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Perfecting the Process of Pairing College Roommates: A State of the Art Review

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Perfecting the Process of Pairing College Roommates: A State of the Art Review

Abstract

The entirety of higher education is facing new budgeting and costly cuts to essential entities of the institutions. One of the most expensive and fiscally-beneficial parts of most college campuses are their residential facilities. With the thousands of universities in the country come hundreds of thousands of residence halls, all filled with pairs of roommates. Apart from a handful of them that self-select who they room with, the majority of college roommates are randomly paired using a computerized questionnaire that does its best to put two random individuals together in hopes that they are compatible as roommates. This state of the art review considers what research has been done to look into what makes the perfect college roommate. If this process can be improved, hopefully the attrition of on-campus living will decrease and residential students across the country will be happier and more content with their living situations. It explores what techniques have been used to study roommate relationships, what has been found regarding compatibility of roommates, and what can be done in the future to continue to perfect this roommate-pairing process.

Perfecting the Process of Pairing College Roommates: A State of the Art Review

Introduction

The entirety of higher education is facing new budgeting and costly cuts to essential entities of the institutions. One of the most expensive and fiscally-beneficial parts of most college campuses are their residential facilities. With the thousands of universities in the country come hundreds of thousands of residence halls, all filled with pairs of roommates. Apart from a handful of them that self-select who they room with, the majority of college roommates are randomly paired using a computerized questionnaire that does its best to put two random individuals together in hopes that they are compatible as roommates. This state of the art review considers what research has been done to look into what makes the perfect college roommate. If this process can be improved, hopefully the attrition of on-campus living will decrease and residential students across the country will be happier and more content with their living situations. It explores what techniques have been used to study roommate relationships, what has been found regarding compatibility of roommates, and what can be done in the future to continue to perfect this roommate-pairing process.

Regardless of one's path in life, it is common to have to live in close quarters with another individual. Whether roommates have a rich history with one another or are randomly assigned to live with each other, there is always the chance that the pair could either get along or the relationship could not go as well as they would like. A common situation in which two people have to live together is in college and university residence halls. Colleges all over the globe offer on-campus residential housing and the process in which they choose the roommates is often random and with little attention paid to whether or not they have compatible personalities. When colleges and universities admit first-year students, they are randomly paired

with their roommates. This frequently occurs after forming smaller groups of the students on the basis of responses to a housing questionnaire that explores individual preferences regarding many different situational and preferential topics. Students are asked about study habits, personal habits, ways to avoid conflict, their personality type, and more (Ingalls, 2000). Thus, roommate distribution provides a unique natural experiment in which researchers might credibly estimate the causal effect of a particular peer group (college roommates), which is beneficial in this study (McEwan & Soderberg, 2006).

It is important that research is done on this topic because of how essential it can be to the success of college students. While colleges and universities are seen more as businesses than educational institutions these days, there are still a large group of higher education professionals who aim to make college campus settings that are conducive to learning. For all of the individuals that choose to live on campus, it is important that their roommate relationships support this intention. Roommate relationships are shown to have the single greatest impact on students' college experiences (Stern, Powers, Dhaene, Dix, & Shegog, 2007). Students' dissatisfaction with their roommates may lead to negative perceptions of their entire university experiences, and it is associated with lower retention rates and GPAs (Stern et al., 2007). This helps to show the importance and the need to shine a light on this topic. As Ingalls wrote in his piece in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "The point is to challenge students' prejudices and complacency while balancing the need for roommate satisfaction and compatibility" (p. A41). This state of the art review will outline what has been looked at in terms of finding what works in these relationships, what areas are being explored to help these relationships, and what should be explored more in depth to help foster the best relationships for the thousands of college roommates everywhere.

Evolution of Roommate Studies Over Time

This is not a new topic. College dormitories have been around for hundreds of years and the idea of college roommates has evolved along with the growth and evolution of boarding students. While the same idea and concept has been around for hundreds of years, the studies have become more in depth along with the development of college campuses. While old concerns for potential roommates included whether they were smokers or nonsmokers or if they were early risers or night owls, the new programs focus on topics such as social media usage and opinion on having others sleep in the room some nights (Garber-Paul, 2014). When reviewing some of the really old studies, a pattern of evolution can be seen. Over thirty years ago, a study found that the maturity of one's roommate can impact a student's awareness and insight of his or her values (Erwin, 1983). Over twenty years ago, a study found that two students who are similar in personality and attractiveness may have an advantage over two students who have different traits (Carli, Ganley, & Pierce-Otay, 1991). A compilation and review of these older studies have been essential in creating the existing software and questionnaires that are used to pair random individuals. The review of the newer journals is still important and could be essential in helping to create the most perfect process for selecting roommates, allowing every college student their best chance.

