Is Three a Crowd? Exploring the Development and Satisfaction of Students in Triples

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TRIPLING, THE ASSIGNMENT OF A THIRD RESIDENT TO A ROOM DESIGNED FOR TWO, is a common practice at many colleges and universities across the United States. Most of the research on tripling was conducted three or four decades ago, and research exploring how living in a triple affects the educational gains and satisfaction of college students is limited. The researchers compared the residential experience of students who lived in standard double rooms to the experience of those who lived in triples. The results revealed that the residential experience of students in triples was comparable to the experience of students in doubles. Differences emerged when we focused on the doubled students, dyads, and isolates separately. Tripling does not seem to have a negative effect on the residential experience of today’s college student.

While tripling might not affect the personal gains and satisfaction of students, it is unclear how tripling impacts residential retention. The experience of living in a triple might dissuade students from living on campus for another year.

Living on campus is associated with many positive outcomes, such as improved academic performance (López Turley & Wodtke, 2010; Nicpon et al., 2006; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1999), persistence (Dakin, 2008; Jamelske, 2009; Nicpon et al., 2006), and social and academic adjustment (López Turley & Wodtke, 2010; Nicpon et al., 2006; Terenzini et al., 1999). To support the transition and adjustment of matriculating college students, many institutions have implemented a mandatory live-on requirement (Schroeder, 1981). This requirement, however, in conjunction with a spike in enrollment and a low attrition rate of residents, might create a situation where more students are slated to live on campus than space permits. Some institutions choose to address this over-assignment problem through tripling, the assignment of a third resident to a room designated as a double (Schroeder, 1981).

Most of the research on the effects of tripling on the residential experience of college students was conducted in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Aiello, Baum, & Gormley, 1981; Baron, Mandel, Adams, & Griffen, 1976; Baum, Shapiro, Murray, & Wideman, 1979; Glassman, Burkhardt, Grant, & Vallery, 1978; Karlin, Rosen, & Epstein, 1979; Reddy, Baum, Fleming, & Aiello, 1981; Ronchi & Sparacino,
1982; Zuckerman, Schmitz, & Yoshia, 1977), though tripling continues to be a common practice on college campuses across the United States (Clark, Jackson, & Everhart, 2012). Additional research is needed to understand how tripling affects today’s college student. The findings would assist student affairs administrators in identifying ways to support students who are involuntarily assigned to triples.

THE EFFECTS OF TRIPLING IN RESIDENCE HALLS

Research on tripling has primarily focused on the perception of crowding (Aiello et al., 1981; Baron et al., 1976; Baum et al., 1979; Kaya & Erkip, 2001; Reddy et al., 1981; Zuckerman et al., 1977), how those perceptions are mediated by the social and physical environments (Aiello et al., 1981; Baron et al., 1976; Baum et al., 1979; Kaya & Erkip, 2001; Zuckerman et al., 1977), and gender differences (Aiello et al., 1981).

The Perception of Crowding

Valins and Baum (1973) defined crowding as continual exposure to unwanted social interactions. When people are placed in spaces smaller than the personal space they are used to, crowding can cause stress, which can lead to multiple negative outcomes in a person’s behavior, depending on the context and the permanence of the situation. Specifically, crowding might result in abated sense of control (Baron et al., 1976; Baum et al., 1979; Hughey, 1981), social withdrawal (Baum, Aiello, & Calesnick, 1978), and social tensions (Aiello et al., 1981; Baron et al., 1976; Karlin et al., 1979).

Factors that mediate perceptions of crowding include context (Desor, 1972), previous experience with crowded environments (Karlin et al., 1979), and physical characteristics such as corridor length and floor height (Baum et al., 1978; Kaya & Erkip, 2001; Zuckerman et al., 1977). Desor (1972) found that the social context influences perceptions of crowding. For instance, a physical space with the same social density would be perceived differently if it were a cocktail party rather than an airport waiting area. In addition, research found that previous experience in high-occupancy environments can mediate perceptions of crowding: college students who came from larger families perceived their residence hall to be less crowded than those who came from smaller families (Karlin et al., 1979). Regarding the physical environment, there is a positive relationship between perceived crowding and corridor length (Baum et al., 1978; Zuckerman et al., 1977) and a negative relationship between perceived crowding and floor height (Kaya & Erkip, 2001).

