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**Title:** Interracial roommate relationships' affect on students' attitude among the other race

**About the Author:** I am an exchange student from Korea, and I will be staying here for one year. I am sharing my dormitory room with one other Asian and a Caucasian. It is my first time to share my space for a long time with somebody from another race. It has been about four months since I started sharing my room with them, and I found it interesting how I get closer to them and understand each other much better than before.

**Keywords:** Race, Residence Halls, roommates

**Abstract:** Problems of racial stereotypes and prejudice exist in the university, as it does in the rest of the society. There is constant debate on racial stereotypes and racial awareness on campus. Racial self-segregation also remains an inconvenient truth in the university. Even though the university is one of the social places with the least racial discrimination, racial stereotypes and prejudice still exist among students. Speaking of racial stereotypes of students, this research looks into relationships between roommates of another race, and how their relationships can affect their view upon the other race. Through research, it was found that sharing rooms can help students break irrational stereotypes that they once had, and help them have a better attitude upon the other race. Before sharing their rooms, students can have anxiety about treating people from other races, because they are fearful of the negative consequences that may occur from the relationship. However, after they share their rooms and interact with each other casually and contact more, the anxiety decreases and positive attitudes increase. This can lead to better attitude and relationship upon people of the other race as a whole. Search on scholarly sources, interviews to students living in the residence hall, observation in the residence hall, and text analysis will support this idea. After analyzing the relationships' effect on students' perception of the other race, the research suggests the possibility for the University to use the dormitories as a starting place for students to break the

anxiety they once had facing other races, and be more confident in interacting with students of another race.

### Initial Exercises:

**Question:** Does Being Roommates with a Student from Another Race Have an Effect on Students' Attitude upon the Other Race? In specifically what mechanism does this change in attitude occur?

**Plan:** First of all, I started to look for scholarly sources, to know whether there have already been researches related to my topic.

Moreover, I made observations in the residence hall lobby, and found articles on IDEALS, to find whether students are interacting with the other race actively or not. This would help me explain how students feel uncomfortable to interact with another race before they get to know each other.

To find real-life examples on students' change in attitude, I interviewed two students who are sharing rooms with another race.

I also found a web page in the housing website about Multicultural Advocates, who are hired by the residence halls.

**Data:** <Text analysis>

This text is a web page, informing students and attracting them to apply for multicultural advocates (MAs). The web page is in the housing website, in the employment section. On the right had above, it has a picture of MAs. People in the picture look very friendly and happy. Along in the left section of the page, there are links to see other information about what is needed to be an MA, and how to apply for it.

This page especially describes what a multicultural advocate is, what activities it does, and its goals. The text repeatedly emphasizes the MAs' positive and significant goal in the residence halls. It says that multicultural advocates "work and collaborate with all levels of University Housing staff and focus their time, talents, and

enthusiasm on making our residence halls safe, welcoming, and celebrative environments for ALL students.” Throughout the text, the writer emphasizes that the MAs try their best to enhance social justice and promote dialogue among residents regardless of their backgrounds. The text repeatedly uses the words “multicultural(ism)”, “diversity”, “social identity”, and contends that MAs try to promote these qualities. Through the text, one can see that the MAs make constant effort to encourage communication and harmony among diverse students. The phrases “Advocating for all students and staff in the residence halls and campus community inclusive of their many social identities (race, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, religion),” “Serving as a resource and consultant for Resident Advisors in the areas of programming and interpersonal or community based conflicts involving social identity issues” show that idea.

The fact that selected students exist to promote diversity also reflects that conflicts and difficulties do exist in the halls. There will be no need of the MAs if people of diverse backgrounds completely feel as the part of the community. On the other hand, it shows that the University is making an effort to enhance diversity in the residence halls and help people from different backgrounds get along with each other. Rather than only talking about the importance of diversity, the university was taking actions to actually enhance diversity.

