

Responding to Roommate Troubles: Reconsidering Informal Dyadic Control

Robert M. Emerson

Existing analyses of informal control within dyadic relations neglect the non-penal responses that characterize many such control efforts, and they give minimal attention to the interactional and interpretive processes that characterize such responses. And while dispute transformation provides a well-developed model of the development of dyadic disputes, this model is limited in prespecifying “injury” as the starting point for these processes and in neglecting informal reactions other than “claiming.” Integrating theories of informal control and dispute transformation, this article provides a case study analyzing the nature and processes of informal reactions to troubles involving college roommates, identifying three general categories of such response: managerial reactions, which involve unilateral, nonconfrontational efforts to manage the consequences or implications of the trouble or to change indirectly the troubling behavior; complaint-making reactions, where the troubled party attempts to get the other to change the disturbing behavior; and distancing and punitive reactions, which are relationally despairing responses marked by open confrontation and hostility.

Sociological studies have long examined issues of social control, generally conceptualizing such control as the sanctioning of rule violations.¹ Most research has addressed legal, state-centered mechanisms of control, with less attention going to processes of informal control. Official control is defined as the enforcement or sanctioning actions of an authoritative agent, in many cases intervening as a third party in a previously private problem or disagreement. Informal control is equated with nongovernmental reactions to infractions of informal norms (e.g., Ellickson 1991:130); such reactions arise with one party’s efforts to respond

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¹ Ellickson, for example, defines social control generally as a “system” of “rules of normatively appropriate human behavior . . . enforced through *sanctions*” (1991:124; emphasis in original).

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to the undesired behavior of another; such efforts can involve actions directed toward the other and the troubling behavior and actions in which informal third parties are turned to for advice and help.

As Black (1984:5) has emphasized, the analysis of social control is narrowed and distorted by the “penal or even coercive connotations” of the sanctioning imagery. These tendencies are particularly limiting in the analysis of informal control, which, as both Gibbs (1989) and Goffman (1971a, b) have emphasized, is often corrective or remedial rather than punitive in purpose. Black rather proposes that control may assume a variety of forms or “styles,” including punishment, compensation (involving a debtor to receive damages for the consequences of the deviant behavior), therapy (deviant behavior is attributed to a victim who will receive treatment), and conciliation (where resolution is sought in a conflict relationship between disputants). But two issues arise with this approach: first, these styles seem to mirror and resonate with official (and indeed legal) responses implemented and enforced by authoritative third parties. Can they then capture the dynamics of informal control that are frequently dyadic and nonauthoritarian in character? Second, these control styles designate particular *outcomes* at a single point in time; yet compensatory, therapeutic, and conciliatory outcomes are products of sequential and contingent interactional processes of negotiation and cooperation between troubled and troubling parties. How can these contingent, emergent processes of interpretation and response be incorporated into the analysis of informal control?

The dispute transformation framework (Felstiner et al. 1980–81; Conley & O’Barr 1998) provides a natural history model of disputing that emphasizes just these informal, contingent processes and that can be expanded to incorporate the development of informal control. The theory of dispute transformation holds that disputes begin with an unperceived injury that may go through four stages of transformation (Felstiner et al. 1980–81:635–6): perceiving or naming the injury in “saying to oneself that a particular experience has been injurious”; blaming, wherein the injured person attributes that injury “to the fault of another individual or social entity”; claiming, when the injured party voices that grievance “to the person or entity believed to be responsible and asks for some remedy”; and finally, rejection of the claim “in whole or in part,” giving rise to full-blown disputes, many of which are taken to both informal and official third parties for possible resolution (Felstiner et al. 1980–81:635–6). Conley and O’Barr (1998) have developed a more elaborate “natural history of disputing” model, which differs primarily in breaking down the initial “naming” stage into “articulating” and “labeling” components.

Two features of the dispute transformation model limit its value as a framework for analyzing informal control. First, dispute transformation presupposes an initial “injury,” albeit one that has to be recognized (or “articulated”) as such by its victim and then attributed to the fault of another. In assuming that disputes begin with a relatively unproblematic event that merely has to be correctly perceived (or expressed), dispute transformation models fail to examine how an occurrence comes to be interpreted as an “injury” in the first place. This fixed starting point not only precludes analysis of the interpretive processes that give rise to “injury,” but also excludes problems that are initially ambiguous and uncertain to an upset or discontent party, e.g., the wife who begins to wonder about the frequency of her husband’s drinking but has not as yet identified it as harmful (Wiseman 1991).

Second, while highlighting the development of disputes over time, dispute transformation models focus on a single major response—claiming—where a party expresses a grievance in seeking redress and remedy from the person responsible.² Focusing exclusively on claiming ignores reactions that attempt to deal unilaterally with the problem without direct appeal to another to remedy the problem. Furthermore, the dispute transformation model fails to distinguish making a claim directly to the other party from situations where a claim involving the other is made to some third party. The model leaves unexamined the possibility that dyadic claims, particularly when made directly to the other to entice or pressure for change in behavior, involve different dynamics than claims to outside third parties.

The solution to the first problem lies in formulating a more open and inclusive starting point for reactions. This can be achieved by examining reactions to the experience of discontent or upset, i.e., to interpersonal *troubles* (Emerson & Messinger 1977), many of which are initially amorphous and indistinct.³ Some such discontents may come to be interpreted, shaped up, and reacted to as “injuries”; but others may come to be defined and

² Dispute transformation does recognize the possibility of nonresponse—“lumping,” where aggrieved parties unilaterally “give up on the dispute and just live with the wrong” (Felstiner 1974:85). But lumping is viewed as inaction, as failure to pursue a claim, without consideration of how parties try to accommodate to or live with or around the problem.

³ Similarly, Black has sought an inclusive starting point, conceptualizing control as reactions to “deviant behavior,” and defining the latter in very broad terms as “any conduct regarded as undesirable from a normative standpoint” (1998:22). But this approach leaves unanalyzed how conduct comes to be interpreted as normatively undesirable. Similarly, the parallel term *grievance* he offers as the starting point for processes of conflict management is usually understood to involve an attribution of responsibility or “fault” (Felstiner et al. 1980–81:635). The alternative concept of “trouble” proposed here opens up the possibility of examining how normative undesirability and “fault” may come to be established in the first place.

treated in different terms—as “normal” if perhaps eccentric behavior, as “violation” of a specific norm, as some form of “deviant behavior.” The solution to the second issue lies in delineating the array of common informal reactions to troubles and in clarifying their distinctive character. One set of such responses involves actions whereby the discontent party lives with or around the trouble, accommodating him- or herself to it in various ways (Lynch 1983). Claiming can be reconceptualized as another form of informal trouble response characterized by dyadic complaint-making—expressing grievance or discontent and proposing remedies directly to the other party in ways intended to encourage this party to correct or change his or her behavior.

Toward these ends, this article develops an interpretive analysis of the variety of reactions to dyadic troubles, incorporating accommodative and complaint-making as well as sanctioning responses to troubles, and exploring the distinctive interactional and interpretive processes that propel and characterize such reactions. It does so through a case study of the troubles within one kind of relationship, that involving college roommates. Roommate relationships and the troubles they generate are sociologically interesting on a number of grounds: first, unlike most public place troubles (Goffman 1971a; Gardner 1980, 1995; Nielson 2006), they are not one-time events and are difficult to deal with by walking away. In addition, unlike longer-term intimate or workplace relationships (Vaughan 1986; Morrill 1996), roommate relationships generally have shallow histories and relatively superficial implications for identity. And finally, in contrast to many workplace and family troubles, roommate troubles arise in relationships that are nonhierarchical and marked by relative equality.

