

The Roommates Dilemma:
Exploration of Conflict Between Apartment Mates
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The conflict focuses on apartment mates Ashley, Kelsey, Katie, and Anna. Kelsey and Katie are roommates. Ashley and Anna are roommates. Kelsey has insomnia, along with many other medical issues. Katie snores loudly, which has created problems. Ashley has chronic migraines, so she cannot room with Katie or Kelsey because the snoring would bother her, and if Kelsey needed to be up because she could not sleep, she would bother Ashley if she was having a migraine. They live in a two-bedroom apartment, so two people per room.

The Nature of Conflict

Katie, Ashley, and Anna are good friends. Ashley and Anna were friends before, and they decided to move in with Katie, because Ashley had met her and they got along well. Anna and Kelsey know each other from an organization they are both in together, and they needed a fourth person so they asked her to move in with them. Kelsey interned over the fall semester, and this hindered her getting closer with the other three friends. There was not a hatred or dislike for anyone. Kelsey often feels out of the loop though.

The main problem is that Katie snores, and Kelsey cannot sleep because of this, which makes Kelsey understandably grumpy and unhappy. Kelsey would go sleep on the couch sometimes, and this bothered Katie because she felt like Kelsey did not like her. This made Katie feel like she was annoying, and she is the problem. Kelsey also would not tell Katie face to face she was going to sleep on the couch, or that she was going to be gone. She would always just text her and tell her, which made Katie feel like their relationship was so bad that Kelsey did not even want to talk to her. Ashley and Anna are close with Katie, so they do not like that she was feeling this way. They were harboring some uneasy feelings for Kelsey.

The triggering event that brought the situation to light was Kelsey being sick and not doing her dishes. Anna asked her if she would do her dishes, but was not feeling well so did not do them. Ashley wanted to address the issue, but could tell that if she did, it would bring up all the other feelings she had for Kelsey. She knew that would not be healthy. Ashley worked as a children's camp counselor and knows a lot about handling conflict. She reached out to me because I am a residential life member, and she knew outside help would be needed. Ashley sat down and told me about everything, and we decided that we would all meet with her community leader Hannah and talk through everything.

The conflict deals with perceived incompatible goals and scarce resources. Kelsey and Katie's goals seem incompatible. Katie wants to stop snoring, wants to sleep in her room, and wants to be comfortable. Kelsey wants a good night's rest and wants to be comfortable in her own room. She cannot get a goodnight's rest because Katie is snoring, and Kelsey has insomnia. Anna and Ashley also have incompatible goals as well. Ashley wants Katie to be comfortable, but can't sleep with Katie because she has chronic headaches, and can't sleep with Kelsey because of her insomnia. Anna wants everyone to be happy and comfortable, but cannot figure out how to do this. The apartment mates realize there are scarce resources though because there are four girls in only one apartment with two bedrooms.

They all had different ways of dealing with conflict. Kelsey is expressing her conflict mostly through texts. If anything is wrong, Kelsey does not talk about it in person. Katie is expressing the problem mostly through her facial expressions. She gets sad when she thinks about the problem, or when she gets a text from Kelsey. Ashley and Anna mostly express the struggle by talking about it with each other. They talk about how Kelsey is making Katie feel.

They also have different feelings towards conflict, which will be explained in detail in the next section.

There was some progress from destructive to productive conflict. Kelsey started with defensiveness. She had a lot of problems in the past, and sees conflict as attacking. When Hannah and I called the meeting to order, she panicked then started crying. For the first 15-30 minutes of our meeting, and especially during her first time talking, she made it very clear that she didn't know why everyone was here. She thought nothing was wrong. She felt attacked because I was there. By having someone she didn't know there to mediate, she felt like there was something going on that she did not know about. After she started to understand the situation and what was really happening, she felt much better and relaxed.

