

Student Perceptions and Experiences of the Living Conditions in a University Residence: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT This qualitative study aimed to explore how students experience the living conditions in the residences of a university campus in South Africa. Three focus group interviews were conducted with 20 students ranging between 18 and 30 years. All participants resided in campus residences. Open ended questions were designed to explore participants' perceptions and experiences about living in student residences on an emerging university campus in Pretoria, South Africa. Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) was utilised to analyse the textual data. Results indicated that students regard their living conditions as unhygienic and neglected. They reported high levels of noise and lack of privacy that impacted their studies. Safety and security was also indicated as substandard. It was concluded that the environmental systems in this institution had a profound influence on physical and psychological well-being of participants.

INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of entering an academic environment is successful study towards a particular career. Researchers have found a positive correlation between living in residence and academic achievement (Rinn and Plucker 2004). It has also been suggested that living on campus promotes a variety of desirable academic outcomes by enhancing students' involvement and engagement with their institutions (Rinn 2004). For instance, Loipez Turley and Wodtke (2010) found that Black students who lived on campuses had significantly higher grade averages than their counterparts who lived off campus. It has been reported that students living in residences tend to be more socially adjusted to campus activities as they become part of the university community (Hughes 1994). This involvement helps their intra and inter personal development which includes an increase in self-confidence (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005).

Living in a student residence, far away from family for long periods of time, can be a challenging experience. This is particularly true for those leaving home for the first time. They have to learn how to live independently and have to share facilities such as kitchens and bathrooms sometimes with students of the opposite sex. The provision of accessible, clean, hygienic and

safe accommodation, that is conducive to student well-being, in tertiary institutions is of great importance to the academic success and social adjustment of students, especially those from a rural and poor background (Austin and Burke 2009).

Recognising the importance of the quality of university residences in South Africa, the minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande called for an investigation into student housing in 2010. The investigation was carried out because the upgrading and maintaining of ageing residences was neglected. Consequently, South Africa witnessed boycotts and protests pertaining to the poor living conditions of students living in residences (Rensburg 2011). Reasons given for this neglect included government cutbacks in Higher Education (HE) budgets and the exponential increase in student enrolment during the last twenty years. It was reported that many residences in South Africa were substandard and not conducive to the academic, physiological and psychological well-being of students. Recommendations included the setting of minimum standards for student housing that are conducive to their social, academic and emotional development. The findings concerned all stakeholders in the educational sphere as poorly managed and substandard residences have a detrimental impact on the psycho-social

health of students (Khozaei et al. 2010; Rinn 2004).

According to Boehm et al. (1993), the spread of infection and disease has been linked to shared and unhygienic toilets, showers, baths and kitchens. Noise pollution is common in student residences and has also been found to affect student health and well-being (Fish and Nies 1996). In this regard, if residences do not have proper rules enforced by wardens and loud music, alcohol use and socialising occurs until the early hours of the morning, there are consequences such as lack of sleep. This leads to the students' experiencing tiredness, irritability and lack of concentration in classes. It has also been reported that students in residences consume large amounts of alcohol which can lead to unsafe sex and violence and aggression towards others (Austin and Burke 2009; Cleave 1996). Living in residence can also negatively impact on mental health, mainly because of loss of privacy, overcrowding, living in close proximity to others, forced social interaction, sharing of amenities and the lack of control over the internal environment (Khozaei et al. 2010). However, this is not always the case as Lau et al. (2013) reported that students who reside on campuses exhibited better sleep quality and less feelings of stress than those who lived off-campus.

The rationale for the study emerged out of a reading of the literature which reported some negative and positive issues pertaining to the topic. It was decided that an initial, exploratory study should take place to discover the sentiment of students, pertaining to living on university residences, at an emerging university campus in South Africa.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This exploratory investigation was qualitative in nature. The study was conducted at an emerging university in Ga-Rankuwa, Pretoria, South Africa. The research was underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems theory which, in this research, looks at the environmental systems in which student residences are contextualized. According to Duncan (2007), these systems include the microsystem (inter and intra personal); the mesosystem (organisational, the university structure); the exosystem (the com-

munity in which the university exists); the macrosystem (the different cultures within the community) and the chronosystem (the life-transitions made in and between those systems).

Research Questions

The research questions for the study were:

- ♦ How did students perceive living conditions on an emerging or previously disadvantage university campus residence?
- ♦ How did students living conditions impact on their perceived well-being?