The individual residents of triples might experience crowding effects differently, and two residents might form a coalition (or dyad), thus isolating the third resident. The third person in a triple, the isolate, tends to report greater perceptions of crowding, less control, and less satisfaction than do dyads and residents of doubles.
**Gender Differences**

Research on gender differences in the effects of living in triples has produced mixed results. According to Aiello et al. (1981), women felt more dissatisfaction with tripling and felt more crowded than did men. The researchers found that college women spent more time in their rooms and expressed a greater desire for social involvement with their roommates than did college men, which could create more social tension for women in triples. However, Mullen and Felleman (1990) found that men demonstrated more adverse reactions to crowding than did women; female-to-female interpersonal distances are often smaller than male-to-male distances, suggesting that men might experience more negative effects in triples because they require larger interpersonal distances than do women.

**Roommate Isolation**

Some research explored the formation of coalitions within triples (Aiello et al., 1981; Baum et al., 1979; Reddy et al., 1981). Baum et al. (1979) posited that the individual residents of triples might experience crowding effects differently, and two residents might form a coalition (or dyad), thus isolating the third resident. The third person in a triple, the isolate, tends to report greater perceptions of crowding, less control, and less satisfaction than do dyads and residents of doubles (Aiello et al., 1981; Baum et al., 1979; Reddy et al., 1981). Moreover, these researchers found no difference in the experience of dyads and residents of doubles. This supports the belief that the experience of isolates accounts for most of the difference in the experience of residents in doubles and triples.

A recent study by Clark et al. (2012) examined whether or not the historically documented negative effects of tripling can be found with today’s student population. The researchers assessed the experiences of 141 residential first-year students and found no difference in depression, anxiety, and stress levels of students in doubles and triples and no difference in the psychological well-being of men and women.

Overall, research on triples has found that crowded living environments might cause psychological and social distress, but this research was conducted three or four decades ago. Additional research is needed to understand if the negative effects associated with tripling can be found among today’s college students. The researchers of the current study also did not find any research on triples that included educational gains and satisfaction with the residential experience as outcome measures. Given that one of the primary purposes of residence halls is to promote student learning and social integration (Strange & Banning, 2001), these additional measures are needed to understand how tripling impacts a residential system’s ability to achieve its mission. The present study contributes to the literature by assessing the residential experience and the self-reported educational gains of college students in triples.

**RESEARCH APPROACH**

**Institutional Context**

The researchers conducted the study at a large public research institution in the Midwest, hereafter referred to as Midwest University (MU). A low residential attrition rate of 50%, record enrollment of first-year students, diminished
housing capacity due to renovations, and a live-on requirement for first-year students created a situation where the number of students who registered to live on campus exceeded the residential system’s capacity. The housing officers at MU decided to convert some of the double rooms into triple rooms, temporarily. This only affected new students, i.e., matriculating first-year students and transfer students. The institution did not offer specialized housing for first-year students; thus, first-year students were randomly assigned to available spaces.

**Dataset**

MU staff disseminated an 80-item online questionnaire to assess the residential experience of students. The questionnaire included demographic questions and measures regarding students’ satisfaction with the living environment. The MU staff sent one invitation and three reminders for residential students to participate in the assessment. The reminders and advertisements in the residence halls resulted in an overall response rate of 50%. The researchers of the current study conducted a secondary analysis of this dataset.

