Managing Conflict in Shared Housing for Young Adults

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Due to housing unaffordability shared residence among young adults is an increasingly popular lifestyle in the Western world and an established cultural institution in New Zealand. Surprisingly, research on the topic is limited. While flatting is economically and socially attractive, navigating inevitable tension in interpersonal relationships in the intimacy of domesticity can present challenges. Applying discourse analysis, the current study examines how New Zealanders, aged 20 to 35, talk about the experience of shared domestic living and conflict. Patterns in talk centered on sources, management and consequences of interpersonal conflict. Young adults actively endeavour to avoid or resolve problems amicably. The study provides insight into the complex social dynamics of these non-kin household relationships.

Keywords: Shared housing, conflict, interpersonal relationships.

Introduction

Globally, contemporary youth are experiencing growing housing difficulties. Shared housing, or flatting, among young adults is a socio-economic contract in which householders split costs and housework (Mause, 2008). Rather than a short stopgap before romantic co-habitation, peer co-residence now features as a way of life from late teens to the early thirties and beyond (Day, 2016). Despite the financially pragmatic popularity of the lifestyle, documented in much of the Western world, literature on the topic is modest. A closer inspection of interpersonal relationships among sharers is overdue (Heath & Cleaver, 2003; Mykyta, 2012). While relationships can evolve into strong social bonds of companionship, trust and mutual support, in close domestic confines the potential for disagreement and offence can be magnified (Toegel & Barsoux, 2016). Conflict can be defined as perceived incompatible differences between people resulting from continuous inconsistencies and disagreements in opinions and interests (Curseu, Boros & Oerlemans, 2012). In flatting there are no institutionalised guiding principles: this uncertainty may contribute to tensions (Natalier, 2003). The current study on the social dynamics of flatting among young New Zealanders investigated how the sources, management and consequences of conflict are discursively constructed.

Shared living involves communal areas, such as lounge, kitchen and bathroom with bedrooms remaining private. Rent, electricity, broadband and necessities, such as cleaning product costs are shared. Food can be communal or individually purchased. Characteristically, households comprise unmarried, childless non-family, geographically mobile individuals (Williamson, 2005). Growth in the demographic has been recorded in the UK (Carlsson & Eriksson, 2015), Europe (Schwanitz & Mulder, 2015) and the United States (Mykyta, 2012). In Australia and New Zealand, sharing has become a rite of passage for young adults and a social institution (Wolfe & Barnett, 2001; Murphy, 2011).

Despite the apparent freedom of contemporary young adults, there are diverse options available. While young adults are considered agents of their own destiny, the impact of broader social, economic and political structures must be taken into account (Mortimer & Larson, 2002). Life choices are not always personal: they are frequently dictated by those available in the particular social strata, culture and historical period in which people live. Consequently, housing pathways differ (Clapham, Mackie, Thomas, Orford, & Buckley, 2014). For example, in the UK, Heath and Cleaver (2003) found that people of colour were less likely to live in non-kin households. Similarly, in New Zealand, Williamson (2006) reported that Māori or Pacific Island young adults are significantly less likely to share households with unrelated individuals because of the strong cultural importance placed on family or whānau. Relying on family networks for accommodation in urban areas, where work may be found, still figures in youth relocation among Pākehā but it is still far more common among Māori and Pacific Islanders.

The relevance of this topic derives from concerns that psychology routinely overlooks research into human interaction in the home and workplace (Potter, 1996a). Hence, the study of intimate relationships among young adult house sharers seeks to address this lacuna. Further, this study seeks to explore the common assumption that sharing is dysfunctional and problematic, and to look into the possible benefits of sharing. There is an obvious contrast with familial living arrangements often falling short of being ideal, and yet these are not similarly characterized as problematic (Heath, Davies, Edwards, & Scicluna, 2017). The quintessentially social nature of shared living provides another good reason for the dynamics of shared living to be of interest to social psychologists. Indeed, this offers a rich source for the detailed study of interpersonal relationships, group dynamics, prejudice and discrimination.

Until recently, the most comprehensive study on young peer households is that of Heath and Cleaver

(2003) in Britain. In America Goldscheider and Goldscheider (1993) studied accommodation options on leaving the parental home. In Europe the topic is essentially confined to housing demographers, who focus on why young people share (Steinfuhrer & Haase, 2009; Mulder, 2003). In Australia Baum (1986) sought to isolate factors contributing to successful co-residence across all ages. Natalier (2003) examined gendered division of labour in young shared households, while McNamara and Connell (2007) found that young Australians consider their flat 'home'. In New Zealand Williamson (2005) compiled a snapshot of how seven flats operated with an emphasis on food preparation and communal meals. Clark and Tuffin (Clark & Tuffin, 2015; Tuffin & Clark, 2016) investigated flatmate selection, suggesting young adults prefer to live with others who resemble them closely in age, life stage and ethnicity. While gender was unimportant unemployment, addiction and mental illness were causes for concern.

