Strategies for Sharing Student Accommodation

A Comparison of Male and Female Student Responses to Single and Shared Rooms

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Abstract

Most earlier discussion of students' responses to shared and to single occupancy accommodation have failed to take into account broad sex differences in room use requirements and possible strategies of sharing rooms. The present study found females to be, overall, more satisfied than males with the level of privacy they could achieve, the extent to which they felt free to pursue their own activities in the room even when shared, and with aspects of student residence life beyond their room, as well as finding their neighbours or room-mate compatible with themselves. Males, when allocated to double rooms, feel their privacy more infringed than do female occupants of similar shared rooms; and an analysis of their coping strategies indicates that they may seek to control their privacy level by avoiding the other occupant, whereas the females may more often seek more positive, social sharing of time and space with the other.

Résumé

La plupart des recherches sur la manière dont les étudiants appréhendent des chambres qu'ils occupent seuls ou qu'ils partagent avec un autre étudiant ne tiennent pas compte des différences dues au sexe, que ça soit pour l'usage de l'espace ou dans les stratégies de partage. Les résultats de cette étude-ci indiquent que les étudiantes sont, de manière générale, plus satisfaites que les étudiants quant aux niveaux de privacité qu'elles peuvent obtenir, quant à la possibilité de poursuivre des activités personnelles même dans une chambre partagée, quant à la vie estudiantine au delà des murs de leur chambre, et encore quant à l'acceptation de celle avec qui elles partagent leur chambre. Les étudiants, plus que les étudiantes, lorsqu'ils doivent partager leur chambre, ressentent que leur privacité est atteinte; une analyse des stratégies de coopération indique que les étudiants contrôlent leur privacité en évitant l'autre, tandis que les étudiantes plus souvent cherchent un partage plus positif et social du temps et de l'espace avec l'autre.

1. Introduction

Universities consist of many different sub-environments (Moos, 1978); and students' perceptions of the overall college environment are affected by their responses to these separate settings. Thus, as Astin and Panos (1969) have shown perceptions of and responses to settings such as the dormitory or hall of residence have implications for student development and well-being.

But, just as earlier workers had tended to lump the various subsettings together, as if equivalent, so also have later researchers tended to group all students together as if they would be equivalent in their response to a particular setting. In this paper, we suggest that, at least in the case of one issue — responses to individual or shared accommodation — there will be major individual differences; and that, at a first approximation to such differences, there will be sex differences in response to shared *versus* individual accommodation. We then argue that basis for such differences in response are mediated and in large part explained by differences in the strategies employed by individuals to cope with enforced sharing of private space with another student, who is initially a stranger to one; together with different expectations of patterns of student life.

Several studies have come close to the present concern. The issue of single versus double occupancy rooms within student accommodation buildings was addressed by Moos (1978), who was concerned with this and other architectural characteristics as influences upon the general social climate. His focus, however, was upon the whole group; and he used the University Residence Environment Scale: "The consensus of individuals characterizing an environment constitutes a measure of the social climate of that environment" (p. 109). Moos found that the architectural characteristic which had the most pervasive relation with social climate *was* this proportion of single rooms within the project. Those living groups which had the greater proportion of single rooms had *less* emphasis upon social interactions, feelings of friendship, concern for others in the house, honest and open communications, and fewer shared activities. This factor was much more important than, for instance, the total number of occupants in the building, or the presence or absence of particular recreational or group facilities (although these did have some lesser effect upon measures of group cohesion). Moos calls for more case studies of the methods and strategies by which such living groups function.

Mercer and Benjamin (1980) have subsequently provided an inventory of the spatial behaviour of pairs of students sharing rooms, and have based their account in the context of theories of human territoriality. Their study, however, has not then compared these students with those in single occupancy rooms.

Privacy, territoriality and personal space are clearly key concepts in the comparison of shared with individual rooms. Altman (1975) has conceptualized privacy in terms of selective control of access to the self (or

one's immediate group); and sees both personal space and territorial be-
haviour as functioning in the service of privacy needs.

Now, although Altman is at pains to stress that there are many social
as well as architectural mechanisms for maintaining privacy, the latter, in
the shape of barriers and separate rooms are a major method used by
Western, non-institutionalized adults. Indeed, Altman cites the strength
of the culturally-acknowledged sign of the closed bedroom door as an
indicant of a need or desire for withdrawal from others; and he gives
"One's own room" as the type-example of his category of a human *pri-
mary territory* (as contrasted with secondary territories, an example of
which would be defensible space).

