The Illogic of Separation: Examining Arguments About Gender-Neutral Public Bathrooms

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Abstract

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In the United States, gender separation is the norm for public bathrooms. As one of the few remaining public spaces that are regularly explicitly segregated by gender, bathrooms are often experienced as sites of symbolic and physical exclusion by transgender and gender non-conforming people. For this reason, one focus of transgender activism in the United States and elsewhere has been safe access to public bathrooms – often by advocating for "gender-neutral" configurations. These challenges to the established norm of separation have sometimes provoked strong resistance. However, the problem of resistance to change is perhaps less pressing for activists than the problem of convincing the public, policymakers, and potential allies that bathrooms are worth discussing at all. This study uses focus group methods to understand how people presumably unfamiliar with debates around public bathrooms understand and talk about the possibilities of organizing public bathrooms in a "genderfree" way. Several of the arguments raised against gender-neutral bathrooms, such as those rooted in concerns around women's safety

and loss of privacy, were either challenged by other participants as internally inconsistent, or proved to be more complicated than they initially seemed. The only argument that remained unchallenged during the discussions was a religiously-motivated assertion about the naturalness of binary gender separation. I suggest that other participants may have also felt uncomfortable with the notion of ending gender separation, but that they lacked access to the "good reasons" for expressing discomfort that this religious discourse provides. These findings imply that for some, resistance to ending gender separation in public bathrooms is wrapped up with deep-rooted attachments to the continuation of the gender system that may be less vulnerable to reasoned debate than apparently rational concerns about safety or privacy.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

Table Number Page

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DEDICATION

To Maddox

INTRODUCTION

Everyday, many of us make use of public and semi-public bathrooms in workplaces, schools, and the myriad other spaces we pass through and occupy while outside our homes.[1] By the time we reach adulthood, many of us have become so familiar with the rules and norms around public bathrooms that we are able to navigate the space as if on autopilot. As a result, we need not speak nor think much about bathrooms nor what goes on behind their doors. This is a tremendous boon in a culture that accords human elimination of waste a taboo status (Cavanagh 2010:4; Chess et al. 2004:220). Evidence of this status can be seen in the range of euphemisms available to spare us the necessity of referring to the acts of urinating and defecating, or to the actual places in which these acts occur (Greed 2010:119; Kira 1976).

As a result of our cultivated inattention to bathrooms, most of us rarely consider the ways in which our cultural norms around public bathrooms represent not natural or inevitable developments, but rather, are the products of historically contingent processes. The separation of public bathrooms by gender is perhaps the most naturalized of these norms. Indeed, people who are not confronted with the problematic aspects of this separation on a daily basis have little cause to remark upon the gendered character of public bathrooms at all.

However, many people encounter gender separation as a barrier to accessing public bathroom spaces. In particular, transgender and gender non-conforming people – including non-transgender feminine men and masculine women – often experience bathrooms as sites of symbolic and physical exclusion and discrimination (Browne 2004; Cavanagh 2010). For this reason, one focus of transgender activism in the United States and elsewhere has been obtaining

1 I define a "public bathroom" as any toilet facility that is not located in a private dwelling. This is a broad definition that necessarily encompasses a great deal of variation in design and accessibility. Indeed, "public bathroom" is something of a misleading term, a recognition which has led the British Toilet Association to coin the phrase "away from home" toilets (Greed 2010:119). This phrasing more accurately describes the phenomenon in question, but as it is not commonly used in the United States, I will continue to use the familiar construction.

safe access to public bathrooms – often by advocating for "gender-neutral" options that make no assumptions about the user's gender (Chess et al. 2004; Mateik 2003; Molotch 2010; Safe2Pee 2011; Transgender Law Center 2005).[2] These efforts have occasionally run up against vigorous opposition, but they are more often confronted with apathy or incredulity at the notion that the public bathroom could be a focus of serious political activism. This study builds from this recognition and seeks to understand how people react to the possibilities of organizing public bathrooms in alternative, gender-neutral ways.

This question is of both practical and theoretical significance. Practically, the gendered standard of public bathrooms is unlikely to change without the support of "non-stakeholders," that is, those who do not identify as transgender in a broad sense. Bathroom activists have been quick to note that the benefits of gender-neutral bathrooms would accrue to many diverse populations, but efforts to change the gendered organization of public bathrooms have been most visible as a part of transgender activism. As a relatively small movement and one that is still struggling to gain legitimacy in many parts of the United States, the ability of transgender activists to succeed may depend on the extent to which they are able to create connections with those who do not identify as transgender, and to strive for social changes which will benefit – or more importantly, be clearly *seen* to benefit – those people (Currah, Juang, and Minter 2006:xv).