This article analyzes dyadic reactions to roommate troubles in order to address two theoretical issues. first, what are the different kinds of informal reactions to such troubles? Considering a wide range of roommate actions, the article identifies three general categories of dyadic responses: managerial, complaint-making, and distancing and punitive reactions. Second, drawing upon analyses of disputing and dispute transformation, the article examines the interpretive and interactional processes that mark these varied responses to roommate troubles. The following section describes the data and the research methods. Then, after elaborating the conceptual framework for analyzing roommate troubles and reactions, the article examines the nature and circumstances under which troubled roommates use managerial, complaining, and relationally extreme distancing and punitive responses.

Methods and Data

This article analyzes 184 first-person accounts of problems with roommates collected by undergraduate students in sociology classes at a large public university, primarily between 1993 and 1996. The bulk of these accounts (154) involved interviews with friends and peers about the problems of living together in dorm rooms or apartments; the remainder (30) included first-person written accounts of students' own experiences with a roommate problem. The interviews and accounts included in this data set were selected from the larger set of class papers on two primary grounds: they included transcripts of tape-recorded interviews, or presented material that was particularly rich, unusual, or revealing. Nine sets of interviews included both of the primary parties to the trouble; in two additional cases, four interviews were conducted with both these parties and other roommates in that living situation.

Student interviewers were instructed to find subjects among their friends and acquaintances willing to talk about recent or current roommate problems. An interview guide framed the purpose of the interview in these terms: "I'd like to hear about your experience of this problem/trouble with your roommate in your own words, from beginning to end, in as much detail as you can recall." Specific questions included how they had come to room with this person, when they first noted a problem and how they reacted, subsequent developments in detail, if and when they had sought outside help, their emotional reactions, and where the current situation stood. The interviews used here varied widely in length, comprehensiveness, and quality: at one extreme, transcripts ran to eight to 10 single-spaced pages covering all the proposed topics in detail; others were several pages, providing a general summary of the relationship and a description of a single major trouble incident.

The roommates involved here were by and large college students, primarily undergraduates in their late teens and early twenties. The roommate situations varied widely: 33 percent involved university-supervised two-person rooms in high-rise dorms or larger apartment-like dormitory suites; 6 percent involved roommates in co-ops, fraternities, or sororities; and 61 percent shared off-campus apartments and houses. The vast majority roomed with others they had not known prior to college, and in a significant number of cases with people they had not known prior to moving in together. Most were living away from home for the first time.

Adjusting to college life was clearly stressful for many, and their living situations were sources not only of comradeship, support, and excitement, but also of personal and emotional turmoil. Thus

roommates reported experiences with a variety of “normal troubles” (Cavan 1966). Those sharing a bedroom (about half the cases) regularly mentioned contention over the use of space, noise, and cleanliness; discontents concerning another’s use of one’s personal possessions; problems arising from different sleeping and wake-up hours; and embarrassment over sexual activities occurring in the room. Suite or apartment mates complained about others’ taking their food, excessive noise, disagreements about washing dishes and cleaning, tensions over the use of the phone or TV, awkwardness with girlfriends or boyfriends always being present or sleeping over, and disagreements over parking spaces assigned to the unit. These troubles reflect the technology of youth culture in the early 1990s, when cell phones had not replaced fixed landlines and music was played on individual stereo systems rather than computers and iPods. Many roommates reported a series of such troubles with the other; interviews focused on the “major” or “most serious” of these.

Sixty-one percent of the cases involved troubles between female roommates, 35 percent concerned troubles among male roommates, and 4 percent involved mixed-gender roommate troubles. While there appeared to be some gender differences in types of troubles (e.g., women seemed to complain more frequently about a roommate disturbing their sleep, borrowing clothes and other items, and having sex in the room), both men and women commonly complained about messiness, problems with cleaning, and taking food. Similarly, more female roommates seemed concerned about the implications of confronting and antagonizing the other, often employing managerial responses and initially hesitating to make complaints directly to the other, while many men seemed willing to make direct complaints as an early response. But given the nonrepresentative sample, this analysis does not systematically analyze relations between gender, types of trouble, and reactions. Similarly, while roommates in both dorm and apartment settings were frequently from different ethnic and racial backgrounds, incomplete information on these differences preclude systematic comparisons.

Clearly this data set is limited in that the accounts included are not a representative or even a systematically selected sample, and the length and quality of the interviews and written accounts varied considerably. But these first-person data also offer a number of distinct advantages in understanding informal troubles. First, students were interviewed by their peers, a procedure that presumably minimized distance and intimidation in the interview situation. Second, these first-hand accounts provide insight into actors’ perceptions and subjective understandings of events that would be difficult or impossible to capture through observational methods

(Kleinman et al. 1994). Finally, the troubled cases elicited included a range of problems, from minor but irritating matters to persistent and more serious troubles, most of which were handled exclusively by informal means. Thus this data set avoids a problem that has beset a number of studies of informal control and disputing—samples composed only of cases that have reached some official and/or legal endpoint processing.⁴

These data were coded qualitatively and analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2001; Emerson et al. 1995). For this analysis, initial codes identified different kinds of roommate responses to troubles; e.g., “avoid confrontation,” “direct demand/confrontation,” “direct payback,” “hiding food or clothing/locking things up/booby traps,” and “discussing problems with other roommates.” Initial memos examined the similarities and differences between responses, generating the categories of managerial, complaint-making, and extreme reactions. Subsequent integrative memos explored key variations within and between these categories.

Troubles: Expressing and Responding to Discontents

Analytically, troubles begin when a roommate experiences dissatisfaction, irritation, upset, or discontent with some act or attitude on the part of another. Consider these typical reports:

Every once in a while when he's on the phone, which is for one or two hours, he inconveniences the apartment and *I get upset at that—his phone calls—only because it lasts so long.* (23; emphasis added)⁵

From what I knew of her, I thought she was a cool person and stuff. But after a little while, *some stuff really started to annoy me. . . .* I noticed that I did all the chores. She wouldn't do anything. I always have to take the trash out. She would just keep piling stuff on top of the trash can and things would be falling on the floor. The floor would be all gross and stuff. (77; emphasis added)

Initial discontents may be articulated or specified as the troubled party reflects on and interprets the sources, nature, and implications of the upsetting behavior or situation.

Interactionally, troubles begin when a party takes some action to deal with or respond to such a discontent or upset. One such action is to express these feelings to the party held to be their source.

⁴ Official sampling misses those cases that have been “successfully” handled by unofficial means and overselects “serious” cases in which attempted informal reactions have failed (i.e., were judged to be inadequate by at least one party).

⁵ Interview/paper identification numbers are indicated in parentheses. Names have been changed from those included in the original data reports.

Troubled parties may express discontent in a variety of ways, from nonverbal facial expressions and other behaviors through brief reverts to carefully prepared, elaborate problem formulations. However, not all discontents are conveyed to the other, and many are not expressed on the first occasion of experiencing upset or dissatisfaction. In these instances troubles may be interactionally constituted when a troubled party takes some action to manage or change the troubling situation or behavior. Deciding on and implementing responsive actions intended to “do something about” the discomfort, discontent, or upset comprise core processes for handling troubles.