**Participants**

The researchers limited the analysis to two residence halls with identical structures and a common dining facility to account for differences that might result from the physical environment (Baum et al., 1978; Kaya & Erkip, 2001; Mullen & Felleman, 1990). The residence halls were located on the perimeter of campus, primarily housed first-year students, were four stories tall, had two double-loaded corridors with communal restrooms, and had double rooms that were slightly larger than other double rooms in the residential system. Residence hall “A” housed 481 students, and hall “B” housed 482 students. The halls provided mixed-gender living environments by residential wing; 56% of the residents were women, and 44% were men.

A total of 488 students of residence halls A and B completed the assessment, for a response rate of 51%. After controlling for missing values using list-wise deletion, the final sample consisted of 451 domestic first-year students. About half of the respondents (n = 226) lived in standard doubles, and 225 lived in triples. Of the respondents who lived in a triple, 67 were isolates. For the purpose of this study, isolates were defined as the third person in a room where two other people requested one another (n = 30) or the person who chose to move once additional space became available (n = 37). About 40% of the respondents were men, and 86% of the respondents identified as White. The demographic distributions of the sample were comparable to the demographic distribution of the two residence halls.

The researchers measured respondents’ perception of the living environment using four variables: floor climate, safety, floor empathy, and floor community.
Variables
The variables of interest included two grouping variables and eight outcome variables. The grouping variables were Room Type (1-Standard; 2-Triple) and Gender (1-Man; 2-Woman). The outcome variables included measures relating to respondents’ perceptions of their living environment, personal gains, and satisfaction.

Living environment. The researchers measured respondents’ perception of the living environment using four variables: floor climate, safety, floor empathy, and floor community. Floor climate was a four-item scale (α = .942) that measured respondents’ perception of the inclusiveness of their peers. The respondents were asked to rate to what extent they believed floor residents were respectful of people with different religious beliefs, physical and mental abilities, racial/ethnic backgrounds, and sexual identities. The response options for these prompts and the other living environment scale items ranged from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7). The middle point (4) was labeled Neutral. Safety was a four-item (α = .899) measure of the extent to which respondents felt safe in their living environment. Respondents were asked to report to what extent their floor felt safe emotionally and physically. They were also asked to report to what extent the residential neighborhood felt safe during the day and at night. The third variable, floor empathy, consisted of six items (α = .923) that measured respondents’ perception of the mutual respect and consideration of floor residents. Respondents were asked to report if they felt respected by floor residents, if residents followed the rules, if the floor was quiet enough when they wanted to study or sleep, and if the respondents felt comfortable approaching a resident if they had a concern. Floor community was a four-item (α = .912) measure of the extent to which respondents viewed themselves as part of the residential community. Respondents were prompted to report if they viewed themselves as a valued member of the floor community, if they knew many residents on the floor, if floor residents did things together, and if they enjoyed living on their floor.

Personal gains. The researchers measured the personal gains, or learning, of the respondents using two variables: alcohol and drug use and personal development. Alcohol and drug use consisted of two items (α = .906) and measured the extent to which living in a residence hall increased respondents’ understanding of the consequences of alcohol and drug use. The response options ranged from Not at all (1) to To a great degree (7). Personal development was a 13-item scale (α = .965) that measured respondents’ gains in interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, such as managing conflicts with others, interacting with people from different backgrounds, compromising with others, and stepping out of one’s comfort zone.

Satisfaction. The questionnaire asked two questions regarding resident satisfaction. The first question prompted respondents to report if they were satisfied with their on-campus experience. The response options were Yes, No, and Neutral. The second question asked if respondents would recommend on-campus housing to new students. The response options were Yes, No, and Maybe.

