

Housing Adjustment As a Symptom of Housing Dissatisfaction: Call for an Integrated Approach to Theory Building

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Abstract

Housing Adjustment is a set of creative human activities that take place to meet various housing needs. Thus far, numerous studies have given attention to speculate a typology of those activities on an empirical base. Overall, though, little is known about its theoretical underpinning, due to the independent nature of each individual study in interpreting differences in conclusions. This study examines and compares results from two previous studies on housing adjustment. Previous research on housing adjustment suggests that, other than household and housing characteristics, housing satisfaction as an intervening variable is deeply associated with the choice of housing adjustment involved in mobility, home improvement, or cognitive adaptation. The two studies used similar theoretical schemes, asked similar questions, yet one sample consisted of Korean American residents and the other sample was poor housing residents in Korea. This study shows that differences in sample characteristics lead to a strong discrepancy in interpreting Speare's (1974) satisfaction theory of housing adjustment. For Korean Americans, housing satisfaction turned out to be a good predictor of housing adjustment preference, while it is not the case for poor housing residents in Korea. This implies that findings of any single study can not be generalized directly to the population as a whole. Thus, continued effort should be made to compare specific findings from various research studies, seeking explanations for differences in conclusions. Theory can be legitimately built and strengthened in this integrated manner.

Keywords: housing adjustment, housing satisfaction, housing theory

1. INTRODUCTION

As human needs continually grow and decline throughout the life span, housing adjustment is undertaken by all families to obtain satisfactory housing. Housing adjustment is the term used to designate either a change in housing or a change in the household to meet housing needs (Parrott and Lodl, 1991).

Since Rossi (1955) addressed residential mobility as one of the responses families can make to unsatisfactory housing, mobility has become the most rudimentary type of housing adjustment. Morris and Winter (1975) began to consider other modes of housing adjustment, such as alterations or repairs of existing structures, in the adjustment process, with residential mobility being the first priority. Both mobility to new housing and home improvements represent housing change. Among others such as an alteration of family composition, on the other hand, changes in the household include cognitive adaptation to existing housing situations which accompanies altering family norms or aspirations. Cognitive adaptation is often considered to be an appropriate solution to unsatisfactory housing for families dominated by monetary constraints (Morris and Winter, 1978).

It might not be unusual to posit that people are willing to continually seek the living environment that is most desirable to them unless an ideal picture of place to live in mind is actually accomplished. Maslow's (1943) theory of hierarchical human needs provides a theoretical underpinning regarding the housing adjustment process. He interpreted the process in a progressive manner in which higher-order needs appear immediately after lower-order needs are satisfied. Based on Maslow's theory, Michelson (1977) suggests a universal basis for accommodating a series of housing needs. That is, various housing needs such as basic shelter provision, self-seteem,

and self-actualization come progressively into play in the housing adjustment process. In this regard, housing adjustment can be easily understood by stipulating what housing needs faced by families in a particular point in the life cycle are all about.

Herman (1992), additionally, provides a different theoretical explanation for housing adjustment in a temporal context. According to his material culture point of view, an artifact as a human product, whatever it is housing or environmental sculpture, is subjected to changes all throughout the life span. Initial performance is an entire range of creative activities to meet basic ideas and values for housing. Subsequent performance is likely to take place in housing through space addition, alterations, and repairs to reflect deviations from its original expressive ideas and values. In this regard, housing adjustments are largely governed by value systems a group of people hold.

Rossi (1980) viewed housing adjustments as the result of a two-way decision making process. One is related to a decision to adjust housing, while the other is a decision to select an alternative, whatever it is mobility, home improvements such as alterations and repairs, or other modes of housing adjustment (e.g., cognitive adaptation). Thus far, no consistent findings for why people adjust their housing have been documented. This study proposed to examine and compare results from two previous independent researches on housing adjustments in relation to Speare's (1974) housing satisfaction theory.