Even over fifty years ago things were different, as is proven with Kidd's 1953 study on personality traits and their effects on acceptability. A survey done at the beginning of the semester found that, in an all-men's residence hall, it is not a large priority for individuals to feel accepted by their peers immediately. It was found that highly rejected persons either do not desire the achievement of acceptability, or lack insight into the values, definitions, and

expectations of the groups of which they are members (Kidd, 1953). A similar study was done fifty years later, but differences in the results are evident. Kurtz and Sherker's 2003 study followed a similar methodology as Kidd's, distributing questionnaires to the residents; however the newer study surveyed both male and female roommates, and they were surveyed at the beginning and end of their first semester. The newer study found that highly rejected people had different views on their social acceptance as their relationships grew. Rather than not desiring the acceptability of others, it just takes a while for individuals to care about or give attention to their agreement with others (Kurtz & Sherker, 2003). The small changes, along with the difference in time period, could all explain the difference in results.

Some of the research topics and the growth in ideas that are of concern to these institutions can be related to some of the more prevalent topics that have been pressing to all of society. For example, race has been a pressing issue for years and there are laws that prohibit individuals from being able to screen roommate assignments based on race (Bresnahan, Xiaowen, Shearman, & Donohue, 2009). Although there is a limit on the questions that can be asked regarding one's preference on rooming with an individual of a different race, studies have still been done to evaluate the effects of interracial roommate relationships. A study found that early on in the relationship, interracial roommate relationships were less satisfying, less socially involving, and less comfortable than were same-race pairings (Shook & Clay, 2012). Shook and Clay's study had the individuals fill out questionnaires early and late in their relationships, which was effective. After reviewing the responses given later on in the year, the racial attitudes became more positive for individuals in interracial rooms, while they either remained the same or decreased for those in same-race rooms (Shook & Clay, 2012). This, again, shows the importance and possibilities for growth in residents as an effect of living in a residence hall

system. This also proves that the prohibiting of racial information being utilized in pairing random roommates may be for the bettering of the individuals as well as society as a whole.

Studying Elapsed Relationships

In fact, a large amount of studies utilized the evolution of a roommate relationship to explore the impact that certain qualities or traits can have on the pairing. As proven by a few that have already been reviewed, it can often show the overall impact of what a more established relationship can make on any feelings or opinions. It has also been suggested that the assistance of Relationship Enhancement training could improve a relationship (Waldo, 1989). Through his research, Waldo randomly paired roommates to fill out a questionnaire right after the year started. They then all partook in a week-long training that improved students' communication skills and enhanced their skills needed to uphold solid relationships with their roommate. It was reported that communication skills and relationships improved in each relationship after having participated in the training (Waldo, 1989). A study completed in 2006 was done solely to review the increasing acquaintanceship in college roommates. 102 college roommate dyads were assessed after two weeks and fifteen weeks of rooming with each other. After two weeks the behavioral styles of roommates did not complement each other, however, after fifteen weeks, the behavioral styles of roommates strongly complemented each other. In contrast to the change in complementarity observed in roommates' behavioral styles, participants' perceptions of their own personalities were relatively unaffected by the personalities of their roommates (Markey & Kurtz, 2006). This is important in that it shows that time elapsed builds the relationship between two individuals rather than just the individuals involved in the relationship. An older study could also be seen as reviewing the relationship over time, although they were more concerned with the

importance of first impressions. Each roommate was questioned on their feelings regarding rewards, self-disclosure, equity, similarity and comparison levels in terms of their relationship with their roommate. Six months later they were asked the same questions and correlations increased for the majority of the areas in the later survey (Berg, 1989).

