

A Research Note on:

SOURCES OF URBAN MULTIFAMILY HOUSING SATISFACTION

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ABSTRACT

A sample of 755 residents of low to moderate cost urban multifamily developments in Vancouver, B. C., was asked to report overall satisfaction with the development and the dwelling as well as satisfaction with specific features. The relationships of these features and demographic characteristics to overall levels of satisfaction were assessed for residents of high rises, 3-story walk ups, and townhouses.

INTRODUCTION

Although multifamily housing has been suggested as a means of meeting urban housing needs, it has received limited acceptance. The single-family dwelling continues to be preferred, especially for families with children (Dillman, Tremblay, and Dillman, 1979; Michelson, 1967; Morris and Winter, 1978). Additional research on factors affecting satisfaction with multifamily units seems appropriate at a time when the single-family dwelling may be too expensive for some families.

The focus of this research is satisfaction with three types of urban dwellings and developments (high rises, 3-story walk ups, and townhouses). The first objective is to note variations in the level of overall satisfaction and satisfaction with individual features for residents of each type of the low to moderate cost multifamily housing. Homenuck (1973) concluded from a review of literature that dissatisfaction with multifamily housing may not be due to structure type per se, but to lack of specific features, primarily space. We suggest that structure type and presence of desirable features are interrelated, and that the structure type determines, in part, which features are likely to be available. In our viewpoint, the multifamily units that are closest to single-family dwellings in structure (townhouses), would be likely to provide the most desired features and thus the greatest satisfaction; those most unlike single-family dwellings (high rises), the fewest features and the lowest satisfaction.

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The second objective is to test the relative importance of features of the dwelling and development as opposed to demographic characteristics in determining dwelling and development satisfaction. In research on single-family dwellings, satisfaction with both the dwelling and neighborhood seem to be explained best by individual features rather than by demographic characteristics (Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers, 1976; Lane and Kinsey, 1980). Lane and Kinsey found a similar pattern for resident satisfaction with apartments and duplexes. We have expanded on Lane and Kinsey's research by including a different set of housing features and demographic characteristics, and by relating these factors to development as well as dwelling satisfaction.

The third objective is to note the relationship between satisfaction with the dwelling and with the development, and whether these responses are explained by similar factors. Satisfaction with the neighborhood has been noted as an important determinant of dwelling satisfaction (Morris and Winter, 1978) to the extent that residents may overlook extensive inadequacies in the dwelling when they are satisfied with the neighborhood (Rent and Rent, 1978). Much of the research on housing satisfaction reflects the relationship of neighborhood to housing satisfaction rather than the relationship of development to housing satisfaction. There are several reasons why satisfaction with the dwelling and the development might be more closely related than indicated by the literature on the relationship of neighborhood and housing satisfaction. First of all, neighborhood is a general term that includes the development plus space outside the development. Residents of multifamily units tend to view the development space as an extension of their dwelling especially when facilities such as recreation and laundry are provided in the development space.

THE STUDY

The data were obtained from interviews with 755 residents of multifamily housing in the Greater Vancouver area of British Columbia. The respondents were selected through a stratified random sample of 19 multifamily housing projects. They were chosen to provide a representative cross-section of low and moderate cost multifamily housing units in six locations within the region. Approximately 30 percent of the households in each of the 19 units was questioned. Unrelated persons sharing a unit and pensioners without a spouse were excluded. Only 8 percent of the sample refused the interview.

The respondent was asked to report, on a 5-point Likert scale, the degree of overall satisfaction and satisfaction with specific features of the dwelling and the development. Demographic characteristics believed to relate to resident satisfaction were requested.

The majority of the townhouse residents (80 percent) own their unit, but only 6 percent of those in 3-story walk-ups and none of the high-rise residents are owners. The cost per month for each dwelling is similar. The residents differ significantly in occupation and income, with those in townhouses having the highest socioeconomic status and those in high rises the lowest. They did not differ significantly in age or marital status. The majority in all groups (80 to 90 percent) are married. The average number of persons per

high-rise unit is 2.87; per 3-story walk-up unit, 3.18; and per townhouse unit, 3.56. Those in townhouses (70 percent) plan to stay in their residence while 82 percent of the high-rise and 49 percent of the 3-story walk-up residents view their stay as temporary.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A comparison among structure types by analysis of variance revealed significant differences in overall satisfaction with the dwelling and development and with 15 of the 19 individual features (Table 1). As expected from previous research (Michelson, 1967; Onibokun, 1976) and from our proposed interrelationship of structure type and features, townhouse residents expressed the most satisfaction and high-rise residents the least.