The following analysis focuses on distinctly dyadic responses—actions by a troubled party seeking to deal with the trouble that are directly or indirectly oriented toward the trouble-making party. It does not systematically consider efforts by one or both parties to involve informal or official third parties in the trouble. Roommates did often consult with friends, acquaintances, and occasionally family members about their troubles and how to deal with them. For example:

I talk to my girlfriend about it all the time. I complain to her every day about it. She always tells me to do something about it. I don't, but I do sometimes . . . (176)

But such informal third parties typically served as sounding boards for advice and support, and they rarely talked to the troubling party or directly intervened in any other way.⁶ By contrast, official third parties—dormitory authorities, college officials, apartment managers, the police—were generally viewed as inappropriate for or too remote from most of the minor, personal troubles that roommates experienced and were appealed to only under limited circumstances.⁷

Several structural features shaped the distinctive nature and range of roommate trouble responses. On the one hand, two common mechanisms for handling informal troubles—“exit” (Hirschman 1970) and interpersonal authority—were rarely used in these roommate situations. In part, the limited use of exit reflected the

⁶ Under these circumstances troubles remained dyadic in structure. Troubles became triadic when informal third parties became directly involved in the trouble, a common occurrence in suites and apartments when other roommates were often actively recruited as potential allies.

⁷ A major exception occurred in campus housing troubles, where 20 of 61 cases reported contact with dormitory authorities (resident assistants and/or resident directors) about the trouble. In most instances this occurred only after repeated informal efforts to deal with the matter had failed, and such efforts continued even after official involvement, as the latter was generally evaluated as providing little or no help. A sprinkling of apartment residents reported complaining to their apartment managers, but usually about matters related to leases, conditions of occupancy, etc. Similarly, roommate troubles were rarely brought to the legal system: in five instances students called the police, and in three cases, all involving dispute between apartment residents over rent, actions were initiated in small claims court.

fact that roommate relations were already of set, determinate length, with an established and relatively near exit point. But in addition, leaving before this predetermined exit point was practically difficult in the face of bureaucratic hassles with dorm officials or legal hassles with apartment managers over leases. In practice, then, roommate relations were of fixed but finite duration—until the end of the quarter or academic year; indeed, a change in roommate situations before the end of the current term occurred in only one of the 61 campus-based troubles (as the result of an unofficial exchange of roommates on the same dorm floor arranged by the troubled party). Furthermore, roommates rarely sought to invoke interpersonal authority as a mechanism for handling troubles. For in contrast to the often strongly hierarchical character of workplace and family relations, roommates' relationships were marked by relative equality with minimal differences in power and status.⁸

On the other hand, the continuing, multifaceted character of roommate relationships provided a rich and distinctive set of response resources for dealing informally with troubles. Unlike fleeting public place encounters between strangers, where the only response resources reside in the immediate interaction (Goffman 1971a; Nielson 2006), roommates had frequent and intimate contact with the other, and could look to a range of shared activities and future encounters for possible ways of responding to and handling a trouble. As a result roommates developed and employed a wide variety of informal responses to troubles, many marked by a distinctly practical, "rough, ready, and changing form" (Goffman 1971a:95–6). Furthermore, many roommates felt a sense of obligation to "get along" with one another, not only by handling their discontents and troubles informally, but also by doing so in ways that sustained at least a minimally compatible relation with the other. Thus many roommates sought to handle troubles in polite, sensitive fashion, often taking care to avoid harsh and antagonistic "confrontations," anticipating how the other would react to direct expressions of discontent and efforts to respond to or remedy the trouble.

The resulting common dyadic roommate responses to troubles can be grouped into three categories:

1. Managerial responses involved actions unilaterally initiated and carried out by the troubled party to respond to the discontent and/or its implications. Such unilateral responses could seek either to change the conditions giving rise to the trouble or to develop ways of living with or around a more or less accepted trouble.

⁸ In private rental situations one roommate might claim limited authority over others on the grounds that he or she had signed the lease and was legally responsible for the apartment.

2. Dyadic complaints were distinctly bilateral responses in which the troubled party proposed that the other undertake some action to correct or remedy the trouble. Although initiated by the troubled party, dyadic complaints involved invitations or bids to the other to change the behaviors or attitudes giving rise to discontent or upset. Whether or not such change occurred, and if so exactly what sort of change, depended upon the other's response, upon the first party's response to this response, etc. Change or remediation was thus contingent and uncertain, a product of these explicitly bilateral exchanges or negotiations between troubled and troubling parties.
3. Abandoning concern with living with or changing a trouble and with maintaining a cooperative relation with a trouble-making other, extreme responses sought either to create distance from or to punish the other. These responses directly expressed alienation and hostility to the other, and tended to generate similar attitudes and responses in return.

Managerial, complaining, and extreme responses represent *ideal types*, each identifying a distinctive constellation of characteristics and elements common to roommate troubles. As ideal types, these responses are not mutually exclusive: in dealing with a single trouble incident, a roommate might respond in ways that combined types; e.g., initially throwing the other's dirty clothes to their side of the room and then making a pointed remark about the mess the other had left. With the failure of an initial response effort, a roommate might turn to another sort of response. Finally, responses were not usually tightly sequenced: although many roommates attempted managerial responses before turning to direct complaints, others complained to the troubling party as an initial response. And while those who employed extreme responses did so after having failed to end the trouble using other responses, the types of prior responses and the order and persistence with which they were used varied widely. The following sections consider each of these roommate trouble response types in detail.

Managerial Responses

Many roommates reported responding to discontents unilaterally in indirect or muted ways focused on managing the circumstances of the trouble rather than directly trying to convince others to cease or change their behavior. Roommates described three major types of such managerial responses: self-directed changes, efforts to manage the consequences of the discontent-producing situation, and unilateral remedial efforts to prevent the trouble from recurring.

Self-directed changes arose when a troubled party responded by attempting to control or change her or his own feelings and perspectives on the trouble.⁹ Some roommates, for example, initially blamed themselves for the problem, feeling that they were overly sensitive, demanding, or intolerant of another's preferences or quirks. In response they undertook a kind of personal "shaping up." Thus one woman described handling recurring tensions with her roommate "by trying to make changes in my character that would make her feel more accepted" (161). Another commented that she began to feel "unreasonable" in negotiating with her roommate over what portion of the rent and utilities the latter's boyfriend should pay on moving into her apartment (141). And another detailed the processes she went through in coming to understand and accept her roommate nonchalantly "changing her clothes in front of my boyfriend":

"At first I didn't say anything because I didn't want to start a conflict between us because I did really like her. Each time she would change, my boyfriend and I would talk about it and I was going to say something to her but I just kept putting it off till next time. I think more than that I was just trying to get used to it so it wouldn't become any big deal to me." She eventually jokingly commented about the problem to her roommate, leading the latter to explain that she was a dancer and "really didn't think about it" since she was "used to changing in front of people, guys and girls, because there was no other area to change sometimes for rehearsal." (90)

Successful self-change is often facilitated by this kind of convincing account from the troubling party.