Research suggests household chores are the primary source of conflict (Baum, 1986; Mause, 2008). Natalier (2003) and Heath and Cleaver (2003) contend that conflict over housework may say more about the unequal allocation of domestic work in traditional households, while also a convenient way of highlighting the dysfunctional nature of shared accommodation. Hierarchical gender role ideologies are not applicable in flatting: In conventional households a domestically indolent husband represents a familiar cultural script but in flatting a loafing housemate can be a target for complaint, if not eviction (Natalier, 2003).

Baum (1986) found motivation to share impacted relationships. Those who felt forced to share by economic necessity, tended to focus on difficulties and were less willing to compromise. Those committed to the lifestyle regarded interpersonal conflict as an inevitable challenge. In addition, problems arose from different standards of cleanliness, tidiness and hygiene. If the status quo is acceptable to all conflict is minimised. Dissatisfaction is virtually unavoidable between the slovenly and the clean and tidy. Surprisingly, there was little concern about bills or rent with these issues anticipated and dealt with early. Income differences can be problematic. This was apparent in Clark and Tuffin's (2015) research, where students and professionals were regarded as incompatible given the latters' greater discretionary income. Rent levels generally ensure similar incomes. Baum (1986) identified two factors that significantly impact successful co-residence. The first was a power imbalance, for example if the house or furniture is owned by one of the inhabitants. Secondly, when there are differences in expectations among housemates about what constitutes cleanliness and the degree of sociability expected. Research also indicates tensions over noise, borrowing housemates' belongings without permission and eating their food without replacing it. Heath and Cleaver (2003) maintain that tensions normally subside without affecting relationships, suggesting the development of tolerance levels and the ability to shrug off difficulties to maintain working relationships.

The rationale for the current research was to increase what is known about flatting among young adults. Since conflict is an inevitable part of human interaction, examining the sources, management and consequences of conflict in the intimate environment of domesticity is integral to fuller understandings of interpersonal relationships in these households.

RESEARCH PARADIGM AND METHOD

The tenets of critical social psychology underpin this study employing social constructionist discourse analysis (Tuffin, 2005). Critical social psychologists challenge traditional social psychological methods of research. Social life is reconceptualised as the product of interaction, promoting language use over the internal psychological processes (Wetherell, 1996, Parker, 2013). Constructionist epistemology challenges the veracity of absolute truths, highlights the possibility of multiple understandings, and considers knowledge provisional and negotiable. For constructionists, knowledge is not a transparent reflection of reality but historically, culturally and contextually contingent. Consequently, universal assumptions cannot be made. Constructionist enquiry aims to demonstrate how people jointly create a coherent social reality by using shared meanings, with understandings inextricably grounded in, maintained and mediated through language (Coyle, 1995).

Discourse analysis involves close scrutiny of language and incorporates a range of methods applied to understanding social practice. Discourse analysis looks at the structure, content, function and effect of language to provide insight (Parker, 2013). Through language actions are accomplished. These include explaining, blaming, excusing, justifying, complimenting or warding off actual or potential counter-arguments. Using various rhetorical devices individuals draw on remarkably similar discourses to construct versions of events, with taken for granted assumptions shaped by prevailing social, moral and political ideologies (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Discourse analysis foregrounds participants' lived experiences and affords the opportunity to delve deep into details (Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

Participants were aged 20 and 35, currently flatting, fluent in English, and purposefully recruited by word of mouth. In total 37 people were interviewed, 14 in individual interviews, and 23 in seven flat groups. Participants were Pākehā (of European descent) apart from two Māori and two identifying as Māori/Pākehā. Fifteen were males and 22 females, with a mean age of 24. Apart from 14 students all were employed full-time. To increase heterogeneity three flat group interviews were conducted in a large New Zealand city and four in a smaller town. Semi-structured, interviews were conducted using predetermined questions, such as, "How do you deal with conflict?". Interviews were audio recorded with group interviews videoed to enable identification of speakers for transcription purposes. An annotated version of Jeffersonian notation was used for transcribing (Wooffitt, 1992). All principles of the Massey University Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations involving Human Participants (2013) were adhered to.

ANALYSIS

The analytic process was inductive and data driven, whereby key patterns were discerned in the data. Analysis requires multiple readings of the transcripts to identify recurring discourses, which intertwine, overlap and contradict each other in complex ways (Fairclough, 2015). Analysis of the current data is organised into three sub-sections dealing with the sources, management and consequences of interpersonal conflict. Extracts employed are those most representative of each discourse.

Sources of conflict

Divergent expectations of cleanliness and tidiness, and freeloading and miserliness were discourses drawn on to explain how conflicts arise between flatmates.