At least one major study has specifically examined transgender and queer-identified people's experiences with and perceptions of public bathrooms (see Cavanagh 2010). However, little sustained research has examined the ways that non-transgender people talk about and understand the gendered nature of public bathrooms. Indeed, in their review of gender and family issues surrounding public bathrooms, Anthony and Dufresne (2007) call for more research on the

2 Activists have also fought parallel battles for the rights of transgender people to use the gendered bathrooms appropriate to their gender identity rather than their birth-assigned gender. These challenges will not be discussed in detail here, but see Mottet (2003).

practice of and attitudes towards gender segregation. How do men and women react to the notion of gender-neutral or unisex bathrooms? Investigating this question, they argue, might shed light on whether or not gender segregation is still necessary at all (Anthony and Dufresne 2007:289).

Theoretically, the question of how people talk about public bathrooms and gender has relevance to a range of perspectives that see gender as situationally, interactionally, or citationally produced. The public bathroom is a space in which the dominant binary conceptualization of gender is made more concrete than perhaps anywhere else in society (Browne 2004:338). Thus, an examination of arguments about and meanings surrounding the public bathroom has the potential to inform our understandings of the social construction of gender.

In this paper, I will first review the history of gender segregation in public bathrooms in the United States, using interactionist theories of gender to think through some of the reasons why the public bathroom has been such a key site for broader struggles around gender. Then, I will consider the contemporary context of bathroom politics, highlighting recent challenges to gender segregation and asking whether the meanings attached to the practice have changed over the last fifty years. I use this question as a point of entry into the research that comprises this study, a series of surveys and focus group discussions with undergraduate students about gender-neutral bathrooms. After reviewing the literature on the methods employed, I present my findings as a set of arguments students made for and against gender-neutral bathrooms during the focus groups. Finally, I consider the implications of students' arguments for the practice of gender segregation specifically, and more broadly, the state of societal beliefs about gender.

BACKGROUND

Historical Context

Gender separation has become a naturalized phenomenon. Without evidence to the contrary, we assume that our practices around the public bathroom are the most sensible solutions to universal biological necessities. For example, a recent book on global access to sanitation can find nothing to say about "unisex restrooms" other than to note that they are an "unpopular solution" to the problem of "potty disparity" (George 2008:143). The author argues that the unisex bathrooms merely add additional problems onto the already awkward situation of the public bathroom, in that they "contravene the social codes of gender segregation that have prevailed forever" in most of the world. No evidence is provided for this claim – presumably the reader is meant to take it as obvious. Neither is any reference to gender variance made, which is odd given that gender-neutral bathrooms of one form or another have mainly been presented as a solution to the access problems faced by gender-variant people. Even in a work about access to safe, acceptable bathrooms, the barriers to access posed by separation are left undiscussed, and the historically and culturally-situated norm of gender separation is universalized to cover all times and all places.

As such, it will be useful to consider the history of public bathroom provision and of gender separation specifically. This history will allow me to situate my respondents' contemporary concerns and thoughts within a longer tradition of discussion and arguments about the topic, which has now mostly been forgotten as a result of the naturalizing process previously mentioned. It will also illustrate that gender separation has not "prevailed forever" around the world, not least in the United States.

Kogan (2010) notes that gender-segregated public bathrooms began appearing in the U.S.

during the nineteenth century. However, the law was silent on the practice of separation until 1887, when the Massachusetts legislature passed a law requiring that workplaces with women workers provide them with facilities separate from the existing men's bathrooms. By 1920, most states had followed Massachusetts' lead and enacted similar legislation.