2. HOUSING DISSATISFACTION AS A PREDICTOR OF HOUSING ADJUSTMENT: THE PROS AND CONS

Since Rossi (1955) recognized housing dissatisfaction as a source of residential mobility, it has become a general conceptual framework for the topic. In his elaboration of

Rossi's satisfaction model of residential mobility, Speare (1974) also interpreted housing dissatisfaction as a predictor of housing adjustments. He argued that every family has its own threshold or tolerance for dissatisfaction. If the threshold is passed, the household begins to seek alternative houses and chooses among them. As a result, a highly satisfied household is less likely to move to another house than its counterpart, although it can be better off somewhere. In support of Speare's (1974) argument, Morris and Winter (1978) explained a perceived gap between actual and desired housing to be a source of dissatisfaction. The gap is typically a marginal deviation of some attributes of a family's house as described by their standards by having either too much or too little. If it is salient to the family who is affected, a significant reduction in satisfaction results (Morris and Winter, 1975). Seek (1983) also supports Morris and Winter's (1978) position by noting that a discrepancy between the actual and the expected level of housing consumption leads to an increase in dissatisfaction. Morris et al. (1976) further articulated that housing deficiencies are a good predictor of housing adjustments. Put simply, they strongly argued that dissatisfied families are more likely to move to another housing unit, modify their housing, or change their family aspirations or norms.

Morris and Winter (1978) posited a theory of housing satisfaction along with a causal model. Every household in every culture seeks to match its own or cultural needs to the available supply of housing. This is a way of reducing dissatisfaction caused by unmet housing needs. Based on the theory, families dissatisfied with their housing are more likely to be active adjusters, seeking an alternative housing. Households who have already satisfied a minimum level of needs, on the other hand, usually take home improvements. Downward adjustments are a post-child phenomenon to reduce a surplus of space after children have left the house. Seek (1983) pointed out that households which are basically satisfied with their housing tend to make upward adjustments for more or better housing. In their remodeling study, similarly, Parrott and Lodl (1989) found that households basically satisfied with their housing are more likely to improve it.

Landale and Guest (1985) pointed out three major problems with Speare's (1974) satisfaction model of housing adjustments (e.g., residential mobility). First, based on their findings, Landale and Guest argued that satisfaction is not a good predictor of actual mobility. Second, structural variables, such as age of the household head, presence or absence of children, family size, housing tenure, and length of stay in place, have a strong impact on mobility, independent of satisfaction. Third, satisfaction turned out not to be an intervening variable between structural variables and actual mobility. For example, Landale and Guest (1985) interpreted that the elderly are less mobile than the young, within similar levels of satisfaction, because of their relatively limited assets and resources (so-called, constraints). Speare (1974), on the other hand, argued that old people are less likely to move than the younger only because they are disproportionately more satisfied with their housing.

Michelson (1977) who found no significant effect of housing satisfaction on mobility supports Landale and Guest's (1985) position. He argued that satisfaction reflects short-term expectations relative to the family's residential environment, while actual mobility as a mode of housing adjustments is a response to a long-term set of family goals and aspirations as the life cycle progresses. This interpretation is well interwoven into Michelson's (1977) theory of self-selection. According to his theory, each family as a self-regulating, rational system has its own mobility cycle in relation to a range of aspirations it holds. The family is deemed to act rationally to achieve its ideal or aspirations throughout the life span. Thus, it is plausible to posit that not all families dissatisfied with their housing move. Or families highly satisfied with their housing may move to satisfy their personal aspirations.

Michelson (1977) suggested two alternative explanations relating man and environment relations. First, a family rationally chooses a house in terms of its desired lifestyle or behavior (so-called, adjusted behavior). In this case, the house is largely understood as an economic good to satisfy the family's lifestyles or behavior. Alternatively, lifestyles could be viewed as a function of place specific opportunities (so-called, situated behavior). In this case, a particular set of demands or opportunities in a house might bring out changes in behavior and ways of daily function. In both cases, satisfaction is a function of how well a desired behavior is achieved in the life cycle context. Simply put, satisfaction is not related to the ability of a house to provide opportunity for central or ultimate needs pertaining to the family, but to it stands in its long range of mobility cycle. Consequently, a positive view of the future might lead to an increasing satisfaction with the house, regardless of its objective conditions. In this regard, Michelson (1980) found that people actually postponed some seriously desired gratifications when they confident that they will eventually achieve them in the later stages of life cycle.

Overall, Michelson's (1977, 1980) theory of self-selection provides a dynamic view of mobility based not only on satisfaction, but on aspirations or ideals a family holds. His theory is useful for several reasons. First, it provides alternative explanation for the weak relationship between dissatisfaction and adjustments by taking a future oriented perspective. Michelson (1980) posited that families are capable of maintaining different and often mutually exclusive desires. As a result, satisfactory housing may possibly be replaced in order to satisfy some long-term desire. Second, it explains a high rate of mobility among families who have already obtained their ideals or aspirations. According to Michelson's (1980) findings, highly satisfied families did move again. That is, satisfaction usually turned out to be high when people are optimistic about their opportunities to move again and they believe more important aspirations can be fulfilled within a reasonable amount of time. In this regard a family's practical ability to achieve its long range aspirations is strongly related to satisfaction.

