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STRIKING THE BALANCE:
THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF SHARED HOUSEHOLD LIVING AMONG
YOUNG ADULTS IN NEW ZEALAND

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology at Massey University, Wellington, New
Zealand

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2017
ABSTRACT
Shared housing or flatting is an affordable, popular housing pathway for young adults in New Zealand and the Western world. The current protracted transition period between adolescence and traditional markers of adulthood status, such as stable employment and marriage has extended flatting tenure into early thirties and beyond. Whereas the dominant motivation is economic, the lifestyle is also socially attractive. Literature on peer co-residence is limited, particularly with regard to how interpersonal relationships are managed in the domestic intimacy of shared living. The rationale for this research was to expand on what is currently known about sharing by contributing a more comprehensive understanding of the social dynamics of young households. With an ontological commitment to social constructionism, discourse analysis was employed to analyse talk of the a posteriori knowledge of experienced flatters between the ages of 20 and 35. The approach is inductive and data driven. In total 37 people were interviewed, 14 in individual interviews, and 23 in flat groups. Participants were Pākehā apart from 2 Māori and 2 who identify as mixed Māori/ Pākehā. Twenty-two were female and fifteen were male. Analysis considers the construction of ideal flatmates; preferences for flatting with friends or strangers, couples or singles; whether the social advantages of flatting are compromised by household chores; the efficacy of rosters; conflict and how participants conceive the concept of the household dynamic. Discourses are extensively interrelated and overlapping with a number of competing tensions evident. For example, desirable housemates were constructed as being cognisant of the need to be sociable but also independent. A requisite fine balance across a number of spheres to sustain a functional household was a dominant, pervasive discourse. Talk was driven by the fundamental value associated with having a working living arrangement. In an unregulated environment with no cultural blue prints, young New Zealanders are acutely conscious of the need to carefully navigate domestic relationships and avoid potential complications that impact on quality of life. While this study provides rich insight into the complexity of house sharing it also sheds valuable light on small group dynamics and the extended transition to adulthood.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am extremely indebted to my primary supervisor, Associate Professor Keith Tuffin, for his ongoing support, guidance, encouragement, patience and humour throughout my post-graduate years. In particular, he has played a great role in refining my writing skills and curbing my Joycean verbosity to that almost approaching the apothegmatic. I would also like to thank my doctoral co-supervisors, Dr. Natilene Bowker and Dr. Karen Frewin, for their valuable contribution by way of feedback, reassurance and attention to detail. The professionalism, dedication and kindness from academics and support staff at Massey University is the best I have encountered in the three universities I have attended. The much appreciated comradery of periodic meetings with the Massey University Critical Health and Social Psychology Research Cluster made the limbo of being a distance student somewhat easier. In addition, I was honoured to be awarded a Massey doctoral scholarship, which substantially increased my motivation to succeed.

This research would not be possible without the participants, who willingly gave up their time to talk about the vicissitudes of their house sharing experiences. I have been privileged to meet these young adults and have incredible respect for the positive way they face the challenges of today.

My husband and adult daughters have been instrumental in my somewhat selfish pursuit of a resurrected youthful dream to do a PhD and I thank them for their encouragement. I have been immensely inspired by my daughters’ academic successes through impecunious student years, living in often substandard flatting accommodation, and working part-time to make ends barely meet. Thank you for unwittingly stimulating my interest in shared households and your insight into this way of life.

And lastly, retrospective thanks to my old running comrades, who helped me conquer ultra-marathons. Completing a PhD has distinct parallels with long distance running: if you prepare thoroughly, and doggedly put one foot in front of the other, even when the going gets tough, you will eventually cross the finish line. That said, the licence to spend my time devoted to reading, thinking deeply and writing in my advanced years has been an amazingly enjoyable experience.
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Possible future papers to be written
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