



The University of Auckland, New Zealand

Authors



MICHELLE SAMURA

Associate Professor and Associate Dean
Attallah College of Educational Studies
Chapman University
samura@chapman.edu



MARINA BALLESTEROS

Research Assistant
Attallah College of Educational Studies
Chapman University
balle105@mail.chapman.edu



SARAH GARCIA-GONZALEZ

Research Assistant
Attallah College of Educational Studies
Chapman University
garci441@mail.chapman.edu

Privacy, Personalization, and Presentation in Bedroom Spaces: Examining the Role of Residence Halls for Undergraduate Students

BELONGING IS ESSENTIAL FOR COLLEGE STUDENT SUCCESS, yet little is known about how residence hall spaces affect this experience. This article reports on selected findings from a multi-year research project that aims to understand the multiple uses, experiences, and meanings of spaces in the residence halls. Qualitative analysis of student-created photo journals, interviews, and focus groups indicate that residents' bedrooms play a critical role in their collegiate experience. In particular, we found that students engage in the processes of creating privacy, personalizing their space, and shaping a presentation of themselves through their bedrooms and bed areas as a reflection of their sense of belonging. Findings from this study can inform the design of student life programming to more effectively support students in personalizing their residence hall spaces in order to enhance student belonging.

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Existing research has identified belonging as essential for college student success (Bowman, 2010; Hoffman et al., 2002; Strayhorn, 2008, 2019). According to Strayhorn (2019), belonging is the “degree to which an individual feels respected, valued, accepted, and needed by a defined group” (p. 4). College students’ sense of belonging refers specifically to “the individual’s view of whether he or she feels included in the college community” (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, p. 327). Student belonging is strongly correlated with persistence, engagement, academic achievement, and overall well-being (Astin, 1993; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; John-

son et al., 2007). Though higher education scholars have also recognized that campus environments affect behavior by facilitating certain kinds of activities and hindering others (e.g., Kuh et al., 2006; Strange & Banning, 2001), there currently is limited information about how specific campus spaces affect the development of student belonging. Addressing this need, this article aims to deepen understandings of the relationship between student belonging and an important campus space: residence halls.

On-campus student housing is a critical space that warrants serious consideration due to its influence on both college choice

(Amole, 2009; La Roche et al., 2010) and the student experience (Arboleda et al., 2003; Reynolds, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008). The literature highlights important connections between living in residence halls and both student involvement and belonging (e.g., Arboleda et al., 2003; Suhlmann et al., 2018) and between residence hall climate and the development of student relationships, community, and belonging (e.g., Berger, 1997; Garvey et al., 2018; Kaya, 2004; Pascarella et al., 1994; Strayhorn, 2008).

Specifically, living on campus during the first year in college has a significant positive effect on peer belonging (Ribera et al., 2017). The residential space contributes to students' sense of belonging by helping them build relationships with others (Spanierman et al., 2013), and the intensity and closeness of these relationships affect their sense of being valued and accepted (Johnson et al., 2007). Moreover, students who are more satisfied with their residence hall are more likely to become involved with others, which in turn can help them academically and socially (Arboleda et al., 2003). Living-learning communities (LLCs), in particular, provide leadership opportunities and multicultural experiences that contribute to improved social and academic support (Spanierman et al., 2013).

Research on college and university housing indicates that residence halls contribute to student identity and advance student sense of belonging (e.g., Clemons et al., 2005; Holton & Riley, 2016; Hurtado & Carter, 1997) in a variety of ways. The extent to which

students feel like they fit within the university environment affects their well-being, motivation, and retention (Suhlmann et al., 2018), and the opportunity to personalize their residential space can lead to other positive outcomes (Clemons et al., 2005; Poggio et al., 2013) such as a sense of belonging, retention, and higher GPAs (Clemons et al., 2005).