Table 1. Satisfaction with features of dwelling and development by type of structure.

| | Type of Structure | | | | | |
|------------------------|---------------------|------|--------------------|------|----------------------|------|
| | High Rise (N=23) | | 3-Story (N=419) | | Townhouse (N=313) | |
| | Mean | Rank | Mean | Rank | Mean | Rank |
| *Overall Dwelling | 2.47 | | 2.28 | | 2.13 | |
| *Overall Development | 2.60 | | 2.48 | | 2.16 | |
| *Kitchen Layout | 2.74 | 9 | 2.37 | 7 | 2.18 | 7 |
| *Closet Space | 3.43 | 13.5 | 1.99 | 3 | 2.00 | 4 |
| *Room Size | 3.43 | 13.5 | 1.95 | 2 | 2.34 | 8 |
| General Layout | 1.87 | 1 | 2.00 | 4 | 1.95 | 2.5 |
| *Storage Space | 3.70 | 17 | 2.27 | 5 | 2.13 | 5 |
| *General Soundproofing | 2.04 | 2 | 3.38 | 17 | 2.90 | 15 |
| *Inside Privacy | 2.47 | 6 | 2.78 | 11.5 | 2.54 | 12 |
| *Development Privacy | 2.32 | 4 | 2.45 | 9 | 2.17 | 6 |
| *Inside Space | 3.00 | 10 | 2.81 | 13.5 | 2.40 | 9 |
| *Inside Soundproofing | 2.43 | 5 | 2.34 | 6 | 1.95 | 2.5 |
| *Space for Children | 3.92 | 19 | 2.81 | 13.5 | 2.53 | 10.5 |
| *Good for Children | 3.87 | 18 | 3.04 | 15 | 2.53 | 10.5 |
| Playground | 3.56 | 15 | 3.19 | 16 | 3.17 | 18 |
| *Recreation | 3.30 | 12 | 3.91 | 19 | 2.95 | 16 |
| Transportation | 3.57 | 16 | 3.63 | 18 | 3.52 | 19 |
| *Shopping | 3.22 | 11 | 2.44 | 8 | 2.90 | 13 |
| *Schools | 2.30 | 3 | 1.80 | 1 | 1.74 | 1 |
| Rules Enforced | 2.48 | 7 | 2.66 | 10 | 2.85 | 14 |
| *Complaints Handled | 2.50 | 8 | 2.78 | 11.5 | 3.04 | 17 |

*Significant $p < 0.05$.

Note: Most satisfied = 1; least satisfied = 5.

The extent to which the same features are sources of satisfaction for each structure type was measured by ranking the features from most to least pleasing. Spearman rank order correlations were done between the rankings (Table 1). Based on similarity of structure

type, we had expected and did find that residents of townhouses and 3-story walk-ups were the most similar in features considered as sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction ($r=0.83$, $p<0.01$). We had predicted that residents of high rises and townhouses would be the least similar, but this was not found. They were dissimilar in ranking features ($r=0.31$, $p<0.05$), but residents of 3-story and high-rise apartments were even less similar in ranking features as sources of satisfaction ($r=0.27$, $p<0.05$).