What spurred this burst of bathroom regulation in the U.S.? Kogan argues that the impetus for gender separation policies was the "protection" of women workers. Indeed, these laws developed as extensions of so-called "protective labor legislation" for women (Kogan 2010:156). Motivated by Victorian ideology about the proper role and place of women, legislators were concerned with protecting women's modesty and virtue – and they sought to do this by re-creating "home-like" private spaces within the public sphere, in the form of separate women's bathrooms. While women had been working in factories in the U.S. for some time prior to the enactment of these laws, Kogan argues that a "confluence of anxieties" – around public health, privacy and modesty, and the rapid growth of technology – convinced policymakers that toilet separation laws were necessary around the end of the 19th century. Eventually, sanitarians incorporated gender separation into guides on sanitary science, and legislators adopted the recommendations. Separation began to appear in sanitary legislation, alongside requirements that actually dealt with concerns of cleanliness and waste disposal in factory settings (Kogan 2010:158). Thus, gender separation found its way into many state laws and over time, acquired the status of common sense.

Gender separation has become the mostly-unquestioned norm since this period, and our deep attachment to the practice is thus hidden until separation is threatened in some way. For example, opponents of the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution employed the mendacious claim that the amendment would mean the forced end of gender separation as a bid

to turn public sentiment against it. This argument was an important part of the antifeminist campaign spearheaded by Phyllis Schlafly (Cahill 1985; Case 2010). Could a similar threat be employed today? If so, why would it be effective? What is it about the "specter of shared bathrooms" that made it such an effective scare tactic? Interactionist theories of gender will assist us in shedding some light on these questions.

Gender Theory

In contrast to those views which take the naturalness of gender for granted, there are a number of perspectives that understand it as a socially constructed phenomenon. These diverse traditions have in common their treatment of gender as a continual process of negotiation and accomplishment, in which small gestures and indicators are crucial to achieving social intelligibility as a gendered person (see West and Zimmerman 1987; Kessler and McKenna 1978; Butler 1993). Such approaches can be found within queer theory, feminist perspectives, and symbolic interactionism.

Adopting such a perspective on gender encourages us to understand the use of gendered public bathrooms as one of the "daily practices through which gender is repeated and secured" (Namaste 2000:191). This is a departure from conventional wisdom, which regards the gendering of public bathrooms as a benign consequence of natural differences between men and women. Indeed, critical analyses of gender separation have inverted the causality of the common-sense view, seeing gender separation as one of the institutions that functions to reproduce and naturalize a particular cultural understanding of gender (Halberstam 1998). For instance, in "The Division Between the Sexes," Goffman remarked upon the reflexive nature of gender separation in toilet design:

> "The functioning of sex-differentiated organs is involved, but there is nothing in this functioning that *biologically* recommends segregation; *that* arrangement is

> totally a cultural matter. And what one has is a case of institutional reflexivity: toilet segregation is presented as a natural consequence of the difference between the sex-classes, when in fact it is rather a means of honoring, if not producing, this difference." (1977:316)

Thus, the existence of two — and only two — separate bathroom spaces props up the cultural fantasy that all persons can be neatly categorized as male or female, and forecloses the possibilities of alternative identifications (Browne 2004). As Cahill (1985) puts it, "Every time we enter a sex segregated bathroom […] we display our sex-identity to the audience-at-large and reaffirm its importance." Here, cultural anxieties around the loss of gender separation begin to become understandable.

As one of the few remaining gender-segregated spaces in U.S. society, public bathrooms provide both an escape from the "other" sex, and more importantly, a daily reassurance that there is an "other" sex to escape from. Societal attachment to this "segregative punctuation" as evidenced by the utility of the threat of shared bathrooms by anti-ERA forces suggests a continuing commitment to the maintenance of gender differences that may go deeper than many people realize or would be willing to admit (Cahill 1985:54). The fear of ending gender separation may have thus reflected "deep fears about sexual mixing, transgressing social boundaries, and ending recognition of gender differences" – that is, fears about the instability of gender itself (Cooper and Oldenziel 1999:17). As traditional gender divisions fall away — albeit slowly and unevenly — the gender-segregated bathroom may come to be invested with more and more of the symbolic work of maintaining the purity of gender categories.

Contemporary Context

Opponents of the ERA successfully mobilized fears around ending gender separation almost forty years ago. One might ask whether these fears are still operant, or whether the specter of shared bathrooms has lost its potential to shock and frighten.

If anything, bathrooms have received more attention in public discourse since the 1970s, though they are no longer mainly associated with gender equality legislation. Instead, the bathroom as a symbol is now most commonly linked with the phenomenon of gender variance. Here, Halberstam (1998:24) argues that "The bathroom, as we know it, actually represents the crumbling edifice of gender in the twentieth century."