Scholars have identified the residential experience as an important means to facilitate growth in many areas of student life, including improved relationships and a stronger sense of belonging (Arboleda et al., 2003; Johnson et al., 2007; Ribera et al., 2017; Spanierman et al., 2013). However, research on belonging in residence halls tends to focus on the space in general, with positive or negative student outcomes based upon their degree of belonging in this space. What still is needed is a clearer understanding of specific physical spaces within residence halls that contribute to student belonging and other positive outcomes. Specifically, how does the built environment and amenities in residence halls lead to a greater sense of belonging for residents? What occurs in residential spaces that may facilitate belonging and connectedness that is different from what is experienced in other campus spaces? More information and clarity are needed to gain a better understanding of residence hall space and its impact on students' sense of belonging. The present study seeks to address these gaps in the literature by examining how students engage in belonging in specific residential spaces.

The residential space contributes to students' sense of belonging by helping them build relationships with others, and the intensity and closeness of these relationships affect their sense of being valued and accepted.

Students used their bedroom spaces to engage in processes of belonging by creating privacy, personalizing the space, and shaping a presentation of themselves.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Part of a larger, multi-year research project, this qualitative case study addressed the following research questions: (1) How do residence hall spaces facilitate or hinder the development of belonging? and (2) How do students use their bedroom spaces to engage in processes of belonging? Case study methodology offers an inductive and iterative theory-building approach that is particularly useful for exploring a phenomenon within a particular context (de Vaus, 2005; Yin, 1989). Thus, a single case student design centered on West University (a pseudonym) enabled an in-depth examination of student experiences in residential spaces and the relationship between these spaces and student belonging.

Theoretical Frameworks

This research is framed by a combination of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), an interactionist view of belonging (Samura, 2016), and critical spatial approaches (e.g., Delaney, 2002; Harvey, 1996; Massey, 1994). From a symbolic interactionist perspective, meaning is created through interactions (Blumer, 1969); it is not pre-existent or unchangeable but is created and re-created through interactions.

Drawing upon a symbolic interactionist approach, Samura (2016) framed belonging as an interactional process. Belonging is more than a feeling or view; it is a process that requires ongoing effort. Furthermore, the meaning of belonging is created and re-created through interactions between or among people and between people and spaces.

A critical spatial perspective offers a useful lens to examine interactions between people and spaces. This perspective emphasizes how spaces—that is, built environments—are not neutral (Massey, 1994); they are not blank slates or empty receptacles in which activities occur (Tickamyer, 2000). Instead, space affects people, and people affect space. Space also contributes to and is reflective of power dynamics (Harvey, 1996). This study examines students' processes of belonging through the multiple meanings of space and of student identities that are created and re-created through interactions with both people and various residential spaces.

Setting and Participants

This article focuses on findings from data collected between January 2018 and May 2018 at West University, a medium-size private university located on the West Coast of the United States. West University's residential community comprises four on-campus residence halls (both traditional double-loaded corridor residence halls and suite-style residences), two apartment buildings, and one off-campus apartment building. Of the 2,208 students living in on-campus housing during the time of data collection, 55% lived in triple-occupancy halls, 18% lived in double-occupancy halls, and 7% lived in quadruple-occupancy halls. Approximately 20% of students who resided on campus were in apartments (with 50% living in double-occupancy rooms). An estimated 4% of students residing on campus lived independently in either an apartment or residence hall room.

The extent to which students feel like they fit within the university environment affects their well-being, motivation, and retention, and the opportunity to personalize their residential space can lead to other positive outcomes such as a sense of belonging, retention, and higher GPAs.

After securing IRB approval, we recruited students using a purposive sampling technique. Requests for participation were sent out to student organizations and psychology and communication departments via class announcements and posters displayed in the residence halls. Participants were eligible for a \$5 coffee shop gift card, two hours of service credit for participating in honor societies, or course research credit. All participants in this study completed informed consent forms.