A different combination of factors is important in contributing to overall dwelling and development satisfaction for residents in each of the types of housing (Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2. Percent of Variation in Dwelling Satisfaction Explained by Selected Variables, by Structure Type

| | High Rise | | 3-story | | Townhouse | |
|-----------------------------|----------------|------|----------------|------|----------------|------|
| | R ² | p | R ² | p | R ² | p |
| Features | | | | | | |
| Kitchen Layout | .040 | .190 | .060 | .001 | .110 | .001 |
| Closet Space | .004 | .390 | .078 | .001 | .068 | .001 |
| Room Size | .080 | .100 | .090 | .001 | .068 | .001 |
| General Layout | .006 | .380 | .060 | .001 | .180* | .001 |
| Storage Space | .230* | .010 | .044 | .001 | .044 | .001 |
| General Soundproofing | .090 | .080 | .032 | .001 | .102 | .001 |
| Inside Privacy | .001 | .480 | .058 | .001 | .073 | .001 |
| Development Privacy | .260* | .007 | .062 | .001 | .144* | .001 |
| Inside Space | .000 | .500 | .078 | .001 | .157* | .001 |
| Inside Soundproofing | .005 | .370 | .084 | .001 | .137* | .001 |
| Space for Children | .002 | .430 | .084 | .001 | .130* | .001 |
| Good for Children | .302* | .003 | .185* | .001 | .122 | .001 |
| Playground Facilities | .001 | .440 | .012 | .010 | .073 | .001 |
| Recreation Facilities | .152* | .030 | .001 | .480 | .058 | .001 |
| Transportation | .029 | .220 | .001 | .440 | .002 | .300 |
| Shopping | .053 | .150 | .008 | .040 | .006 | .040 |
| Schools | .020 | .260 | .001 | .490 | .008 | .060 |
| Rules Enforced | .325* | .003 | .185* | .020 | .040 | .001 |
| Complaints Handled | .490* | .006 | .078 | .001 | .008 | .100 |
| Demographic Characteristics | | | | | | |
| Ownership ¹ | | | .003 | .120 | .006 | .100 |
| Cost per month | .031 | .210 | .007 | .050 | .002 | .210 |
| Total income | .013 | .290 | .001 | .220 | .001 | .390 |
| Occupation | .001 | .460 | .001 | .500 | .004 | .170 |
| Number of Children | .008 | .340 | .006 | .050 | .013 | .020 |
| Number of People | .001 | .440 | .002 | .220 | .003 | .190 |
| Marital Status | .001 | .500 | .001 | .460 | .001 | .380 |
| Planned Length of Stay | .020 | .260 | .032 | .001 | .073 | .001 |

¹All of the high-rise residents were renters.

*R² are 0.13 or greater.

As shown in Table 2, management, adequate space, and privacy, identified as important in earlier studies on multifamily housing satisfaction (Francescato, Weidemann, Anderson, and Chenoweth, 1975; Homenuck, 1973; Norcross, 1973; and Onibokun, 1976) were noted as important in explaining dwelling satisfaction in this study. Management, i.e. rules enforced or complaints handled, seemed to be of concern to residents of high-rise and 3-story walk-up apartments, but not townhouses. Ownership was common only for townhouse residents. Dissatisfaction with management appears to be a function of nonownership which means reliance on others to make decisions about handling complaints and regular maintenance.

Having space for children's activities is important in townhouses while storage space is a consideration in high-rise apartments. Suitability for children is important for high-rise and 3-story apartments. More of those living in the high-rise residences are singles or couples without children (43 percent) than those in townhouse (13 percent) or 3-story walk-up units (19 percent). The implications are that families with children tend to select multifamily units other than high rises and if they do live in a high rise, lack of space for child-related activities is a source of dissatisfaction. Apparently, townhouses and 3-story walk-ups, but not high rises, offer features of soundproofing and assurance of privacy. Inadequate soundproofing may not be a problem as these residences have less shared structural and exterior space than do high-rise residences.

As shown in Table 3, development features that are commonly believed to be vital in the selection of multifamily units--convenience of transportation, and nearness to schools (Ermuth, 1973) -- are not sources of satisfaction with the development for this sample. These features may not be expected to be available in moderate cost units and are neither sources of satisfaction nor dissatisfaction. Instead, privacy of the development, enforcement of rules, and suitability for children are related to development satisfaction.

In explaining dwelling and development satisfaction, the previously mentioned individual features rather than demographic characteristics seemed most important. In interpreting the results, caution is necessary as the high-rise sample was small. In addition, two issues to address are: our sample may have lacked variation in demographic characteristics or, as reported by Morris and Winter (1978), the characteristics may have an indirect influence.