Orientation to the Conflict

The apartment mates all view conflict differently. Kelsey and Katie perceive conflict as bad. Kelsey grew up in an environment where there was constant fighting and bickering, and to her conflict is unhealthy. When conflict was mentioned she broke down and started crying. Katie sees conflict as negative because she is very reserved, and does not like admitting when something is wrong. During the meeting, Katie said she likes to hold everything in, and does not like to let people know when there is a problem, because normally it will just figure itself out eventually. Ashley sees conflict very similarly to Katie. She doesn't like to address problems when they come. She ignores them and hope they go away. One difference in Ashley's and Katie's views of conflict is that Ashley will often go to a third party and talk about her problem, instead of talking about it with the actual person. Anna sees conflict as neutral. Conflict is there, and it needs to be dealt with. She is very extroverted and has no problem bringing up whatever is

bothering her. Anna states during our meeting that conflict is not typically good to her, but is just a part of life.

The initial analysis found no obvious use of metaphors by the parties. However, in processing this conflict, this observer would suggest a dance metaphor to describe the situation. A lot of the conflict is them not only learning to live with each other, but learning to talk to each other, include each other, etc. They need to dance to the same rhythm and get their moves coordinated.

I do not believe that gender has a significant role in this situation. Although all four participants are females, the same thing could be applied if they were all male. Most of the conflict stems from perception of incompatible resources, which would affect males the same way.

Interests and Goals

The four roommates interests and goals seem different. With a closer analysis, it can be observed they are similar, but just present themselves differently. At the beginning stage, the main goal appears to be to communicate and air everything out. As the meeting goes on, the goals switch to more personal goals, focusing on what each party wants individually.

At the meeting, Kelsey's told us her goals are to not hurt anyone's feeling but also wants to be able to sleep in peace without Katie snoring. These are individualistic goals. Ashley and Anna's goals are more systemic. Their goal is not to have Katie sad and upset. They also do not want to start anything with Kelsey. Katie's goals are a mix. She wants to make the apartment a happy place and not fight, but wants to try to help Kelsey as much as possible.

Kelsey thought everyone's goals was to attack her. Katie, Ashley, and Anna saw Kelsey's goals as Kelsey trying to avoid Katie at all possible costs. She thought Kelsey was mad at her

personally for snoring. These are not like the real goals everyone had, which are thoroughly discussed later in this section. No one would talk to each other, and caused a lot of confusion and false perceptions.

Everyone has the same goal of living in peace together and communicating more. The prospective goals were vastly different than the transactive and retrospective goals. The prospective goals of each party were unique. Kelsey came thinking all she wanted from the meeting was clarity about to what was wrong. Katie went into the meeting wanting to make everyone happy. Anna and Ashley approached the meeting wanting to let Kelsey know how they feel. The parties eventually realized they had the same goal. They decided as a group they needed clearer communication and needed to figure out how to live together in harmony. Their retrospective goals after they left the meetings became mostly trying to learn how to get along.

A topic goal is the roommates want to live together in peace. The relational goals differ depending on the participant. Ashley, Anna, and Katie have the goal of developing a better relationship with Kelsey and vice versa. Katie has the goal of being treated better by Kelsey. Kelsey has been passive and hurting Katie's feelings. For example, she would just text Katie and tell her she was going to sleep on the couch instead of saying to face to face. She would also go sleep on the couch without telling Katie why. Katie has the goal of getting Kelsey to be more considerate of how she's feeling.

The group is very interdependent because they are roommates, so a lot of the goals become relational. Identity goals were evident in this interaction. Kelsey sent texts to Katie instead of talking in person in order to save face. She thought if she talked to her in person it would create more problems. Katie had the goal of not being a nuisance because she saw her snoring at the sole problem in conflict. The only process goal was evident was the at the end of

the first meeting when they talked about how they would meet again and where to discuss the issue further.

Identity and relational goals were the drivers of the conflict. The main goal came from the fact they are roommates. The goals they have are specific to their relationship. They also have goals based on who they are and how they see themselves and each other. Katie wanted to not be the problem. Kelsey saw Katie as the problem. Anna and Ashley see Kelsey as the problem. If they did not live together then there would be no conflict, therefore relational goals are important.

