

This is weird...people do this?: Locational aspects of women's latrinalia at the University of Winnipeg

Meaghan Sawka

University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, MB R3B 2E9

Abstract

Literature from a variety of disciplines has examined washroom graffiti, with an emphasis on its social meaning. The location of such graffiti within the micro-environment of the public washroom has not yet been analyzed. This study examines the content and location of graffiti in eight heavily trafficked women's washrooms at the University of Winnipeg. Graffiti locations, numbers and content were monitored on a daily basis. Clear locational preferences for women to write graffiti in the washroom environment were evident. Drawing on ideas of proxemics, territoriality, and Kohn's cluster concept, this article examines the complex dynamics of graffiti and perceived privacy within women's public washrooms.

Introduction

"Graffiti" is generally regarded as anti-establishment and socially unacceptable, conjuring images of old, run-down neighborhoods rife with gang tags. It has mainly been researched as an urban phenomenon (Bruce 2010; Docuyanan 2000; Fischer and Rosenfeld 2006; Ley and Cybriwsky 1974; Nayak 2010; Spocor 2004) that has been perpetrated by deviant youth (Ferrell 1995; Sorensen n.d.) and as a phenomenon that needs to be removed and eradicated (Craw 2006; Munday, Walsh, 2006; Sorensen n.d.; Spocor 2004). Some have taken a different approach and use urban graffiti as a mechanism to understand those who create it (Ferrell 1995; Fischer and Rosenfeld 2006; Ley and Cybriwsky 1974; Young 2009). Others have written on graffiti depicting it as unrestricted and uncensored social commentary (Fischer and Rosenfeld 2006; Gonos, Mulkern, and Poushinsky 1976; Nayak 2010; Stocker et al. 1972; Cook 1972).

Many have had experiences with the lewd pictures or foul comments that pepper public washrooms everywhere, thus earning washroom graffiti, also known as "latrinalia", (Dundes 1966) a different but, similarly, "vulgar" reputation as urban graffiti. Although the general public may regard latrinalia as an ugly nuisance, many have analyzed their content in an attempt to understand what they tell us about the nature of the dominant population (Dundes 1966; Farr and Gordon 1975; Gonos, Mulk-

ern, and Poushinsky 1976, 1976; Nwoye 1993; Obeng 2000; Stocker et al. 1972).

Although this area of research has visibly expanded since Kinsey's (1953) psychodynamically slanted study of latrinalia, there remains a lacuna in the literature: the information that we can infer from the location of latrinalia. This article begins to answer this question through a case study at the University of Winnipeg, examining the prevalence of latrinalia in public washrooms and exploring what this pattern may indicate about privacy dynamics within public washrooms. In order to understand the subtle differences between public and private space in public washrooms, Kohn's "cluster concept" of public spaces is employed (Kohn 2004).

Methods

For this study, the main method of data collection was to monitor washrooms and record the location, frequency and content of latrinalia within them. The University of Winnipeg was chosen as the study area for its ease of access and an assumption that the University of Winnipeg is broadly representative of Canadian universities with a downtown campus. Eight heavily trafficked women's public washrooms on the University of Winnipeg campus were monitored twice a day for one week. The number of comments and their location was recorded ac-

ording to the stall in which they were written. Using this data, hypotheses as to why women can feel secure enough in a public washroom stall to inscribe their thoughts on the wall are offered. The complex nature of private and public space is also explored. Although the content of comments was recorded it is not the intention to explore this in this article.

Findings

In total, eight washrooms were monitored for latrinalia and six of these eight had latrinalia present. Latrinalia was exclusively found in stalls of average size with no latrinalia found in wheelchair-accessible stalls. Further, washrooms that contained wheelchair-accessible stalls were the only washrooms included in this study that did not contain any latrinalia.

There was a spatial trend to latrinalia: most comments were written in the stall furthest from the door. In fact, 89 per cent of latrinalia was found in the stall located furthest from the washroom entrance. The closer to the washroom entrance the stall was located the less likely was it to contain latrinalia. This spatial aspect is discussed more fully by Sawka (2013).

Although the content of latrinalia was not a major focus of this study, it is significant that some graffiti writers revealed very personal information which suggests they felt a significant level of security within washroom stalls and felt confident they could retain their anonymity while leaving their comments in a public place.