Indeed, as conceptions of gender are being expanded and tested at the edges in increasingly visible ways, the public bathroom has arguably become a very powerful symbol, one that is often called upon by claimsmakers in order to dismiss broader attempts to protect or recognize gender variant people under the law. This phenomenon is exemplified by the trend of labeling anti-trans discrimination laws as "bathroom bills" in order to deny gender variant people's rights claims by ridiculing them.

For example, in December 2010, the Canadian parliament voted for the second time on a bill to include gender identity and gender expression as protected categories under the Human Rights Act and Criminal Code. Canadian religious groups and the Conservative Party opposed the legislation. One well-known evangelical Christian leader claimed that "it could allow male sexual predators dressed as women to enter women's bathrooms," and a Conservative MP echoed these concerns, voting against the bill "because current legislation already protects transgendered Canadians, and it raises murky legal issues, like the bathroom question" (Maher 2010). When the House of Commons passed the bill in February 2011, a CBC article noted that the bill faced a "storm of criticism" from conservative groups, who argued that it would protect sexual predators from prosecution (CBC News 2011). Despite the apparent concern for women's safety, the language employed by many opponents of gender-neutral bathrooms demonstrates that one of their major fears is about the legitimation of gender variance and of transgender

identities as real, which would potentially threaten the stability of binary gender. For example, a statement on the aforementioned bill from a Canadian conservative lobby group called REAL Women asks the rhetorical question, “What about women who don't wish to share the restroom with a disturbed male?” (Zerbisias 2011).

Dismissal is a typical response to activism specifically targeting bathrooms as well. In her case study of a University of Massachusetts at Amherst group's efforts to create gender-neutral restrooms, Gershenson (2010) describes how media refused to take the issue seriously and treated it as a topic of curiosity and humor. She cites one commentator who argued that the motive behind the Restroom Revolution group was “desire for attention”, and who went on to claim that “activists behind the movement are using a petty issue like bathrooms as a medium to throw their lifestyles in the face of every-day students” (Gershenson 2010:199).

In response, activists argue that access to public bathrooms is anything but a “petty issue,” highlighting the difficulties presented by gender segregation to families, people with disabilities, and especially, transgender people. Because gender-segregated public bathrooms allow for only two genders and hence set up the possibility of “failing” this gender test, public bathrooms are often sites of violence against gender non-conforming individuals, who may be the targets of interpersonal gender policing regardless of which gendered choice they make (Browne 2004; Cavanagh 2010; Halberstam 1998). This policing can range from stares and unwelcome comments to expulsion and physical violence.

Browne's (2004) study on masculine women's experiences in public bathrooms demonstrates a range of gender policing behavior. Respondents described times at which they were asked if they were in the “right toilets,” accused of being male trespassers, and ejected from public bathrooms by nightclub staff. Similarly, Cavanagh (2010) interviewed a wide range of

transgender, queer, gay, lesbian, and gender non-conforming people in Canada and the US and found that fears and experiences of violence in public bathrooms were common. Participants related stories of beatings, harassment, police arrests, and the perception that they represent a danger to children in the bathroom. Cavanagh's (2010) respondents, on the whole, find bathrooms to be inherently unsafe places, chiefly because of "non-trans people invested in heteronormativity [who] want bodies sorted into oppositional categories – male and female" (73).

These forms of violence and exclusion are often transactional in character. However, they also manifest in institutional policies – both formal and informal – which make the public bathroom an unsafe or unwelcoming place for many. Perhaps in recognition of this dynamic, a recent US national survey of 6,450 transgender and gender non-conforming people included several questions about bathroom access. It found that 26% of respondents in educational settings reported denial of access to facilities such as bathrooms, 22% of respondents reported being denied access to appropriate bathrooms at work, and 21% reported being unable to work out a suitable bathroom situation at work (Grant, Mottet, and Tanis 2010).

It is hardly surprising, then, that many transgender and gender non-conforming people express discomfort with using traditionally gendered bathrooms. One study of 166 transgender adults found that 48.9% of MTF respondents, 71.2% of FTM respondents, and 89.1% of genderqueer respondents indicated at least "a little" discomfort with having to choose a gendered bathroom (Factor and Rothblum 2008). For these reasons, activist groups mainly based on university campuses – such as People In Search of Safe and Accessible Restrooms (PISSAR) – have sought to push for greater acceptance and availability of gender-neutral bathrooms (Chess et al. 2004).