Goals emerged in different forms. All of the people have the same goal: to let everyone live in harmony. Getting to this goal and the way they want this goal are different. For example, one of Kelsey's goal is to be able to sleep in peace. Katie's goal is to not bother Kelsey with her snoring. These goals are the same: to have a peaceful place to rest.

Power

The parties did not openly talk about power. Through observations of the parties, and analyzing the way they talked about the situation, assumptions could be made about views on power. Katie believes Kelsey has power over her and underestimates her own power. She sees herself as the problem and believes there is no solution. She believes she is subject to Kelsey's ways and cannot do anything about it.

She believes this because she lets Kelsey have control of all the things in the room. This is more than likely because of guilt she has for snoring. She believes there is nothing she can do to change her situation. She is always going to be under Kelsey because of Kelsey's defensive nature and passiveness. Anna and Ashley also seem to feel like they have very little power is this

situation, which is why Ashley came to me. The parties knew Hannah had power, but they felt like she would abuse it because of her friendship with Kelsey.

The group sees Kelsey having resource control. Kelsey squatted (stayed in) the apartment, so the group sees it as hers. They know if they have a conflict, she will stay and they will be the ones to leave. They also see Kelsey as having interpersonal linkages with Hannah. They believe Hannah and Kelsey's friendship gives Kelsey control over the rest of the party. Kelsey sees Ashley, Anna, and Katie as having interpersonal linkages with me, and therefore thinking I had power over her. Hannah and I are seen to have communication power by all parties because of our position as community leaders.

The group does not seem to notice Ashley's expertise in dealing with conflict. She has a specific power which is being overlooked in this situation. She is a children's camp counselor and has many training sessions on how to deal with conflict. The group also does not seem to notice Anna's expertise at communicating, and her power in this situation is ignored. If the struggle was mainly between Anna and Ashley, these powers would be used, and the situation would be handled differently. Since it mostly stems from Katie and Kelsey though, these expertise powers are underestimated and are unused.

Katie's belief she has little power influences the conflict because she does not anything about it. She believes she has no control, so she lets it continue. Anna and Ashley's view of mine and Hannah's power encouraged them to reach out to me, and I reached out to Hannah. Kelsey's view of her own power made her unaware of the conflict. She did not know she was in the position of higher power, or the other parties felt this way. The group could benefit if they realized that power is not owned by an individual. If the parties realized that power came from their relationship than they could handle conflict more efficiently.

Styles and Tactics

Katie uses accommodation style. She does not want to make a scene, so she will go along with whatever anyone else says or does. This is beneficial because Kelsey is not physically hurting anybody by sleeping on the couch for a few days. Anna is using collaboration. This is beneficial because everyone will benefit. She wants to make everyone happy and was willing to work for as long as needed. Ashley and Kelsey used avoidance. They did not want to talk about the problem. Ashley would often complain about the problem to other people, but would not talk about it with the parties involved. This is beneficial because snoring is something that cannot be controlled, so by ignoring the conflict, it could get better over time.

Throughout the process, Katie and Anna's styles did not change. Ashley and Kelsey moved to a compromise tactic and wanted to come to a quick solution. They were willing to give things up if needed. The parties all perceived the styles accurately. Katie's style was accommodation and Kelsey's style was avoidance and the conflict just kept growing. Anna's collaboration style helped bring the situation to light. Anna convinced Katie that she needed to talk to Kelsey about the problem. When Kelsey would not talk about the conflict, the parties sought outside help.

The participants seem to think that the relationship is good but just needs communication management. The parties do not seem to think about their conflict style and they do them automatically. A tactic Katie used is denial of needs. She denies that she needs anything, and acts like nothing is wrong. She also uses a need for harmony tactic when she agrees with whatever Kelsey wants. For example, she said something like, "I don't want to fight about it. I'll get over it later." Anna uses qualifying statements as a tactic when she said, "The biggest conflict we have is we don't communicate well." Kelsey uses direct denial, by saying things like "I don't

think we have a problem.” Ashley uses topic avoidance and would just change the subject when the conflict came up. Just as how the styles contradicted each other, the tactics used also make the conflict worse. Katie denying her needs and Kelsey denying that there is a problem does not help the conflict. Ashley will not talk about the problem. Anna tried to talk through the issues but was thwarted because the avoiders would not collaborate until outside help was sought.