However, whether the MAs are playing a significant role in promoting communication is doubtful. It was questionable whether the MAs are making visible actions in enhancing qualities of “diversity”, or “multiculturalism”. Whereas residents see or meet room advisors often, there are hardly any time that I have seen people meeting multicultural advocates or get involved in the activities that they arrange.

I think knowing more about MAs can be useful for my research. The existence of the MAs made me more curious about the roommates’ roles in the dormitory, because comparisons can be made between the impact of

roommates and MAs.

<Annotated Bibliography>

Shook, Natalie J., and Russell H. Fazio.. "Roommate Relationships: A Comparison of Interracial and Same-Race Living Situations." *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 11.4 (Oct. 2008): 425-437.

This article is about a research on White students. It was to find out whether being roommates with a White or African-American affects the White students' attitude toward African-Americans. The authors emphasize that this experiment focuses on changes in automatically activated racial attitudes, not explicit attitudes. The researchers examined how the participants' unconscious attitude toward African-Americans changed after sharing their room with an African-American or another White. The research showed that even though White freshmen in interracial rooms were generally less satisfied, less socially involved, and less comfortable with their roommates than were White freshmen randomly assigned to a White roommate, the automatically activated racial attitudes of White students in interracial rooms became more positive toward African Americans than the others'. I find this article applicable to my research because it will help make my research more convincing. I think it is more persuasive because it focuses on automatically activated attitudes, which is unconscious, instead of explicit attitudes which one can easily lie about.

Brown, Rupert, et al. "Intergroup contact and intergroup attitudes: a longitudinal study." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 37.4 (July 2007): 692-703.

This article is about a longitudinal study conducted to test the contact hypothesis, which was suggested in the 1950s by Allport. Contact hypothesis suggests that the more people contact with a member of the outgroup, the more they associate with more favourable attitudes towards the outgroup. This article explores more into the contact hypothesis. One of them is how positive change towards a particular individual extends to positivity towards the

outgroup as a whole. Through several experiments, the study shows further evidence supporting the contact hypothesis, and finds that when the contact is with someone perceived to be typical of their group, it may have stronger and beneficial effects than when it is with an atypical individual. I find this article useful for my research because it can give detailed explanation on actually what mechanism students' attitudes toward the other race can be changed through increased contact.

Laar, Colette Van, et al. "The effect of university roommate contact on ethnic attitudes and behavior." Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 41.4 (July 2005): 329–345. Academic Search Premier.

This article is about how sharing rooms with students from ethnic outgroups can affect one's prejudice upon the other group. This article, as the first article, contends that increased contact through sharing rooms can lead to decrease in prejudice. However, this study comes up with an interesting and unique discovery that contact with Asian–American roommates rather had a negative effect on people's prejudice. I chose to use this article in my research because this point was very interesting. I think I can use this article to explain possible exceptions.

<Interview>

I interviewed two students in ISR (Illinois Street Residence Halls). This was to know more about the students' experience in sharing rooms with another race. Younhee, a 21-year-old Asian female, lives in ISR with an African–American roommate. Emmanuel, a 20-year-old Hispanic male, also lives in ISR with a Nigerian and Caucasian. Both of them have lived with their roommate(s) for about 3 months and were randomly assigned. The conversation was fairly casual, since both of them are my friends. I had the interview questions in my hand, but found that it would be better to not concentrate on the paper and make the atmosphere comfortable. So there were questions that I asked to only one of them, and also ones that I skipped.

Through the interview, I talked with both of them about

their experience with their roommate(s). Both of them were not very close friends with their roommates, but were having a fairly good time (“Not bad,” “it’s going well”). After having about 7–8 minutes talk to each of them, I found that they felt more confident in treating people from another race, now that they have had experience with their roommates. They both gave positive responses on whether their experience will help them in the future or not.