After a series of campaigns by one such group of activists during the late 2000s, the University of Washington adopted a policy requiring all newly built on-campus facilities to provide a single-stall gender-neutral bathroom alongside the more typical multi-stall gender-segregated variety. Activists also began working with administrators to convert existing single-stall gender-segregated bathrooms into gender-neutral facilities. These changes were promoted by activists as being parent-friendly, beneficial for transgender and gender-variant people, and accessible for people with disabilities (Sekins and Hackett 2007).

While some bathroom activists want to see an end to separation in all public bathroom spaces — even multi-stall bathrooms — the student activists at the University of Washington were careful to make clear that they were not pressing for this sort of total conversion, only for the "degendering" of single-stall bathrooms. The decision was likely based on an assumption about differential public support for single- versus multi-user gender-neutral bathrooms. Whereas single-stall gender-neutral bathrooms can be easily explained via a comparison to most home bathrooms, the multi-stall option is extremely unusual and potentially frightening – not just due to its novelty, but because it presents the possibility of interpersonal interaction between genders in a space that is simultaneously coded as private *and* public.

Thus, it seems that some bathroom activists believe than attitudes towards ending gender segregation have not changed much over the last half-century. This study seeks to link this contemporary activism to the historical symbolic roles of segregation in public bathrooms. It does so by examining the public discourses that arise in response to the possibilities of configuring public bathroom spaces in alternative and previously unimagined ways.

METHODS

While interviews and standardized surveys are generally the methods of choice for research dealing with opinions and attitudes, both methods have serious limitations with regards to the topic of public bathrooms. Given that there was little reason to expect that most people in the population of interest would have thought much about the topic of gender and public bathrooms, the use of surveys to assess the range and prevalence of particular opinions was unlikely to be particularly fruitful. Indeed, surveys are not well-suited to dealing with the processes of opinion formation when encountering previously unfamiliar topics. Rather, they are generally designed for collecting data on the *product* of those cognitive and social processes – that is, relatively stable, consistent individual opinions.

Semi-structured interviews might be somewhat more useful than standardized surveys, given the ability to probe for additional information and break from a strict survey format. However, they are subject to similar caveats insofar as they often aim to collect information on participants' prior experiences or preexisting opinions. Additionally, given that the method places a great burden on the individual participant in the form of the interviewer's singular focus, the interviews might potentially be embarrassing or awkward for participants who felt uncomfortable speaking about the topic.

In contrast to these more commonly-used methods, focus groups seem very well-suited to the topic of gender separation in public bathrooms. While definitions of what precisely constitutes a focus group vary, a broad definition would include any research design making explicit use of group interaction to generate data (Kitzinger and Barbour 2001:5). Focus groups allow the participants to generate their own questions, frames, and concepts, resulting in data that are closer to the emic than etic side of the research spectrum (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990:13).

Due to their nature as group settings, focus groups also allow for the exploration of the social processes by which particular viewpoints are constructed (Delli Carpini and Williams 1994; Waterton and Wynne 2001:141). This allows for a much different kind of analysis than a survey which seeks to capture the *products* of those processes, and is especially relevant in those cases where the participants have little or no prior experience with the topic, as is likely to be the case in this research (Cunningham-Burley, Kerr, and Pavis 2001).

Compared to individual interviews, focus groups are also particularly useful for exploring topics that might be considered uncomfortable or taboo. In a group discussion, the more gregarious members of the group can often spark discussion by mentioning a shared idea or experience, thus "breaking the ice" in a way that would not be possible in a non-group setting (Farquhar and Das 2001:47; Kitzinger 1994). Thus, the focus group method seems well-suited to getting past the issues of awkwardness that might stymie full participation in an interview setting.

Like any method, focus groups have weaknesses as well as strengths. One commonly-noted issue is that group discussions — as opposed to individual interviews — create the potential for more vocal members of the group to take up more space than other participants (Krueger and Casey 2000). This may make it more difficult for others to express their opinions, which is especially a concern for any discussion group that includes members of different status groups. In this study, I took two measures to reduce this possibility. First, I made an effort to involve all group members in the conversation by soliciting comments from those who were more quiet than others. Second, I conducted one-on-one follow up interviews with many participants some time after their participation in the focus group. With that said, the impact of the potential shortcomings of focus group methods depends to a substantial degree on the

researcher's epistemological approach.