Private Versus Public in “public” Washrooms

Although public washrooms may seem to be the most mundane of every day spaces, they are actually very complex in terms of privacy dynamics. Some may believe that the term “public washroom” betrays all there is to understand about them—they are public and nothing more. However, if public washrooms are entirely public, why do many women feel comfortable enough to reveal intimate things about themselves through graffiti when in a washroom stall? Clearly, washrooms are more than a public arena.

Women may often assume that the stalls in public washrooms are private and anything that lies outside the stalls, such as the sinks and hand dryers, is public. However, this is an oversimplified notion. This is similar to Young’s assertion that university washrooms lie in the middle of the public-private continuum because the washroom as a whole is public but occupancy of the stall is much more private. What factors could be attributed to a perception of privacy in public washroom stalls? Only women are socially and/or legally permitted to even enter the washroom thus making the space more private than, for example, the hallway to which it is connected. Another factor that contributes to a sense of stalls being private is “solitude”, which Proshasky, Ittelson and Rivlin (1976) define as “state of privacy in which the person is alone and free from the observation of other persons” (174). This perception of solitude occurs due to the fact that, while a woman is occupying a stall, others in the washroom

can only see a limited portion of their body—the lower part of a person’s legs and feet.

Another sense of privacy that is caused by the lack of observation experienced in washrooms stalls is “anonymity”, which is “a state in which the individual seeks and achieves freedoms from identification and surveillance in a public setting” (Proshansky, Ittelson, and Rivlin 1976, 174). This term can be understood in the context of latrinalia in that, unless a writer leaves their name or other identifying characteristics, it is unlikely that anybody will ever determine who wrote the comment. This is an important factor when examining why women create and respond to latrinalia, since they tend to reveal very personal information or ask for advice about serious issues.

Taken together, solitude and anonymity may provide a strong enough perception of privacy that is conducive to the creation of latrinalia. It is also possible that these concepts change depending on several factors: the location of the washroom, the size of the washroom, of the stall within the washroom and the size of the stall. Therefore, it is conceivable that the location and content of latrinalia differs simply according washroom layout.

The layout of the washroom seems to affect women’s perception of solitude and anonymity since most latrinalia is written in the stall furthest from the entrance. This may be due to having to walk further to reach this stall or physically distancing themselves from the most public part of the washroom—the sinks and entrance. Regardless of the reason for the heightened sense of solitude and anonymity, this increase in the perception of privacy appears to be enough to make women feel more comfortable performing and act generally regarded as anti-social if not as an act of vandalism. Further research is required to determine whether the content of latrinalia in the furthest stall from the entrance is more personal than in other stalls.

Kohn’s Cluster Concept in the Context of Public Washrooms

Margaret Kohn offers a model of understanding the privacy dynamics in washroom stalls and the space that latrinalia inhabits is through her “cluster concept” of public space. This concept includes three factors: ownership, accessibility and “intersubjectivity.” All factors operate on a sliding scale with one side representing completely public space and the other representing completely private space (Kohn 2004).

Ownership refers to who owns a specific space, whether it is a person, corporation or a governing body. A person’s house would be at the private end of the continuum whereas, as Kohn argues, government property is public (Kohn 2004).

The accessibility factor describes how effortless or difficult it is for anybody to enter and move within a space. If a wide variety and a large number of people are able to travel to and within a space, it is more public than a space that restricts who may enter. At the private side of the scale, a person’s house is only accessible to those who live there or those who have a key and, at the public end of the scale, communal or government property, such as a town square, is available for anybody to enter and move within. It is clear that, depending on who owns

a space, the accessibility to that space may also change (Kohn 2004).

Intersubjectivity is the final factor that comprises the cluster concept of public space. This term, essentially, refers to the way in which people are oriented in a space. More specifically, intersubjectivity pertains to whether or not those who occupy the space are encouraged to position themselves in a way that facilitates interaction. For example, Kohn argues that sports stadiums and movie theatres fall on the private end of the scale because they force people to orient themselves toward one particular object, the screen or the sport being played, thereby producing what she calls “collective isolation” (Kohn 2004). Places like government-owned parks or even sidewalks lie on the public end of the scale because people are facing toward each other and there is a possibility of spontaneous interaction. Intersubjectivity is the most difficult to assess because people’s actual actions may contradict the implied and expected behaviour for that space. For instance, people may interact in a space that is meant to separate people (Kohn 2004).