Within a given structure type, residents varied in family composition; across structure types, residents differed in two aspects, income and occupation. The influence of demographic characteristics seems to be indirect in that townhouse residents who have higher socioeconomic status than other multifamily residents, express the most satisfaction. Further research is needed prior to stating that multifamily housing satisfaction, like single family housing satisfaction, is explained best by features of the dwelling and development rather than by demographic characteristics of the dwellers.

The overall satisfaction with development and dwelling were significantly correlated ($r=0.56$, $p<0.001$) and each multifamily housing type included several features that were important in explaining both development and dwelling satisfaction. For high-rise residents, the

two features were rules enforced and development privacy; for 3-story walk-ups, rules enforced and suitability for children; and for townhouses, development privacy and space for children. There may be no clear distinction between dwelling and development space for

Table 3. Percent of Variation in Development Satisfaction Explained by Selected Variables, by Structure Type

| Features | High Rise | | 3-Story | | Townhouse | |
|-----------------------------|----------------|------|----------------|------|----------------|------|
| | R ² | p | R ² | p | R ² | p |
| Kitchen Layout | .020 | .270 | .022 | .001 | .078 | .001 |
| Closet Space | .002 | .430 | .036 | .001 | .058 | .001 |
| Room Size | .022 | .250 | .058 | .001 | .022 | .001 |
| General Layout | .004 | .400 | .022 | .001 | .073 | .001 |
| Storage Space | .026 | .230 | .044 | .001 | .073 | .001 |
| General Soundproofing | .053 | .140 | .084 | .001 | .096 | .001 |
| Inside Privacy | .010 | .320 | .109 | .001 | .090 | .001 |
| Development Privacy | .325* | .003 | .084 | .001 | .185* | .001 |
| Inside Space | .078 | .100 | .040 | .001 | .096 | .001 |
| Inside Soundproofing | .008 | .330 | .040 | .001 | .096 | .001 |
| Space for Children | .022 | .310 | .073 | .001 | .130* | .001 |
| Good for Children | .062 | .120 | .240* | .001 | .160* | .001 |
| Playground Facilities | .044 | .170 | .073 | .001 | .029 | .001 |
| Recreation Facilities | .032 | .210 | .029 | .001 | .040 | .001 |
| Transportation | .040 | .170 | .001 | .300 | .002 | .270 |
| Shopping | .109 | .060 | .006 | .040 | .001 | .340 |
| Schools | .020 | .260 | .005 | .090 | .001 | .440 |
| Rules Enforced | .200* | .020 | .160* | .001 | .073 | .001 |
| Complaints handled | .058 | .220 | .044 | .001 | .029 | .005 |
| Demographic Characteristics | | | | | | |
| Ownership ¹ | | | .012 | .050 | .018 | .020 |
| Cost/month | .250 | .120 | .026 | .007 | .020 | .020 |
| Total Income | .045 | .170 | .001 | .330 | .013 | .040 |
| Occupation | .344 | .054 | .027 | .020 | .021 | .020 |
| Number of Children | .102 | .070 | .002 | .240 | .005 | .100 |
| Number of People | .116 | .050 | .001 | .400 | .006 | .070 |
| Marital Status | .001 | .370 | .001 | .440 | .001 | .480 |
| Planned Length of Stay | .036 | .190 | .006 | .050 | .058 | .001 |

¹All of the high-rise residents were renters.

*R² are 0.13 or greater.

multifamily residents who expect to share both structural space and development space (for recreation and laundry). Since both areas comprise one's living space, satisfactory features of the dwelling might also be satisfying with regard to the public space.

These results suggest that in times of high construction costs, builders and developers should try to ensure space for children and privacy of the development. Property managers play a critical role by enforcing rules and maintaining privacy as residents tend to be satisfied with both the development and the dwelling when these

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features of management are present. Educators might assist families in identifying housing features that are important to them, and in assessing whether multifamily housing could offer these features. This exercise is especially important at a time when the North American goal of a single-family dwelling is rapidly becoming too costly for many people to reach.

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