Convergent notions of what constitutes acceptable standards are important. Whereas the necessity for flatmates to be reasonably clean and tidy was frequently expressed, flatmates who were too meticulous, demanding virtual perfection were regarded as sources of tension. Unrealistic expectations often resulted in untenable conditions.

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310  Lucy: so I (.) I like living in a clean and tidy space
311  but I wouldn't consider myself to be like::
312  obsessive about it
313  I like places spaces that are lived in
314  and she:: came across more and more (.) like that
315  um (.) we >you know< like we had to (.) uh
316  I:: had had dinner one night
317  cleaned my dishes
318  and left them (.) in the drying rack
319  just to dry while I was watching TV
320  and (.) I:: went to bed and::
321  left them there to dry
322  and then I got (.) told pretty quickly that::
323  actually in this house? they::
324  you dry the dishes and put them away
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Beginning with a disclaimer of liking "a clean and tidy space" (310) without being obsessive (312), Lucy deflects any presumption of questionable personal sanitation standards. Disclaimers are impression management strategies designed to pre-empt potential assignment of negative attributes to the speaker (Pomerantz, 1986). A "lived in" domestic space (313) is preferable to pathological tidiness (312). The flatmate is constructed as increasingly obsessive (314). Lucy uses an example of dishes left to dry overnight (318-321), which provokes a negative reaction (322-325). "Actually in this house" (323) conveys patronising admonition while positioning Lucy as someone unfamiliar with house rules. The expectation of what is done in the house is framed as the flat ethos, making challenge difficult. While feeling comfortable with flatmates was a dominant discourse in constructing desirable flatmates (Clark, Tuffin, Frewin & Bowker, 2017), this level of comfort was not achievable for Lucy, and she subsequently moved out.

Phoebe also spoke of clashes resulting from different standards.

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43  Phoebe: it's:: (.) you just might clash
44  or have a very different idea of
45  you know (.) what clean means
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46  or ((laughs)) um (.) yeah
47  or also (.) some people are::
48  much more easy going than others (.) so
49  some people get very um angry and frustrated
50  if you (.) don't just put away a teacup
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57  you need to be OK (.) with the occasional
58  teacup or glass being left out
59  cause otherwise you will end up
60  being really stressed out °all the time° yeah
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Having "a different idea about what clean means" (44-45) is euphemistically utilised to denigrate either those with questionable standards or the overly zealous. Easy going people are positioned as less likely to get "very angry and frustrated" (49) with negative implications. In articulating the necessity to accept minor infractions Phoebe positions herself as easy-going (48) and qualifies this by identifying that doing so maintains one's own wellbeing (57-60). Not putting away a teacup (50) is hyperbole, representing a minimal breach, employed more for rhetorical effect than accuracy (Edwards & Potter, 1992). This serves to underscore unreasonable reactions. The extreme case formulation "all the time" is an overstatement to legitimise claims (Potter, 1996b). That unrealistic expectations can lead to disagreement and potential conflict is evident in both the above examples.

For Jody minor violations have the potential to become contagious.

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96   Jody: Um (0.2) personally I don't mind if
97   people um (.) like messy
98   but I suppose in the communal space
99   like the kitchen and the lounge
100  that's where I you know
101  like if I leave a mess there
102  then it's kind of the broken window effect
103  so one person leaves their glass
104  and then the next thing you know
105  the next day there's now a plate and a glass
106  and a knife and a fork
107  and another glass (.) so yeah
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"Personally I don't mind if people [are] like messy" informs us that Jody herself is not obsessively tidy. This is followed by the ubiquitous "but" (98) of the classic disclaimer (Pomerantz, 1986). "So one person leaves out their glass" (103) is strikingly similar to the above examples (318, 58). The infectious aspect of how this can escalate is cleverly explained (104-107) by invoking Wilson and Kelling's (1982) Broken Window theory, which suggests that norm violation and disarray potentially spread disorder. In contrast, early prevention averts further violations and untidiness spreading.

The plight of a person appreciating a clean environment but having little control over the laxness of others is equally likely to cause distress.

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227  Pia: I:: (.) so there was about  six of us
228  six or seven of us? um in the same flat?
229  and like it was (.) like it
230  just got absolutely disgusting (.) like
231  and I just hated it just because like
232  I don't know I just like things clean
233  because it's their spaces and I can't like
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234   it was not my place to mother them
235   to tell them to clean up after themselves

   If numbers are stacked against a fastidious flatmate, effectively dealing with the problem is unlikely as the influence of one flatmate is limited. "Absolutely disgusting" (230) is an extreme case formulation, a potent rhetorical resource used to influence listeners' conclusions (Pomerantz, 1986). "It was not my place" (234) acknowledges that it is not the duty of a tidy person to adopt a parental role. "Mother them" reflects powerful cultural ideologies. One of the benefits of flatting is to escape the demands of parents and power hierarchies (Heath & Cleaver, 2003; Natalier, 2003), hence no one would be keen to be cast in the role of mother. The message is that flatmates are responsible for cleaning up their mess with the need to respect the rights of others who share those spaces.