Nevertheless, they did have complaints or bad impressions about their roommates. Younhee said her roommate is “not that much sanitary,” and told me about how she wears the same socks when she goes to the bathroom and when she goes to sleep. She was dissatisfied in how “she doesn’t really clean up,” and “[she’s] the only one cleaning.” Emmanuel’s main point was that his roommates don’t talk so much. He was saying that “they don’t talk about their stuff… I mean they don’t talk about how their day went or how some test was or something like that, they just talk about trivial stuff, like the TV, the TV show…” Emmanuel, an outgoing Mexican, was surprised that his roommates don’t like to talk about themselves.

Surprisingly, I found from this interview that the students’ experience with students from another race can significantly affect their impression about the other race. In the interview, asked about their thoughts about their roommates’ race, Younhee answered “…definitely, they are not sanitary.” Emmanuel said “I don’t know, I feel like Americans don’t talk that much.” Younhee and Emmanuel were both connecting the images of their roommate to the image of the whole racial group.

Still, Younhee also had positive experiences which changed her view upon African–Americans. Having chances to see her roommates’ friends come to braid her hair, and seeing her roommate talk to her friends, Younhee saw the positive side of African–American culture, and got familiar with it. Her experience helped her understand the African–American accent, and also helped her think that “they are kind of friendly, and they laugh a lot.”

Overall, through this interview, I believe I have found some

ideas to support my research, especially how students' experience with their roommates can affect their attitude about other races. I could find that Younhee and Emmanuel's roommates had a great impact on how they think about their race. I think I can connect this to the contact hypothesis, especially in which it says people tend to determine the out-groups' characteristics through their experience with an individual.

### <Observation>

To find out more about my topic, I observed the lobby in my residence hall, ISR(Illinois Street Residence Halls) among the three lounges open to the residents, I chose to observe the one in the middle of Townsend and Wardall hall, which has no doors. I decided to observe this place because even though it is not an actual dormitory room on which I am researching, it can show how students get along with students of another race in the residence hall.

The lobby is on the way from the main entrance of the building to the dining hall. There are three small tables which each have four chairs surrounding the edges. There are also three short long tea-tables, surrounded by long sofas. Many students use this lounge as a meeting place where they can talk with their friends, and also as studying spots. In the morning, it is mostly quiet, whereas in the afternoon and night you can hear some talking.

I was sitting on one of the small tables, with my laptop. It was 8 pm. Listening to music, I carefully observed the students in the lounge.

Not all of the tables were full at the time I was there. All the small tables were occupied, but one of the set of sofas was empty. In one of the small tables, there was a group of three, each of them with his laptop. They were all white men, and they seemed like they were working on a group project, frequently using academic jargons. In another table, there was a group of Asians. Two of them were female, and one was a male. They were chatting relatively

loudly. I could not understand what they were saying, but they were speaking in speed, laughing from time to time. On one set of sofas, with a tea-table in the middle, there was a group of four white girls. They were talking about their school life, also loudly. They were sitting comfortably, putting their legs on the table, and leaning on the couch. On another sofa, there was a group of white females and males. There were three females and two males. They were also talking about their school life and people. It seemed, the time being about right after dinnertime, as students were having a little time of relaxation. Other than the group of men who were working, other students were mostly chatting comfortably.

Having observed the lobby for about half an hour, I could feel the relaxing atmosphere of the evening. However, I could find the separation between racial groups in the lobby. Although there were not any tensions between the groups, the fact that students were only with students of their race was noticeable. Asians were with Asians, and Whites were with Whites. Blacks happened to not even be there. From my observation, I found that students usually tend to be together with students of their own race. This observation, sadly, is not surprising. Racial self-segregation has been around for a long time.

Still, I believe this observation will be useful for my research, for it can be an example through which I can explain how students tend to stay close to students in the same race, rather than in another race. I think I will be able to link students' attitude towards other students with what I have seen in the lobby.

