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# The Science of Roommates

By ABIGAIL SULLIVAN MOORE

FIRST-YEAR roommates matter. Though they may go their separate ways sophomore year, their reach can ripple throughout the college years and after.

“No one forgets their college roommate,” says Allison Ryan, an associate professor in educational psychology at the [University of Illinois](#), Urbana-Champaign, who studies social and academic development during adolescence. Busy building their own identities, first-year students are especially impressionable to a roommate’s sway.

A growing body of research is identifying how much these roommates may influence each other, in ways temporary and longstanding, negative and positive. A lack of previous bonds at school make first-year students perfect subjects for social scientists and economists.

## PUTTING ON THE ‘FRESHMAN 0.5’

Students fret about the myth known as the Freshman 15. The reality involves far less added poundage.

A new study of [Marquette University](#) freshmen who had been randomly assigned to rooms found that women with heavier roommates actually gained less weight on average than those with thinner roommates — a half-pound versus two and a half pounds.

The reason? Four of five overweight roommates were dieting and exercising, and those habits often rubbed off on a roommate, regardless of her size, says Olga Yakusheva, an assistant professor in economics at Marquette and a co-author of the study. Even thin women were weight watching, Dr. Yakusheva says, pointing to cultural pressures.

Margo D. Maine, a psychologist and specialist in eating disorders, warns that young women age 17 to 19 are at risk of developing some form of eating disorder, and some may be particularly susceptible to a calorie-counting roommate. Why one student wields more influence over another isn’t always clear. But when students first arrive on campus, some may lose confidence, Dr. Maine suggests, and follow the lead of a more self-assured roommate.

## **MOOD SWINGS**

Feelings are contagious. “Each happy friend a person has increases that person’s probability of being happy by 9 percent and each unhappy friend decreases it by 7 percent,” says Nicholas A. Christakis, a co-author of “Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives.”

Males with depressed roommates may end up feeling a bit blue themselves, according to Daniel Eisenberg, an assistant professor of public health at the [University of Michigan](#) who recently led a survey of 1,600 freshmen at two universities — a public one in the Midwest and a private one in the Northeast — on the issue. He found no such carryover for female students.

This mood contagion seems to occur when the student keeps his feelings bottled up, Dr. Eisenberg says. And it’s only a mild case; roommates typically don’t develop their friends’ more serious conditions.

“It’s not like you catch a mental-health cold,” he says. “People are resilient. They have a lot of coping strategies.”

## **THE X-BOX EFFECT**

Todd R. Stinebrickner, an economics professor at the University of Western Ontario, has proved what many a parent already suspects: video games contribute to lower grades.

“If your roommate brought a video game, you study a lot less and you do a lot worse in your classes,” says Dr. Stinebrickner, who surveyed the study habits of randomly matched roommates at Berea College in Kentucky.

Students whose roommates brought video games tended to study a half-hour less a day than students with non-gamer roommates. Their grades showed it, too, with grade-point averages that were 0.2 lower on average than students without X-Box roommates.

## **ONE TOO MANY**

“Peer pressure is intense in that first year of college, probably more intense than in any other year of life,” says Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, a research psychologist at Clark University and author of “Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road From Late Teens Through the 20s.”

“Everyone around you is a stranger and you want to fit in,” he says. “One way to find that place is to go along with what other people seem to be doing and what they seem to want you to do.”

Drinking is a case in point. The beer-soaked epic “Superbad” is not off the mark: many high school students drink to excess. Dr. Eisenberg’s survey of first-year students in August found that 34 percent reported bingeing in the month before arriving on campus, with bingeing defined as at least five drinks in a row for men, four for women. By the spring, however, 54 percent said they had recently binged.

Where did these new guzzlers come from? Dr. Eisenberg found a correlation between the likelihood students would binge drink and their roommates’ behavior.

The non-binge drinker was more likely to binge when paired with a drinker. As students said in the survey, their drinking roommates made for good buddies. “You are more likely to consider that person to be a close friend and to spend more time with that person,” Dr. Eisenberg says.

And what’s the effect of all this beer pong?

Nondrinkers paired with drinkers get poorer grades, by a quarter-point in G.P.A., according to a study of a large public university by [Harvard](#) researchers. Two roommates with drinking histories do even worse, with grades that are two-thirds of a point lower. The effect was seen across the board regardless of students’ academic résumés, and predominantly in male roommates.

As the roommates moved to sophomore year, the lower grades persisted even though many were living with someone else. Dan Levy, co-author of the study, posits that alcohol’s addictive quality is at play here: “Maybe your roommate is no longer there, but because you’ve got into the habit of drinking, that influence lives longer.”

## **ROOMMATES AND RACE**

Research at [Ohio State University](#) has found that black students with high SAT and ACT scores earn better G.P.A.’s when assigned to white roommates — perhaps, the study speculates, because a white roommate smoothes the adjustment both socially and academically at the largely white university. (For the white students, there was no G.P.A. bump.)

But interracial pairings do tend to be more problematic, with more room changes than among same-race roommates, according to studies at Ohio State and [Indiana University Bloomington](#). Yet when a housing crisis at Ohio State forced unhappy roommates to stay together, white students adopted more favorable attitudes in just 10 weeks about African-

Americans as a group, says Russell H. Fazio, an Ohio State psychologist who studied interracial roommates there and at Indiana.

Multiple studies have shown that rooming with someone of another race reduces prejudice, and leads students to diversify their friendships. A longitudinal study of more than 1,000 freshmen at an academically strong state university concluded that white students assigned to room with black students were more positive about diversity policies like affirmative action.

According to the study, “Empathy or Antipathy? The Impact of Diversity,” the white roommates in later years also reported more easy interactions with members of minority groups.

Courtney Jones is a case study in empathy. Ms. Jones, who is white, expected her first-year roommate at [North Carolina State University](#) to be white. But she was matched with Melanie Paige, who is African-American.

“I was like, ‘Oh, wow! What is this going to be like?’ ”

Ms. Jones says she had had no black friends in her high-school inner circle. In the end, she says, rooming with Ms. Paige was transformational.

That year, commiserating in their small room about missing home, an inconsiderate friend or impending tests, more similarities emerged than differences. “You realize that even though you are different races, a lot of things you go through, a lot of the struggles are the same,” says Ms. Jones, now a junior. “She helped me develop a sense of respect for different people and where they come from. Now I have friends from every background and every race and before I didn’t.”

Ms. Paige says she was changed, too.

She had close white friends before college. But sharing the intimacies of daily life with a white person, she says, “I feel like I kind of have more knowledge about white people, how they do things, and how they think.”