   Freeloaders taking advantage of others by failing to share costs and responsibilities contribute to conflict.

59   Donna: We had a (.) pretty crap (.) flatmate that
60   moved in that we didn't really know::
61   and so (.) um (.) there was a bit of conflict with him
62   but (.) he ended up moving out?
63   because (.) he was just very immature
64   and so (.) we were paying for the food
65   because he was doing his own grocery shop
66   and he would keep eating our food (.)
67   and using our stuff
68   and so we said, (.) "Look
69   you either buy the groceries? (.)
70   or you stop eating our food"
71   >and he said, "Well then I'll just move out"<

   The negativity associated with this flatmate is partly attributed to not knowing him beforehand (60). The "bit of conflict" (61) is an understatement considering the consequence (62, 71). Understatements are rhetorical devices designed to have the opposite effect (Harris, 2013). The flatmate's behaviour is ascribed to immaturity (63). Although the ultimatum was to stop consuming others' food (70), the freeloading flatmate moved out when challenged (71). Active voicing (68-71) serves to authenticate the account (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

   Flatmates' freeloading partners are a further source of conflict.

237   Julie: When (.) you know (.) you're a student
238   and money's such an <u>iss::ue</u> and people
239   are showering at your house
240   and you are paying for it
241   and they're not
242   and he would also eat our food

   Impecunious students are particularly susceptible to depletion of scarce resources (237-238). Two abuses of others' resources, showering and food are mentioned with issues of injustice and costs involved. Whereas consumable resources in co-residence may be easily accessed, money tends to be less collectively available but is of vital importance to successful shared living.

84   Chloe: I don't know why
85   but some people you know when they

86   money comes into it
87   they don't want to pay a bill
88   or you know (.) not on time or (.) um
89   not not prepared to (.) put their
90   their share into the (.) the cleaning or something
91   you know (.) they don't want to do their part
92   but it's definitely been the breakdown of it

   Ostensibly Chloe finds it hard to comprehend why some housemates freeload by not being prepared to meet their communal obligations (84). Potter (1996b) notes it would be erroneous to view "I don't know why" (84) as disinterest but rather as a mask of stake inoculation in which the speaker attends to the possibility of a counter explanation. Chloe suggests that relationship breakdowns (92) are due to unwillingness to contribute to combined expenses (87) or agreed timing of payments (88). Violation of expectations threatens the cohesion and ultimately the viability of shared living as does failure to participate in household chores (90-91).

   This research endorses findings that freeloading by failing to contribute equally to housework is as a prime cause of conflict (Baum, 1986; Heath & Cleaver, 2003; Mause, 2008).

124   Lucy: not everyone's as considerate (.) as:: others so:::
125   there can be conflict (.) because (.) you know
126   someone doesn't (.) pull their weight ((laughs))
127   VC: Yeah
128   Lucy: doesn't contribute to the house so::
129   um there (.) it can be challenging to::
130   uh try and get that person on board and
131   along::side the other (.) folks
132   >and sometimes it doesn't work<

   Consideration for others (124) was a prominent discourse regarding desirable flatmates (Clark et al, 2017). A person failing to "pull their weight" (126) and hence doing their fair share was a commonly cited idiom when discussing conflict. Idioms are formulaic expressions in language use and useful rhetorical devices, which convey an extensive range of information in few words to those proficient in the language. In addition, without specific information their content is difficult to challenge (Drew & Holt, 1989). "Try and get that person on board" (130) in the colloquial sense evokes the necessity for participation and reinforced with "along::side the other folks" (131). The challenge in trying to get some people to co-operate (130) is not always successful.

   While limited budgets foster economic prudence, penny pinching is not appreciated, as reflected in Mary's extract below. Protecting resources as a consequence of potential misuse from freeloaders may be necessary, but tolerance for dealing with minor infringements of food ownership is necessary for sustained interpersonal relationships.

248   Mary: um I'm not worried (.) if someone
249   eats my apples or uses my butter
250   and that sort of thing
251   I've never been one of those
252   VC: Ah yes
253   Mary: I've never been one of those flatmates

254   who draws a line on the olive oil ((laughter))

Mary is unperturbed (248) about flatmates using her supplies. Humour is employed to stress her relaxed attitude, with the example of "drawing a line on the olive oil" (254). While humour can be entertaining it plays an important role in creating identity, comradery, unity and social consensus (Rose, 2007). Through humour Mary presents a self-identity as easy-going, tolerant, generous and not given to pettiness while skilfully criticising those who resort to such measures. Frugality may be necessary but miserliness is unattractive. Next we consider how conflict is dealt with.