### **Discuss: Introduction**

Problems and issues about racial stereotypes do not seem to end. Many students are aware of race in the campus, and many constantly struggle with racial stereotypes. Even though students may know that prejudice and stereotypes are wrong, it is difficult for the students to be absolutely free from it. Actually it is almost impossible to be free of stereotypes because even though students do not endorse explicit stereotypes, implicit stereotypes make students unconsciously associate certain races with certain

impressions (Devine)

To break stereotypes and enhance diversity, the university has made constant effort. For instance, the Inclusive Illinois program seeks diversity and inclusiveness across the campus, regarding race, ethnicity, and any identity students may have.

Thinking of racial stereotypes in the campus, I came to think of the residence halls in which many students live in. I found it would be interesting to research how students' experience in the dormitory affects their attitudes about the other race. I speculated that when students share their room with a student of another race, their stereotypes of the other race will change, mostly positively. I guessed that spending more time together and getting to know each other, students will break the stereotypes that they once had and build positive attitudes based on their experience. Through research, I found that there are students hired by the residence halls called Multicultural Advocates (Appendix 1). The MAs work to enhance diversity in the residence halls and promote equality. However, proceeding through research, I came to believe that students' actual experience in their room will affect their thoughts more effectively, for it is more direct and informal than the temporary events that MAs present.

Through my research, I seek to find that being roommates with a student from another race have an effect, especially positive effect, on students' attitude upon the other race. I have searched for scholarly sources related to my topic to support it, and also observed the lobby of the residence hall to know how students interact with students of another race. I also interviewed two students who are sharing rooms with students of another race, to get to know how their experience changed their views.

### **Background Information**

Students in UIUC can (re)assign for the residence hall that they want in the beginning of the prior semester. Many students live in the residence halls because of its convenience and safety, and many more reasons.

Especially, Freshmen are required to live in the University residence halls for their first year. There are many residence halls throughout campus, and also university certified apartments from which students can choose. Other than which hall they prefer, students can take into account many variables; how many roommates they want to be with, if any, and the floor in which they want their room to be. Choosing how many roommates they want, students can either let the housing to assign the roommate randomly or request for a specific person they want to live with. In my research, I have concentrated on students who were randomly assigned to their roommate(s). I decided that looking into randomly assigned roommates will show the changes in students' attitudes from the beginning to later more effectively.

### **Anxiety before sharing rooms**

Students, before getting to know students from another race, are likely to feel unfamiliar with the other race. In a society where awareness about race is so high, students may have worries about relationships with students from another race, not even knowing the reason why it is so difficult. This may be the same for any race.

In other words, regardless of race, students tend to fear about getting close to students of other race. Furthermore, this makes them accompany with students in their own race rather than in the other race. Students hesitate being friends, worried about the awkwardness and the mistakes that they think they will make, and finally decide to hang out with people that they know how to treat.

This kind of attitude can be seen in many places within the campus. The fact that Six Pack residence halls are dominated by whites whereas residents in PAR(Pennsylvania Avenue Residence Halls)/FAR(Florida Avenue Residence Halls) are mostly racial minorities is already known by many people. There has been debate about this phenomenon, and some students conclude that this is because students self-segregate themselves based on race and ethnicity (Myers), and some, more importantly, find this is because students, especially white students,

are not used to interacting with students of another race, and feel uncomfortable to do so (Reynolds). Trying to avoid the inconvenience, students often choose to be with students of their race. I myself could also find places in campus where students are evidently divided by race. Especially, in the lobby of the residence hall that I live in, I could find that students seldom, if any, gather with students of another race (Appendix 4).

This pre-thinking that keep students from interacting with students of another race can be explained through intergroup anxiety. The intergroup anxiety model suggests that when people think of interactions with people outside their racial/ethnic groups, expect certain negative outcomes. (Stephan&Stephan). In other words, people, students in this case, tend to think ahead of the unfavorable outcomes that may occur in their relationships with students of another race, and this makes them hesitant in getting close (Littleford). For instance, people may think the other person may be insulted unintentionally, because of one's ignorance. Therefore, people mostly feel more anxious when they are or are about to meet somebody from an outer group than when they are meeting somebody from their own group.