Managing the consequences of the trouble can take different forms. Some try to compensate for the effects of the discontent-producing behavior; thus a woman who had difficulties coordinating a working and sleeping schedule with her roommate reported: "One day I was really tired and I didn't want to go back to the room, so I just found this really long bench at the library and went to sleep" (165). Another noted that "sometimes the TV playing until 2 in the morning is a little frustrating," but added: "It is no big deal. I just put my Walkman on" (19). Or roommates may handle upset by taking it to their friends and "venting," expressing annoyance and anger about the other's behavior while seeking advice and support:

She used my shampoo, she used my laundry detergent, she ate my food. Oh God, she used my toothpaste, my hair spray, it didn't

⁹ Self-directed change is an expression of what Goffman terms "personal control" (1971b:347), and Gibbs expresses as "internal" or "self-control" (1989:49).

matter, my makeup, she just figured it was all hers. And, um, but I just kind of bitched to all my friends and not directly to her. Well, I did but I tried to be subtle with her. I guess I wanted to avoid confrontation. (155)

Despite deep upset with her roommate's behavior and vociferous complaints to her friends, this woman avoided or at least muted direct expression of her discontent to the other.

Efforts to prevent the trouble from recurring involved actions where the troubled party sought, generally circumspectly, to inhibit or avoid reoccurrence of the trouble. This took a variety of different forms.

Preventive measures, such as hiding food and possessions too freely consumed or used by others, provided one common managerial response:

A dorm resident complained that her roommate wore her shorts without asking, took her "hair things without asking permission," and used her cups although she "never asked to borrow them and even let her friends use them." In response she "hid all her things"; "her magazines, clothes and cups are all hidden." (4)

In several cases, roommates took and/or destroyed another's alarm clock; after an earthquake one roommate took a hammer to smash a particularly irritating clock (which had initially survived intact because in his roommate's absence he had placed it under his pillow to muffle the sound) and then placed it under a fallen bookcase (82).

Other roommates reported taking anticipatory actions intended to preclude the other from engaging in upsetting behavior. In the following situation the troubled party tried to discourage her roommate's loud phone conversations at bedtime through an exaggerated display of "going to bed":

She's like, on the phone nonstop when I'm in the room. I mean, she freakin' talks and laughs totally loud. Sometimes when I'm going to go to sleep, I make it all obvious. I fluff up my pillows and jump into bed, but she still doesn't get off the phone or talk any softer. (77)

In several cases women disturbed by a roommate's sexual activities in their common bedroom reported trying to preclude this activity—usually unsuccessfully—by going to bed early in order to occupy the room. In such instances a troubled roommate unilaterally and indirectly tried to get the other to act differently by visibly establishing lines of activity assumed to be incompatible with those the other was engaged in or about to engage in.

Similarly, in some situations roommates sought to disguise activities they knew would elicit troubling reactions from the other. Thus a woman who wanted to avoid socializing with her roommate reported: "When it was time to go out to a party or the movies, I

would just leave the house and get dressed over my other friends' house so that my roommate would not volunteer herself to go along with us" (85). Often, disguising imminent actions was combined with mild deception (Blum 1994), as in the following instance where a woman who had begun dating the ex-boyfriend of her roommate sought to forestall hostile comments by misleading the roommate about her plans to spend the night at his house:

It got nuts because she got really mad at me. Like she would get mad at me for going to his house. I would like go to spend the night at his house, and I would wear my overalls and I would put my toothbrush and stuff in my pocket so she wouldn't know I was going, because she'd be mean. (158)

Short-term withdrawal from the troubling situation provided another common managerial response. In some instances such situational withdrawal immediately ended the trouble:

[A woman complained that her roommate listened in on her phone conversations with her new boyfriend.] Clifford and I would be on the phone, all shy and stuff because we had just started going out and she would try to listen and comment on whatever we were talking about. I would get so pissed and she would say, tell Clifford this and this. I finally solved the problem by going into the hall with the phone. (165)

In other situations, withdrawal could be used as a tactic for avoiding a likely or predictable trouble. Thus one woman described handling her male roommate's anger in the following fashion: "I would be able to read when he was upset and so I would leave the apartment and go over a friend's house or something to study" (159).

Finally, some roommates reported managing the annoyance and troubles created by messes left by others by cleaning up those messes themselves:

By now I pretty much knew that things weren't going to get any better. So I tried to make things better by keeping the apartment neater when possible and washing dishes and stuff when I had time. (159)

Here the troubled party directly corrected a recurring problem in pragmatic fashion, ignoring or bracketing issues of responsibility for the problem and the "fairness" of solutions to it.¹⁰

¹⁰ Conein (2003) similarly reports that roommates in France may clean others' messes, but primarily as a means of asserting collective solidarity and responsibility. Communal sensitivity seemed weak among the American college students studied here; cleaning others' messes was seen at best as expedient and was frequently accompanied by strong resentment; for example, one student reported, "I would just go clean it all up," adding that she "bitched" about doing so to her friends but "not directly to her" (155).

Why do managerial responses appeal to troubled roommates? One reason is that these responses are invisible or of low visibility to the other and hence allow the troubled party to avoid or minimize direct confrontation and open tension. Managerial responses reduce visibility by avoiding both overt expressions of discontent and direct proposals to change or correct the troubling behavior. Thus self-change, venting to one's friends, hiding possessions, and disguising plans to engage in upsetting activities are appealing non-confrontational reactions exactly because they remain unknown to the other, conveying no expression of discontent or proposed change. Similarly, even when responding in the presence of the other, roommates generally seek to minimize confrontation by not expressing discontent or by keeping any upset low on the horizon. For example, with preclusive acts roommates avoid any explicit signaling of grievance and upset; withdrawal may be passed off as just a "normal" occurrence rather than as an expression of discontent. By contrast, cleaning up another's messes does signal one's own dissatisfaction with their cleaning practices, but in an indirect, muted, and hence thoroughly nonconfrontational fashion.

Managerial responses appeal to troubled roommates for a second reason—they entail unilateral actions that can be implemented without informing or consulting with the troubling party. An upset roommate, for example, can take preventive or corrective actions on his or her own, often even without the knowledge of the other toward whom they are directed. In this sense managerial responses provide ways of dealing with troubles without having to present a remedial proposal to the troubling other, and hence contain the quality of individual initiative that has frequently been analyzed as unilateral "self-help" (Black & Baumgartner 1980; Ellickson 1991).

When do roommates use managerial responses? Many of the roommates interviewed employed managerial responses when troubles first arose. In these circumstances, roommates sometimes hoped that such responses would subtly and indirectly encourage the other to change their upsetting behavior:

A few weeks after I had lived there I noticed that every day she would cook and leave her dishes in the sink and on counters, crumbs and spills all over the counters and stove, and she left my milk and butter out on the counters all day after using them. In the beginning I would put a few of her dishes in with mine daily just to help out. I also would wipe off the counters every few days so that I could make a clean place to set my plate down. During this time not as many items were cluttering up the kitchen because I kept putting her things in daily. (21)

While cleaning up here is presented both as a matter of "helping out" and as a practical necessity (making "a clean place to set my

plate down”), these acts also provide an indirect and carefully modulated plea for remediation by the other. Cleaning up for someone else tacitly communicates discontent with what has been not done and “models” a desired change in the other’s behavior. Similarly, preclusive actions project indirect, subtle cues to the other to act differently than in the past. These sorts of responses may give the other a glimpse of one’s discontent and upset and may indeed make such actions visible as ways of trying to deal with upset and trouble, in this sense implicitly appealing to the other to become more sensitive and to change.

But roommates also turned to managerial responses when confrontation and direct complaints had failed to produce any significant or lasting change in the other’s behavior. Consider these two instances:

I leave messages on the machine every day. I remind him, it’s your turn—it’s more than your turn—to do dishes, mop the floor It never works. Since we’ve lived here he has never done a load of dishes. He has never done anything. I pick up all his bottles, everything. (25)

We agreed that I’d buy my own food and he’d buy his own food. We agreed on that but obviously he changed his mind. [What have you done to try to remedy this problem?] I hide my food. (6)

Here managerial responses were employed after the failure of direct complaints and even explicit agreements for change. In these situations, little care may be taken to hide or obscure the responsive action and its implied discontent, but with no expectation that it will lead to behavioral change on the part of the other. Here managerial responses allowed roommates to “do something” unilaterally about a persisting trouble but without open confrontation and without having to obtain the active cooperation and agreement of the other party.