During the spring 2018 data collection period, a total of 79 students participated in the study. Thirty-six students participated only as photo journalers, and 43 participated in both photo journaling and interviews or focus groups. Of the pool of student participants, most (90%) were in their first or second year of college. Participants racially identified as follows: 59% White, 18% Asian, 11% as two or more races, 6% Hispanic or Latinx, and 4% Black or African American. Of the participants, 88% were born in the United States, and English was the primary language for 91% of them. A total of 9% self-identified as first generation (born in a country other than the U.S.), and 18% identified as second generation (born in the U.S. with at least one parent who was born in another country). Fifteen academic majors were represented among participants, with the highest participation from those majoring in communication, health science, and psychology.

Data Collection

In order to understand students' experiences, perspectives, and the meanings they associated with different spaces, we employed multiple qualitative methods, as is common in case study methodology (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), including participant-created photo journals (Chaplin, 2004; Collier & Collier, 1986; Suchar, 1997), focus groups, and interviews (Kvale, 1996). Students had the option to participate in photo journaling and a follow-up interview or focus group. All participants completed a brief online questionnaire that requested basic demographic information (e.g., gender, race, generation, etc.). For the photo journaling process, students were provided with a shooting script to guide their picture taking (Suchar, 1997). Participants had approximately two weeks to respond to seven questions through photos. Representative questions included the following: "In which space(s) in your residence hall do you feel the most comfortable?" and "What does it mean to 'belong' in your residence hall?" Participants also had the opportunity to provide brief descriptions or explanations of their submitted photos. Students were invited to participate in a 45-minute individual interview or a 90-minute focus group session. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups centered on the shooting script questions and prints from the photo journals. With all identifiers removed, the

photos were collectively analyzed and discussed using a photo elicitation technique (Harper, 2002).

Data Analysis

The combination of participant-created photo journals, focus groups, and interviews emphasized student perspectives and enabled the research team to examine meanings, perceptions, and the processes of belonging in which students engaged. After photos were submitted and interviews and focus groups were completed, we analyzed data using coding processes and constant comparative analysis from the analytical tradition of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). We organized photographs by shooting script question and by participant. We then coded the photographs and analyzed them for emergent patterns and themes (Collier & Collier, 1986; Suchar, 1997). This process involved making several passes through the photos, taking notes on the content and characteristics of the photos, and assigning one to three codes to each photo. Comments and explanations of photographs provided by participants, as well as notes on the interviews and focus groups, were also coded. We then identified themes and patterns across all data sources in order to identify (1) spatial practices that seemed connected to student belonging and (2) key spaces that facilitated and hindered student belonging.

All research team members participated in the coding processes. We began by individually coding a portion of the data and then collectively discussed our coding processes and our rationale for selected codes in order to determine consistency among codes within our research team. Throughout the remainder of the data anal-

ysis process, we frequently met to discuss our coding processes and compare emergent themes. By confirming the salience of themes and checking each research team member's interpretations of the data throughout the process, we engaged in researcher triangulations that contributed to the trustworthiness of the study. Additionally, triangulating the different forms of data (focus groups, interviews, photographs, and photo journaler notes) through constant comparative analysis also further refined and confirmed our interpretations of the data. Given the scope of this study and the sample size, we do not claim generalizability of our findings. However, the fact that students in this study had particular experiences, including some revealed in prior research, suggests that these phenomena may also be happening elsewhere.

FINDINGS

For this article, we chose to focus on a space that participants most frequently cited as being areas of comfort: their bedrooms. Of the 79 participants in spring 2018, a total of 72% (57 students) indicated that they felt most comfortable in their bedrooms or bed area. They also indicated that their bedrooms served as areas in which they engaged in the processes of creating privacy, personalizing their space, and shaping a presentation of themselves.

Privacy

Participants cited privacy as one of the main reasons they felt most comfortable in their bedrooms. For example, along with submitting a photo of her bed area (Figure 1), Josephine (all names used in this study are pseudonyms) explained that she feels most comfortable in her room because "this is

where I feel like I can have my own space.” Similarly, Erika submitted a photograph of her bed area (Figure 2).

I feel most comfortable in my dorm room because all of my stuff is here. I do not have to worry about people walking by, and I feel like I can sleep, do homework, eat, and do other thing[s] that I need to do.