Managing conflict

Two competing aspects dominated when discussing dealing with conflict. Whereas most participants agreed that communication and talking over problems at flat meetings was the best means of resolution, many preferred to avoid conflict.

In the following all-male flat interview occupants maintained that they were competent at dealing with conflict by talking about problems:

45   Miles: Just no really (.) secrets
46   we sort of all just sit down
47   and talk about it
48   Noah: We're real good with conflict
49   like if (.) if we ever (.) like our flat meeting
50   if we ever need to bring something up
51   we just do it round dinner
52   'nd (.) we haven't had any fights
53   or anything (.) so no it's fine

"No secrets" (45) implies openness. "If you need to bring something up" suggests the policy of transparency is accepted, expected and provides a mechanism for dealing with issues. Discussing challenges over dinner (51) or other flat gatherings is less confrontational than convening a specific meeting (50). Noah concludes that no altercations have evolved (52) indicating that the policy of open communication is successful.

Flat meetings can be effective but resolution is not guaranteed.

106   Sam: communication is good (.) like
107   you know (.) like hold flat meetings
108   and uh:: I've been in flats where things have (.) been
109   a bit unsteady (.) and (.) yeah so (.) if everyone
110   gathers around the kitchen table and puts
111   kind of as much as they want to out there
112   and say "I don't like that this is happening"
113   or "I would like this to change" (.) um
114   that is (.) your kind of (.) best case scenario
115   um (.) which has worked in the past
116   other times that hasn't

Like most participants, Sam stresses the need for communication (106). He refers to past experiences where "things have been a bit unsteady" (109) suggesting possible tensions. In this way problems can be alluded to without specific allocation of blame. Contrastively, "the kitchen table" (110) is specific, adding plausibility to statements as does the use of active voice (112-113)

(Edwards & Potter, 1992). If "everyone gathers around" (109-110) working through issues is possible (115). Such qualified action speaks to the collective will to participate in the process. Nevertheless, while some outcomes, "best case scenario", (114) are ideal, others are not (116). While directly addressing issues through communication and group meetings was the dominant discourse, the opposite discourse of avoiding problems was also raised.

The avoidance discourse takes two forms. The first is pre-emption of problems by consideration, tolerance and sensitivity to flatmates' moods: knowing when to be particularly circumspect in interaction or defer contentious or adversarial discussions. In the following flat interview housemates agreed that awareness of what may annoy or upset others is important.

132   Annie: =I think we try to avoid conflict
133   a lot of the time mmm ((general sounds of agreement))
134   I think we're forgiving about
135   each other's um (.) personalities as well
136   Meg: Yeah (.) we know what each person does
137   and what (.) you know what (.) their things are
138   that gets them annoyed
139   or stuff like that
140   so we kind of (.) I don't know
141   like make allowances or::
142   Claire: =Yeah yeah you kind of know
143   yeah like that would annoy Annie
144   or whatever (.) so yeah
145   Tamsin: You just become
146   a little more considerate you know (.) like (0.3)

This all-female flat considered themselves good friends, which may account for the level of consideration for each other. Annie's statement that they endeavour to avoid conflict (132) is qualified by "a lot of the time" (133) suggesting that there are occasional unavoidable tensions. Being sensitive to housemates' idiosyncrasies and moods (135-137) was commonly raised in talk about problem prevention. Personal pet peeves were frequently acknowledged, suggesting that a minor irritation to one person can be a major source of annoyance to another and potential cause for conflict. Being aware of what disgruntles others is important. Meg and Claire encapsulate this by talking about making allowances (141) for others and abstaining from acting in a way that is vexatious (143-146). Tamsin adds the ubiquitously pervasive term "consideration" to the complex nexus of negotiating everyday interactions in the intense arena of domesticity (145). Pre-emptory consideration and skilful decoding of emotions promotes accord, reducing the likelihood of conflict.

A second part of the avoidance discourse in managing conflict is to gloss over problems by circumventing issues. Many find confrontation, even in a most congenial way, too stressful. In the interest of maintaining harmony some preferred to avoid dealing with issues. Maree justified not directly addressing problems.