However, it should be emphasized that even while roommates frequently turned to managerial responses to avoid open confrontation, these efforts were often only partially successful. The targets of even intentionally invisible responses could well pick up subtle indicators of upset and aggravation, becoming aware that something was wrong, recognizing the first party’s changed attitude or situational adjustments. Similarly, low-visibility acts such as hiding food and drink, cups and spoons, clothes and makeup, were likely (eventually) to be noticed by the other, and when noticed to be understood as responsive to one’s prior “takings” and hence as discontents. In these ways, the other’s appreciation of actions as reactions to trouble could begin to transform his or her understanding of the roommate relationship. Hidden or low-visibility responses often only minimized or delayed these reassessments.

Dyadic Complaint-Making

Complaining responses arise when a discontented roommate makes a complaint directly to the other in an attempt to induce that other to change or correct a troubling behavior. Paralleling the dispute transformation notion of claiming as voicing a grievance and asking for a remedy, the concept of dyadic complaint-making identifies two core components of full complaints: an expression of discontent about some behavior of the other and a proposed course of corrective action.

In many situations roommates directly communicate discontent or dissatisfaction to the other, signaling their upset with behavior they regard as problematic. Such discontents may be conveyed nonverbally through actions implicitly requesting the other to cease or correct the behavior that the discontent identifies:

A student with a long-standing problem with the noise level of his roommate's stereo reported: "Played at a high decibel, his music could easily vibrate the walls of the apartment. Occasionally, I would exit my bedroom and enter the living room when John would suddenly lower the volume of his stereo. No verbal exchange would be necessary as I would simply return to my bedroom to either study or sleep." (180)

Al would leave his underwear in the sink after taking a shower. Joe took the underwear and dumped it under the sink and now Al doesn't leave his underwear in the sink any more. (2)

Discontents can also be delivered directly by a succinct remark:

She's just [not] being considerate in getting off the phone when other people need to use it If I was on the phone and if five people called for Jill, I would get off the phone. But if like sometimes she'll be on the phone for hours and hours and she'll tell [me] at 1:30 [a.m.] that "Oh, this person called and this person called and wanted you to call her back tonight." I'm like, "*Thanks Jill!*" (22; emphasis added)

Here a sarcastic comment clearly communicates a roommate's upset at not having been given her messages in a timely fashion and implicitly requests the other to change her behavior in this area in the future.

In other instances, rather than accenting the discontent, complaints highlight a request, proposal, or demand for behavioral change. In some instances complaints may present only the requested remedial action, leaving the discontent unstated and implicit; for example, a roommate concerned about the other's failure to lock their room remarked on leaving, "Could you make sure you lock up when you leave?" (181). But more commonly, room-

mates reported making complaints by explicitly asking that acts committed by the other in the past not occur again; thus one woman roommate left a note reading: "Please don't use my bed for sex with your boyfriend when I've gone home for the weekend" (48).

In some instances the desired behavioral change involved fixing some immediate problem—loud music, a mess in the kitchen, etc. However, in many such situations it was hoped that immediate correction would establish a kind of precedent, leading the other to make future changes in his or her behavior; for example, the problem of dirty underpants left in the sink was immediately "fixed" by tossing the underpants under the sink, but in so doing the troubled party also alerted the other to his discontent and conveyed the expectation that the other would not so behave in the future. Indeed, in some cases immediate correction may be abandoned entirely in favor of future prevention:

I'd put food in there [refrigerator] and one night I walked over there and Doug and Bill were eating some of my food and I said, "You know, they were mine. I don't have a car, so I can't get more. I'd appreciate it if you not eat it. You know, go ahead and finish that up, I'm not going to stop you now, but you know, don't eat it in the future." (153)

Here the troubled party's complaint is prospectively focused, seeking to convince the others not to eat his food in the future by highlighting the inconvenience it causes him.

Complaining responses to roommate troubles reveal a number of distinctive features. First, making a complaint does not in itself remedy trouble, but rather proposes change by the other. Its ultimate outcome and success or failure depends upon how the other responds in turn: while the other may agree to the proposed course of action, he or she may also reject it and the discontent upon which it is based in whole or in part, as in the following example:

A woman living in an apartment was extremely embarrassed and upset by the openly sexual behavior of a woman who came to live with them, sleeping on a bed in the living room where she regularly entertained her boyfriend. When she directly confronted this woman about her behavior, "she told me that it was my problem and that she was free to be the way she wanted to be in her living situations and that I needed to deal with it." (27)

In this sense, one party's proposal for some change in behavior to another often initiated a bilateral process of negotiation, a process which could involve a series of moves and counter-moves. In some instances these exchanges might eventually produce an agreed-upon outcome that both parties could accept (or at least acquiesce to).

But second, successful outcomes to complaints were hardly guaranteed, as negotiations might fail and the trouble persist: the troubling party could reject the proposed remedy and continue as before, offer a counter-proposal that was unacceptable *prima facie* or that proved inadequate in practice, or accept the proposal but sustain the agreed-upon changes only fitfully or temporarily. In turn, the troubled party might decide at any point to cease pressing the complaint; or alternatively and more commonly, turn to other responses (e.g., in the apartment guest case above [27], efforts to get the other to leave the apartment). As a result, roommate troubles typically moved through complex response cycles—sequences of responses, continuing troubles, and further responses, some proving at least temporarily successful, others failing—through a number of iterations.¹¹

Third, roommate complaints may be framed in more or less accusatory language. As Conley and O’Barr (1998:83–6) have argued, accusations lie at the heart of claiming, which they characterize as “the actual confrontation of the accused by the accuser with a claim about responsibility” (1998:84). Citing Atkinson and Drew’s (1979:112–7) analysis, they suggest that in most situations persons respond to an accusation with denials, excuses, and counter-accusations, actions that reject responsibility and “self-blame”; by contrast, “admissions and apologies, which involve some acknowledgement of responsibility, are very infrequent” (Conley & O’Barr 1998:84). And indeed, many roommates presented their complaints as accusations subsequently eliciting denials of responsibility and turning into heated arguments, as in the following case:

[Megan was upset when her roommate Anne gave her boyfriend keys to their apartment, and was convinced that the boyfriend had taken her pager and surreptitiously returned it.] When I spoke with her, it wasn’t on friendly terms. It was more business-like . . . very cold for the both of us actually . . . I told her, “Anne, I don’t like this and I don’t like that.” And she said, “Well, I don’t like this and I don’t like that.” Finally that’s how it ended. She basically said she didn’t know anything about it and that she would talk to Gabriel and I told her well, it’s really no use because I told her I saw him put the pager in the laundry basket and that I didn’t trust him and that I wanted the keys back from him. (173)

More commonly, however, roommates relied on what can be termed *modulated accusations*, presenting discontents cautiously and

¹¹ While Goffman (1971b) uses the term *corrective cycle* to refer to this process, not all roommates’ attempted responses were remedial (i.e., aimed at changing the other’s troubling behavior). For example, with the failure of direct complaints, roommates might turn to nonremedial managerial or distancing/punitive reactions. The term *response cycles* allows for such noncorrective responses.

politely and framing requests for change mildly in ways that minimize direct accusations of blame and wrongdoing. For example:

Well, long overdue because I hate conflict. I went up to him and said, "Look David I don't like how it's been lately, I don't feel comfortable here. If I did something to upset you please let me know what it's about. I like you as a friend and I'd like to work it out." He very quickly, without looking at me said, "I don't want to talk about it" and left. He actually took his bike and left the apartment That was pretty much it. (156)

Here the complaining roommate began by framing the issue as a matter of dealing with his discomfort and alluded to the trouble indirectly by suggesting he may have done "something to upset" the other. He did not specifically insist on or propose change in the other's behavior, only that they talk about what was taking place and try to "work it out."

