



A place for sharing: The emotional geographies of peer-sharing in UK University halls of residences



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ABSTRACT

Our homes are important spaces through which emotions are produced, performed and regulated. They carry significant material and symbolic value and are inscribed with meaning and belonging that are often crucial in shaping and (re)producing collective and individual identities. Yet while research has explored the role of the home in the co-production of familial values, networks and behaviours, less is understood of the emotional geographies of accommodation occupied by non-related adults – defined here as ‘peer-sharing’. This paper responds to this gap by exploring how peer-shared living-spaces are emotionally constructed through a case study of students living in a UK university’s halls of residences. In doing so, this paper examines how (1) the morphology of shared living-spaces contributes towards the production of sharers’ emotions, (2) emotions become inscribed upon home-spaces through place-making activities and (3) diversity is enacted through the emotional work of sharers and how this is performed through friendship in shared living-spaces. This analysis concludes by emphasising the important role of emotions in co-producing different spaces, activities, knowledges and experiences among peer-sharers and how peer-sharing might be both performed *in* and influenced *by* living spaces.

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1. Introduction

Since the ‘affective turn’ in the social sciences in the 1990s (Clough and Halley, 2007) research has grappled with the complexities of emotions, exploring how our embodied experiences and feelings influence our interactions with (in) certain spatial scales (Anderson and Smith, 2001; Davidson et al., 2007). Davidson and Milligan (2004: 523) have seminally argued that: “emotions [...] take place within and around [the] closest of spatial scales”, providing geographical contexts that may enable understandings of the relative associations between potentially contrasting emotional behaviours. Moreover, while emotions may be in and of the body, they equate to more than simply cause and ‘affect’ and can influence experiences of environments both spatially and temporally (Brown, 2011). There is a well-established body of work that examines the role of emotions in home-spaces (Blunt, 2005; Hockey et al., 2007). Yet, while our homes are recognised as important sites through which emotional work is produced, performed and regulated, such research has engaged less with the emotional geographies of accommodation occupied by non-related adults –

defined here as ‘peer-shared households’ (Heath, 2004). Rates of peer-sharing among young people are increasing (Clapham et al., 2014; Moos, 2015) due to competitive rental markets (Van Criekingen, 2010) and a growing reliance upon multiple incomes to subsidise rents (Smith, 2012). Yet, little has been discussed of how young adults might *perform* peer-sharing in their accommodation and how this might influence their shared living experiences. Following Pile’s (2010) call for emotional geographers to investigate the ‘spaces in-between’ to explore how emotions produce, or are produced by spaces, this paper examines how the emotional construction of the shared non-familial home informs different spaces, activities, knowledges and experiences among peer-sharers.

As Blunt (2005) posits, our homes carry significant material and symbolic value, they are inscribed with meaning and with belonging and are often crucial in shaping and (re)producing collective and individual identities. Crucially, we dwell within our homes and for those living in temporary, short-term or shared accommodation, dwelling may well be part of a more complex process of mobility – a stop, a pause or a break in proceedings. Indeed, Heidegger (1977) instructs that “dwelling is the manner in which mortals are on the earth” (245), insofar as to dwell is to consider the performance of an activity in conjunction with other

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activities – “we work *here* and dwell *there*” (Heidegger, 1977: 245, emphasis my own). Moreover, notions of ‘travelling-in-dwelling’ and ‘dwelling-in-travelling’ have been developed by Clarke (2005) to emphasise how home, for those on the move, hinges on the interplay between the moveable and the stuck, the material and the symbolic, the corporeal and the imagined. Yet while this may emphasise complexities in how people reside together, what is often missing is an understanding of how sharing might produce, or be produced by, different emotional factors for those in transition. For instance, Giorgi and Fasulo (2013) draw upon the term ‘global abode’ to refer to “a notion of home captured in the tension between mobility and stasis” (113). They argue that such tension can be partly ameliorated through the transportation of material objects that may produce familiarity, maintain imagined connections and provide a sense of home while in transition, something that will be attended to in this paper. To explore these phenomena, this paper examines how (1) home-spaces produce emotions through their morphology, (2) emotions become inscribed upon home-spaces through place-making activities and (3) diversity is enacted through the emotional work of sharers and how this is performed through friendship in shared living spaces.