Statistical Procedures
A preliminary analysis revealed skewed distributions and unequal variances for the living
environment and personal gains measures. The researchers decided to use a rank-based factorial analysis of variance to test the difference in the experiences of the respondents by living arrangement and gender. The researchers used the `bmd2way` function described by Wilcox (2012), which tests the null hypotheses of no main effects for the two factors and no interaction between the factors. The function produces test statistics and relative effects. A relative effect represents the score of a group relative to the scores of all of the groups. The value of a relative effect can range from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating greater scores for a particular group. The relative effects of all groups are expected to be .50 if the null hypothesis for a given outcome variable is not rejected (Erceg-Hurn & Mirosevich, 2008). Pairwise comparisons were conducted using Cliff’s delta $d$, which is a nonparametric statistic that assesses the probability that a randomly sampled score from one population is higher than a randomly sampled score of another population, minus the reverse probability (Cliff, 1996). An advantage of using Cliff’s delta for inferential statistics is that it also serves as a measure of effect size. The researchers controlled familywise error rates using the Holm-Bonferroni step-down procedure (Cliff, 1996). The satisfaction measures were categorical in scale. The researchers conducted chi square analyses for these measures.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Relative effects</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Standard</td>
<td></td>
<td>Triple</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Living environment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floor climate</td>
<td></td>
<td>.533</td>
<td>.475</td>
<td>.545</td>
<td>.472</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td></td>
<td>.604</td>
<td>.445</td>
<td>.604</td>
<td>.413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floor empathy</td>
<td></td>
<td>.610</td>
<td>.447</td>
<td>.568</td>
<td>.436</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floor community</td>
<td></td>
<td>.598</td>
<td>.468</td>
<td>.574</td>
<td>.414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal gains</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol and drug use</td>
<td></td>
<td>.556</td>
<td>.435</td>
<td>.539</td>
<td>.507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal development</td>
<td></td>
<td>.558</td>
<td>.468</td>
<td>.537</td>
<td>.470</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Relative effects represent the degree to which respondents in one group score high or low on a dependent variable relative to the scores of all of the respondents. Higher values correspond to higher ratings. Statistical significance was set at the .05 level. Significant differences are in bold.*
RESULTS

Room Type

The 2 x 2 factorial ANOVA revealed no statistically significant main effects for the living environment and personal gains measures by room type (see Table 1). Respondents who lived in triples reported levels of personal gains and satisfaction with their living environment that were comparable to those of their peers who lived in standard rooms.

In regard to the differences by gender, there were statistically significant main effects for all of the living environment and personal gains measures. Men reported greater levels of learning and a more positive perception of the living environment than did women. Moreover, there were no statistically significant interaction effects by room type and gender for any of the outcome variables, indicating that the gender differences are not a result of women and men experiencing tripled rooms differently.

 Resident Type

To further understand the experiences of students in triples, the researchers conducted a 3 x 2 factorial ANOVA (resident type x gender, see Table 2). The researchers split the triple group into its dyad and isolate components to assess if the experiences of these subgroups differed from one another and their peers in standard rooms. Similar to the room type by gender

### Table 1 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Room type</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Room type x Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Living environment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floor climate</td>
<td>0.03(1, 363)</td>
<td>.870</td>
<td>6.13(1, 363)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>0.40(1, 376)</td>
<td>.527</td>
<td>45.67(1, 376)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floor empathy</td>
<td>0.95(1, 366)</td>
<td>.330</td>
<td>29.56(1, 366)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floor community</td>
<td>2.12(1, 367)</td>
<td>.146</td>
<td>28.79(1, 367)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal gains</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol and drug use</td>
<td>0.96(1, 346)</td>
<td>.328</td>
<td>772(1, 346)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal development</td>
<td>0.11(1, 307)</td>
<td>.740</td>
<td>7.37(1, 307)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** Relative effects represent the degree to which respondents in one group score high or low on a dependent variable relative to the scores of all of the respondents. Higher values correspond to higher ratings. Statistical significance was set at the .05 level. Significant differences are in bold.
analysis, the resident type by gender factorial ANOVA revealed significant main effects for all of the living environment and personal gains measures by gender. Men reported higher ratings than did women. The results differed from the previous analysis in that there was a statistically significant main effect for floor community by resident type, $F(2, 146) = 5.05, p = .010$. Isolates ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 1.76$) reported less satisfaction with the floor community they experienced than did dyads ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.54$, $d = .241$, $p = .006$) and residents in doubles ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 1.52$, $d = .234$, $p = .006$). There was no statistically significant difference in the experience of dyads and doubled residents ($p > .05$).