Other writers on privacy have been in broad agreement. Thus, Kelvin
(1973) stresses that we have such safeguards of privacy in order to ensure
the individual's independence in situations where he might otherwise be
vulnerable to the power available to others, even if this power consists
only in their unwitting constraints upon his perceived freedom to act as
he will.

"Privacy" is a much more positive concept than "isolation", which
in reality may have been what Moos' student housing studies have been
identifying as a property of single room dormitories. Kelvin argues that

"the difference in affect associated with 'privacy' and 'isolation' would seem to have
as its basis the availability of choice, or at least perceived choice" (p. 253).

He concludes, however, that "whether privacy is a fundamental
human need is probably a metaphysical question" (p. 259).

How then do two adult strangers allocated by college authorities
to share a room maintain their desired levels of privacy? Mercer and
Benjamin (1980) hypothesized that such individuals would seek to estab-
lish and protect separate territories within the room. They asked their
subjects to indicate, on a map of their shared room, the areas they con-
sidered to be respectively their own, their roommate's, and shared areas.

Their first analysis indicated that two males in a room maximise own
territories and minimise shared areas, compared with female students
sharing, for whom the shared area was important. The authors conclude
that males claim and use large private territories as an insulator or place
of privacy; whereas it is exceptional for females to use territory as an
"agressive social statement". (Those females who *did* claim large terri-
tories reported that they did not like their roommate, participated less
than average in social activities, and had not had their own room at home.)

Taylor and Ferguson (1980) have shown that students who have
shared accommodation are more likely to seek solitude in a public area
(beaches, parks, the open air) than those having single accommodation.
Whereas personality and demographic variable were poor predictors of
seeking solitude away from one's room, having fewer, more compatible
and better acquainted roommates and co-residents influenced this privacy-
seeking behaviour, serving to enhance their experiences of privacy.

Another strategy for successful sharing of student rooms may lie in

the practice of personalizing one's area, as described by Hansen and Altman (1976). Arguing that there exists too little baseline data on how people actually use their everyday physical environment, these authors provide a description of how students decorate their living areas, and show a relationship between the extent of this activity and student drop-out rates. Those first year students who were earliest in decorating their rooms after arrival at college showed lower drop out rates than late- or no-decorators, arguably indicating a greater initial commitment to the institution. They speculate whether "decoration may be a symbol of a personal-social state, much as territorial marking (in animals) is symbolic of ownership and intended use".

Heilwell (1973) cites other strategies, including staggered time use by the two-room residents, and the use of an auditory screen ("spending large amounts of time inside stereo headphones"); but, in his extensive review of the literature on the influence of dormitory architecture upon resident behaviour, could find no studies to indicate the prevalence or effectiveness of these or any other strategies. The literature published since has only partially remedied this, and it is the purpose of the present study to offer some further observations.

Much of the existing research has been of student housing in the USA, where the main pattern has been for shared accommodation (see, for example, Ankele and Sommer, 1973, on the reasons for this). Both single and double rooms tend to be found in British student accommodation, with a general predominance of single occupancy. Where, as in the setting for the present study, both types occur in the same halls of residence, and first year students are allocated at random to one type of room or the other, then this provides a research opportunity to compare single and double rooms for:

— overall user satisfaction;
— sex differences in preferences for single and double accommodations;
— sex differences in patterns of room use;
— sex and other individual differences in strategies for sharing accommodation (be they physical modification, avoidance, etc.).

2. Method

2.1 Setting

Two single-sex student halls of residence (broadly equivalent to the American college dormitory) at the same 6000 student university (the University of Sheffield, England) were chosen for study. The all-male hall has a total population of 450; the all-female hall has 300 residents; and both have a mixture of single and double occupancy rooms, to which first year students are allocated at random by the hall administrators. Thus, none of the subjects in the double rooms had initially known each other.

2.2 Subjects

Forty female and forty male students were selected at random from the two halls, with half of each group being in single, and half in double rooms (Figs. 1 & 2). In no case were both students in a shared room interviewed.
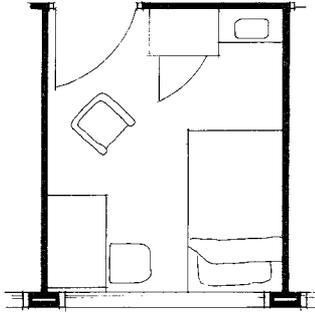
Fig. 1. Typical single room occupied by student.
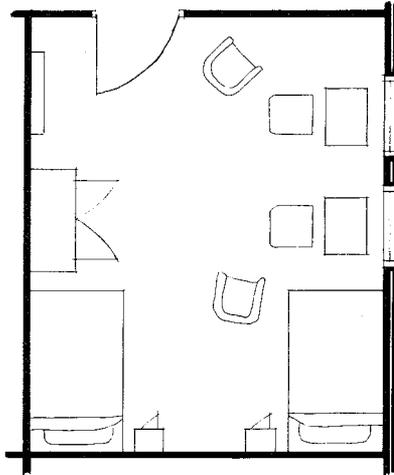
Fig. 2. Typical double room occupied and shared by two students.