In support of Michelson's (1977, 1980) proposition regarding housing adjustment intention, Cook (1989)

found no significant relationship between satisfaction and residential mobility. He explained satisfaction as a function not only of existing conditions but also of perceived alternatives or future expectations. Highly dissatisfied families usually have a plan to move in the future. Cook (1989) interpreted thinking about moving to another house simply as a way to endure present difficulties that do not actually cause a move. It is interesting to note that renters are more likely to move than homeowners, regardless of how satisfied they are with their house. Mobility might be simply a function of dissatisfaction only for those who were pessimistic or thought future mobility unlikely. Put simply, satisfaction is largely governed by a family's practical ability to achieve its long range aspirations or norms. This further supports that satisfaction is not the sole factor in adjustment decisions.

3. REVIEW OF TWO INDEPENDENT RESEARCHES: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

3.1 Study I

Based on Koreans in the Houston metropolitan area, Lee (1998) investigated the utility of three independent variables (e.g., housing complaints, housing satisfaction, and willingness to pay) in interpreting housing adjustment decisions involved in residential mobility and home improvements. This study, hereafter, will refer to as Study I. Figure 1 shows the conceptual model devised for Study I on several grounds.

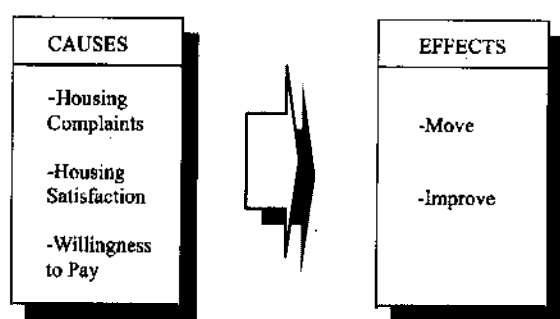


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Study I

(1) Model Specification

First, Rossi (1955) posited complaint theory of housing adjustments. It might be that objective deficits in housing lead families to adjust their housing. Newman and Duncan (1979) supports Rossi's idea by noting that serious structural problems (e.g., deficits in plumbing systems) which are more than can be endured by residents may result in residential mobility. On this base, housing complaints need to be weighed on housing adjustment decisions.

Second, Speare (1974) posited satisfaction theory of housing adjustments. There is a considerable amount of consensus among housing professionals that families dissatisfied with their housing are more likely to involve in housing adjustments, though some do not agree with this proposition. Numan and Duncan (1979) found that specific housing problems which are depressing yet tolerable are deeply related to satisfaction, but they are not a good

predictor of actual mobility. As a result, housing satisfaction should be examined for its utility in interpreting housing adjustments among various groups of people (e.g., Koreans in different situations).

On an experimental base, finally, willingness to pay for cultural amenities is included to explore the role it may play in housing adjustment decisions. It might be that ways of adjusting are often determined by what families think of valuable, adequate, or ideal in the living context.

In Study I, mobility designates residential shifts to meet personal housing needs (so-called, voluntary move), while home improvements indicate a series of resident activities (e.g., adding space, painting, structural remodeling, and so forth) that take place in housing.

(2) Method

Study I is based on 326 Korean immigrant households in the Houston metropolitan area. No single data collection effort would be efficient or effective for the study, because of the sample population's general lack of understanding regarding what it ought to obtain from them plus their apprehensive and vulnerable status. Therefore, Study I used a three-stage data collection strategy.

First, site visits in conjunction with an initial walk-through with the selected sample were done to establish an atmosphere of mutual trust and confidence with them. Second, self-administrated group surveys in a form of cluster sample which is comprised of six Protestant churches, one Catholic church, and one Buddhist temple were conducted. Roughly, 61% of response rate with questionnaires (e.g., 326 out of 539 households) were obtained. Finally, in-depth oral interviews with the survey subset (e.g., 10 survey participants on a voluntary base) were undertaken to corroborate the questionnaire results.

(3) Results

There is strong evidence of significant differences in preferred modes of housing adjustment behavior as related to the degree of housing complaints (see table 1). The mean distribution of housing complaints between stayers/improvers and movers is significantly different.