Sampling

A type of purposive sampling was used in the study namely snowball sampling. This type of sampling uses previously recruited participants to recruit additional participants who share the characteristics required by the investigation (Whitley 2002). Several students known to live in residence were approached and asked to recruit others. Three focus groups were conducted with a sample of twenty students between the ages 18 and 30 years old, residing in campus residences. The focus groups comprised both males and females with differing courses of study, year levels, and nationalities.

Data Collection

Data was collected in the form of focus group interviews using a data recorder and field notes. The focus groups were conducted in English. A semi-structured interview guide was used, which consisted of questions and probes exploring students' experiences of the living conditions in residences. This included questions regarding how students are affected by the living conditions, how students feel about these living conditions, as well as their expectations about these living conditions. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed to provide textual data for the purposes of analysis. The focus groups lasted between 40 to 60 minutes.

Data Analysis

The transcribed data was analysed through thematic content analysis. Thematic content analysis (TCA) is a descriptive presentation of qualitative data. In essence, TCA is about dis-

covering themes and concepts embedded throughout interviews (Neuman 2006). A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data.

In order to ensure the validity of the research, every effort was made to ensure that the participants' viewpoints, thoughts, intentions and experiences were accurately understood and reported (see Struwig and Stead 2001). In this regard after the data were transcribed a second session (15 to 30 minutes) took place where participants were asked to validate the researchers' transcriptions.

Emphasis was placed on the participants' perspective and language rather than on the researchers' interpretations and terminology. For data credibility and trustworthiness checks, debriefing sessions and participants validation of the transcripts were utilised. The investigation was thus transparent and explicit (Ryan and Bernard 2000).

Ethical Considerations

Appropriate ethical clearance was given by the University's Research and Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of the study. Participants were required to sign an informed consent form before participating in the study. They were advised of the rationale of the study and were advised they could withdraw at any time. As a means of protecting their identities, participants were not asked to disclose their real names and a code was given to each participant. They were assured of confidentiality of any information they provided. Students were provided with the details of a professional psychologist, an employ of the University, should any negative emotional reactions have resulted from the interview.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Five themes emerged from the data analysis, detailing the participants' perceptions of the living conditions and the impact of these conditions on their well-being.

Theme 1: Unhygienic and Unsanitary Conditions

Participants spent a great deal of time during focus group discussions discussing the unhygienic conditions of the shared facilities, which

include bathrooms, toilets and kitchens. Most participants agreed that many students do not clean up after themselves. A number of participants mentioned that they were aware of fellow students who contracted fungal infections which could be related to the unsanitary conditions. In support of this theme one student commented:

"I don't like the fact that I have to share the shower and the bathroom with so many people because most of the people are.... they are not very hygienic ... and you go to the toilet and you see that someone leaves something so filthy and everything, and you have to live with that, which is not fair, because I am a hygienic person."

Female students found the sharing of toilets with males inappropriate and even "disgusting".

The hygiene of the kitchen areas was also described as unsanitary. Participants noted that this worsens over weekends and public holidays when there are no cleaners. A participant commented:

"You can imagine now you are coming from a long weekend, you know it means the last time they cleaned was last Friday and there was no school on Monday. You should have seen the dustbins. My room was full of flies."

Some participants indicated ways that they adjusted to, and managed these conditions. They stated that they waited until the bathroom facilities were cleaned and would use them immediately. Other strategies included washing dishes in their bedrooms and washing themselves in their rooms. One student explained:

"And then for the toilets, I have uhm... disinfectants, like the kind of things I have in my room to clean like I make sure I don't get all those parasites that are there you know. And then you manage to be happy. It's the time of our lives, the varsity life, you're supposed to be happy, enjoy and it's okay."

These findings confirm the investigation by the Minister of Education on the sub-standard quality of university residences in South Africa (Rensburg 2011). However, the unsanitary and unhygienic conditions experienced by the focus groups seem to be linked to problems associated with student behaviour.

Theme 2: Lack of Privacy

During first year in residence many students have to share bedrooms with fellow students that they have not met before. They experience

this as an invasion of personal space. Some students mentioned that it affected their study patterns: This theme is supported by comments from participants such as:

"Every time I want to wake up and study, I have to switch on my roommates light by her side, and then I'm bugging her now because she wants to sleep and I do not want to wake her cause she's a light sleeper."

