



Random Roommates: Tiptoeing Around Race

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Overview

Empirical research findings regarding interracial roommate relationships are equivocal.

- **Disadvantages:** anxiety and stress (West et al., 2009)
- **Benefits:** reduce racism (Van Laar et al., 2005; Shook & Fazio, 2008)



Upon entering the University, many students opt to live with a randomly assigned roommate. Sometimes these relationships go smoothly, while other times there is conflict, perhaps even requests for room reassignments.

Empirical research is needed to provide insight into the role of race and other factors in compatibility among interracial roommate relationships.

Method

Students were recruited from an advanced undergraduate psychology course at the University of Illinois

Students were eligible to participate if they had been randomly assigned to live with a student of another race at the University of Illinois

Survey

Participants completed a 12-item survey regarding their living situation and experiences with their roommate

8 White females, 2 White males, 5 Asian American females, 1 Asian American male, 2 Asian (International Student) females

Example questions include:

- How close did you feel to your roommate during the time you were living together?
- Did you talk about race with your roommate?

Interview

1 female South Korean student

1 female White student

Preliminary Findings

Randomly assigned interracial roommates get along well enough for the year, but decide to live with other people the following year.

- **Biggest stated reason for choosing to separate is perceived lack of commonality.**
 - "We had different social groups."
 - "Got along perfectly, but weren't 'friends.'"
 - "Didn't work because our lives didn't really overlap"
 - "Didn't have a lot in common"
 - "Since we had such different schedules, we never really did anything together."
 - "Not really interested in one another"
- **Avoidance of topic of race:**
 - "If I bring the topic [of race] up out of nowhere, then that would be awkward."
 - "To be safe, we never talked about [race]."
 - "Race is a personal topic."
 - "When I'm with people of a different race...I don't want to offend them or say anything wrong."



Discussion

Considered together, findings suggest that perceived lack of commonality may stem from racial difference. If students in interracial roommate relationships were able to discuss race and its implications in their lives and in their relationship, perhaps they could reduce their fear of being offensive and their anxiety about being "different." Perhaps they might find that they are really not that different.

Making racial awareness and intergroup dialogue a bigger priority within the university would stimulate roommates to engage in more honest conversations about race.

Could racial differences be causing the perceived lack of commonality?

Suggestions to Work Toward This Goal:

Require diversity classes for all incoming students

Use Critical Race Theory in the classroom and in curriculum planning when possible

- Be skeptical of claims of neutrality, racial color-blindness, and merit
- Center race and racism
- Work Critical Whiteness Studies into every class and acknowledge works by people of color
- Emphasize the voices of people of color
- Continue to diversify the faculty and students

