



## Author's Reply

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# Author's Reply

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I am delighted that our two Focus articles have inspired such intelligent critical commentaries, most of which are not only comments on our papers but self-standing contributions to the discussion concerning theorising in housing studies. Like David Clapham, I will not try to respond to all of the comments. My paper was about housing and theorising. Although there were quite intriguing ideas about housing in the comments (e.g. Anita Blessing's idea about the hybrid nature of housing), my response focuses on comments on theorising. I will take up two sets of issues that need more clarification.

## **Explanation and understanding**

In my paper, I defined social theory as a discourse that consists of a set of linked (a) concepts and (b) propositions to be used for hypothetical (i) redescription, (ii) explanation and (iii) interpretation of all or some subset of social entities, relations and processes. Somerville points out that this is a demanding definition: "it might be questioned whether a social theory must also provide both explanation (e.g. causal or functional or fit to a model) and interpretation (new meanings and understandings)" (Somerville, this issue, 243). Later in his response he writes about two kinds of theories, one aiming to explain and another aiming to account for people's experiences. It is apparent that my formulation gives a misleading impression. I *do* think that crafting concepts and statements for redescription and interpretation is also theorising. I see theoretical redescription and interpretation as aspects of theory-building, but a full-blown theory should also have explanatory content. And: redescription, interpretation and explanation are not always far removed from each other (at least if you adopt a mechanism-theoretical view of explanation). A well-known example is Paul Willis' book *Learning to Labour* (1977) which attempts by an analysis of an ethnographic case study to account for "how working class kids get working class jobs". It has been convincingly shown that Willis' redescription and interpretation

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also entails an explanatory mechanism that explains *why* this happens (Manicas 2006, 77–81; see also Kaidesoja 2013).

In his comment Manuel Aalbers considers my, as well as Clapham's, view of theory surprisingly positivist-influenced, missing "attention to 'understanding' in the Weberian meaning of *verstehen*" (Aalbers, this issue, 194). But in my mind, explanation and understanding are intertwined. For Weber explanation of action required understanding of the meaning that the actor invested in her/his action, and sociology was for him "a science concerning itself with the interpretative understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences" (Weber 1978, 4). This is a view of sociology and of social explanation that I have considered most fruitful and interesting for a long time (though I have lately been trying to unlearn parts of the Weberian vision).

My reading of Weber is that for him explanation of social action is the main goal and understanding the meaning that actors invest in it is a necessary part of such an explanation. Therefore, explanation assumes understanding – though this is not explicated in my paper. To put this in terms of explanation by mechanism, the explanatory mechanisms suggested by a theory need to have an account of the meanings that actors invest in their action as well as their actions following from these meanings. Weber distinguishes between two kinds of meanings, the meaning that all actors or most of them empirically give to action and the meaning that the researcher theoretically attributes "to the hypothetical actor or actors in a given type of action" (Weber 1978, 4). Investigating the meanings actors really invest in their actions in an empirical-historical situation must be a task of empirical research whereas on the level of theory the ascription of meaning has to be hypothetical, based on theoretical reasoning or results of previous research.

For Chris Allen the problem of my view of theory is not excessive focus on explanation instead of understanding, but the idea of explaining housing phenomena in itself. He argues that to try to give an explanation of housing (or any other phenomenon) is to place oneself outside of the phenomenon. Allen's view is that as we social researchers are members of society and all have a relation to and experience of housing we cannot pretend to stand outside of this object of inquiry. What we can and should do (instead of explaining) is "to understand how beings, in their being, relate to those objects" (Allen, this issue, 201). The function of theoretical reflection is not to provide tools for explanation but to "produce understandings that allow us to nurture experience so that it is fulfilling" (Allen, this issue, 201–202). Thus, theoretical reflection helps "people to understand their experiences more fully in order to enable and empower them in their own decisions about housing" (Allen, this issue, 202).

Allen's view is based on a normative commitment that I see as positive. He wants to defend people's particular, lived experience of housing and the knowledge and perspectives arising from it against social scientists who would universalise knowledge, claiming to know better than the people themselves what housing is and what needs to be done with it. A warning against social scientists' hubris about their superior knowledge is certainly in place. A good example is US economists' policy recommendation to introduce an American-style mortgage system to post-socialist Russia without knowledge of how differently from Americans Russians perceive home-ownership and mortgage debt (Stephens, this issue). There is no knowledge from nowhere in social sciences (e.g. Abbott 2016); social scientific concepts, perspectives and generalisations bear the mark of the time and place where they were

crafted (cf. Saegert, this issue). We should also beware of what Abbott calls *knowledge alienation*, “the situation of saying one thing and living another” (Abbott 2016, 255). By this he means a situation, where the researcher is giving interpretations and explanations of people’s behaviour that he/she is implicitly *not* applying to his/her own behaviour. If a researcher is interpreting the desire for home-ownership as an attempt to compensate for the feeling of powerlessness in working and social life (such a theory was presented in Daun 1983), then he/she must be ready to apply this diagnosis to his/her own choice of home-ownership.