There was a resident type by gender interaction for the measure of floor community, $F(2, 146) = 6.08$, $p = .004$. Pairwise comparisons revealed that female isolates were less satisfied with the floor community they experienced than were the five other groups (male doubles, female doubles, male dyads, female dyads, and male isolates). Moreover, female dyads were more satisfied than were female isolates, $d = .414$, $p < .001$, and women in doubles, $d = .149$, $p = .006$. There were no statistically significant differences between the male groups ($p > .05$). Further, there was no gender difference between residents in doubles ($p > .05$); however, there were gender differences for dyads, $d = .199$, $p = .002$, and isolates, $d = .491$.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relative Effects and Factorial Analysis of Variance of Differences in Experiences by Resident Type and Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Measure</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Living environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floor climate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
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<tr>
<td>Floor empathy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Floor community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal gains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol and drug use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Relative effects represent the degree to which respondents in one group score high or low on a dependent variable relative to the scores of all of the respondents. Higher values correspond to higher ratings. Statistical significance was set at the .05 level. Significant differences are in bold.*
$p < .001$, with men reporting greater satisfaction than women. The results illustrate that the dissatisfaction of women in triples, especially isolates, drives the resident type main effect for the measure of floor community.

**Satisfaction**

A chi square test revealed no association between respondents’ satisfaction with their on-campus experience and their room type, $\chi^2(2) = 5.07, p > .05$. About 75% of respondents in triples and 83% of respondents in standard rooms reported they were satisfied with their on-campus housing experience. A weak association emerged after analyzing the relationship between resident satisfaction and resident type, $\chi^2(4) = 12.96, p = .011$, Cramer’s $V = .120$ (see Figure 1). About 67% of isolates, 78% of dyads in triples, and 83% of standard room residents indicated that they were satisfied with their on-campus experience. A follow-up analysis using configural frequency analysis (von Eye, 2002) revealed no local associations.

Regarding the second measure of satisfaction, a chi square test revealed no association between respondents’ tendency to recommend on-campus housing and room type, $\chi^2(2) = 1.59, p > .05$. About 81% of respondents in triples and 85% of respondents in doubles indicated that they would recommend on-campus housing to new students. There was also

**Table 2 (continued)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statistical results</th>
<th>Resident type</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Res. type x Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$F(d_f, df_j)$</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
<td>$F(d_f, df_j)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Living environment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floor climate</td>
<td>2.27(2, 145)</td>
<td>.115</td>
<td>5.99(1, 145)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>0.94(2, 120)</td>
<td>.378</td>
<td>31.28(1, 120)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floor empathy</td>
<td>1.22(2, 107)</td>
<td>.294</td>
<td>22.89(1, 107)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floor community</td>
<td>5.05(2, 146)</td>
<td>.010</td>
<td>37.09(1, 146)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal gains</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol and drug use</td>
<td>1.64(2, 179)</td>
<td>.199</td>
<td>7.22(1, 179)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal development</td>
<td>2.32(2, 132)</td>
<td>.107</td>
<td>9.66(1, 132)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Relative effects represent the degree to which respondents in one group score high or low on a dependent variable relative to the scores of all of the respondents. Higher values correspond to higher ratings. Statistical significance was set at the .05 level. Significant differences are in bold.*
no association between respondents’ tendency to recommend on-campus housing and resident type, \( \chi^2(4) = 6.48, p > .05 \). About 73% of isolates, 84% of dyads in the triple rooms, and 85% of standard room residents indicated that they would recommend on-campus housing.