Table 1. Analysis of Causes Related to Housing Adjustment Decisions

Independent Variables	Dependent Measure			
	No.	Mean	SD	P-value
Housing Complaints ¹				
-Stay or Improve	326	1.9	1.88	.000
-Move		3.7	3.37	
Housing Satisfaction ²				
-Stay or Improve	326	4.0	.75	.000
-Move		3.4	.75	
Willingness to Pay ³				
-Stay or Improve	326	2.3	2.50	.000
-Move		4.2	2.89	

Note 1. A total of 20 housing complaint items are included in the study. Respondents were asked to select items.

Note 2. Housing satisfaction is measured on a 5 point ordinal scale where the higher numbers represent greater satisfaction. Missing values are coded as "neither dissatisfied nor satisfied (3)."

Note 3. A total of 11 cultural amenity items are included to measure willingness to pay. Respondents were asked to select items they are willing to pay for. Missing values are coded as zero.

As shown in table 1, the less the degree of complaints, the more likely people prefer to stay and improve the house. This supports Rossi's (1980) finding that stayers or improvers are usually those households likely to have satisfied their basic housing needs. In a similar context, keeping the status quo (e.g., staying without improving the house) turned out to be an alternative solution used by residents when housing complaints are low. It might be that minor housing complaints do not lead people to move elsewhere. As Seek (1983) pointed out, people are likely unwilling to look for alternative housing elsewhere unless certain thresholds of complaints are passed over.

Additionally, a strong relationship between housing satisfaction and housing adjustment preference was found. Overall, whether a household moves or stays depends on how well it is satisfied with its housing. Satisfied households are more likely to stay in the house and subsequently improve it. The less satisfied households, on the other hand, tend to seek a better housing unit elsewhere. This finding supports Morris and Winter's (1978) proposition that highly satisfied families are usually stayers or improvers, while dissatisfied families are marginal home improvers. It is quite interesting to note that there is a strong relationship between housing complaints and housing satisfaction ($\tau = -.38, p < .001$). That is, the fewer housing complaints, the greater the degree of housing satisfaction with the house. Housing complaints account for 24% of the variability in housing satisfaction. This finding supports again Morris and Winter's (1978) theory of housing adjustment. They explained housing deficits (e.g., complaints) as a major source of dissatisfaction which, in turn, leads to housing adjustment.

Finally, Study I found that willingness to pay for cultural amenities is strongly related to housing adjustment preference. It seems likely that mobility is an increasing function of willingness to pay for cultural amenities. In other words, cultural amenity needs are more likely to be resolved by seeking a better housing, rather than working on amenities which are culturally desirable. Two possible explanations can be made. One is that cultural amenity needs are usually salient to recently immigrated people whose social and economic solidarity is relatively weak. Those people are more likely to maintain cultural amenities by seeking an alternative housing which better satisfies their family needs, rather than improving the existing house. The other explanation is that locational advantages (e.g., proximity to Korean neighbors) relative to structural dimensions are deemed important to Houston Koreans. It is also interesting to find that the less satisfied a household is with its housing, the more likely to pay for cultural amenities. Kendall's tau ($\tau = -.26, p < .001$) indicates a strong relationship between housing satisfaction and willingness to pay.

3.2 Study II

Based on poor housing residents in the Seoul metropolitan area, Lee et al. (2000) examined a pattern of housing adjustments involved in residential mobility, home improvements, and cognitive adaptation as weighted on housing satisfaction. This study, hereafter, will refer to as

Study II. Figure 2 describes the conceptual model used for Study II on several grounds.

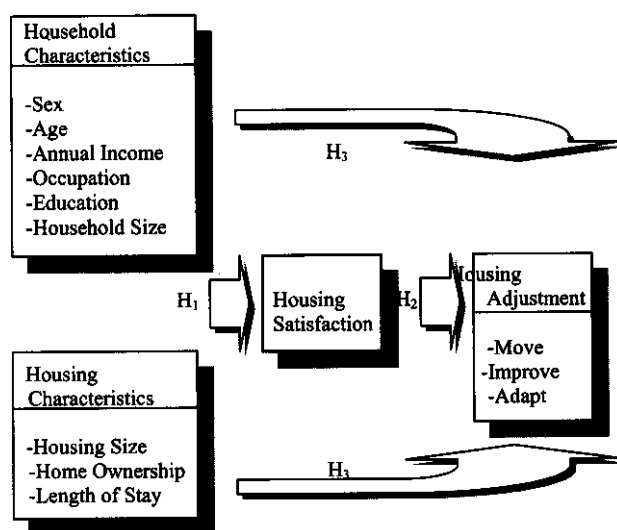


Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Study II

(1) Model Specification

First, Rossi (1980) posited life cycle theory of housing satisfaction. That is, life cycle changes lead to housing need changes which results in housing deficits. Morris and Winter (1975) explained housing deficits as a predictor of housing satisfaction. In this regard, Newman and Duncan (1979) found that specific housing deficits in the life cycle context are deeply associated with housing satisfaction.

