

Title: Why Own? A Cross-National Typology of Homeownership Motivations in Germany, Hungary, Spain, and the United Kingdom

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Across Europe, homeownership continues to structure wealth accumulation, intergenerational transfers, residential stability, and local opportunity. While scholarship has documented who owns and the outcomes associated with ownership, the underlying *motivations* for owning—and how those motivations are patterned across individuals and national contexts—remain theoretically fragmented and empirically under-studied. Existing (quantitative) studies tend to rely on single-item questions or country-specific instruments, limiting cross-national comparability and the ability to distinguish between asset-building and other relevant motivations. This paper addresses that gap, and complement extant qualitative studies on tenure motivations, by constructing a cross-national typology of reasons for homeownership using new harmonized survey data from Germany, Hungary, Spain, and the United Kingdom.

Research background

Attitudes toward housing tenure have often been reduced to an investment calculus, with limited attention to the multiple meanings attached to owning and how these vary across individuals and populations (Reid, 2014). Following the Social Production Functions framework (Ormel et al., 1999), we treat tenure choices as means to produce subjective well-being under resource constraints. From this perspective, homeownership and renting are not unitary states but bundles of substitutable motives—whose salience shifts with personal experiences, cultural context, and social background (McCabe, 2018; Reid, 2014).

Prior work on reasons for owning—from quantitative and, particularly, qualitative studies—points to recurring themes such as asset building (e.g. investment, savings for retirement), normative (e.g. symbolic milestone, social standing), family welfare (e.g. security, inheritance, schooling area), or autonomy (e.g. freedom from landlord rules) motives (Andersen, 2011; Gram-Hanssen & Bech-Danielsen, 2004; Levy et al., 2008; McCabe, 2018; Reid, 2014; Vassenden, 2014). Yet there is no agreed taxonomy, and studies differ in how many dimensions they posit, how they label them, and where they draw boundaries; they also report that the salience of motives varies across demographic groups and contexts.

Much of the existing evidence is hard to cumulate across populations for several reasons. First, most studies are single-country, so findings are tightly bound to specific housing regimes and cannot be generalized. Second, measurement is fragmented: instruments differ in item wording, response scales, and reference frames (e.g., “current tenure” vs. “ideal tenure”), making observed differences as likely to reflect survey design as genuine variation in motives. Third, many studies focus on a narrow subset of

reasons—typically investment or ontological security—while sidelining status, family welfare, autonomy/control, which builds in confirmation bias and truncates the construct. Finally, samples often focus on current owners or under-represent aspiring owners, blurring selection and life-stage effects.

We address these limitations by analysing harmonized data from four countries and integrating open- and closed-ended evidence. The open-ended answers showcase *emergent* and minority motives (including country-specific rationales) that closed lists often miss. Mapping these coded themes onto the closed battery allows triangulation. We ensure that conceptually equivalent motives are captured even when phrased differently across languages and cultures. We also consider differences in ‘why own’ between owners and non-owners.

Our comparison spans Germany, Hungary, Spain, and the United Kingdom—four countries representing coordinated vs. liberal market economies, post-socialist regimes, and familialistic regimes—providing a strong test of contextual variation in motivations. To make cross-country comparisons meaningful, we estimate a multi-group latent class model with country as the grouping variable and test measurement invariance in stages. This design separates differences in *meaning* (item–class associations) from differences in *prevalence* (class shares), so that cross-national contrasts reflect genuine motivational patterns rather than translation choices, response styles, or culture-bound semantics.

We anticipate a set of recurring motivation profiles across countries and population groups, alongside systematic cross-national differences in prevalence—for example, stronger asset/retirement emphases where private wealth substitutes for public provision; stronger family-stability and intergenerational-transfer motives in more familialistic contexts; and a more pronounced autonomy/anti-rent profile in tight private rental markets. At the individual level, we expect parental homeownership and higher parental education to increase the probability of asset- and status-oriented profiles, whereas foreign background may heighten the salience of autonomy and stability. Age gradients should reflect life-course priorities (e.g., children’s welfare vs. retirement security).

Method

We draw on the DECIPHE survey (currently in fieldwork), a study designed to measure subjective dispositions relevant to housing decisions—especially aspirations, expectations, and motivations (Iglesias & Vidal, 2025). The survey is fielded in Germany, Hungary, Spain, and the United Kingdom.

The questionnaire combines two types of items about “why own.” First, respondents answer an open-ended prompt in their own words about the main reasons they (would want to) own a home. Second, they choose from a short list of common reasons (e.g., investment/asset, security/stability, children/family, autonomy/control, status, neighbourhood/schools). Open responses are translated, standardized, and coded with a transparent procedure that group synonymous expressions across languages. We map these coded themes onto the same set of concepts used in the closed questions so both sources of information talk to each other. The codebook and language-equivalence checks are documented in an online appendix.

Our analysis proceeds in two stages. First, we identify motivation profiles—groups of people who tend to endorse similar reasons—using multi-group latent class analysis—a comparative, multi-country clustering approach. We begin by exploring profiles within each country and then build a joint model that allows us to compare countries directly. Throughout, we check that a given profile means the same thing in each country; where some items behave differently due to translation or culture-specific meanings, we allow those differences while keeping the shared core comparable. Second, we describe who is most likely to fall into each profile using background information: country, gender, three age groups, foreign background, current tenure, stated preference for owning, parental education, and whether parents owned. For clarity and to make like-for-like comparisons, we present results separately for current owners and for renters who say they want to own.

We handle missing answers to background questions with standard, conservative procedures and rely on the full pattern of reasons to define profiles. To assess robustness, we replicate key results using only open-ended indicators, only closed-ended items, and alternative coding thresholds; we also repeat the analysis after modest changes to the number of profiles.

Concluding remarks and next steps

By leveraging new, harmonized data and a multi-group LCA framework that integrates open and closed responses, this paper delivers a comparative typology of “why own” and documents its social stratification across four European housing regimes.

We are currently in the phase of data collection, and we will subsequently run the above-mentioned analyses. Main output in the body of the manuscript will include: (i) sample and key measures by country; (ii) latent class profiles; (iii) class prevalence by country and tenure situation; (iv) average marginal effects of class membership predictors. Appendices will include: (i) item wordings and translations; (ii) fit statistics and classification diagnostics; (iii) robustness tables for the owner/aspiring owner/renter stratifications; and (iv) predicted-probability plots by covariates.

With regards to academic advancement, this paper makes three fundamental contributions. Conceptually, we consolidate a multidimensional typology of reasons for owning that integrates instrumental, normative, and relational dimensions. Methodologically, we bridge open- and closed-ended evidence of reasons for owning, and implement a multi-group latent class analysis with systematic invariance testing, enabling cross-country comparability while accommodating contextual specificity. Substantively, we map how motivations cluster and how their prevalence varies by country and individual situation—including tenure status and intergenerational origins—thereby clarifying demand-side drivers of tenure decisions.

Policy wise, by distinguishing profiles (e.g., pension-substitution vs. child-centred stability) we speak to targeted housing and savings policies, rental market reforms, and financial education. If aspirations to own are driven by retirement security, for instance, pension design and long-term savings instruments may substitute for homeownership pressure; if autonomy from rental insecurity dominates, rental regulation and quality enforcement are first-order.

We acknowledge several limitations. Open-ended coding, while transparent and validated, remains sensitive to language differences. Cross-country comparisons can also reflect translation choices, cultural connotations, and response styles rather than true differences in motivations. Finally, cross-sectional motives may not perfectly align with realized tenure transitions; we therefore frame interpretations as motivational profiles rather than causal.

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