197   Maree: I'm:: more likely to just try and
198   skirt around (.) skirt around them
199   um (.) than address them directly
200   which (.) can sometimes they resolve themselves
201   because people move out

202 because flatting is a (.) not always a permanent
203 situation so it (.) sometimes (.) you might put up with
204 things because it's only going to last
205 X (.) number of months more
206 or (.) you know someone's on their way out
207 so might (.) just let some things slide

The idiom "skirt around" conveys avoidance (198). "Sometimes they resolve themselves" (200) is explained by the possibility of someone moving out but could also refer to tension dissipating with time. Maree maintains that given the transience of most flats (202) the odds of the source of the problem moving out are good. The inclination to "let some things slide" (207) or "put up with things" (203) is increased if you know someone is leaving (206). Arguably, a person who knows they are departing is less likely to be collaborative if confronted. This passive approach to managing conflict carries with it a rationalisation that many sources of conflict resolve themselves if one is patient and adopts a long term perspective. Both talking through and avoidance of problems as a means of managing conflict recognise the consequences of escalating tension for group well-being and long-term household survival.

Consequences of conflict

Two commonly occurring discourses arose when discussing conflict consequences: negative psychological states and moving out. Conflict avoidance can have negative psychological implications.

265 Justin: =If there's something (.) that (.) like
266 really frustrates you about living with people
267 and it's never brought up
268 and you don't communicate properly
269 it can be really bad
270 it can be like you're always in a bad mood
271 um (.) and that sort of thing
272 but then as soon as (.) the conflict is resolved
273 it like (.) levels out (.) so just it's sort of
274 it's sort of another layer of things
275 to keep on top of (.) um
276 to keep yourself like (.) yeah feeling good
277 Mathew: Yeah
278 Justin: Yeah like if you don't like
279 if you don't like where you're living
280 it's bad (.) then it's not (.) it's not good

Failure to communicate (268) problems increases frustration and negatively affects moods (270). Again, effective communication is stressed as paramount in effectively solving problems. "It can be really bad" (269) clearly indicates the destructive impact of unresolved issues. Once conflict is settled equilibrium returns (273). The toll household tension takes, in addition to everyday stressors, is evident in Justin's frank admission of trying to keep on top of things. "To keep yourself like (.) feeling good" (276) indicates that unresolved issues can undermine a positive outlook, especially since homes should be an important refuge from everyday stress (Mallett, 2004; Clark et al, 2017). Tense households are often an incentive to move out.

The predominant consequences of unresolved or on-going conflict are to ask the offending person to move out, or depart oneself.

240 Sam: and I guess that's one advantage of flatting
241 is that (.) if things do get too bad
242 you'll just say "Well I'll move out"
243 and you can (.) you can walk away from
244 whatever arrangement you have

An advantage of flatting (240) is the capacity to move out (242,) when conflict becomes unbearable (241). "You can walk away" (243) "and you just call it a day" (246) suggests that such action is unproblematic. "Arrangements" (244) could refer to length of notice specified by flat rules, finding replacement flatmates or tenancy conditions. However, relocating can be costly, financially and emotionally: alternative accommodation needs to be found with no assurance that it will be any better. In addition, extra money is required for rent in advance, bond money and moving costs. These costs speak to the importance of managing conflict before it escalates into the untenable.

DISCUSSION

In discussing conflict it is important to note that in shared housing there are few guiding ideological templates. Certainly, there are fundamental rules, such as, 'Do not steal' and respect for the privacy of flatmates but the default hetero-normative system of men being breadwinners and women being responsible for housework do not apply in this egalitarian way of life (Natalier, 2003). Nevertheless, Natalier found gendered attitudes to division of labour in these establishments persisted. In nuclear families, well-established expectations of interactions between family members are generally accepted and provide some sense of stability in interrelationships. These roles can prevent potential conflicts and disagreements, making relationships easier to maintain. Natalier argues that shared householders create their own meanings with counter cultural discourses, which are used to understand and manage relationships. Flatting rules are almost never written or prescribed but rather evolve organically and differ from one household to another. If everyone is in accordance with how the household should be run, harmony is possible. Practices are shaped by flatmates and driven by the crucial value of having a workable living arrangement (Clark, Tuffin, Bowker & Frewin, 2018).

Sources of conflict

Divergent expectations regarding cleanliness can be difficult to resolve. Participants spoke of the stress of living with an obsessively clean and tidy housemate. The counter aspect to this was living with slothful housemates but also the necessity not to let a flatmate get away with being lazy. The Broken Window effect (Wilson & Kelling, 1982) was evoked to explain that overlooking a violation of expectations can be used as an excuse for non-co-operation of others or the flat deteriorating to the point where no-one cares or takes responsibility for housework.

Whereas the extant literature does discuss different understandings of cleanliness and hygiene (Baum, 1986; Heath & Cleaver, 2003), this research provides insight into the difficulty of living with flatmates with excessively high standards. One reason for obsessiveness being a recurring complaint is that no one willingly takes

on the judgement of being dirty or lazy, so one response is to position others as overly fastidious, effectively downplaying responsibility for one's own implied imperfections. This is achieved through various rhetorical devices such as exaggeration or extreme case formulation. A prerequisite of a desirable flatmate is that they do not make others uncomfortable (Clark et al, 2017). Unrealistic, unsustainable demands can be perceived as interpersonal rejection (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Flatting is a context in which the desire for warm social relationships can be satisfied. The extent to which this desire is met influences behaviour and attitudes towards others and shapes the complex interpersonal dynamics of the group.