Young (2009) argues that ownership of the washrooms at a public university lies somewhere in the middle of the public-private continuum, making these washrooms a semi-public space. While this is true for the washroom as a whole, the ownership of an occupied stall is more private. Although the occupation of a stall is usually quite brief, a person’s perception of ownership is likely to increase during the time of occupancy. This is because an occupant is alone and it would be viewed as unacceptable for another person to enter the space without permission from the occupant.

Accessibility to the washrooms included in this study is influenced both by the location and unusual construction of buildings at the University of Winnipeg. The University is located in a central urban area instead of a more suburban area as are many Canadian universities. Generally, there are a greater number of people who live or work in the downtown area of cities, thereby increasing the possibility that anyone could enter one of the buildings and use a washroom.

Due to this central urban location, at least two washrooms included in this study can be classified as public—they are on the first floor of two connected buildings very near to a set of doors. However, washrooms on upper floors then have reduced accessibility since the public is more likely to use a washroom adjacent to an entrance than one that is on the fourth floor.

Theoretically, all the washrooms in this study could be of equal accessibility because the washrooms on upper floors can be accessed just as easily as those on the first floor for able-bodied people. However, because many of the washrooms included in this study are located on upper floors and not everybody is completely able-bodied, the accessibility is reduced. Accessibility to washrooms on upper floors is also lessened by the fact that it is not always convenient for people, especially the general public, to use washrooms located above the first floor.

Accessibility is further reduced when gender is introduced. All washrooms in the University of Winnipeg, with the exception of several handicap and gender neutral washrooms (single occupant), which were not examined in this study, are divided

according to gender. This study only analyzed the content and the location of graffiti in women’s washrooms, meaning that approximately half of the population of the university is not socially or legally permitted to enter these washrooms.

Finally, intersubjectivity within public washrooms within the University of Winnipeg must be examined. This is a term that is subject to much interpretation; it must be analyzed in a number of ways. The first factor that will be examined is the layout of public washrooms and the way it dictates how women ought to act within this space. Second, drawing from personal experience and research, the way in which women actually use the space is also explored.

Within the whole of a women’s public washroom, intersubjectivity falls somewhere near the midpoint on the public and private scale. This space is private because the space is designed for a specific sequence of events to occur—first a woman enters the washroom and then makes her way over to the stalls; in the washroom, she occupies a stall alone; then, she walks a short distance to the sinks that almost always face a blank wall; after that, she moves over to the hand dryers to face yet another blank wall. It is clear that, under normal circumstances, the environment of the public washroom does not facilitate any interaction because the occupants are either alone or facing a wall instead of others.

In all washrooms included in this study, there is at least one mirror present. Depending on the size of the mirror and how many women are able to gaze at their reflections, mirrors could cause women to, indirectly, face each other. Although simply facing others via reflections in a mirror may not facilitate interaction, this would nudge the intersubjectivity level slightly to the public end of this scale.

The intersubjectivity of a blank stall is similar to the washroom as a whole in that the physical barriers make it extremely difficult for women to face and interact with each other. In fact, it could be argued that washroom stalls are designed to make it nearly impossible for occupants to interact with others in the washroom. Interaction is potentially feasible, because the stall walls and doors do not touch the floor or ceiling which makes it possible for sounds, including voices, to travel from the stall to the rest of the washroom and vice versa.

Drawing from strictly anecdotal evidence, women generally use washrooms in an intersubjective way but it is important to keep in mind that the architecture of washrooms is not conducive to interaction. It is very well known among most of the population that women usually go to the washroom with at least one friend by their side and they will typically carry out a conversation while waiting for stalls to become vacant thus, increasing the intersubjectivity of the place.

Outside of the stalls, where women must usually wait for a stall to become available, a line normally forms during peak usage times. Although a queue does not necessarily facilitate interaction, depending on the length of the wait, spontaneous conversations may commence between strangers. This is especially true in women’s washrooms where it is understood that socializing is a part of the nature of the space. This presumed social aspect of women’s public washrooms outside of the stalls

may remove the taboo that some may feel about writing latrinalia within the stalls, thus leading to the presence of latrinalia.

