

Feeling and thinking: Quantifying the relationship between perceived tenure security and housing improvement in an informal neighbourhood in Buenos Aires

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Abstract

In this paper, the relationship between perceived tenure security and housing improvement in informal neighbourhoods is examined drawing from a case in Buenos Aires, Argentina. A perspective based on recent insights from social psychological research on judgment and decision making under uncertainty is introduced to operationalize the concept of perceived tenure security and to establish the nature and strength of its frequently assumed relationship with investment behaviour. Following these insights, perceived tenure security is shown to be composed of both the perceived probability of eviction (a thinking state) and the fear of eviction (a feeling state), which are related but separate variables. The results show that perceived tenure security is an important individual variable influencing housing improvement, with fear of eviction being a more important determinant than perceived probability of eviction. These results have important consequences for the future study of tenure security and can also have policy implications.

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Introduction

Even though there seems to be widespread agreement amongst development scholars and practitioners that tenure security is an important, if not necessary, condition for people to invest in their dwellings and that tenure security as such can promote slum development, there is strong disagreement as to what can constitute it. Some have maintained that legal title is a necessary condition for investment, thus relying on the principle of *legal* tenure security (e.g. Deininger, 2003; De Soto, 2000; World Bank, 1993), while others have argued that *perceived* rather than legal tenure security is a more important mechanism driving housing investment (e.g. Broegaard, 2005; Gilbert 2002, 1994; Payne, 2002, 2001; Razzaz, 1993; Turner, 1976; Varley, 1987). Even though the latter notion is gaining ground in current habitat discourse, most studies are silent about the *nature* of the concept of perceived tenure security nor is the actual *strength* of its relationship with housing improvement considered. Both issues are addressed in this paper.

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In the present study, the relationship between perceived tenure security and housing improvement is examined in a *barrio* that has its origins in a collective land invasion in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In line with recent insights from the social psychological study of judgment and decision making under uncertainty, perceived tenure security is conceptualized as being composed of both *feeling* states and *thinking* states. The proposed method enables us to study individual differences in the perception of residents in a single neighbourhood and relate these differences to the level of consolidation of their dwelling in order to understand the strength of the relationship between perceived tenure security and housing consolidation.

The following section focuses on the different perspectives on tenure security. Subsequently, the social psychological field of judgment and decision making under uncertainty is discussed before considering its application to the concept of tenure security. Special attention will be devoted to the research methodology used as it regards a perspective which, though uncommon to the field of tenure studies, may contribute to it in significant ways. Following this section, a description of the settlement under study is given. After a discussion of the results, the paper concludes with a set of research and policy considerations.

The concept of tenure security

Current development policies aimed at securing urban land tenure are often based on the idea that people in informal settlements should receive legal title to their dwelling.¹ One of the principle assumptions of this approach is that titles form an important, and according to some even necessary, source of security for residents to improve their dwellings and also function as an incentive to invest in them (see e.g. Deininger, 2003; Field, 2003; Jimenez, 1984; Lanjouw & Levy, 2002; De Soto, 1989, 2000; World Bank, 1993). According to this perspective, dwellers without titles are assumed not to enjoy a high enough level of tenure security to invest significantly in their housing. A relationship between titling and investment has been studied and claimed in a variety of contexts, though most studies focus on rural and/or agrarian situations (Besley, 1995; Carter & Olinto, 2003; Feder & Feeny, 1991; Field, 2003; Galiani & Schargrodsy, 2003; Jimenez, 1984; Lanjouw & Levy, 2002; De Soto, 2000; World Bank, 1993).

A different position regarding the idea of tenure security that has gained substantial ground in habitat discourse has questioned the necessity of legal title as bearer of security for poor slum dwellers and argued that tenure security is not merely determined by legal category as people improve their houses also in the absence of legal title. Once people are confident that they will be left alone by the authorities, they will improve their dwellings (Gilbert, 1994). Legality of tenure is thus not necessarily a precondition for security of tenure according to the adherents of this perspective as tenure security “depends less on the exact legal status and more on occupants’ perceptions of the probability of eviction and demolition” (Razzaz, 1993, p. 349). In a similar vein, Doebele stated that: “while tenure is generally considered a legal category, it is, just as fundamentally, a matter of the state of mind of the persons concerned. Stated operationally, the critical element may not so much be the legal category involved as the *perception* of the occupant of his security in relation to the investment contemplated” (1978, p. 111). In sum, what is important for the process of housing improvement, according to this perspective, is not legal title but rather some sense of *perceived* tenure security (Aristizabal & Ortíz Gómez, 2004; Broegaard, 2005; Calderón, 2004; Ferguson & Navarrete, 2003; Gilbert 2002, 1994; Gilbert & Ward, 1985; Karst, 1971; Payne, 2002, 2001; Razzaz, 1993, 1994; De Souza, 1999, 2000; Turner, 1976, 1972; Varley, 1987).

The perceived tenure security perspective does not negate the possibility that title can generate tenure security, but argues that tenure security can be achieved by different means. In the words of Payne: “It is undeniable that perceived security of tenure is widely accepted as a precondition for households to invest in house construction or improvements. This is not the same thing, however, as saying that full titles are the only means of achieving acceptable levels of security. Numerous examples exist of considerable investments being generated simply by an official statement that a settlement will not be removed, by the provision of services, or by the issuance of certificates of use” (2001, p. 421). Other factors that have been said to establish extra-legal

¹In this paper, the terms ‘informal settlement’, ‘illegal settlement’ and ‘slum settlement’ are used interchangeably. All terms are meant to refer to self-help auto-construction settlements that are not (fully) legally recognized.

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