The necessity for flatmates to have similar expectations in a number of spheres was commonly drawn on when constructing desirable flatmates (Clark et al, 2017). The tension and stress that can arise from an imbalance is evident. This was part of a pervasive and broader discourse of a fine balance necessary in many aspects of flatting. Treading a delicate path between acceptable and objectionable behaviour requires discerning interpersonal skills and sensitivities crucial for successful shared living.

A second source of conflict involves freeloading and miserliness. Freeloading focused on areas where flatmates demonstrated lack of consideration for equal sharing of communal commodities, such as food, hot water, electricity and household responsibilities. A particular source of conflict arose in flats not sharing food, where an individual consistently consumed others' food without replacement. In most student and many professional flats financially challenged residents, of necessity, practise economic austerity. Conflict over scarce resources is well documented (Deutsch, 2014). Visiting partners or friends' use of meagre supplies can create tension. Whereas students can be particularly cash strapped, young professionals aspire to better standards but can still resent others taking advantage of them. Conversely, miserliness, such as drawing lines on containers is not appreciated. The subtle nuance between frugality and meanness again demonstrates the careful equilibrium required for successful co-residence. There is a need to feel confidence and trust that housemates will meet their financial obligations and remittance deadlines. Failure to do so causes stress and anxiety for those who do comply. Penalties for late payment, such as electricity being cut off can affect all.

The current study endorses extant research that failure to contribute fairly to household chores is a major source of tension leading to conflict in communal living (Baum, 1986; Heath & Cleaver, 2003; Kemp & Rugg, 1998; Mause, 2008; Natalier, 2003). Increased tension has the potential to undermine the fragile basis on which shared living operates, through frayed interpersonal relationships and compromised trust. How are these threats to relational harmony managed?

Managing conflict

Two discourses arose regarding conflict management. The first involved communal meetings to openly discuss remedying discontent, and the second avoidance. While conflict avoidance may be regarded as a negative coping strategy it may serve as an important stress reduction function (Cohen, 2004). Reducing the possibility of tension by pre-emptive means, such as sensitivity to moods and avoiding ways of communicating that create unnecessary, unresolvable conflicts is highly positive, providing the exercise is reciprocal. Avoidance and delay, such as skirting around issues, motivated by aversion to confrontation and/or the transitional nature of shared households, is not always maladaptive and can preserve relationships (Afifi, Coughlin & Afifi, 2007). Clearly if a troublesome flatmate is leaving it's best to simply wait it out. Nevertheless, extensive avoidance by neglecting to deal with problems can be counterproductive. Unresolved conflict can increase stress and distrust and become increasingly malignant if the source of dissatisfaction is recurring (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Withholding complaints can erode relationship satisfaction and ultimately result in withdrawal from household socialising. Since communal interaction is the glue that holds households together (Heath & Cleaver, 2003), prognosis for continued co-residence under these circumstances is not positive.

Meta-analysis of 118 group studies identified three types of group conflict (de Wit, Greer & Jehn, 2012). *Relationship conflict* involving perceived incompatibility in personality, norms and values are destructive through threats to individual self-concepts, increased anxiety, negative emotions, hostility and lack of trust, particularly if persistent for a significant time (Toegel & Barsoux, 2016). Such conflict has a relatively low probability of resolution since it is emotion driven and very often includes personal attacks, thus negatively impacting the communication process. Prognosis for dealing with conflict is more positive if the group has similar values, with high levels of trust and respect (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). This speaks to the importance of similarity of flatmates, which has been identified. In constructing ideal flatmates participants spoke of the desire to live with people who resembled themselves in a variety of ways, such as similar age, values, morals and backgrounds (Clark et al, 2017). In participants' talk of conflict, it became clear that young people develop an acute awareness of what might compromise domestic harmony and actively seek to prevent potential problems by careful selection of flatmates.

The second type of group conflict, *task conflict* (de Wit, Greer & Jehn, 2012), refers to problems with tasks. This tension is more easily managed by focusing on overcoming differences to achieve a common objective. Unfortunately, task driven conflict, such as failing to contribute to housework, frequently becomes emotion based exacerbating tension and making problem solving more difficult. A third conflict type, *process conflict*, produces a consistently negative effect and can sabotage group viability. For example, a group member may consider s/he is not respected or consider certain tasks beneath his/her dignity (de Wit, Greer & Jehn, 2012).