Within the stalls of these washrooms it is impossible to face another person and hold a conversation, at least a socially acceptable one. This is determined by the very architecture of the stall. The walls and door are generally taller than the occupant and the gaps between the stall and the ceiling do not allow for occupants to be comfortable facing and interacting with each other. In spite of structural constraints, women manage to interact without being oriented towards each other via conversational graffiti. These extensive conversations that may occupy entire walls or doors allow for the silent, but very tangible interaction between women and, thus, slides the intersubjectivity continuum to the public end of the scale.

Examining all three of Kohn's (2004) factors that define public space—ownership, accessibility and intersubjectivity—in the context of women's washrooms, we encounter ambiguity. Ownership has been deemed semi-public; accessibility lies more on the public end but, it is made semi-public when gender and architecture are included as factors. Intersubjectivity also falls on the public side of the scale but is restricted by the architecture. Overall, in terms of ownership, accessibility and intersubjectivity, the stance taken in this report is that women's public washrooms are slightly more public than private.

It is also interesting to note that Habermas (as cited in Young 2009) argues that the most public spaces allow for a high degree of access as well as for public opinions to be formed. As will be explained later, the nature women's latrinalia at the University of Winnipeg forms a public space by way of intersubjectivity and Habermas's ideas about public space.

Stalls as Temporary Territories

Theories of human territoriality have been contested since the 1920s when Eliot Howard first published his book regarding territorial behaviour of birds. Some believe that territoriality in all animals, including humans, is instinctual so animal models of territoriality can be applied to humans (Ardrey 1966; Edney 1974; Hall 1959, 1966; Hediger 1950; Lorenz 1966; McBride 1964; Tiger and Fox 1966). However, others assert that, because humans have very complicated social relationships, it is entirely different from the territorial behaviours of other animals (Alland 1972; Callan 1970; Ittelson et al. 1974, 1974; Nelson 1982; Roos 1968; Sack 1983; Sommer and Becker 1969).

This contention has carried through to the idea of temporary and micro territories as well, albeit in a slightly different manner. In one corner of the debate, there are those who believe that humans have a personal space that always surrounds them as they move about the world and that they have the ability to establish territory using this personal space almost anywhere, no matter how brief occupation of the area may be (Gold 1982; Hall 1966; Porteous 1977; Sommer and Becker 1969; Taylor and Brooks 1980). However, some researchers argue that the definition of "territory" is not met by the transient occupation of space; they argue that any territory must be defended or else it is not considered a territory (Edney and Buda 1976; Sommer

1959). According to this view, personal distance is real but it cannot be used to establish a temporary territory.

To apply theories of territoriality to women's washroom stalls, one must consider the general script, or series of expected consecutive actions or events that take place in a particular place or situation (Abelson 1981). This can be applied to the setting of a women's public washroom: a woman walks into the washroom, enters the stall, closes and locks the door behind her. Once she no longer needs the privacy that the stall provides, unlocks and opens the door and makes her way to the sinks or the mirror until she exits the washroom. The key part of this script involves the woman closing and locking the door behind her, which can be interpreted as an act to defend the space that she is occupying. In this sense, then, washroom stalls can be viewed as temporary territories and this may also contribute to feelings of solitude, which are conducive to the proliferation of latrinalia.

Proxemics and Washroom Stalls

Edward Hall's (1966) idea of "proxemics" comprises the foundation for the final hypothesis that suggests the reason that women feel secure enough within a washroom stall to write intimate truths about themselves and their lives on the walls.

Central to Hall's theory is the notion that the distance that one is standing from an individual connotes something about the action being performed between the two people; he calls these distances "proxemics zones". For example, Hall terms the zone that surrounds the space zero to 18 inches (0 to 45 centimetres) away from a person as the "intimate distance". This is an area for "love-making and wrestling, comforting and protecting" Hall (1966, 116). There are three other proxemics zones: the "personal distance", where it is socially acceptable to stand and make conversation with someone because it keeps them at an arm's length; the "social distance", which is where business affairs are carried out, and the "public distance", the zone in which public figures occupy to address an audience (Hall 1966).