Second, Speare (1974) developed housing satisfaction theory of housing adjustments. That is, people adjust or adapt to their housing according to how they are satisfied with it. Morris and Winter (1978) interpreted cognitive adaptation as an appropriate reaction to unsatisfactory housing particularly for families whose social and economic solidarity is relatively weak (e.g., such as poor housing residents). On this base, cognitive adaptation is included in Study II as a mode of housing adjustments.

Finally, numerous studies on housing adjustments indicate that household and housing characteristics have a direct effect on housing adjustment decisions, regardless of how families are satisfied with their housing. That is, structural variables (e.g., such as age of the household head, family size, housing tenure, and length of stay in place) turned out to have a significant impact on adjustment decisions, independent of satisfaction (Lundale and Guest, 1985). In this regard, as shown in figure 2, Study II examined the effect of household and housing variables on housing adjustment preference. Ultimately, results of Study II are expected to broaden the area of inquiry regarding housing adjustments.

(2) Method

Study II is based on 100 poor housing residents in the "Bon-Chun 2, 3 Dong" area. In order to effectively collect data, site visits and self-administrated questionnaire survey in a form of face-to-face interviews were done in a separate but sequential time frame.

(3) Results

Results of Study II can be summarized in three ways. First, housing satisfaction is strongly related to household and housing characteristics. As shown in table 2, old heads of the household are more likely than young heads to be satisfied with their housing. This finding supports Speare's (1974) and Morris and Winter's (1978) proposition that as age grows, people tend to positively evaluate their housing, regardless of its objective conditions (e.g., so-called the saturation effect of age on housing satisfaction). Due to their relatively weak financial assets, the saturation effect might be more salient to poor housing residents. Additionally, small housing residents are more likely than their counterparts to be satisfied with their housing. This is quite interesting in that it does not support Speare's (1974) finding that housing satisfaction is a direct function of housing size. Study II found that old families tend to live in a relatively small house ($r = -.24$, $p = .028$). Consequently, age structure turned out to be important in explaining satisfaction, independent of housing size. In this regard, the saturation effect of age on satisfaction is further supported.

Table 2. Household and Housing Characteristics As Related to Housing Satisfaction

Independent Variables	Housing Satisfaction			
	No.	Mean ³	SD	p-value ⁴
Age ¹				
-Young	47	1.4	.49	.002
-Old	48	1.8	.64	
Housing Size ²				.012
-Small	33	1.8	.58	
-Large	55	1.5	.57	

Note 1. Based on average age (44 years old), heads of the household below 44 are classified as young, while over 44 as old.

Note 2. Based on average housing size (11 pyung), housing units below 11 pyung are classified as small housing, while over 11 pyung as large housing.

Note 3. Housing satisfaction is measured on a three point scale where the higher numbers represent greater satisfaction; dissatisfied is coded as one, neither dissatisfied nor satisfied as 2, and satisfied as three.

Note 4. Results of two group t-tests are statistically significant at 95% confidence level.

Second, results of ANOVA tests indicate that housing satisfaction does not appropriately explain housing adjustment preference, no matter what it is moving, improving, or adapting. Consequently, this finding does not support Speare's satisfaction theory of housing adjustments. Contrarily, Landale and Guest's (1985) proposition that not all families dissatisfied with their housing move or improve it is largely supported by this study. In this regard, Michelson's (1977, 1980) theory of self-selection (e.g., each family has its own adjustment cycle based on its family aspirations or housing needs) turned out to be useful as a theoretical base for this study.

Third, household and housing characteristics have a strong, direct effect on housing adjustment preference as reported by the respondents. As shown in table 3, mobility turned out to be a predominant pattern of housing adjustments for both young (56%) and old (71%) heads of the household. They might recognize that their place of

living will be replaced soon or later or a better housing can be found only by moving to another house. Young households tend to prefer cognitive adaptation as a mode of housing adjustments. As shown in table 2, housing satisfaction is relatively high among old households. Thus, it is interesting to posit the idea that cognitive adaptation might be a preferred mode of housing adjustments among households highly dissatisfied with their housing. Those households may stay in unsatisfactory housing because of their limited financial assets, although they believe a better housing can be sought elsewhere.