FIGURE 1

Josephine's Room



FIGURE 2

Erika's Room



Erin's photograph provides a glimpse into the private space she created (Figure 3). She shared more about this space with the following explanation:

. . . (excuse the mess) I feel most comfortable in my dorm bedroom. I live in the Harold Apartments [pseudonym], so there are two bedrooms and a living room area. I feel most comfortable in my bedroom as it is a space for me to get work done and relax, as well as get away from any stresses/issues that may arise between roommates as it's easy to close the door and have my alone time.

FIGURE 3

Erin's Room



Other students articulated how their bedrooms were spaces in which they could control who was around. As Molly stated, “I feel most comfortable in my room. It is a place where I know the majority of the time will just be my roommates and I, I do not feel like I have to be social and I can relax.” Kelsey also shared, “I feel most comfortable in the room which I share with my roommate. It is big enough that we have our own space and do not invade each other’s but we are still able to have that company.”

Participants cited privacy as one of the main reasons they felt most comfortable in their bedrooms.

Personalization

The sense of control students felt within the privacy of their rooms connected with their desire to personalize their spaces. For example, Karina submitted a photo of her bed area (Figure 4) that depicts a bed with a laptop propped open on the blankets. At the head of the bed is a large poster and hanging art. To the side are several photos hanging on the wall. Karina explained:

I recently moved into a single room in Hart Hall [pseudonym]. This photo is of my wall and bed. I definitely feel the most comfortable in my own room. The things I have put on my walls are familiar to me and remind me of home and what is important to me. I am introverted and need to have my own space for down time and to relax after long days. My room is my safe space no matter what goes on outside of it.

FIGURE 4

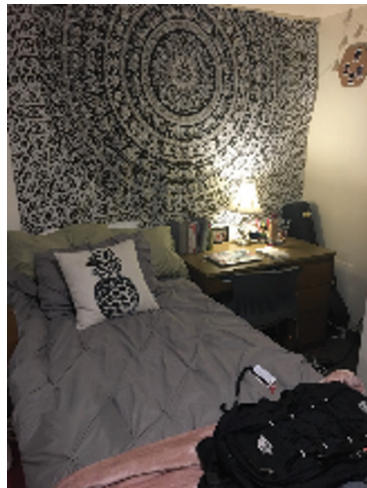
Karina's Wall and Bed



Similarly, Rachel responded to the question about the space in which she feels most comfortable by submitting a photo of her bed area (Figure 5). She explained how, in her residence hall room, “I have my space and my things in it, which makes it the closest feeling to home I can get.”

FIGURE 5

Rachel's Space



Students also personalized their spaces by adding lamps or string lights or by hanging curtains to adjust the natural and artificial light in the space. As seen in Figure 4, Karina hung photographs on string lights, small and dim lights that served as additional decor.

Finally, students expressed their identities in the ways they choose to decorate their rooms. Most of the submitted images show photographs on the walls (e.g., Figure 6): standard 4 x 6 photos either posted on walls

or hung by ribbon or string lights. These decorations were purposive and personalized; in Figure 6, which depicts three beds situated closely to one another, the different angles of the beds, placement of desks, and wall decorations signal the varied spaces carved out by each resident. In addition to photographs, students accessorized their spaces with other decorations, such as tapestries, Greek letters, and posters.

FIGURE 6

Student Room Decorations and Demarcation of Personal Space



Presentation

Students used their bedrooms to engage in the process of presentation—that is, showcasing aspects of themselves and their identities that they wanted to highlight to those entering and observing the space. For example, one participant's photo of her bed area featured plush bedding, string lights, and tapestries covered in a glow of pink light (Figure 7), and another (Figure 9) displayed numerous Disney items as decor. Conversely, students' rooms provided some respite from the pressure to present themselves outside the comfort of their bedroom. Natalie submitted a photo of her portion of the room (Figure 8) and explained, "I feel most

comfortable in my room because I can be [in] comfortable clothes and I don't have to be dressed up because no one will see me other than my roommates who I am very close with."