On one level, roommates used modulated accusations in order to avoid arguments and open hostility from "confronting" the other. In this sense, roommates seemed to anticipate that full accusations would lead the other to respond in alienating, oppositional ways, beginning with a denial of responsibility. In the following case, for example, a roommate self-consciously limited her complaint to a single issue:

I talked to her about the cleaning but not about the food. I didn't want her to feel like I had a whole list and she wasn't pulling her weight at all. She's a good roommate other than that and I don't want her to feel that I'm totally attacking her. I don't feel like that. We still do things together and I don't want that to interfere with our relationship To me the main problem was how to tell her without hurting her feelings [I did not want] to constantly remind her that she has to do her dishes or pitch in with the food or something like that. (26a)

Here a roommate toned down her complaint by not running through "a whole list" of failures and faults to avoid giving the sense of "totally attacking."¹²

But on another level, roommates tended to modulate accusations because, lacking effective authority or force to compel a change in behavior, they had to convince or persuade the troublemaker to act differently. To do so they had to obtain the agreement

¹² Another device used to modulate accusations in order to minimize the sense of attacking another, found particularly in multiparty suites, was to present a generalized complaint that did not identify a specific target. Thus a woman upset because one of her apartment roommates "never washed her dishes" recounted: "I avoided the situation at first, but that did not remedy the problem much. Then I left friendly notes, never directing it to Gail but to the 'girls.' For example, I'd write, 'Hey Girls! I know we're all busy at times but let's try to wash the dishes after we eat. We are starting to attract bugs. Thanks a bunch!'" (136).

and cooperation of the other to change. These processes are evident in the following report:

So one day I sat him down and we had a talk I said, "Look, I understand that you are having problems with your relationship with Allison, but you have to understand that relationship is affecting our relationship as roommates. So in order for this relationship to work between you and I, you need to make a concerted effort to leave those feelings aside." And he said something to the effect that it was a difficult time for him and asked me to sympathize with him. He also said that he would try his best not to come home pissed off all the time too. (15)

The language of this complaint was shaped to enlist the active cooperation of the other, to "awaken corrective action from within" (Goffman 1971b:347) by modulating the accusatory elements and implications of the complaint. Thus the complainant framed the encounter not as an occasion for expressing his upset and frustration but as a heart-to-heart appeal to save their relationship. He alluded to his discontent in general terms as something that was "affecting our relationship as roommates," avoiding reference to the other's specific misbehaviors and possible attributions of blame. He located the primary cause of the trouble outside their relationship in the other's bringing home "problems" with his girlfriend; he offered this cause as an excuse diluting fault and responsibility. Finally, he proposed a change in the other's behavior—"making a concerted effort to leave those feelings [from his problems with the girlfriend] behind"—in neutral, therapy-like terms, focused on what could now be done rather than on past fault and wrongdoing.

Distancing and Punitive Responses

Troubled roommates who openly expressed discontent and pressed for remedial action, only to see the trouble continue, came to view the problem as intractable and experienced growing frustration and despair:

Nothing, nothing really seemed to work. I put up some little signs in the kitchen. I'd make some jokes to him, or little comments, you try to make it in a nice way so I wasn't saying "Hey you, clean this right away." Signs, little comments here and there, nothing seemed to help at all. (143)

Under these conditions, roommates might begin to implement a third type of response, one that abandoned entirely concerns for accommodation and correction in favor of harshly confrontational and even openly hostile reactions to the other. Such relationally extreme responses sought to either establish a pro forma relation-

ship through systematic distancing, or punish and/or harm the other.

Distancing responses evolved as frustrated roommates began to entertain the idea of exit, thinking about either moving out or inducing the other to move out as a solution to what they now saw as an irremediable trouble. But as noted earlier, immediate exit usually took time to arrange, and even deeply despairing roommates often had to “make do” until the end of the term or the expiration of a lease. Thus exit was often not immediately possible; in the meanwhile, a number of roommates responded with systematic exclusion (Lemert 1962) or avoidance (Felstiner 1975; Black 1998), a set of interconnected practices sustained over time to minimize relational contact. To cite two examples:

There were points where I just didn't want to deal with her, so I just wouldn't come home. I'd be gone all day, all night . . . I would go out of my way to, like, get out of the house as early as possible so I didn't have to see her, and come back as late as possible. And then other times, it got to the point where, if she was in the living room watching TV, I would just stay in my room, I'd stay in my room, close my door, and was practically a prisoner in my own room because I didn't want to see this girl. Instead of just saying, “What's your problem?” I basically ran away from her. (73)

I started to act differently towards her. I didn't invite her anywhere with me, I locked my bedroom every day when I left and took the spare key with me, and I asked my supervisor to schedule me on days I knew she wouldn't be working. (160)

As these comments suggest, avoidance practices reflected a conviction that any relationship with the other, beyond incidental and perfunctory contact, was hopeless and impossible. In these ways avoidance differed from situational withdrawal: rather than a limited response to a specific incident or trouble, avoidance practices involved multifaceted responses implicating a variety of relationships (friends, intimates, family, work) that were sustained over a period of time. Furthermore, while situational withdrawal and other managerial responses were generally isolated to one specific trouble area, leaving the overall relationship with the other more or less intact, systematic avoidance involved persistent tension and controlled resentment pervading all aspects of the relationship.

Those living with persisting troubles and an intractable other also responded by implementing distinctly punitive responses. Here roommates acted primarily to hurt, “get back at,” or inconvenience the other. Consider, for example, the disguised, covert retribution reported by a student who had been unable to remedy the use of Rogaine and a series of other offending smells produced by his roommate:

We had a class together at 8 a.m. and Mike couldn't ever wake up to his own alarm. He relied on mine and the noise I would make to wake him up. So since I always seem to wake up before my alarm, I would turn it off and quietly slip out to class. I would laugh later when I would see him come into class a half hour late knowing that he hadn't showered or Rogained. (138)

Here a grievance with one's roommate led to an act intended to deliberately inconvenience the other—a response motivated by feelings of frustrated ill-will and revenge (yet feelings still hidden from the other).