Epistemology

Methods are not bound to particular epistemological positions – however, they may share affinities with some such paradigms over others. Freeman (2006) suggests that focus group research can be broadly understood as motivated by either a realist or a constructivist paradigm. Wilkinson (2001:77) adopts a similar typology of "essentialist" versus "social constructionist" epistemology.

A realist or essentialist approach to focus groups sees the method as a useful means of "uncovering the substantive views of particular groups of people" (Freeman 2006:495). That is, researchers using focus groups in this way seek to understand what people "really" think or do about the topic of discussion. This approach requires that the researcher follow particular sampling procedures in order to segment the sample into homogeneous groups (Krueger and Casey 2000:72). Homogeneity is important for ease of analysis and to ensure that participants are comfortable in the focus group setting. Too much heterogeneity – especially insofar as heterogeneity means differential status – might inhibit discussion (Freeman 2006). Thus, in the absence of procedures to minimize heterogeneity, the researcher's ability to speak to respondents' true opinions – or to compare across some category such as race – is severely limited.

In contrast, research motivated by constructivism is chiefly concerned with the ways in which participants talk and make claims about a certain topic in a group setting. Operating under this paradigm, researchers are less interested in making claims about participants' true beliefs than in analyzing the social processes that occur in the focus group setting. Waterton and Wynne provide a clearly worded statement of the unique value of focus groups for constructivist research which seeks to understand not just *what* attitudes people hold, but *how* they come to

hold them:

> "...the contribution of focus groups as opposed to interview or quantitative analyses lies in their capacity to permit wide-ranging interaction on a subject. The important point here is that this flexibility and fluidity of the focus group is seen not just as a means of expressing the wide-ranging nature of attitudes, but as a way of facilitating and recording the active formation of those values within the group setting." (2001:141)

Drawing on this understanding, I adopt a constructionist perspective in this research. I expect that participants will not have given much serious consideration to the topic, and thus will not have previously established attitudes or opinions. While the actual level of support for gender-neutral bathroom options was of some interest to me, the primary objects of analysis were the different arguments participants *publicly* raised in favor of or against these alternative possibilities.

Procedures

After receiving approval from my institution's human subjects review board, I recruited participants through open calls for participation in several large undergraduate sociology classes. Many of these classes were survey-level courses, which have no restrictions on admission. They tend to attract a wide range of students, rather than solely sociology majors. Potential participants provided their contact information, which I used to inform them of a time and place where the focus group would be held.

Upon arriving at the designated time, participants' informed consent was secured and they were provided with complimentary food and beverages (see Appendix A: Consent Form). Before the discussion began, each participant was asked to complete a brief survey on the topic of public bathrooms (see Appendix B: Pre-Discussion Survey). Using a series of images illustrating four kinds of public bathrooms — multi-user gender segregated, single-user gender-segregated, single-user unisex, and multi-user mixed-gender — participants ranked their preferences and

provided brief explanations for them (see Appendix C: Bathroom Photo Reference Sheet). They were also asked to imagine possible arguments that might be raised in favor of each type of bathroom, and to imagine which "social groups" might benefit from or be opposed to each of the two gender-neutral options.

This exercise served two purposes. First, it gauged participants' prior knowledge of and attitudes towards public bathrooms, in order to provide a reference point for analysis of the conversation to follow. Second, the survey introduced the participants to the different types of bathrooms under consideration using visual and textual explanations. This provided participants a common language with which to discuss an unfamiliar topic, and served as a useful launching-off point to begin the focus group discussion.

After they completed the surveys, participants engaged in group discussions that lasted approximately one hour each. I began the discussions by asking participants to share their rankings and the reasoning behind them. I then posed specific questions to the group, asking participants to imagine their own reactions upon encountering each type of gender-neutral bathroom on campus. I also asked the groups to speculate on how various social groups might react to the presence of these kinds of public bathrooms on campus, or to the total replacement of all gender segregated bathrooms with gender-neutral ones (see Appendix D: Focus Group Questioning Guide). From spring to autumn 2011, I conducted nine focus groups consisting of two to six participants each, with a total of 35 participants in all.[3]

Two to four weeks after they participated in the focus group, I re-contacted most