### **How sharing rooms help**

However, through my research, I could learn that students can use their experience with their roommate as an opportunity to lower the anxiety, and reduce stereotypes and enhance positive images upon people of another race. Spending time together, and getting to know each other more, students can build positive attitudes toward the out-group. Sharing rooms with another race can be a good means for the school to encourage diversity, and for the students to break the negative stereotypes that they once had.

Living in the university residence halls, students can apply for a particular roommate that they want to share their room with. Still, there are many students who stay with roommates that the residence hall randomly assigned. Assigning roommates, the university does not gather

information about the race of the student. Asking for this kind of information almost cannot be seen at all, thinking that it is unconstitutional and goes against educational goals (Young). Consequently, there are many students that share their room with another race. Starting to share rooms, the students may be worried, not knowing how to treat the other and hesitating to talk, especially if he/she has never had a chance to get close to another race. However, even though it is uncomfortable at the first time, I believe sharing rooms will help students build a positive image about the roommate's race. Staying together in the small room for a semester, they will be able to get close to each other.

According to the contact hypothesis, increase of contact with an individual from the out-group leads to decrease in hostility and prejudice. "The underlying assumption of contact hypothesis is that prejudice stems from a lack of knowledge and exposure," says Shook and Fazio. In other words, students build stereotypes about students of another race not because they have actually had an experience to support it, but rather because they barely did not have an opportunity to contact them. Not having experience together, people tend to define the other race only through what meets the eye. However, sharing their room, students can have a considerable time together to get to actually know each other personally, and build positive attitudes toward the roommate. Furthermore, having positive attitudes towards an individual can consequently lead to positive impressions to the whole group. This can be done more effectively when the individual is thought as the typical member of the racial group (Brown). This shows that experience as roommates can change one's attitude significantly, providing the roommates a chance to know each other well.

I myself, am sharing my triple room with an Asian and a Caucasian. We have been staying together for about three months, starting from January of 2009. At first, I was a bit worried about sharing my room with a Caucasian, since I have never had a chance to spend much time with one. Having a pre-perception of Caucasians as without love, individualist, and too clean, I did not know how to treat

them. This anxiety was even more severe because I did not know much about American culture, having been lived in my home country for most of my life. However, spending time together, I could find more similarities with my white roommate than I thought there would be. From things as fashion, to personal things as friends and family, I was surprised at how we could agree on so many ideas. Even though we do not talk constantly, and we are not that close friends still, talking from time to time certainly helped me to know how to treat their race. Yet, saying I got to know how to treat their race does not necessarily mean that there is a specific way to treat certain races. Breaking stereotypes, one can get to know how similar their roommates are with them, and will be able to treat them comfortably, knowing that they are actually not that different. Knowing the similarities helps, not the differences.

This does not end to my experience. While interviewing my friend, Younhee, I could agree to this idea even more. Younhee, having been sharing her room with an African American roommate for about three months, was saying that she has learned much about their culture and friendship, having seen her friends come over and talk about their lives. Younhee could also understand the accent better, which helped her be more confident in talking to African Americans (Appendix 3).

There have been many researches on interracial roommate relationships, linked to contact hypothesis, contending that sharing rooms with another race has a positive effect on students' attitude toward the other race. Interracial roommates are found to improve automatically activated attitudes, which are attitudes that people show about other races unconsciously (Shook, Fazio, Jul. 2008). In other words, sharing rooms not only affects explicit attitudes about other races about which people can easily lie, but also implicit attitudes which are automatically activated although the individuals did not intend to. I think this fact gives interracial roommates a significant advantage, for it can give them a time to break stereotypes that they do not even recognize.

Looking at somebody from the outside does not give

people much information. The information is neither right. It only gives them an impression, which can easily be misunderstood. Making judgments about other students that they do not know, students only take the impressions into regard. These superficial impressions are mostly misleading. However, getting to share the room together, students can have a useful time together, significant in both length and content.