An elapsed relationship could also show no or negative changes in some relational traits. When looking at 134 pairs of randomly-paired individuals, it was found that the ones that included a superordinate member would commonly have declining feelings of friendship with each other (West, Pearson, Dovidio, Shelton, & Trail, 2009). Also, when looking at the impact and importance of communicative competence, both the early and late surveys showed that it had little to no importance on the relationship (Duran & Zakahi, 1988). Duran and Zakahi note that this study was hurt due to attrition but the results that they received still showed that the relationship between communicative competence and roommate satisfaction are almost nonexistent. With these studies finding things that may not have very much of an effect on college roommates, that is still important to keep in mind when creating the perfect pairing process. It gives researchers and institutions insight on what does not need as much attention when creating the matching surveys, allowing them to focus more on the subjects that do. And now, using the studies that have been completed up until now, the attributes that have been proven to be relevant and poignant will be reviewed.

Proven Influences on a Roommate Relationship

With all of the completed research, there are things that have been statistically proven as influential to a college roommate relationship. When looking at the questions asked in some of the current roommate-pairing software, they probably reflect some of these ideas. Asking

potential students their thoughts or views on these ideas allow them to use their answers or beliefs to put traits with a positive correlation together, or to keep those with traits they see as not being compatible apart. Peer effects are the way in which one's roommate has an impact on what they do. It can either be a helpful impact or a problematic one and they can be important to understanding student outcomes. Peer effects may be even more critical and long lasting earlier in the student's lives or in a context where there is more heterogeneity (Sacerdote, 2001).

A common problem faced by college students, freshmen especially, is weight gain. Gaining the "freshman fifteen" is not uncommon, and a study was done to see whether roommate relationship had any effect on that. The study looked at the influential relationship between two roommates and whether or not it has any effect on each other's weight gain. There was found to be little to no relationship between peer influence and amount of weight gain. When there was a sense of influence, it was much more common to see it in a female-female relationship rather than a male-male one (Yakusheva, Kapinos, & Eisenberg, 2014). This same study looked at what things were largely influenced by peer influence. It found that peer influence is stronger when peers are similar with respect to their academic performance, religiosity, and political views (Yakusheva et al., 2014). Identifying all of these as beneficial would be essential in being sure to look at them when pairing roommates, ensuring an appropriate amount of peer influence is present in these relationships. Complementing Yakusheva and Kapinos and Eisenberg's work, peer influence was examined again, in a separate study, specifically in relationship to academic performance. It was found that having a roommate who was academically strong significantly helped your GPA, while having one that was weak did not hurt it (McEwan & Soderberg, 2006). Peer effects can also be seen as contributing to risky behaviors. A study was done to see what impact they might have on the more negative side of relationships and the results show that it can

have in impact. Many different risky behaviors were reviewed, some showing more influence from peers than others. For example, peer effects have a huge impact on drinking habits in college students (Eisenbert, Golberstein, & Whitlock, 2014). Little evidence was found to show an impact of peer effects on illicit drug use, gambling, and sexual activity but there was a substantial amount of peer influence on the amount of alcohol intake. In addition to these findings, the study found that similarity in pre-existing risky behaviors can help in predicting the closeness of friendships (Eisenbert et al., 2014). Again, this is something that should be kept in mind when sending out questionnaires and taking information into consideration while pairing random individuals.

Even some of the more internal and emotionally-driven impacts have been reviewed. Emotional communication between persons has been seen to be related to their interpersonal compatibility in a complex manner. Highly compatible pairs were generally high in sensitivity (Hornstein, 1967). While the majority of these studies have used questionnaires and surveys to gather information, a study done in 1997 used memory recall to estimate a relationship's outcome. Researchers looked at roommates that were believed to have a higher affinity to their roommates and asked them to imagine an interaction, write it down, and then read the interaction back to them from memory. They were asked to judge their emotional connection to their roommate, judging their level of affinity toward their respective roommate. When comparing the success of individuals with a high affinity for their roommate with those that have less affinity for their roommate, the higher levels of affinity were more successful in their recollection of the stories (Honeycutt & Patterson, 1997). While it may seem irrelevant to look at this as an important area of study, it is important to remember that the remembering and recollection of information is a huge and important skill in the life of a college student. Honeycutt's findings

could also help in showing that creating compatible and like-minded relationships are important. These just continue to show the variety of research being done, all coming together to help foster the idea of the best college roommate pairing.