All social actions are subject to moral evaluation (Goffman, 1971). Whether behaviour is considered appropriate, bad or ill-judged is a subjective judgement, depending on culture and pre-established values (Chiu & Hackett, 2017). Very often conflict is rooted in issues of fairness (Jones, 2000) with some form of atonement or

penance demanded by the offended (Drew, Hepburn, Margutti & Galatolo, 2016). Failure of flatmates to contribute to housework or eating others' food is hard to justify, and ultimately payed for by moving out. However, what is considered acceptable in one flat may not be so in another.

Flatting entails individuals living in a shared living space as a collective, where inevitable conflict can be positive and productive. Collaborative resolution with respectful, honest debate and mutually agreed solutions enhance group cohesion and relating to others (Deutsch, 2014). For young adults negotiation skills learned through constructive collaboration and co-operative strategies to deal with problems in shared households have positive implications for interpersonal interactions in the workplace and relationships in general (La Valle, O'Regan & Jackson, 2000). Strong positive connections can enhance human well-being and deepen relationships while too much negative interaction can be alienating, reduce morale and undermine team work (Chun & Choi, 2014; Curseu et al 2012).

The two discourses on managing conflict seem somewhat contradictory. Openly discussing problems is active, direct and confronting, while avoidance is the opposite. The similarity lies in both being aimed at managing stress that can be destructive to the ongoing nature of relationships of a group of folk living together. In essence, effective conflict management requires the ability to paradoxically be confrontational and avoidant (Roloff & Ifert, 2000), with sensitivity to the context and when it's best to adopt different strategies.

Consequences of conflict

Two discourses regarding the consequences of conflict were identified. The first involved the negative psychological implications of unresolved conflict. Young adulthood is an exciting period of possibilities but also a turbulent life stage with multiple challenges, such as resisting risky peer pressure, gaining qualifications, career choice and forming early sexual relationships (Arnett, 2000). Although conflict can be reversed through effective resolution, non-resolution can produce negative outcomes, with detrimental psychological and physiological ramifications (Cohen, 2004).

The second discourse is to move out in the face of intractable conflict. This can take the form of a decision to move out or request that someone move out. Others regroup as a household in a new location without the perceived problematic agent. However, exits can be costly: economically, there are moving expenses, bonds and rent to be paid in advance. The complexity becomes more involved if the person leaving has the lease on the property. Emotionally there is the loss of social capital and anxiety. In a competitive rental market finding new accommodation can be difficult with no guarantee that the new household will be more satisfactory. However, the negative psychological consequences of remaining in an unhappy situation frequently make moving out an attractive option.

Careful selection of flatmates by way of similarities and expectations can reduce possibilities for tension but can be subverted by the necessity of finding someone promptly to cover expenses and the simple fact that it is difficult to predict how relationships will work when sharing a household. The seemingly healthy mechanism for dealing with tension is to manage this by mature discussion and resolution, rather than moving to another flat. Very often leaving a tense or uncomfortable household is regarded as the only solution to a problem.

The current study is not without limitations. For example, in promoting a positive self-image, participants would seldom admit to responsibility for initiating tension. In addition, more in-depth research is needed into the negative psychological aspects of co-residence. Traumatic experiences are likely to result in individuals seeking alternative types of accommodation. By interviewing only those currently flatting those most adversely affected were excluded. Based on this limitation future research could concentrate on those who prefer not to share households.

While sharing can be challenging, focusing on tensions does not draw a complete picture. Current research indicates that house sharers are typically happy and content (Heath et al, 2017). Flats are not merely regarded as a room to rent, but homes in which to unwind, while appreciating the support and ready-made social life available (Clark et al, 2018). By carefully navigating the hazards of shared living, which have few traditional markers, young adults demonstrate an acute understanding of the domestic dynamics, which mutually impact the quality of their lives (Clark et al, 2018).

Conclusion

While many positive advantages, both economic and social, can be gained from residing with peers, interpersonal relationships can be challenging. Clearly, participants were familiar with household conflict but managed to ensure it was minimally disruptive to their generally successful construction of shared living. However, sometimes the decision to move out is seen as the only solution. And this highlights the fact that the management of conflict takes place against a background where arrangements are often loose and transitory: with no ideological blueprints for co-residence, rules evolve organically. This adds to the uncertainty and ambiguity involved in dealing with conflict.

The current study strengthens the literature on shared housing among young adults by adding a deeper relational understanding of the sources, management and consequences of conflict. Understanding this intimate way of life is particularly important in New Zealand as flatting is an established way of life. By providing insights into the complexity of shared households, it offers a window into contemporary life of young adults as well as group processes. The unique contribution lies in analysing how participants construct their experiences, the active and passive ways of navigating conflict in flatting relationships and how the negative effects on well-being can be circumvented. It also affords a more sophisticated appreciation of the structure and complex social dynamics of these domestic microsystems.

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