Intimate distance is germane to average sized stalls in public washrooms when explaining women's latrinalia. Often, they allow only one foot (30 cm) to the left and right of the occupant and two feet (60 cm) in front; most of the stall occupies the intimate distance. Perhaps the reason that women feel solitude and anonymity within washrooms stalls is because the walls of the stall serve as a physical manifestation of the outer boundary of the intimate distance. This logic is able to explain the finding that wheelchair accessible stalls had little or no latrinalia present, which means that the majority of the latrinalia is present in standard-sized stalls.

To further corroborate this claim, Hall's personal and social distance can be used to explain reduced sensations of privacy experienced in wheelchair accessible stalls. Wheelchair accessible stalls are generally much larger than average sized stalls, and for good reason. In terms of privacy, women may feel less solitude and anonymity in these stalls because the walls are quite far away; in some cases, several feet. Just as the walls of average sized stalls can be seen as a physical manifestation of the intimate distance, the walls of wheelchair accessible stalls are

a manifestation of the transition zone between the personal and social distances. These distances, by definition, are less private than the intimate distance. This change in the physical demarcation of proxemic zones may explain the finding that the majority of latrinalia was found in average sized stalls. The more limited mobility of those confined to wheelchairs may also inhibit the writing of latrinalia in such stalls.

Summary and Conclusions

At first glance, the geographical pattern of latrinalia in women's public washrooms may initially appear random and illogical. Using the concepts introduced in this article, an explanation of this spatial pattern can be advanced.

One possible reason that women feel comfortable enough in a public washroom stall to perform actions that nature intended and sometimes reveal their innermost thoughts is that stalls offer both solitude and anonymity (Proshansky, Ittelson, and Rivlin 1976). The underlying cause of these comfortable and private sensations is unknown but may be explained using several theories.

The "cluster concept" (Kohn 2004) is a method of how public or private various spaces are, including public washrooms, using sliding scales of accessibility, ownership and intersubjectivity. In this case, washrooms are fairly accessible to able-bodied women but less so to others outside of this demographic, making the accessibility of public washrooms fall between public and private. In terms of ownership, university washrooms are, government-owned so the ownership is on the public end of the scale. Despite the physical structure of public washrooms, which does not allow for easy communication, intersubjectivity in women's public washrooms is on the public side of the scale due to the presence of latrinalia.

Although, when the "cluster concept" is applied to public washrooms, it appears that they are quite public, theories of territoriality and the idea of proxemic zones demonstrate how the stalls within public washrooms can create feelings of security and privacy. The layout of public washrooms enhances these effects so that, by having to walk further to reach the last stall, it increases the perception of solitude and anonymity. This explains why women prefer to write in the stall that lies furthest from the entrance.

Together, these theories comprise a foundational understanding of the privacy and territoriality dynamics in women's public washrooms. Varying dynamics can then provide an explanation as to the locational trends of latrinalia and bring order to the seemingly random pattern of comments written on the stall.

References

ABELSON, R. P. 1981 'Psychological status of the script concept' *American Psychologist* 36 (7), 715-729
 ALLAND, A. 1972 *The Human Imperative* (New York City, NY: Columbia University Press)
 ARDREY, R. 1966 *The Territorial Imperative* (New York, NY: Atheneum.)