Punitive responses either subordinate or abandon entirely efforts to accommodate to or to correct or remedy the upsetting trouble. Consider the later stages of persisting trouble between Alice, an Anglo, and Janelle, an African American, who roomed together in a suite with two other girls. Alice described in detail how Janelle had peremptorily and hostilely rejected several polite requests to be quieter and more considerate about going to bed at night and getting up in the morning, then avoiding meeting with the dorm resident assistant (RA) to discuss the problem. Alice continued:

Since I couldn't get the RA to come over or intervene, I decided to take matters into my own hands. I started being really, really loud. Where I used to be considerate . . . like planning out what I was going to wear, putting it into the bathroom so that I would make less noise in the morning . . . I would make these processes so noisy that I would awaken her. I would actually keep making noise until she said something to let me know she was awake. I got great satisfaction from this. After all, she was keeping me awake all night so I would wake her up extra early. Then I would turn on the overhead light and blow-dry my hair in the room instead of in the bathroom. This really pissed her off! I went all the way, I bought an outlet for my phone and talked on it all night. I would ask my friends to call for no reason, just to tie up the line so that she couldn't talk to her boyfriend. (48)

Here Alice used the failure of the dorm official to handle the problem to justify “tak(ing) matters into my own hands” by deliberately making noise and disturbing her roommate in the mornings. She presented her actions as direct “payback” for her roommate's prior treatment of her and emphasized the “great satisfaction” she felt from so doing.

Under these circumstances, hostility becomes open and mutual, and punitive acts by both parties can escalate:

Janelle, however, wreaked her revenge, having sex with her boyfriend on Alice's bed one weekend when Alice was away, “leaving behind the evidence of what they had done It was so disgusting, I had to get my comforter dry-cleaned. Why in and on my bed? Now she was being destructive to my things

I went to my RA and then to the RD [resident director]. She thought that Janelle had indeed gone too far. So an appointment was set up for the four of us to talk, but Janelle never showed up. Then she went home after the Christmas vacation, and I guess as far as the RA and the RD were concerned it was over. They never made efforts after that to talk to her, so this problem is mine to deal with. I think I got her pretty good though because now when I leave for the weekend I leave painful reminders on my side of the room . . . like putting needles in my bed. I took my sheets home, but I put needles in my mattress in case she decides to get it on over in my bed again. When I came back the first time, I noticed a big scratch on her arm so I don't know if I can take credit, but I haven't seen any evidence of her being on my side of the room anymore. (48)

Here Alice first recounted a new offense—deliberately leaving traces of having had sex on her bed in her absence. She supported her sense of outrage by citing the RD's comment that Janelle had “gone too far.” And with continuing official inaction, she moved to the deliberately punitive strategy of sticking needles in her mattress to injure the other when going away.

Punitive acts, of course, can be intended not simply to harm but also to deter the other, as in sticking needles in a mattress to discourage the other's sexual activities. And indeed, in many situations there will be no clear distinction between punishing as an end in itself and punishing with some hope that the others might change their behavior. But often such hopes seem incidental to the unrestrained expression of frustration and anger. In this respect, punitive actions involve an essentially different dynamic than accommodative and corrective responses: because the other is seen as someone who knowingly and intentionally provokes and offends, the other's motives and character become fundamentally untrustworthy (Emerson 2007). Such attributions of blame and responsibility (Goffman 1971a) justify abandoning accommodation and efforts to work things out and turning to self-consciously hurtful, penal responses. Under these conditions the relationship can become heated and explosive, sometimes approaching all-out war.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed three types of dyadic responses to troubles in roommate relations. The conclusion explores some of the implications of this analysis.

Managerial responses—low-visibility, unilateral actions seeking to manage the occurrence and implications of troubles—have been underappreciated in existing research on disputing and informal control. In part this relative neglect occurs because these minor, situationally sensitive responses have been collapsed into a residual

category of “non-action” or “inaction,” both by the concept of lumping (Felstiner 1974) and by definitions of unilateral control in terms of “active,” “aggressive” responses (Black 1998; Horwitz 1990). Just as the dichotomy between “arrest” and “non-arrest” renders the latter a residual category that obscures the range of “alternatives to arrest” police patrol officers may implement (Bittner 1967), so the concept of non-action has restricted an appreciation of the range of alternative, nonconfrontational informal responses that may be made to troubles. Such responses include efforts to make changes in one’s self, attitudes, and sensitivities; to dilute or deal with consequences and implications; and to prevent or discourage further trouble incidents.

The hallmark of managerial responses is their unilateral character. But this unilateral quality is grounded in a distinctly bilateral relationship. While in some situations unilateral responses can be imposed by authority or coercion, this is not the case with roommate managerial responses, which, while initiated by one party, typically depend on the passive acquiescence of the other party, i.e., the other’s willingness not to act or not to act further. Situational withdrawal, for example, works only if the other accepts the troubled party’s leaving, as when the intruding other did not follow her roommate making an intimate phone call out into the hall (165). Similarly, secreting personal possessions may prevent further takings if the other remains ignorant of the hiding; but given roommates’ mutual accessibility, previously available items are likely to be noted as absent and perhaps sought out. Thus hiding does not so much prevent access as create a symbolic barrier, a barrier that assumes that the other will accept and honor this action as a “limit,” not seeking out and taking the hidden items.¹³

Dyadic complaint-making is a second common type of response to roommate troubles. Existing analyses have given limited attention to such complaints. The dispute transformation model focuses on claiming, a framework that marginalizes complainants’ concern with getting the other to change or correct his or her troubling behavior. Similarly, Black’s (1984, 1998) analysis of social control recognizes only conciliation and therapy as remedial processes. While some complaints may be framed in conciliatory or therapeutic terms (e.g., expressing a willingness to work out a compro-

¹³ In some instances this limit was not observed, as when a student who had hidden his Cokes under his bed to keep roommates from drinking them woke up one evening to find one roommate surreptitiously helping himself to a bottle (153). And even more-restrictive measures may ultimately depend upon some element of trust; for example, one woman reported: “I don’t keep my nice clothes in the closet anymore, I lock them up so she can’t take them and tape my boxes up” (9). But tape and even locks can be bypassed or broken, and hence while discouraging easy access do not so much directly prevent access as assure visible signs of illicit entry.

mise agreement, or to “talk to,” “advise,” or “help” the other), many seek other kinds of change or correction by the other (for example, ceasing the troubling behavior entirely, apologizing, and acknowledging fault) and by other means (e.g., by emphasizing the seriousness of one’s upset or dissatisfaction). And again, while complaints seeking change or correction in the other’s behavior may ultimately produce conciliatory or therapeutic outcomes (i.e., mutually agreed-upon “joint decisions” or informal help-giving), these results are fundamentally indeterminate, the product of often complex and problematic negotiations.

Furthermore, most existing research has examined not dyadic complaint-making to the troubling other, but complaints to third parties—to friends and acquaintances in cases of “troubles telling” and “complainable matters” (Pomerantz 1978; Jefferson 1988; Drew & Holt 1988), to officials in order to obtain legal intervention in continuing troubles (Black 1980; Emerson 1994). Complaints to third parties center on accusations of wrongdoing and blame and typically elicit denials, excuses, or counteraccusations from the accused, all of which avoid acceptance of responsibility (Conley & O’Barr 1998; Atkinson & Drew 1979). By contrast, in roommate situations complaints are generally aimed at persuading others to change their troubling behavior rather than seeking the kind of redress of injury or wrong implied by the notion of accusation. As a result, these complaints typically involve modulated accusations that suppress expressions of discontent and frustration and dilute blaming and fault-finding. They do so through such devices as appeals to the goodwill and concern of the other, plans to restructure daily routines in the future (OK, we will make up a cleaning schedule alternating jobs between the two of us), etc.