1.1. Peer-sharing and friendship

Research suggests that interactions within households have adapted in line with changes to our contemporary (im)mobilities, labour structures and access to technology (McDowell, 2007). Proximity has become less important within the post-modern home with a growing tendency for connections between householders to be structured more by ephemeral bonds than strong familial networks (Moos, 2015; Clapham et al., 2014). As McDowell (2007) argues: “the home increasingly is a space marked by [...] the co-presence of people united not by ties of blood and affection but by economic exchange” (130) and this caution is perhaps essential in informing the complex, non-familial ways of contemporary living outlined in this paper. Williams (2005), for example, discusses how non-familial co-housing may facilitate transferences of social capital among cohabiters that provide the building blocks of community cohesion. Other more heteronormative understandings of inter-personal relationships within the home have been subverted to emphasise the diverse ways unrelated adults might experience a sense of ‘at-homeness’ in shared accommodation (Wilkinson, 2014). Moreover, Kenyon and Heath (2001) touch upon the non-material benefits young people might draw from shared living arrangements such as the trade-off between company and privacy which may not be so easily negotiated in coupled or familial relationships (Heath and Kenyon, 2001). Furthermore, Jarvis (2011) argues against proximity and social interaction as being the sole proponents of convivial co-resident accommodation, proposing instead that harmonious and sustainable living also includes carefully cultivated time-space negotiations within households and between sharers. For example, Moss and Richter (2010) suggest that daily routines may not have clear spatial or temporal organisation in shared living spaces, with activities being performed in the same environment, and at different times of the day, offering little opportunity for differentiation or structure. What punctuates these debates though is how the individualisation of identity, or a conflation of the Self, has become synonymous with peer-sharing. Here, researchers have typically drawn upon Giddens’ (1991), Beck’s (1992) and Bourdieu’s (1984) views on post-modern lifestyles (especially among young people) as being developed through self-identity, independence, risk and choice. Hence, we approach our lives self-reflexively, intensely scrutinising, monitoring, (re) evaluating and (re)configuring our identities according to our own “project[s] of self-identity” (Reimer and Leslie, 2004: 191).

Crucially, this paper extends the influences of individuality upon peer-sharing and how this facilitates interactions in contemporary accommodation. Where some types of shared accommodation might provide fairly soft structural regulation (Moss and Richter, 2010) there remain ample opportunities to explore how such spaces may affect the emotional relationships that are negotiated between sharers.

Moreover, friendship is crucial in developing meaningful and lasting interactions in shared living arrangements. The context of peer-sharing encourages new ways of considering and understanding friendship by examining the contrasting ways in which friendships are produced, performed and negotiated through shared interactions. Bowlby (2011) argues that friendship “is a key aspect of patterns of sociability [that recognises] (or not) solidarities and communal belonging” (605). Friendships are commonly built upon trust, activity and communication and the common practices this produces among friendship groups. Yet friendship networks are complex and their fluid, temporal, and sometimes ephemeral, qualities make them difficult to spatially contain (Bunnell et al., 2012). As this paper suggests, friendships can also be paradoxical, shifting between being proximate or virtual, firm or ephemeral, present or disembodied, emotional or material. This paper responds to Bunnell et al.’s (2012) call for more critical investigations of the “formation, significance and spatiality” (500) that constitute young people’s geographies of friendship. For example, in the context of student friendships, Robertson (2016) argues that friendship is a vital component in the production of ‘translocal subjectivities’ (Conradson and McKay, 2007) for those in mobility as they interact (with) in new social and living environments. Notwithstanding, friendships are intrinsically tied to relationships with place and processes of place-making and the ability to enact social identities among ‘people like us’ (Fincher and Shaw, 2009).

1.2. Accommodating students

To examine the emotional relationships between sharers this paper draws upon a case study of UK university students living in Plymouth University’s halls of residences (hereafter referred to as halls). Student halls are particularly useful in understanding the complexity of sharing as they are usually occupied by groups of young, mobile, disconnected people who are mostly embarking on their first experiences of living away from home. Friendship and living arrangements are thought to be crucial components for sojourners’ (re)adjustment and emotional well-being (Brown, 2009). Hence, this provides an insight into how emotional work might influence, and be influenced by, temporary residents and how this may challenge some of the ways in which we think about the occupation of ‘home-spaces’. Accommodation has been central to discussions of the geographies of students for centuries. Historically, institutions have provided halls in some shape or form to students (Blakey, 1994; Silver, 2004). The Oxbridge college model has, since its inception, acted *in loco parentis* (Morgan and McDowell, 1979) as surrogate parents, harnessing academic reflection not clouded by domestic responsibilities. From the 19th century the new civic universities that were formed as urban home-based centres of learning contrasted with the seemingly ‘detached’ Oxbridge models. These more ‘local’ institutions were designed without accommodation in mind, instead encouraging learners to remain at home during their education. This, inevitably, did not last with universities recognising the need to accommodate students and by the 1960s student halls had become a ubiquitous feature of HE locations (Holdsworth, 2009; Silver, 2004). This, coupled with the opening of post-1992 universities and the rapid influx of students, contributed to the familiar patterns of home-to-

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