BRUCE, C. 2010 'Public surface beyond the great wall: Communication and graffiti culture in China' *Invisible Culture* 15, 23
 CALLAN, H. 1970 *Ethology and Society: Towards an Anthropological View* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press)
 CRAW, P. J. 2006 'The mural as graffiti deterrence' *Environment and Behavior* 38 (3), 422-434 doi: 10.1177/0013916505281580
 DOCUYANAN, F. 2000 'Governing graffiti in contested urban space' *POLAR* (1), 19
 DUNDES, A. 1966 'Here I sit--A study of American latrinalia' *Kroeber Anthropological Papers* 34, 15
 EDNEY, J. 1974 'Human territoriality' *Psychological Bulletin* 81 (12), 17
 EDNEY, J., and BUDA, M. A. 1976 'Distinguishing territoriality and privacy: Two studies' *Human Ecology* 4 (4), 14
 FARR, J. H., and GORDON, C. 1975 'A partial replication of Kinsey's graffiti study' *Journal of Sex Research* 11 (2), 4
 FERRELL, J. 1995. "Urban graffiti: Crime, control, and resistance." *Youth & Society* no. 27 (1):73-92. doi: 10.1177/0044118x95027001005
 FISCHER, E., and ROSENFELD, S. 2006 *Grffiti and Public Space: A Semiotic Analysis of Graffiti in Seattle's University District* (BA thesis, University of Washington, Washington)
 GOLD, J. R. 1982 'Territoriality and human spatial behaviour' *Progress in Human Geography* 6, 24 doi: 10.1177/030913258200600102
 GONOS, G., MULKERN, V., and POUHINSKY, N. 1976 'Anonymous expression: A structural view of graffiti' *Journal of American Folklore* 89 (351), 9
 HALL, E. 1959 *The Silent Language* (New York, NY: Fawcett World Library)
 ———. 1966 *The Hidden Dimension* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books)
 HEDIGER, H. 1950 *Wild Animals in Captivity* (London, England: Butterworths)
 ITTELSON, W. H., PROSHANSKY, H. M., RIVLIN L. G., and WINKEL, G. H. 1974 *An Introduction to Environmental Psychology* (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston)
 KINSEY, A., POMEROY, W. B., MARTIN, C. E., and GEBHARD, P. H. 1953 *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia, PA: Saunders Company)
 KOHN, M. 2004 *Brave New Neighborhoods: The Privatization of Public Space* (New York, NY: Routledge)
 LEY, D., and CYBRIWSKY, R. 1974 'Urban graffiti as territorial markers' *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 64 (4), 16
 LORENZ, K. 1966 *On Aggression* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and World)
 McBRIDE, G. 1964 *A General Theory of Social Organization and Behaviour* (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press)
 NAYAK, A. 2010 'Race, affect, and emotion: young people, racism and graffiti in the postcolonial English suburbs' *Environment and Planning* 42, 23
 NELSON, S. D. 1982 'Review Section: Nature/nurture revisited I: A review of the biological bases of conflict' *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 18, 285-335
 NWOYE, O. G. 1993 'Social Issues on walls: Graffiti in university lavatories' *Discourse & Society* 4 (4), 419-442 doi: 10.1177/0957926593004004001
 OBENG, S. G. 2000 'Doing politics on walls and doors: A sociolinguistic analysis of graffiti in Legon (Ghana)' *Multilingua* 19 (4), 28
 PORTEOUS, J. D. 1977 *Environment and Behaviour: Planning and Ev-*

- eryday Urban Life* (Don Mills, ON: Addison-Wesley)
- PROSHANSKY, H. M., ITTELSON, W. H. and RIVLIN, L. G. 1976 *Environmental Psychology 2nd Edition: People and Their Physical Settings* (Toronto, ON: Holt, Reinhart and Winston Inc.)
- ROOS, P. D. 1968 'Graffiti: A nonreactive measure?' *Human Relations* 21 (1), 75-84
- SACK, R. D. 1983 'Human territoriality: A theory' *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 73 (1), 20
- SAWKA, M. L. 2013 *Writings on the Stall: Space and Place of Women's Latrinalia* (BA thesis, University of Winnipeg)
- SOMMER, R. 1959 'Studies in personal space' *Sociometry* 22 (3), 14
- SOMMER, R., and BECKER, F. D. 1969 'Territorial defense and the good neighbor' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 11 (2), 8
- SORENSEN, J. n. d. 'Stopping graffiti'
- SPOCTOR, M. A. 2004 'This is my space: Graffiti in Claremont, Cape Town' *Urban Forum* 15 (3), 13
- STOCKER, T. L., DUTCHER, L. W., HARGROVE, S. M., and COOK, E. A. 1972 'Social analysis of graffiti' *Journal of American Folklore* 85 (338), 11
- TAYLOR, R. B., and BROOKS, D. K. 1980 'Temporary territories?: Responses to intrusions in a public setting' *Population and Environment* 3 (2), 11
- TIGER, L., and FOX, R. 1966 'The zoological perspective in social science' *Man* 1, 75-81
- YOUNG, J. C. 2009 'Restroom politics: Voices in the stalls' *Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal* 4 (2), 10