistemic drift towards policy concerns and towards lowest common interdisciplinary denominators are characteristic tendencies in housing research. Other drift-like tendencies may take place from time to time, for example towards abstracted empiricism or grand theory, towards micro or macro biases, or towards quantitative or qualitative research methods. An important task of housing researchers is therefore to be alert to the tendency towards epistemic drift in housing studies. This requires a degree of reflexivity and theoretical awareness among researchers, which is encouraged by an awareness of the relationship of housing studies to other areas, as discussed in this chapter, and an awareness of the epistemological grounds of the field, an aspect of metatheory that is the subject of Chapter 2.

CONCLUSIONS

I have argued that the place of housing studies within the social sciences needs to be clarified and developed in a number of respects. The rapid

expansion of the field in recent decades, its growing complexity and diversity, and above all the growing interest in theoretical and conceptual issues, make it increasingly important that housing researchers begin to systematise their work in relation to the social sciences. A number of tasks present themselves in this context.

The first task is to begin to obtain a clearer idea of precisely what housing studies is about in terms of conceptual and substantive focus. Is it possible to specify the focus of housing studies in terms of a social dimension, such as the home, or residence? This may well prove to be an intractable problem, but it is worth addressing in order to increase awareness of the issues. In addition, it would be wrong to foreclose the discussion because of the difficulties involved, as even the most pessimistic predictions can sometimes be confounded.

Housing issues need to be more closely related to debates in the disciplines than is still the case today, in spite of progress in recent years. Housing research is too isolated and has become too narrow in focus, with housing issues too often abstracted out of the wider social context. Housing research needs both to draw more extensively from debates and theories in the social sciences and to contribute to such debates with studies of housing. These issues are illustrated in more detail in chapters 3, 4 and, to a lesser extent, 5.

In the long run it would be greatly enriching if housing research were to become interdisciplinary, drawing explicitly on theories, concepts and debates within more than one discipline and applying these to housing in an integrative manner. This would also involve feeding back into the disciplines with findings and applications of concepts and theories taken or adapted from the disciplines. In this way, housing research could make important contributions to broader debates which may have little or nothing to do with housing directly.

Housing research can also draw from, and contribute to, debates and issues in cognate fields. Research on social welfare and the welfare state is one obvious area. Theories of the welfare state, drawn from sociology and political science in particular, form the obvious disciplinary sources of its theorising, while social welfare research provides the cognate field within which housing can be understood as being one element.

Awareness of the relationship between housing studies on the one hand and the social science disciplines and cognate fields on the other enables housing researchers to monitor continually developments in their field. This creates opportunities for 'contextualised reflexivity' in which developments in housing studies can be kept in step with those in other areas. Sometimes it may enable housing research to result directly in the initiation of new developments in other areas.

18 *Housing and metatheory*

The importance of housing studies developing in relation to other social science areas cannot be over-emphasised. It provides the stimulus for outside influence and acts as a mirror to the state of the field. In the next chapter I address some of the basic issues around theorising in relation to housing. In doing so, I draw heavily on developments and contributions in other social science areas, and in particular in my own discipline of sociology.

2 The epistemological grounds of housing studies

INTRODUCTION

Although the undertheorised nature of housing studies is well known, little has been done to understand why this is so and what may be done to rectify it. One of the reasons for the low level of theoretical awareness within housing studies is that very little reflexivity is apparent in the work of housing researchers. As a result, the question of how housing studies may be conceptualised and the limits within which it may be theorised tends not to be addressed.

This situation is beginning to change, particularly since the mid-1970s, and there is now a growing awareness of the theoretical issues that lie behind housing questions and that can help to inform their analysis. This growing theoretical awareness has been partly in response to the influence of Marxist perspectives. Thus, for example, during the 1970s the nature of the state and its consequences for the nature of the housing market received some attention (Clarke and Ginsburg, 1975; Forrest and Lloyd, 1978). More recently, there has been interest in shifting the emphasis from narrow policy issues to broader social ones surrounding the nature of housing provision (Ball, 1983; Ball *et al.*, 1988).

But even outside of Marxist theory there has been growing theoretical interest since the late 1960s. The most important development has been the pioneering work of Rex and Moore (1967) in which the concept of housing classes was developed to understand inner city ethnic disadvantage. This led to a substantial literature on housing classes, the basic argument being that housing advantage is a major determinant of social inequality (Bell, 1977; Couper and Brindley, 1975; Rex, 1973; Saunders, 1978). Other developments have been work on urban managerialism (Pahl, 1969), theories of power (such as élitism and pluralism) in housing (Dunleavy, 1981), the central and local state (Dickens *et al.*, 1985; Saunders, 1986), and the concept of structuration developed and applied in a number of contexts