However, limitations exist. As mentioned above, attitude toward an individual of the other group can be associated to the impression of the whole group. This can be said in a good way, but in fact, it can also generate in a negative way. Even though the results are mostly positive, there still may be negative cases, where bad experience with the roommate can lead to bad stereotypes about the whole race. When asked about his experience with his Nigerian and Caucasian roommates, Emmanuel, a Hispanic, answered that they don't talk much. He was saying "they don't talk about their stuff... I mean they don't talk about how their day went or how some test was or something like that, they just talk about trivial stuff, like the TV, the TV show..." Further, he ended up saying "I feel like Americans don't talk that much." (Appendix 3). Through the interview, I could find that I can't generalize every students' experience to give them a positive effect, for there can be cases where the experience rather enhanced negative stereotypes.

## Conclusion

Before students share their rooms with students of another race, their mind is full of stereotypes and anxiety. It is almost impossible to be free of stereotypes. However, after sharing their room with another race, students can easily break the stereotypes they once had and replace it with positive images.

**EUI Links:** IDEALS article , Myers, Joshua; Herrera-Urizar, Juan Pablo (2006-12-15) , " Cultural mapping of dorms", <  
<http://hdl.handle.net/2142/1837> >

This article is a research on current and past trends of student distribution based on race, sex, socio-economic

status, etc. within the dorms, and the impact these trends have on student housing and the greater university community. Through cultural mapping, observation, and interviews, the writer examines whether students' race, socioeconomic status, and/or gender affect placement in student housing. The research finds that the dominance of white students in Six Pack houses and minority students in PAR/FAR is partly because of the housing process itself, but it is also because students self-segregate themselves based on race and ethnicity. I think this article is useful because it shows how students are hesitant in using the same residence hall with students of another race or ethnicity. I believe this will guide me to know how students pre-perceive about sharing rooms with students of another race.

IDEALS article – Reynolds, Felicia (2008), “ Multicultural Community vs. White Community”, <  
<http://hdl.handle.net/2142/8734>>

This article also looks into the reason why the Six Pack residence halls are dominated by white students, whereas most of PAR/FAR residents are students of racial minority. This article points out that students, especially white students, not used to interacting with students of another race, and feeling uncomfortable to do so, tend to choose to rather be surrounded by the same race. The author points that this fear can be seen more within White students because they want to say whatever they want, and want to avoid feelings of uncomforted, anxiety or misunderstanding. The research finds that most of the minorities living at PAR/FAR report feeling content while the ones living at the Six Pack feel some form of isolation. I find this article useful because I believe this article can show the necessity for students to spend more time with students of another race, and have more time to understand each other. I think it will be more effective if I connect this article with other articles which argue that increase in contact can enhance positive perceptions upon the outgroup.

**Reflect:** The final [research paper](#) was a long journey of one

semester. Even though it is absolutely minute compared to other scholarly researches, it was still a new experience for me to devote that long of a time for a research. I am very proud to have this research complete. I am proud that I did not stop at only searching for academic sources, but also made effort to do find evidence in real life. The interviews and observations were not summaries of other people's ideas. It was something that I searched for and got the answer for myself, from my own curiosity. Getting ideas from other students' previous researches was also interesting.

However, if I had more time to work on my research, I think I would have interviewed both roommates that were sharing the room with another race. Because I found it hard to interview somebody that I did not know, I only interviewed one person per room. Now I think it would have been more interesting and persuasive if I had interviewed both roommates and found if they were going through similar changes in their mind and attitude. Moreover, I think it would have been better related to the EUI's goals if I had done more research about the university itself. I think I have concentrated too much on general ideas than the situation unique in the University.

**Recommendations:** I believe sharing the dormitory room with another race will effectively help break stereotypes, and reduce the hesitance that students may have in interacting with people of another race. This can be more effective than having regular meetings or events, because students can spend a much longer amount of time together, in a much more comfortable environment. I believe this gives the possibility for the University to use the dormitories as a starting place for students to break the anxiety they once had facing other races, and be more confident in interacting with students of another race.