In spite of these problems, I think like most researchers (e.g. Lawson, this issue; Darcy, this issue) that social scientists are licensed to provide explanations as well as understandings of housing issues. Allen thinks that to try to explain is wrong as explaining puts the researcher outside the people’s lived experience. But doesn’t interpretation of people’s experience (understanding) require similar distancing? Even for Allen, researchers’ understandings are obviously not the same as the researched people’s understandings. The function of researchers’ understandings is to help the researched understand their own experiences *better* than what they would have otherwise done. So also the researcher’s interpretation of people’s experience is distanced from that experience, and therefore there is not such a big difference between explaining and understanding. Moreover, by explanation I mean simply answers to why-questions. These can be of many kinds depending on the question asked. To ask why-questions about society and human behaviour is human, common to all people, not just social scientists. Why should social scientists be disallowed to engage in the basic human activity of asking “Why”? But if we are allowed to do that, can our answers be given a special weight over the ones that lay people might give – provided the questions are the same (often they aren’t)? This is a crucial concern for Allen, and one that I share, though it is not expressed in my paper.

Together with my son, I spent many days a couple of summers ago plastering the outer walls of our sauna house. The result of that work has a certain rough charm, and we can live with it, especially after the wall is painted. Yet, I know that a professional builder would have done a better job much faster. He or she has the training for the job, command of the right techniques, knowledge of the right tools and materials, as well as the tricks of the trade and confidence coming from experience. Should we not think similarly about our own craft? Are we not similarly craftspeople in social inquiry, including the explanation of social phenomena. We know the materials, tools and techniques of social inquiry and if we use them well we can hope to produce knowledge claims of the social world that are well founded and can challenge other knowledge claims. But social scientific knowledge is not all knowledge, and as social scientists we shouldn’t be too arrogant in believing we have the whole truth about housing.

### Experience and theory

Chris Allen reads my demanding definition of theory as saying that experience is “not an adequate basis for theory” – as understanding experience does not provide explanatory ideas (Allen, this issue, 201). The issue of experience is also taken up in Saegert’s comment. Drawing on the American pragmatist tradition she sees theorisation as processual, contextual, positional and targeted toward solving problems arising from experience. She criticises our papers for having “a narrow frame of reference concerning who does housing theory, why they do it, and what theorizing constitutes” (Saegert, this issue, 241). The reason for our narrow perspective is the

(false) “separation of theorizing from experiencing, from doing and enjoying or suffering consequences of action” (Saegert, this issue, 241). Implicitly this refers to what Allen calls co-production of theory. For Allen this means theorising together with those researched.

My term “theory from housing” does refer to theoretical thinking arising from phenomenological reflection of experience of housing, though Peter King, who has done most in this line of research, calls it *thinking* on housing rather than theorising it (e.g. King, this issue).<sup>1</sup> I do believe that experience, or rather thoughts and knowledge arising from it, can be a resource for redescription, interpretation and explanation just as well as books and papers we have read and the research we have done. I do not see any reason why such reflection would not be able to lead to theoretical concepts and statements. Allen points out that neither Clapham nor Ruonavaara refers to co-production of theory (or thinking). This is accurate, but our focus was not on how theories are made. The kind of co-production that Allen thinks of can be accomplished for example, in a participatory research design like the sociological intervention developed by Alain Touraine and his team (see Touraine 1981).

So far I have accepted the rather abstract talk about experience and have not asked the obvious question: *whose* experience? It is clear that for Allen the crucial experience is that of working-class people, or more generally, ordinary people who do not rank high on economic or cultural capital. But surely there is diversity in how people experience housing within any category of people. This is not the usual starting point of phenomenological analysis aiming to capture pure experience. Mostly the experience analysed is that of the thinker, and I guess that is also King’s starting point. The researchers’ own experience of housing is a resource for research, and also for theorising. Why did I focus so much on the Finnish housing company (a form of owner-occupation) in my doctoral dissertation on the history of housing tenures in urban Finland? Well, I had moved to a housing company flat at the time I was beginning my dissertation and that experience drew my attention to the undeniable originality of this Finnish housing institution (see Ruonavaara 2005).

Also Anita Blessing is concerned about “whether those making theory include individuals with deep and enduring experience of the phenomena to be theorised” (Blessing, this issue, 213). However, she mainly refers to another kind of co-production of theory than the one involving the people subject to housing policies or housing market developments. Sometimes “current or former housing professionals may be better equipped than pure social scientists to distinguish between concepts that elucidate – and those that obfuscate – significant attributes and dynamics of the research object” (Blessing, this issue, 213). She is probably right in this. The experience and knowledge of practitioners could and probably should be seen both as a resource and “reality check” for theorisation of housing issues, as well as the experience and knowledge of “ordinary people”.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Note

1. Also Allen is inclined to speak about thinking rather than theorizing. I consider the kind of thinking that King does as theorizing.

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