Other participants complained about the small rooms and the fact that they could hear the resident's activities in the room next door, one participant stated:

"The problem is, they told me the walls are thin very thin, so whatever happens next door you know (laughing). I felt, that eish, you understand what I'm trying to say?"

Participants reported to retreating into their own "personal space" for psychological and emotional renewal and in order to gain control of their emotions.

People who are forced to share facilities with non-family members have little privacy and little opportunity to seek retreat in their own private space (Marshy 1999). A bedroom should act as a place of sanctuary from external stressors of life and should not add to overall life stressors. The sharing of facilities, especially if of poor quality, can affect the mental health of individuals. They experience lack of control over their environment which may lead to symptoms of depression, anxiety, hostility, emotional stress, social disorganisation and social withdrawal (Page 2002).

Theme 3: Neglected Facilities

Participants expressed concern about the physical condition of residences. They complained about the condition of furniture, baths and showers. One participant said that she had high expectations when she came to live at the university residence but was very disappointed when she saw her room.

"I hate the quality of the things that are in our rooms, example the clothing closet it looks so old it's like my great-great grandmother once used it... (Participants laughing) I think that they should at least try to renovate at some point yah .Yah and the fact that the closet doesn't have drawer's yah."

Another participant's comment supported this theme as she stated:

"My other problem with the room that I'm now in it's so small. It's tiny; you can't breathe in it. You can't cook; you can't fit anything [in it]."

Even though residences should be a place where students feel safe and at home; a space that replaces home, some students expressed that the poor condition of residences affects their social lives they are ashamed to invite friends. One participant said:

"Well they don't affect me academically but it affects me to a point where I can't call someone like a friend to come over, I can't do that because hey if they see where I am living from a university they gonna think what the hell you know I don't want that. It's basically how they affect me in that sense."

Many of the participants indicated that they have to share bathrooms and toilets with the opposite sex which they dislike. They also reported that conditions affect them emotionally. In support of this theme some participants mentioned that just thinking of the residences, "depresses them", while others were "disappointed". One participant stated:

"To be honest entering the residence is the most depressing thing ever. Serious! When I think about it from the gate the minute you are on the gate and you see the residence there and you walk all the whole way to these dirty res there is no way you gonna feel good about it. It drains you the moment the taxi stops and then you have to walk all the way in the sun and then there is noit's like gravel in or something you get to the res you have to think of going to the toilet that is dirty it's the worst. It's unbearable."

Other participants were positive and regarded their poor living conditions as a challenge for growth and experience. One stated:

"It's all about adapting, imagine, I'm an international student, like I'm from another side of the globe, not even of the continent so when I came here I just took as okay this is a new experience, you just have to go, show your focus, it's going to build you in a way. So you just, you can't be here and complaining, I'm here for a six years degree, I can't complain every day, I'm going to kill myself (giggling) by the end of the week, I just keep on telling myself that you're going to make it, a lot of people before we get it, a lot of people after...? So I just have to go there and get a degree."

Marshy (1999) states that people who are forced to reside in poor quality accommodation often experience poor psychological and physical well-being. This is supported by the findings of this research which noted that participants perceived that poorly managed and sub-standard residences had a detrimental impact on their health, social and emotional well-being, academic progress and safety (Khozaei et al. 2010; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Nonetheless, a few participants in this study had a more optimistic outlook and reported that they managed to turn the trying conditions into a positive learning and growth experience.

Theme 4: High Levels of Noise Impacting on Studies

Participants reported high levels of noise in the residences which adversely affected their studies and sleeping patterns. Many of the concerns raised implicated neighbours as sources of noise:

"So my neighbour is always singing 24/7. I don't know how other people are coping, who prefer studying here in the [residence]. Nah... I can't."

Some participants tried to make agreements with their neighbours:

"Like my neighbour: she plays gospel music every night but then you come to the agreement that okay, because you have your Bible study at 10 o'clock until 11 and during this time you play gospel music, during this time I will go out there, I will not study, cause I can't study with noise and then afterwards I expect you to switch it off and I'll get back to studying."

Noise hinders students from studying effectively in their rooms, compelling them to find other venues to study. One participant reported preferring to study in a hall and reported to sometimes spending all night there. In other cases, significant changes in students' routines had to be made, to accommodate study sessions unhampered by noise:

"Uhm, for my res, I know that during the day you can't study. I have to do an assignment and when everybody is asleep, maybe around 1 o'clock, that's when I will study until maybe 5. So if I have a morning class, uhm I don't know, and that means I'm gonna end up sleeping in class cause I don't have any other choice. Over the weekends it's the same thing."