All subjects were in their first year at university, had been in residence for three months at the time of the study, and were either eighteen or nineteen years old. Male and female students in the university as a whole have a somewhat different range of academic specializations; and the present sample reflected this, with the females being predominantly arts and social science students, and the males being predominantly social science, pure science and engineering students. All but two of the subjects had previously spent most of their lives in a town or city.

2.3 Instruments

Semi-structured pilot interviewing of comparable students in other halls of residence in the same university covered topics including their

satisfaction with the physical and social features of rooms, corridors, halls, the university as a whole; their daily activity patterns and, in the case of students in double rooms, their strategies for sharing.

From these interviews, themselves guided by the studies cited in the Introduction, a questionnaire was developed, designed to cover the above topics.

The first part of this consisted of fifty statements, to be rated on seven-point scales of agreement/disagreement, which generated five sub-scales of the questionnaire: satisfaction with the physical features of the room; with the level of privacy in the room; with the activities possible in the room; the level of compatibility with one's immediate neighbours, including, where appropriate, room-mate; and the general satisfaction with the hall of residence and university (see Appendix).

The second part of the questionnaire asked the subject to indicate which if any of a number of coping strategies the subject used to achieve privacy within the double room; and collected data on subjects' previous experiences in room-sharing (at home or at school).

The list of strategies included techniques of physical separation (moving furniture to divide the room; delimiting areas to provide separate territories); of personalisation (putting up decorations, importing other markers); of withdrawal via absorbing activities (using headphones; spending time listening to records, watching television, etc.); of actual withdrawal from the room (explicit time-sharing arrangements; avoidance of the other by working in the library, or socializing with friends); and of active befriending of the room-mate. Subjects were asked to add any further strategies; and the experimenter, on collecting the self-administered questionnaire, probed further on the techniques, and on the subjects' feelings about shared single accommodation.

2.4 Control Study

To anticipate the criticism that any differences between single and double occupancy subjects in the same hall might have arisen from social comparison within the hall, rather from more basic differences between living in the two types of room, a control sample of subjects was taken. The questionnaire was administered to subjects comparable in terms of stage of university course, but who had single rooms in a hall of residence having only such accommodation. Control group scores on all measures matched those of the single room occupants in the main sample: and we therefore feel that differences to be reported below are not explicable in terms of social comparison within the hall.

3. Results

3.1 Satisfaction with the physical features of the room

Double and single room occupancy subjects' scores on this sub-scale show no significant differences: indeed, mean scores of the two groups were very similar (Analysis of Variance: $F = 0.13$, df $= 1$, n.s.). Females,

however, scored consistently and significantly higher than males, regardless of room-type occupied ($F = 5.28$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$), but there was no room by sex interaction ($F = 0.005$, $df = 1$, n.s.).

Thus, where such aspects of accommodation as the adequacy of the furnishings, the comfort of the beds, and the shape of room were concerned, these particular single and double rooms were perceived as equivalently satisfactory, with the female students being consistently more satisfied than the males. (The two halls have very similar furnishings, and are funded to the same level per student.)

Fig. 3. Personalization most often involves a mass of decorative art.

Fig. 4. Shared rooms may pose problems when wishing to entertain boy and girl-friends.

3.2 Satisfaction with the level of privacy and control in the room

How much time is spent, and how many activities the student can perform in the room are significantly related to the type of room ($F = 6.69$, df $= 1$, p $< .05$), and to the sex of the subject ($F = 5.17$, df $= 1$, p $< .05$); but again there is no significant interaction ($F = 2.30$, df $= 1$, n.s.).

Thus, the occupants of single rooms report themselves significantly more satisfied than do the occupants of double rooms on scale items measuring, for example, preference for working in one's own room, as opposed to elsewhere, and the perceived freedom to entertain others, including boy or girl friends; with males spending considerably less time in their rooms than do females in the equivalent type of room.