Overall, respondents in triples were as satisfied with their on-campus housing experience as were their peers in standard rooms. It should be noted, however, that some isolates were not as satisfied as their coalitional or doubled peers.

**DISCUSSION**

Several studies on the effects of residential density were conducted in the 70s and 80s.

As natural environments, many studies took place in college and university residence halls. Most of these studies associated crowding with negative outcomes, such as reduced sense of control (Baron et al., 1976; Hughey, 1983), social withdrawal (Baum et al., 1978), and social tensions (Aiello et al., 1981; Baron et al., 1976; Karlin et al., 1979). Since then, fewer researchers have studied the topic.

The purpose of the present study was to revisit the topic of the effects of tripling on the residential experience of college students and to explore if the documented negative outcomes still apply to today’s college student. Regarding the residential experience of students in doubles and triples, the researchers found...
no difference in the living environment and personal gains measures by room type. Respondents who lived in triples reported levels of personal gains and satisfaction that were comparable to those of their peers in double rooms. This counters much of the classic research on tripling (Aiello et al., 1981; Baron et al., 1976; Baum et al., 1978; Karlin et al., 1979).

Tripling does not appear to have the same negative effects on today's college student as it did with previous generations. This is supported by recent research by Clark et al. (2012), who found no difference in the stress level of doubled and tripled college students. The results of the current study indicate that tripling students does not appear to interfere with a residential program’s mission of providing safe learning environments.

Differences in the residential experience of doubled and tripled students emerged once we focused on the dyads and isolates separately. Isolates were less satisfied with the floor community they experienced than were dyads and students in standard rooms. A difference in the experience of isolates and dyads was found by other researchers as well (Aiello et al., 1981; Baum et al., 1979; Reddy et al., 1981). Baum et al. (1979) attributed the difference to the instability of triads as social formations; two people in a triad might form a coalition, which can have an isolating effect for the third person. The results of the present study suggest that isolates also had difficulties connecting with other floor residents. The triple rooms at MU were temporary, so it is possible that some isolates chose not to form meaningful relationships with floor residents because of the potential of being placed on another floor or in a different building. Moreover, the data suggests that female isolates lacked social support, which Cobb described as “information leading the subject to believe that he is cared for and loved, esteemed, and a member of a network of mutual obligations” (1976, p. 300). The resident assistant can play a vital role in providing social support for tripled students by mediating conflicts and connecting students to other residents with similar interests. These connections might alleviate some of the social tensions reported by isolates in other studies (Aiello et al., 1981; Baum et al., 1979).

Despite the lack of social integration of some tripled students, the results revealed no difference in the satisfaction of doubled and tripled students. Participants who lived in triples were as likely to be satisfied with their residential experience and recommend on-campus housing to new students as were their peers in doubles. These findings contribute to the research on triples by illuminating that tripling does not negatively affect students’ satisfaction with on-campus housing. Previous studies primarily examined satisfaction with roommate relationships (Aiello et al., 1981; Baum et al., 1979; Glassman et al., 1979) and the college experience (Baum et al., 1979).

Implications for Practice

The results of this study have several implications for practice. The recommendations might assist student affairs administrators in providing positive residential experiences for tripled students. The recommendations include supporting the social integration of tripled women, giving residents the option of choosing their roommates, managing expectations, and considering available resources when tripling.
Support the social integration of tripled women. Women in triples were the least satisfied with the floor community they experienced. Residence educators should identify strategies to integrate tripled women, such as connecting them to other residents who share similar interests and providing alternative study spaces. Previous research indicated that women might experience social distress because they have a desire for close relationships with roommates (Aiello et al., 1981). The aforementioned strategies might help tripled women form additional relationships, while decreasing the social distress that might result from all three roommates studying in the room.

Give residents the option of choosing their roommates. This study revealed that dyads tended to be more satisfied with their residential experience than were isolates and students in standard rooms. Allowing three residents to choose one another might reduce some of the social tensions experienced by an isolate.