Participants reported to dealing with the noise by closing their windows, and banging on the doors where the noise emanated from. However, these strategies did not work.

Participants also identified socialising and the use of alcohol as contributors to high levels of noise. One participant felt unable to confront noisy neighbours while trying to study:

"...if I believe there is a bash and everybody is drinking, you want to study, then you'll have to take your bag and go to the study hall to study. You can't just ask everybody to switch off their music because you are the only one who wants to study now." Weekends seem especially noisy: "...when I would make my way up to [the residences], Saturdays especially its "chillas", and Friday- cars, booze, noise... it's a happy place."

Research suggests that exposure to high levels of noise has an impact on academic performance negatively (Hambrick-Dixon 1986; Smith 2012; Szalma and Hancock 2011). Students exposed to high levels of noise often experience difficulties when trying to study. This necessitates the use of other facilities on campus. This may also expose students to other safety and security risks for instance, when walking back to their residences alone at night. Furthermore, constant exposure to unwanted noise has been linked to increased stress and other psychological health problems.

Theme 5: Safety and Security

Perceptions regarding the effectiveness of security personnel were prominent. Issues arose concerning the visibility of security personnel, access control to various facilities, and monitoring practices and equipment that are inadequate. Participants were especially concerned by the ease of access strangers have to the campus and residences. A comment support this theme was:

"It's safe as it can be, but it's not safe... but it's better than nothing. People go in and out anytime of the day- I mean the doors or the gates or whatever they work or they don't- anyone just goes in and come out."

Another participant felt this problem stems from security personnel's lack of vigilance: *"sometimes when you go [on] recess you find securities sleeping and when the security is sleeping anyone can get in."* One participant

shared her dissatisfaction with ineffective access card system on campus:

"I don't feel safe at all especially because I almost got raped. My residence is something else, they don't use cards that side, everything is open, their houses... they don't lock their houses at night so anybody can just get in and out. There are no lights outside, it's completely..., it's in the dark hey, at night."

Participants' perceptions about the ineffectual security practices in the residences are likely to have a negative impact on the functioning of students. Pasca (1971) observed that students who regard their environment as unsafe have generalised increases in anxiety, depression, difficulty in coping, and general fears which reduced their ability to concentrate on their academic work or to enjoy it. Similarly, feelings of unease stemming from insecure or unsafe living environments will negatively affect the psychological health and academic performance of students.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the perceptions of students living in residence on an emerging university campus. Student residence and living conditions were found to have a major impact on the adjustment of the participants and their general well-being. Analysis of participant interviews highlighted five major themes namely, unhygienic conditions which had a potential negative impact on their health; neglected facilities which has an impact on their academic performance; high levels of noise that impacts their ability to study and sleeping patterns; lack of privacy resulting in loss of environmental control which impact on participants' general well-being and safety and security issues which impacts their physical and psychological well-being.

This study supports the findings of the committee appointed by the Minister of Education in South Africa which notes that many university residences are neglected and sub-standard. However, the problem is more complex than just neglect and poor maintenance of residences as a contributing factor is students' behaviours in not keeping facilities clean. In terms of the theoretical implication this study links interdependence between students and their environment. This illustrates the reciprocal relationship between students and their environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear that students are dissatisfied about conditions in their residences. Recommendations include: Resident staff should be monitored for efficiency and be accountable for not reporting neglect and damaged facilities; health education should be provided to students residing in campus residences to enable them to learn about the importance of good hygiene practices; students should be given information regarding mixed residences and be able to choose if they wish to live in a mixed or unisex residence; a study hall that is safely accessible at all hours should be made available for students who find it difficult to study in noisy residences; and a policy should be formulated and communicated to students, which address residence rules and consequences for not abiding by those rules.

LIMITATIONS

Due to the exploratory, qualitative nature of the current study, generalisations regarding its findings are precluded. It is recommended that a randomised sample using a survey research design should follow from the present study. Correlational studies would also allow insights into the relationship between living conditions and other indicators of functioning, such as academic performance. Future research should investigate the impact of neglected and poorly managed residences as this may affect the through put rate.

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