3.3 Satisfaction with the level of compatibility with room-mate and neighbours

Although males and females report very similar levels of compatibility with their neighbours, including their room-mate, there is a striking and significant interaction between type of room and sex of student: males feel more comfortable with the people around them when they are in a single room, whereas females feel more compatible with others when in a double room ($F = 11.80$, df $= 1$, p $< .01$). The compatibility sub-scale covered such items as having much in common with one's neighbours or room-mate, sharing hobbies, and generally getting on well with them.

3.4 General satisfaction with the hall beyond the immediate area

Females reported a higher overall level of satisfaction with hall life than did males ($F = 6.26$, df $= 1$, p $< .05$). But, further, a significant inter-action was found, indicating that the males in single rooms are slightly more satisfied with hall life than the females in single rooms, whereas the females in double rooms are much more satisfied with general hall life than are males in double rooms. Thus, females in double rooms had the highest level of satisfaction of all, and males in double rooms had the lowest level of all.

3.5 Previous experiences of sharing

No significant differences were found between those who had previous experience of sharing a room, and those who had not, in levels of overall satisfaction, or on any of the sub-scales. There is thus no support for the hypothesis that this experience would provide any better ways of coping with the demands of accommodation in a hall of residence.

3.6 Coping strategies

Whereas the majority of all students reported that they had person-alised their rooms by posters and other decorations (an assertion which was clearly verifiable by the experimenter), there was a slight, non-signifi-cant trend towards those occupying single rooms to have done this more ($t = 1.98$, n.s). The experimenter noted, and subjects reported, no instances of the physical segregation of double rooms by screens, or the positioning

of furniture for a visual cut-off. Rather, the fact that the double rooms were provided with duplicate sets of the basic facilities (bed, desk, chair) of itself offered a measure of territorial demarcation without the need for negotiation.

Of the social rather than physical strategies listed on the questionnaire, achievement of privacy by involvement in absorbing activities (disappearing behind ones headphones) was not reported by any of the students; and active withdrawal from the room for most of the time to avoid the other was only mentioned by six of the male subjects and five of the female subjects in double rooms: a figure comparable with the activity pattern reported by male occupants of single rooms, and lower than that of females in single rooms (who reported working in libraries to avoid their neighbours).

Respecting the other's privacy, by explicit time-sharing and planning one's activities together, is more frequently a female strategy for the joint use of double rooms: ten of the females but only five of the males reported this strategy. However, the expected correlate of this — in reported friendship patterns — was not found: females did not report higher levels of friendship than did males.

4. Discussion

The follow-up interviews with subjects confirmed the results indicated above from the questionnaire. Subjects described their typical coping strategies, the alternative places that they used (if applicable), their feelings about sharing, and their general level of satisfaction with life at the University. The interviews further demonstrated the broad conclusion that, in this survey, male and female students have somewhat different expectations of social life in and around their room in the hall of residence; and that this is both facilitated by, and reflected in their satisfaction with, the type of room to which they are allocated.

Males tend towards larger scale friendship groups than females; their activities are more hall-, or university-, than room-based (with the hall bar as a main focus of their social life); whereas it would seem that many female students prefer the smaller, more domestic scale activities of the room and the corridor — and that the shared room provides a useful base for this.

The study eliminated one possible explanation of the observed results — that there might be intrinsic differences in the satisfactoriness of the two types of room: the physical features and furnishings of both single and double rooms were judged as equivalently satisfactory by their occupants. And yet there remains the clear and consistent, sex-related pattern of reported differences in satisfaction with other aspects of the rooms, and other aspects of hall life (itself, we would argue, an indicator of general well-being) between the occupants of single and double rooms.

Males, in the present sample, tend to be happier with the specific room and the hall in general when allocated to single rooms; whereas females allocated to double rooms were in general happier than those in single rooms.

Now, the females were, overall, more satisfied with living in halls, and on the privacy, activity and compatibility sub-scales than were the males. Particularly significant were their higher compatibility scores: and, if we link this with the evidence on coping strategy style differences between the sexes, then it would seem that female students, already more positively inclined towards hall living than were the males, were, when allocated to double rooms, then further able to interact in a positive, cooperative style rather than in a negative, avoidance style than were the males in double rooms.

Similarly, females scored significantly higher than males on satisfaction with the amount of privacy and control afforded by their room, and with the extent to which they felt free to act as they wished in their room.

This finding holds good for both kinds of room: females *in general* are more satisfied with the level of privacy that they can achieve, and spend more time in their room. Thus, feelings of privacy are inevitably going to be lower for both sexes in double than in single rooms, males showing markedly more discrepancy between the two. Do males need more privacy than females, and are thus more affected by the lack of it in a double room — resorting to avoiding the other occupant? Or do females have just as great a need for privacy as males, but do in general have better and more positive coping mechanisms, which enable them to maintain their desired level of control and privacy by coordinating their activities with the room-mate?