Systematic distancing and punishment make up a third, relationally extreme type of response to roommate troubles. The notion of distancing suggests a modification of Felstiner’s (1974, 1975) analysis of avoidance. While Felstiner conceived of avoidance as a dual process including both “shrinking” and “terminating” (exiting) relationships (1975:695), this analysis has identified critical differences between sustained avoidance on the one hand and exit from a relationship on the other. “Exit” is a one-time act; for roommates, sustained avoidance involves an ongoing set of activities whereby a troubled party limits as much as possible personal and social contact with another who lives in close physical proximity.¹⁴ Moreover, sustained avoidance entails significant costs, not

¹⁴ Similar patterns of sustained avoidance have been found in severely troubled family relations (e.g., Baumgartner 1988: Ch. 3). See also Sampson et al.’s 1964 analysis of the “separate worlds” developed by some couples, the breakdown of which led to the wives’ mental hospitalization.

simply from the shrinkage of the relationship but also from the care, effort, and planning that has to go into maintaining social separation in the face of physical proximity: Comings and goings have to be carefully calibrated, alternative places to hang out have to be found and cultivated, strategies and tactics must be developed for managing moments of contact and co-presence that cannot be prevented. In this sense, for roommates avoidance is neither low-cost and easy to implement, nor, as some approaches might suggest, simply a matter of “inaction.”

In contrast to the frequent back-and-forth movements between managerial and complaint-making responses, extreme responses are tightly sequenced: roommates turn to distancing and punitive responses only when they have come to feel that milder responses are not working and they despair of fixing the relationship. And trying milder responses first is a socially enforced preference in that both peers and dormitory officials expect that a troubled roommate will have tried direct complaints to the other before concluding that the trouble is intractable and worthy of official attention. There is a direct echo here of the pattern Macauley (1963) reported in business uses of contracts: Troubled parties who want to continue the relationship with the other in the future avoid invoking the legal system and formal enforcement mechanisms in favor of informal negotiations and agreements; businesses turn to the legal system with contract troubles when they are no longer interested in continuing to work with the other in the future. Similarly, roommates turn to punitive and other extreme measures only when they begin to despair of fixing and maintaining their relationship with the other. Roommates' use of extreme responses, then, is rarely the result of a single, dramatic act by the other, but rather grows out of the ebb and flow of response efforts over time. In this respect, knowledge of the prior history of a trouble, including initial uncertainties and false starts, changing meanings and interpretations of one another's actions, temporary and partial successes, and ultimate failures and escalations, is necessary for a full understanding of relationally extreme responses.

On another level, punitive responses reveal a distinct change in the language and character of trouble responses (Emerson 2007). Managerial and remedial responses have a pragmatic and expedient character: the troubled party commonly seeks to establish an arrangement that “works,” that the other accepts and agrees to, even if it is not the ideal or most “fair” solution. Troubled parties' priority lies less in determining basic causes or ultimate rights and wrongs in the situation, and more in figuring out “how can I handle or deal with what is happening here?” Punitive responses, by contrast, are driven by openly moralistic concerns and evidence

relationship-denying actions seeking to get back at and punish a “wrongdoer” (Emerson 2007). In this way, penal responses to roommate troubles parallel the aggressive, often violent responses that mark other troubles when issues of “honor” or “face” become engaged. Luckenbill, for example, found that encounters that ultimately led to criminal homicides began with an action “performed by the victim and subsequently defined by the offender as an offense to ‘face’” (1977:179), while Katz has analyzed hot-blooded, “righteous” killings as beginning with what the killer interprets as “attacking what he . . . regards as an eternal value,” framing the situation as “a last stand in defense of his basic worth” (1988:18–9). The inclination of most roommates to respond to the troubles others cause by means of nonconfrontational managerial and complaining responses reflects their willingness and ability to find neither offense nor threats to honor and face in such troubling acts.

It is important to consider how these patterns of informal response in roommate troubles generalize to other relationships and their troubles. On the one hand, roommate troubles are marked by an unusual feature—they arise in relatively long-term relationships of fixed, known duration that in this sense provide built-in, pre-set exit. Contractual relations in business (Macauley 1963) and project-based work relations probably provide the closest parallel, albeit ordinary service encounters, although of brief duration, have natural ending points (Mars & Nicod 1984). In all these instances, fixed, relatively proximate relational endings minimize the attractiveness of immediate exit as a trouble response and encourage the elaboration of and routine reliance on other nonconfrontational informal responses, particularly dyadic complaining and processes of informal negotiation. Thus Macauley quoted one purchasing agent: “If something comes up, you get the other man on the telephone and deal with the problem” (1963:169).

On the other hand, a second feature of roommate troubles—an initial desire to minimize confrontation, not only to preserve some sort of civil, working relationship but also to convince or pressure the others to change their disturbing behavior—is common to many troubles, ranging from business and corporate office conflicts (Macauley 1963; Morrill 1996) to intimate and family difficulties (Vaughan 1986; Baumgartner 1988; Merry 1990). In these situations systematic exclusion and exit are generally precluded, with troubled parties instead elaborating and relying on an array of complex managerial and complaining responses. Similarly, punitive action and official third-party intervention, if used at all, tend to be invoked reluctantly as last-resort decisions (Emerson 1981).

Finally, these considerations suggest important differences in the nature and development of personal troubles between the acquainted and the intimate, and of the relatively impersonal troubles that arise between strangers and within instrumental and institutional relations. Troubles within the latter are defined and in large part produced by “legal consciousness” through which a troubling event is interpreted “in terms of legal concepts or terminology” (Ewick & Silbey 1998:45). By contrast, college roommates initially tend to interpret troubles with those with whom they room in distinctly *relational* (see Conley & O’Barr 1990) rather than legal terms. In ordinary exchanges, roommates are not concerned with legality, legal rules, or legal sanctions, but with the upset or problem a relational other is causing, deciding whether or not that problem needs to be responded to or dealt with, and if so how this might be done in ways that preserve or fix the ongoing relationship. In this sense, roommates tend to display what can be termed *relational consciousness*. Relational consciousness may include strong moral concerns with fairness and reciprocity, with interpersonal sensitivity and consideration. But these are matters that are weighed and assessed within the framework of a particular relationship and its history and distinctive qualities, practices, and features. And the primary emphasis lies not in redressing some wrong or harm, but in practically changing or “fixing” the relationship so that the trouble does not recur in the future.

However, when roommate troubles persist and prove irremediable by normal means, relational consciousness may give way to legal consciousness. Roommates turn to legal concepts and terminology as they come to despair of fixing and maintaining their relationship with the other, begin to formulate specific rules to try to control the trouble, and try to implement punitive responses. Such responses are driven by openly moralistic concerns and invoke abstract legal rules and principles (e.g., deterrence, defense of property) in seeking to fix a persisting and resistant trouble or to get back at and punish the other as a “wrongdoer.”

I suggest, then, that legal consciousness may arise in different ways and with different tempos in troubles marked by personal as opposed to impersonal relations between the parties. The latter are either framed in legal terms from the start (e.g., the essentially contractual relation between buyer and car dealer; Ewick & Silbey 1998:124 and following pages) or quickly come to be interpreted in legal terms after relatively brief and circumscribed remedial efforts. By contrast, troubles in personal relations are typically marked by sustained efforts to improve, fix, or correct the relationship, and it is only with the failure of such efforts that those involved begin to think and act in distinctly legal terms.

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Robert M. Emerson is Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles. He has written extensively on ethnographic and field research methods. His substantive research has examined both the decisionmaking practices of official social control agents and agencies—juvenile court judges, psychiatric emergency teams, junior high school deans, prosecutorial intake screening, legal aid programs for applicants for domestic violence restraining orders—and the identification and handling of informal troubles, including stalking, caregiving for family members with Alzheimer's disease, and adolescent problems in family and community contexts.