Effects of Similarities in a Roommate Relationship

Again, the findings of these studies give reasoning to whether traits would make a good pair or would be better not residing in the same room. Existing research has done a good job of looking at similarity between two people and the effect it can have. Even assumed similarity, which is explained as an observer seeing some of his or her own characteristics in another person, has been explored (Paunonen & Hong, 2013). People tend to adopt an assumed similarity bias in formulating judgments of others. This is basically looking at the validity of judging a book by its cover. Hundreds of students were asked to fill out a survey reporting what they think, as well as one on what they believe their roommate would think. Results showed that people are generally accurate when rating personality-related characteristics of others (Paunonen & Hong, 2013). Judging a book by its cover, while not always suggested, is not always the worst way of judging someone else, especially in the college roommate relationship. In comparison to the earlier study that looked at emotional communication, another was done comparing verbal communication and the effects of pairing two individuals that had similar communication traits was beneficial to the relationship. Using questionnaires and the comparison of roommates' answers, it was found that looking at communication traits does matter. Roommates who are prosocially similar (both low in verbal aggressiveness versus both high in verbal aggressiveness) express more satisfaction with and liking for their roommates. The results of this study provide

further support that individuals' traits matter in explaining relationship satisfaction and liking (Martin & Anderson, 1995).

Territoriality is another important aspect of a roommate relationship, with every roommate dyad having to share space in one way or another. The subject was looked at in terms of the benefits of having roommates with similar views on the subject. It surveyed roommate dyads to determine the extent to which similarity in territoriality and expressions of nonverbal immediacy are related to roommate satisfaction. Erlandson (2012) defines immediacy as, "a set of behaviors that sends messages of approachability and positive affect or liking simultaneously" (p. 50). With every roommate bringing their own styles, decorations, and interpersonal nonverbal cues into any room, nonverbal immediacy is a beneficial area of study. This study also introduces an innovative way of gathering data. Rather than sending out questionnaires or surveys, roommates were recorded having conversations and discussing different subjects they had provided to them. The author of this study believes that examining actual interactions instead of self-reported behavior is crucial to understanding interpersonal behavior more deeply. When reviewing the results, the more similar roommates were with managing boundaries and personal space, the more uncomfortable they were in interactions with each other (Erlandson, 2012). This poses an interesting question, in that it would be difficult to decide whether it beneficial or detrimental to a roommate dyad. It would be interesting to see what different results would come up if Erlandson would have used the typical questionnaire method of gathering information.

The last area that has been looked at is whether choosing your roommate is beneficial versus getting randomly paired. In a study done earlier than the one previously discussed, Erlandson dove into this subject and saw an overwhelming amount of compatibility in self-chosen roommates as compared to randomly-assigned ones (Erlandson, 2009). He looked at the

importance of inclusion, openness, and amount of control in a roommate relationship, and compared chosen roommates' answers to random ones. Along with the higher level of content between two roommates who chose to room together, the study still gives some more insight into what could be important when pairing roommates. The study suggests that pairing roommates based on their need for control may be one additional variable to consider, and it would be relatively easy to integrate, requiring the addition of questions about control needs to roommate matching surveys (Erlandson, 2009). While choosing your roommate is believed to create a stronger relationship, that is not always possible. Apart from actually choosing your roommate, students often create their roommate in their heads, imagining their "ideal" pairing and everything they want in a roommate. In a 2012 study, over six hundred roommates were asked to share their ideal type of roommate, describe their current roommate, as well as rate their satisfaction with the relationship between them. Proving that people tend to know what they want, roommates who shared the same ideal type had significantly greater corresponding levels of relational satisfaction. If a roommate's "ideal" roommate traits were met, a greater relationship resulted (Hanasono & Nadler, 2012). Both of these studies and their corresponding results provide support for encouraging less random selection but rather having students choose their roommates. It also may support why students seem to be more satisfied in off-campus housing, where individuals do typically choose their living-mates. It could also be argued that the random roommate process is good for these individuals, as you are bound to work with people you do not ideally wish to work with, building character early on in their careers. These last two studies are encouraging and show that the areas of study with this subject are growing and expanding into good and necessary subjects.