As Kelvin said of the assessment of privacy needs in general, the answer is probably metaphysical: nonetheless, we incline towards the belief that female students have indeed more often achieved a successful strategy for the civilized sharing of private territories.

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Appendix

QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: _____ Age: _____ Sex: _____

Nationality: _____ Type of Room: _____ Subject Studied: _____

1. How many brothers and sisters have you?
2. Do you have your own room at home at the moment?
3. Have you ever had to share a room at home?
4. If so how long was this for?
5. Did you go to boarding school?
6. Did you take a year off before coming to University?
7. Have any of your friends come to Sheffield as well?
8. Was this Hall your first choice of accommodation?
9. Did you ask for a single or double room?
10. Was Sheffield your first choice of University?
11. Was this course your first choice?
12. Would you prefer a single or double room?

Please rate the following statements on the following seven point scales (where 7 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree)

7	6	5	4	3	2	1
strongly agree	agree	mildly agree	neutral	mildly disagree	disagree	strongly disagree

If the question is not applicable please score 4 and put NA under it.

	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
1. This room is far too small							
2. I get on well with my roommate							
3. I feel free to do what I want in my room							
4. I like working in my room better than anywhere else							
5. The rules in the Hall are petty							
6. I find the Hall too noisy							
7. The people here are friendly							
8. The beds are too small							
9. My roommate has become my special friend							
10. I often entertain other people in my room							
11. My nextdoor neighbour and I spend a lot of time in this room together							
12. Living in the Hall is too expensive							
13. I go out a lot and feel I'm taking full advantage of University social life							
14. Double rooms are advantageous because you have a ready made friend in your roommate							
15. The beds are too hard							
16. My roommate annoys me by playing loud music when I want to work							

	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

17. My nextdoor neighbour is intrusive

18. Having guests staying overnight is a problem

19. My course has turned out worse than I expected

20. I feel apprehensive about meeting new people

21. The meals here are appetising and are better than if I had to cook for myself

22. This room is too cubic, I would prefer a room with an alcove or an L shaped room

23. I feel I have nothing in common with my roommate

24. I feel isolated in my room

25. Sometimes I feel awkward about bringing a girlfriend/boyfriend back to my room

26. The people in Hall are too cliquey

27. I feel I could say "Hello" to all the people on my corridor when I see them around

28. A serious disadvantage of a double room is the lack of privacy

29. The soft furnishings add a cosy homely touch to the room

30. I get on well with my nextdoor neighbour

31. My room can be a refuge at times

32. My roommate and I spend a lot of time in this room together

33. People try to organise you too much in Hall

34. I resent paying for meals I don't have

35. Mixed sex halls are better than single sex halls

36. My nextdoor neighbour has become my special friend

37. My roommate is intrusive

38. I prefer solitary activities to social activities

39. My neighbour annoys me by playing loud music when I want to work

40. I enjoy being in my room

41. Single rooms are better than double rooms because you don't have to consider anyone else in the things you want to do

42. I feel confident that I will be able to cope with my course

43. I intend to leave Hall before the year is finished if I can find alternative accommodation

44. I feel I have nothing in common with my nextdoor neighbour

45. I feel I have become more competitive rather than cooperative since I've come to Sheffield

46. Most of my friends are people in Hall with me

47. The washing facilities are convenient

48. Being in Hall is fun

	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

49. University day are much better than school days

50. I find my life very boring at the moment

Thank you for filling in the 7 point scales. Most people employ various coping strategies to enable them to live in close proximity with other people. Some coping strategies have been listed below.

Please tick the appropriate box for each strategy. These are by no means the only ones employed so feel free to add any more that you personally use.
(N.B. Time sharing is when people get together and work out a timetable for use of the room at certain times when they would appreciate some privacy).

	Major strategy	Occasionally used	Never used
1. Time sharing			
2. Have bits of the room that are own territory			
3. Have physically divided room			
4. Become special friends with roommate			
5. Moved furniture around			
6. Put up posters			
7. Have a radio/cassette/record player			
8. Have a T.V.			
9. Have headphones so can play music loudly			
10. Spend a lot of time in public/friends' rooms			
11. Work in the library			
12. Have a level of untidyness that won't go beyond			

Any other coping strategies?

Any comments in general about Hall life/Sheffield/this questionnaire?

Thank you for your co-operation.