FIGURE 7

Use of Decorative Lighting to Personalize a Space



FIGURE 8

Natalie's Room



The sense of control students felt within the privacy of their rooms connected with their desire to personalize their spaces.

FIGURE 9

Brooklyn's Disney Decor



DISCUSSION

Students used their bedroom spaces to engage in processes of belonging by creating privacy, personalizing the space, and shaping a presentation of themselves. In this section, each of these three emergent themes will be discussed.

Privacy

A sense of privacy has been identified as a predictor of student satisfaction in housing (Amole, 2009), so it is useful to consider privacy when determining what helps students feel a sense of belonging. For many students, transitioning to campus housing means having to share bedrooms, which reduces their sense of privacy (Clemons et al., 2005). Both Molly and Kelsey's descriptions of their rooms and bed areas revealed their strong desire to have some control over who they were around. Their rooms became sites where they could choose to be around certain people (e.g., just with one's roommates) and not feel like they had to be overly social.

Erika's comment about being able to do whatever she wanted in her room without needing to be concerned with others emphasized how students find comfort in private

spaces, such as their bedrooms. These findings align with Holton and Riley's (2016) research on how private spaces can serve a variety of purposes for students. While other research has indicated that the multifunctional nature of a shared bedroom can be problematic (e.g., Amole, 2005), participants in this study have described this as a positive attribute of their spaces.

Privacy is an important "psychological factor" that serves as a boundary "to keep an optimum balance between seclusion and social interaction" (Keeley & Edney, 1983, p. 220). While students' bedrooms are one type of a space that serves multiple functions, they are also unique because they serve as students' personal multipurpose spaces. For many students, these are the only campus spaces over which they have control. This finding supports research that highlight trends in college students' desires for increased privacy and more control over their personal spaces (e.g., Banning, 1995).

Personalization

Opportunities to personalize spaces are a source of comfort for students. Within their bedrooms, they personalized their space by displaying photos (Hansen & Altman, 1976; Walsh, 2006), rearranging furniture, adjusting the height of beds, moving dressers, using desk space for purposes other than studying, and personalizing lighting for functional or decorative purposes. These findings support existing research that indicates the importance of students being able to personalize their residence hall space. Previous research indicates that bedrooms can function as a place of refuge when residents are given autonomy to personalize their space (Clemons et al., 2005), which in turn is connected to their overall sense of belonging (McKelfresh et al., 2006). Previous research

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has also found connections between decorating and personalizing one's residential space and higher GPAs, lower drop-out rates, and a smoother transition to college (Hansen & Altman, 1976; Walsh, 2006).

As illustrated by the photo journal data, students personalized their bedroom space in a variety of ways. They rearranged furniture to meet their needs, adjusted the height of their beds to fit their preferences and to make room for personal items (Figure 3), and used their desk space for purposes other than studying. Figure 5 depicts how one student used her desk as both a bookshelf and laptop station. Figure 6 shows how three roommates configured their room by demarcating each roommate's personal space. The use of furniture to manage relationships supports the results of Amole's (2005) study in which participants rearranged furniture as a territorial strategy to de-escalate spatial conflicts with roommates. While our respondents did not specifically cite this as a strategy to alleviate roommate conflicts, it can be inferred that these arrangements may have served as physical markers to distinguish personal spaces.

Presentation

The process of shaping a presentation of themselves can play out in different ways. Through their selection of items for their room and bed areas (e.g., artwork, posters, pillows), participants had some agency in how they presented themselves and in how they were perceived by others. For example, if they hoped their peers viewed them as having financial resources, they may have selected styles of bedding or items associated with

higher social status (Figure 7). This finding aligns with Poggio et al.'s (2013) explanation of personalization as an act of communication, in which observers can decode signs within a space to gather information about the possessor.