Manage expectations. Previous research revealed that residents who were mentally prepared to live in a triple experienced less distress than did their peers who were not prepared (Glassman et al., 1978; Mullen & Fellemann, 1990). Student affairs administrators might be able to relieve some of the anxiety of living in a triple by providing residents with informational materials on living in a triple, which could include information about available resources and tips to maximize the physical space. Student affairs administrators might also consider allowing students a chance to preview the rooms.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The results from this study should be interpreted in light of its limitations. First, the study focused on the residential experience of students in two residence halls at one institution. The results may not be generalizable to students in other residential and campus contexts. Second, the study did not control for background characteristics, such as race/ethnicity, age, and prior experiences in crowded environments. Previous research demonstrated that students with prior experiences in high-occupancy environments were less negatively affected by tripling (Karlin et al., 1979). The differences between students in triples and doubles might become amplified or diminished once these background characteristics are taken into consideration.

Despite these limitations, the present study contributed to our understanding of the residential experience and outcomes of students in triples. The negative effects of tripling found in the classic literature on the topic do not seem to apply to today’s college student. While tripling college students might not hinder institutions from accomplishing their mission of providing safe learning environments, student affairs administrations should consider strengthening their efforts to facilitate the social integration of their residents when tripling.

Future research on tripling should include additional outcome measures, such as academic performance, persistence, and residential retention. Previous studies showed that sense of belonging is related to academic performance and persistence (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008; Nicpon et al., 2006). The present study illustrated that isolates felt less
integrated into their floor communities, which might negatively affect their academic success. Moreover, while tripling might not affect the personal gains and satisfaction of students, it is unclear how tripling impacts residential retention. The experience of living in a triple might dissuade students from living on campus for another year.

Additional research that is multi-institutional in nature is needed as well. Most of the research on triples is mono-institutional (e.g., Aiello et al., 1981; Baron et al., 1976; Baum et al., 1979; Clark et al., 2012; Glassman et al., 1978; Kaya & Erkip, 2001; Ronchi & Spara
cino, 1982; Zuckerman et al., 1977). Multi-institutional research that describes inter- and intra-institutional differences would illuminate how the experiences of students in triples might differ by campus and residential context and would also improve the generalizability of the findings.

Finally, qualitative research that examines the lived experience of students in triples is needed. Most, if not all, of the research on tripling used quantitative methods. Qualitative data collection methods, such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, and journaling, would provide rich insights on the topic.

**SUMMARY**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of residential students in overflow housing. At the room level, tripling does not appear to influence the residential experience of students negatively. However, minor differences emerged after examining the residential experience of the respondents at the resident level. Isolates were less likely to view themselves as valued members of the floor community. Student affairs administrators should consider the potential negative effects that individual students might experience and implement appropriate processes to support the social integration of tripled residents.

**REFERENCES**


Discussion Questions

1. The authors suggest additional research on this topic using qualitative research methods. If your intent is to better understand the experience of students living in tripled rooms, what are the merits of each of the following data collection strategies: journaling, focus group, and one-on-one interviews?

2. Considering the varied types of residence halls in which students may live three to a room, what are some of the variables within those environments that could impact the satisfaction level of those residents other than room occupancy?

3. How might residence hall staff identify isolates, and what strategies could be used in supporting these students?

4. This study found that tripling at this particular institution did not have a negative effect on the residential experience of these college students, though past research has indicated dissatisfaction with the tripling experience. Why do you think the findings vary over the years? Are there differences in today’s college students as compared to previous generations that might lead to this conclusion? Or are the findings counter-intuitive?

5. The authors note that the RA can “play a vital role in providing social support for tripled students by mediating conflicts.” How are RAs on your campus trained and prepared to help mediate conflict?

6. Women in triples in this study were the least satisfied with the experience. What do you know about female development that might explain the social distress experienced by some women in this study? Use student development theory (e.g., Gilligan and Josselson) to support your assertions.