Emotions

Hannah and I encouraged Katie not hide her feelings because they are real and valid. We explained to her by telling her roommates how she is feeling, we can work better towards making sure her emotions are protected. Katie said she felt insecure and hurt. Insecure because she was the reason that Kelsey could not sleep. Hurt because she felt like Kelsey did not want to be near here. These emotions helped to show that there was a problem. If there was not a problem, Katie would not be feeling that way.

We told Kelsey it is understandable that she was concerned in the beginning of the meeting. Kelsey said she felt overwhelmed because of all her normal activities plus her lack of sleep. Understanding how Kelsey felt help Katie feel less insecure. She realized that she was not the whole problem, and could understand Kelsey’s motives from a different point of view. Ashley also realized this as well, and it helped her to view Kelsey differently.

We told Ashley it was reasonable she was feeling angry because Katie’s feelings were constantly being hurt. She said she felt angry because her friend was being hurt. She said she also felt useless because there was nothing she could do about it. Ashley’s anger indicated there was a problem that needed to be addressed. These approaches were very effective and helped the parties to be open and honest.

Anna said she felt preoccupied. She knew there was a problem going on, but did not understand the full extent. She was caught up in other things. Understanding this helped Hannah and me to understand how Anna let the conflict go on for so long. It also helped Ashley feel better because she understood that Anna was caring, just unaware.

In this conflict, I am learning how misinterpretations of conflict lead to negative emotions. If the parties would vocalize how they are feeling instead of ignoring their emotions, they could have helped the conflict early on. I also learned how one's negative emotions can greatly influence parties around them, such as Katie's insecurity influenced Ashley's anger

If the parties showed interest in each other's feelings, it could be more beneficial. If each party showed interest in the other, a lot of the negative emotions could have been avoided. If Kelsey would have told Katie, "I care about you, but I'm not comfortable sleeping in here. It's not your fault, I'm just going through a lot." then Katie's self-esteem would not be lowered so much. She would not be as insecure. The parties tended to have very high emotions with the exceptions of Anna. If the parties were to manage some of their emotion by identifying the emotions they were feeling, then it could be beneficial for everyone.

Conclusion

Looking at this conflict through a systems approach, it can be noted that the parties are intertwined. The roommates are all connected and one ripple in the apartment affects everyone. There is also an obvious chain reaction. Katie was upset about Kelsey ignoring her, which upset Ashley, which upset Anna. If the situation was not addressed when it was, coalitions would have formed. Ashley, Katie, and Anna were all feeling the same way, and if the conflict would have escalated, then they would have formed a coalition against Kelsey.

If the roommates were more aware of what these are, through recognizing them they can begin addressing them more constructively from the beginning. For example, if Kelsey would be considerate of Katie's feeling, then Katie would not feel as sad. If Ashley would think of the fact that Kelsey needs sleep and is not able to get it in her current room, then Ashley would not be as hard on Kelsey.

In the end, the parties could not live in harmony. Hannah and I tried everything we could, but if one person refuses to collaborate, then the whole system fails. Hannah and I offered solutions to the group and they left willing to try them. A week later, Kelsey started stonewalling the group, and refused to do anything productive. Hannah talked to Lanie, the Resident Director, and together they decided the best course of action was to split up the roommates. Ashley, Katie, and Anna moved into another apartment building, and Ashley said they are happier and healthier.

It would have been nice if the parties could have worked out all their difference, but sometimes conflict is managed and not resolved. Hannah and I did everything we could, and in the end, it was up to Kelsey. She refused to budge, so we took the next best course of action. Everyone is much happier now, and in time, the parties will hopefully be able to reconcile and get past this rough patch in their relationship.

References

Wilmot, W. W., & Hocker, J. L. (2011). *Interpersonal conflict*. New York: McGraw-Hill.