Discussion

It is clear a great deal has been done to study roommate relationships and the many facets of them. As proven by this in-depth literature review, college roommates may seem like a simple idea but they are, in fact, a complex and detailed relationship that deserve to be studied. While the earliest study that was reviewed was completed in 1953, the research goes back even further. Along with the evolution of the research, there have been new areas of study and an increased amount of interest in this relationship. Topics such as race and gender equality are now being evaluated, which will only continue to contribute to this subject. This paper alone looked at the benefits of studying an elapsed relationship versus just a new one. It showed that not only do peer effects have an impact on a college roommate relationship but one's own emotions can also play a huge part in their compatibility with another. Similarities were evaluated, as well as the benefit of pairing those who have different views on things. Also, interpersonal qualities and intrapersonal views were looked at, which gave an interesting perspective on what is wanted from others and what is actually provided by others. This looked solely at the college roommate relationship. While the populations of people who room together are much larger than just the national residence hall population, focusing just on the college roommate compatibility makes this study even more valuable to the higher education institutions. It can be stressed again how important the on-campus residential populations can be to an institution. They contribute financially, environmentally, and simply just to the overall feeling of a college campus and it is essential that studies continue to be done in their favor. Making these efforts to continue to perfect the roommate choosing process may help bring more life to college campuses, encouraging students to stay on campus rather than move to the growing communities outside of

campuses that are not affiliated with the school. The completed research is important and it is imperative that we continue to learn more.

There are certainly some ways in which the research can continue. When looking at what has been done and where the area of residence life in higher education is headed, there are a few areas that should be considered going forward. First, opposite sex relationships should begin to be looked at. Gender-neutral housing is a large topic right now in higher education. Every study looked at reviewed only same-sex roommate dyads. As the gender equality movement and sexual orientation topic is becoming more prevalent, it would be useful to look at relationships other than just same-sex ones. It may also be helpful to get more information to which to compare the on-campus housing. So much was done when looking at residence halls on campus, but it would benefit them to look at the off-campus options and how they compare. This would be helpful also to see where they stand in terms of where more satisfaction is found, possibly giving them a head up in that competitive market. Also when looking at comparisons, it may be useful to compare the various roommate-pairing software that is available today. Since there is not just more than one, maybe look at which one is the most successful in terms of pairing compatible roommates. If this was found, the different software companies could compare and contrast what traits they find important, using it to then tweak the different programs and possibly make even the most successful software a little more effective.

Looking into more nonverbal variables is also an area that can be improved upon. Perhaps looking at the residence hall environment in general might come up with some beneficial information. Maybe the simple change of a paint color or adding carpet instead of hard floors will help to make a warmer environment, fostering more positive relationships. Nonverbal variables may have more of an impact on relationships than researchers are aware, and it would

help to know which ones could be easily changed. Also the size of the living quarters would be an interesting nonverbal area to study. While some of the newer residence halls being built have larger rooms, a lot of the older ones have multiple roommates packed into closet-sized rooms. It would be interesting to look at the differences in size and whether being in closer quarters is beneficial to a relationship or causes more tension between them. One last area that should be looked into more is the effect that the amount of roommates in a room has on college students. Another growing theme with the newer housing facilities is suite-style rooms with up to five or six residents in one shared space. Again, there could be positive and negative effects having more people in one room. While the social interactions are enhanced, causing fewer awkward and uncomfortable situations, there are also more opinions and attitudes, therefore very possibly causing a more difficult situation. Lastly, it may be beneficial to expand upon the methodology used to research this topic. The large majority of these studies used simple surveys and questionnaires. As Erlandon's 2012 research suggested, it may be beneficial to review actual conversation and interaction rather than having self-reported data. This could be essential in expanding on all of the areas that have been looked at and will be looked at from this point forward.

Conclusion

College is hard enough; your living situation should not contribute to the difficulties that come with this challenging and memorable period in a lot of peoples' lives. When looking at what has been done to research the college roommate relationship, how the data has typically been gathered, and what can be done to expand on this information, it is clear that is and has been an important area of study. Higher education institutions are going through a lot right now

financially and this may be one of the key points in maintaining high attendances and increasing overall satisfaction in the students across the country. Hopefully more and more research will continue to be done to get inside the mind of college roommates, look at how they are paired, and perfect the process.

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