Exploring College Roommate Conflicts

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Overview

Research Question: How do students perceive the experience of a roommate conflict?

Subquestions:
- What conflict resolution strategies do roommates in conflict use?
- How do roommates in conflict describe how the conflict has shaped their ability to handle future conflicts?

Methodology

Data Collection:
- Qualitative study with 30-60 minute semi-structured interviews.
- Six students self-selected to take part in the study.

Data Analysis:
- Open and a *priori* coding were used to see if Thomas and Kilmann's (1974) Conflict Management Modes (see graph in column 3) and Hocker and Wilmot's (2018) definition of conflict emerged.
  - Conflict is "an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources and interference from others in achieving their goals" (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018, p. 13).

Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	School Year	Gender	Race
Emily	Freshman	Female	White
Alexis	Sophomore	Female	White
Jordan	Freshman	Female	White
Ashley	Freshman	Female	White
Cara	Freshman	Female	White
Courtney	Sophomore	Female	White

Themes

Living Habits: A majority of underlying issues for participants appear to stem from different living habit preferences, which align with Hocker and Wilmot's (2018) definition of conflict.

Themes from Hocker and Wilmot's (2018) Definition of Conflict

Incompatible Goals	Scarce Resources	Interference
When to sleep	Peaceful rest	Being loud while sleeping
Nose level in room	Quiet time	Audible distractions
Amount of socializing	Balanced social time	Ability/inability and frequency of having others over
Cleanliness level	Contentment with cleanliness level	Room is dirtier or cleaner than preferred
When to lock the door	Safety vs. not being locked out	Locking the door more or less than desired
Communication efforts	Knowing roommate's plans	Lack explanations from roommate
Use of drugs/alcohol in room	Freedom of expression vs. not getting in trouble	Having the opposite alcohol/drug use preferences
Time spent in room	Having room to self	Roommate spending too much time in room

Roommate Housing Form: Participants feel either their roommate misrepresented themselves on their housing form or the forms are not taken into consideration when making random roommate assignments.

Shared Space/Interdependence: Participants do not feel their space is being adequately shared. They believe their roommate(s) is not mindful about their wants and needs.

Safe Haven: A phrase commonly used by participants in reference to their room is "safe haven." To them that means they want their room be a place to escape life's issues and have peace and quiet.

Depth of Relationship: At first, they were hoping their roommate could fulfill their social needs in college.
- The depth of the relationship changes the ability to discuss conflict—when there isn't a close bond between roommates, it is perceived that the relationship is too fragile to address it.

Confiding in Others: Participants confide in other people besides their roommate about the problems they are experiencing in their living situation such as friends, parents and their R.A.

Thomas and Kilmann's (1974) Conflict Management Modes: Three participants can be characterized as having an assertive style (Y axis on the graph) and the other three appear to have a cooperative style (X axis on the graph).

Growth in Conflict Management: Participants learn from these conflicts and realize they have room for growth in the way they handle conflict; however, none of them want to considerably change their style. They feel more confident handling future conflict.

Future Roommate(s) Selection: Experiencing roommate conflict early on in their collegiate career equips them to strategically pick their future roommate(s) based upon living habits through a more serious vetting process.

Recommendations

- Stress the importance of being honest about living habits on roommate housing form and having the student, not their parent, fill it out.
- Help roommates early on to form a relationship with each other through roommate programs that strive to establish personal connections.
- Create programming for students to understand Thomas and Kilmann's (1974) Conflict Management Modes and focus on helping people strive for the collaboration mode, which creates win-win situations. Train housing staff and R.A.s on this, too.
- Conduct a future study that focuses on better understanding roommate conflict from the R.A.'s perspective.

Limitations

- Conflict does not bring out the best in people, so participants may have painted a better picture of themselves than reality to protect their image.
- All participants were white, females which may have resulted in a limited representation of roommate conflict experiences. Different themes may have emerged if a better variety of demographic characteristics were represented.

References

Hocker, J. L., & Wilmot, W. W. (2018). *Interpersonal conflict*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education.

Kilmann Diagnostics. (2018). *An overview of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI)*. Retrieved from http://www.kilmanndiagnostics.com/overview thomas-Kilmann-conflict-mode-instrument-tki

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