Ironically, the photo of a bedroom that Natalie submitted (Figure 8) sharply contrasted with the comments she provided on feeling most comfortable in her room because she does not have to get dressed up or care how she looks; this photo depicts a carefully styled bed with pillows fluffed and arranged and a decorative throw casually draped across the bed in a way that mirrors current design catalogs. As Gosling and colleagues affirmed, people alter their spaces to "broadcast information about themselves" (2013, p. 279). It is possible that although students in the present study may have felt comfortable not displaying themselves a certain way in their rooms, they still may have decorated or organized their spaces if they felt their rooms would be showcased to others. For instance, some students may have staged their bedroom spaces before taking the photographs, knowing they would have an audience.

The process of presenting themselves through their bedroom spaces can also express their current or aspirational identities. For example, Brooklyn submitted a photograph (Figure 9) of her bedroom with decorations relating to Disney. Since college students often live in small, temporary spaces, they must be selective about what they choose to bring from home, what to have on display, and what to add or remove. This creates a

continuous process of filtering previous and new possessions throughout the students' time at the university. This finding aligns with Holton and Riley's (2016) research, which revealed that the temporality of living in the residential space affected the objects students chose as part of their presentation. Brooklyn may have included such decor to project her current identity as a committed Disney fan, someone connected to Disney's culture and/or someone who values youthfulness and the alternative worlds of Disney characters. As Gosling and colleagues (2013) point out, personalizing a bedroom space is both a personal and deliberate experience.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Findings from our study revealed how residential students utilize their bedrooms and bed areas to engage in critical identity work. Residents employed these spatial practices in their bedrooms as a way to develop and project a sense of belonging. These findings have implications for both research and practice. As our results have illustrated, in-depth insights can be gained through an examination of students' use of campus spaces. This is especially true for spaces where students have some control or agency, such as their bedrooms.

Future research might examine whether there is a relationship between specific student identities and how they design their bedroom spaces. For example, there may be a specific population of students for whom the opportunity to personalize these spaces

is especially important for their sense of belonging. Additionally, researchers may benefit from examining how students choose to curate items in their rooms. These insights may reveal the salience of different identities students feel they need to project in order to connect with their peers. Additionally, scholars of college student development would benefit from examining student bedroom spaces over time; understanding how and why students change these spaces may provide insights into changes in individual student identities and their relationships with their peers.

Student staff, such as resident advisors (RAs), would benefit from learning about the impact of residential spaces on the development of student belonging. RAs could then design programs or decorations for their halls that provide support for identity work and social connectedness. This might include offering opportunities for residents to personalize their individual areas and share valued aspects of their identities with fellow residents. RAs could also refer to their residents' bedroom spaces as they get acquainted with them and as they encourage the development of community.

Given the insights gained through this study's findings, campus designers and facilities management could explore ways to support more personalized student bedroom or bed area design. They could, for example, build more flexible bedroom areas that better enable residents to express themselves; when students have opportunities to design,

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... when students have opportunities to design, contribute to, and occupy spaces, even if they are shared spaces, they likely will experience a greater sense of connectedness with the space as well as with their peers.

contribute to, and occupy spaces, even if they are shared spaces, they likely will experience a greater sense of connectedness with the space as well as with their peers.

Institutions of higher education are in a moment of great challenge and great possibility, with campus housing and residence life playing a critical role in creating a di-

verse community in which residents experience a sense of belonging—and on-campus student housing plays a critical role in this process. The more we can understand the identity and belonging work with which students engage in these spaces, the better we can meet the needs of and more effectively support all students. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The findings indicate that students at West University use their student rooms to engage in the process of belonging by creating privacy, personalizing the space, and shaping a presentation of themselves. How do you think this compares to what residential students at your institution do?
2. As a way to support students in creating a sense of belonging, how can you encourage them to personalize their residential rooms?
3. What may hinder students' ability to personalize their residential rooms at your institution? What can you do to overcome these challenges?

Discussion questions developed by Gudrun Nyunt, clinical assistant professor and HESA program coordinator in the Department of Counseling and Higher Education at Northern Illinois University.