Table 3. Household and Housing Characteristics As Related to Housing Adjustment Preference

Independent Variables	Housing Adjustments				p-value
	No.	Move	Improve	Adapt	
Age					
-Young	48	27(56)	8(17)	13(27)	.05
-Old	48	34(71)	10(21)	4(8)	
Income ¹					
-Low	47	25(53)	12(26)	10(21)	.05
-High	27	22(82)	3(11)	2(7)	
Family Size ²					
-Small	35	17(49)	12(34)	6(17)	.008
-Large	64	45(70)	6(10)	13(20)	
Ownership					
-Renters	71	45(63)	9(13)	17(24)	.03
-Owners	29	18(62)	9(31)	2(7)	

Note. The numbers in table 3 are frequency distributions and percent distributions in parentheses.

Note 1. Based on average annual income (10,000,000 Won per year), below 10,000,000 Won is coded as low, while over 10,000,000 Won as high.

Note 2. Based on average family size (4 persons per house), below 4 persons is coded as small, while over 4 persons as large.

High income earners are more likely to prefer mobility, while low income families choose cognitive adaptation as a preferred mode of housing adjustments. This study found that annual income is a good predictor of housing satisfaction ($r = .20$, $p < .05$). Despite of the relatively high degree of satisfaction, high income earners consider moving to another house, because of their financial ability to adjust their housing. This finding does not support Morris and Winter's (1978) proposition that families dissatisfied with their housing seek an alternative housing, while households who have already satisfied a minimum level of needs usually take home improvements.

Large families are more likely to prefer moving to another house, while home improvements are preferred by small families. There is a strong relationship between family size and annual income ($r = .46$, $p < .001$). Again, financial ability to adjust is deemed important in choosing mobility as a preferred mode of housing adjustments. It might be that home improvement intentions are another expression of cognitive adaptation for poor housing residents.

Finally, though mobility is a predominant mode of housing adjustments for both renters and owners, renters are more likely to prefer cognitive adaptation, while home improvements are preferred by owners. In this regard, it is interesting to note Morris and Winter's (1978) finding that homeowners are more likely than renters to involve in

improvement activities. Consequently, home ownership might be useful in predicting the degree of housing satisfaction and preferred modes of housing adjustment as well.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Study I found a strong relationship between housing satisfaction and preferred modes of housing adjustment. Households highly satisfied with their housing are more likely to choose home improvements as a preferred mode of housing adjustment, while dissatisfied households tend to seek alternative housing elsewhere. Study II, on the other hand, found that housing satisfaction is not a good predictor of housing adjustment preference. Rather, structural variables (e.g., age of heads of the household, annual income, family size, and home ownership) turned out to better explain housing adjustment preference. Although mobility is a predominant mode of housing adjustments for poor housing residents, old families, high income earners, large families, and homeowners are more likely to be active adjusters, seeking alternative housing elsewhere. Cognitive adaptation as a mode of housing adjustment, additionally, is salient to those residents. This supports Morris and Winter's (1978) proposition that serious monetary constraints might lead families to adapt to existing housing in a way of changing their norms or aspirations.

Table 4. Mean Comparisons of the Two Samples

Indicators	Study I	Study II
Household Characteristics		
-Sex (Female=0; Male=1)	.9	.4
-Age (Years)	46.8	44.2
-Annual Income (U.S. \$; Won in thousand)	45	10090
-Occupation (Unemployed=0; Employed=1)	.9	.6
-Education (Schooling Years)	14.6	10.5
-Household Size (No. of family members)	3.5	3.8
Housing Characteristics		
-Housing Size (Feet ² ; Pyung)	2,200	10.8
-Ownership (Renters=0; Owners=1)	.7	.3
-Length of Stay (Years of Stay in Place)	6	9.5
Data Collection Method	Survey	Interview
Sample Size (N)	326	100
Response Rate	60.5%	100%

Speare's (1974) satisfaction theory of housing adjustment might not be applied to both studies, possibly because of significant differences in the two samples (see table 4 for more specific analysis). Thus, findings of any single study in housing adjustment can not be generalized directly to the population as a whole, though some implications can be carefully made. Consequently, studies of this sort should be continued in different situations and with different groups of people in order to empirically test and strengthen existing theories in the field of housing.

Furthermore, data collection method and sample size need to be standardized for reliable comparisons between studies. Housing theory can be built and sustained by interpreting differences and integrating similarities in conclusions between studies, and by collecting data in a standardized manner.

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