3 During the initial phases of the study, I noticed that most participant volunteers were women. I made efforts to address this gender disparity as recruitment continued, but nonetheless ended up with only slightly more than 30% of my participants being male. This is likely due to a number of factors, possibly including a differential willingness to speak about the subject matter between men and women. Additionally, the gendered makeup of my sample may be in part a result of the composition of the recruitment pool of undergraduate sociology classes, which are probably reflective of the discipline and social sciences as a whole.

participants for a follow-up interview. This was a very brief, open-ended procedure asking participants to reflect on the group discussion and providing them with an opportunity to share any ideas or stories that were not brought up – for whatever reason – in the focus group itself (see Appendix E: Post-Discussion Interview Guide). Typically, these interviews lasted from three to seven minutes. I conducted these interviews as a means of providing participants who might have been shy or intimidated during the group an opportunity to elaborate on their ideas. During these interviews, many participants said that they had felt comfortable and able to speak freely in the focus group setting, and some related thoughts that had occurred to them since the group meeting. Only a very few explicitly mentioned that they had held some comments back during the focus group.

As the focus group recordings were transcribed, I began a process of coding in which I noted themes that recurred within and across the group discussions. I then aggregated these themes into broader categories of arguments for or against each type of gender-neutral bathroom. In the analysis that follows, I present quotes from across the groups to illustrate particular instances of these arguments. My selection of quotes from different groups to support the same point necessarily abstracts these exchanges from the contexts in which they occurred. However, doing so allows me to demonstrate the recurrence of similar arguments across the nine focus groups that comprised this study.

Terminology

There is no universally-used language to talk about public bathrooms. Here, I use "single-user" (and sometimes "single-stall") to designate any public bathroom that is a self-contained space generally intended for use by a single person at a time. In contrast, "multi-user" or "multi-stall" refers to a bathroom space which contains multiple stalls and/or urinals. Each of these

types of bathrooms might be gender-segregated or not, so that there are four possible configurations, as summarized in the following table.

Table 1. Typology of Public Bathrooms

	Gender-segregated?	
Design	Yes	No
Single-user	Single-user gender-segregated	Single-user unisex
Multi-user	Multi-user gender-segregated	Multi-user mixed-gender

I used the phrase "gender segregated" rather than "gendered" as an adjective, as it seemed more likely to be more intuitively comprehensible for participants. When it came to signifying the gender neutral options, I again avoided terms like "genderfree" in favor of more accessible language. The distinction between "unisex" and "mixed gender" was partially made to distinguish these two options, which might otherwise be confused during group discussions were they both labeled "gender neutral." I chose "unisex" as I expected that most of my participants would be familiar with the term — it is the language that is often used to signify a single-user bathroom without gender restrictions. "Mixed gender" was chosen to signify the social mixing that such an arrangement would entail, although "all-gender" is sometimes used as well (Transgender Law Center 2005).

SURVEY DATA

All 35 participants completed a brief survey before the group discussions. The survey mainly served as a means of getting participants to begin thinking about the topic, but it also provides some data about participant attitudes and perceptions prior to the discussions. The first set of questions asked participants to rank the four different types of public bathrooms described above. Table 2 provides a summary of responses.

Table 2. Pre-Discussion Survey Bathroom Type Rankings *

	Multi-user gender-segregated	Single-user gender-segregated	Single-user unisex	Multi-user mixed-gender
Most preferred	19	11	7	0
Least preferred	2	3	9	23
Would never use	0	0	0	4

* When participants accorded the same ranking to multiple types, each was counted. As a result, the totals for most and least preferred do not sum to the total number of participants.

As Table 2 indicates, the multi-user gender segregated bathroom was the most preferred type overall, and the multi-user mixed-gender bathroom was the least preferred. In fact, four participants indicated that they would *never* use a multi-user mixed-gender bathroom, and none ranked it as their most preferred choice. Both of the single-user options fall between these two extremes, with the gender segregated variety being somewhat more popular.

The second set of questions asked participants to imagine others' responses to the different bathroom types. Here, participants were tasked with identifying particular social groups that they thought might benefit from or be opposed to the presence of single-user unisex and multi-user mixed-gender bathrooms on campus.

Table 3. Frequencies of Social Groups Mentioned as Beneficiaries of Gender-Neutral Bathrooms

Group	Single-user unisex	Multi-user mixed-gender
Self-conscious individuals	11	0
Gender and sexual minorities	10	23
People with disabilities	8	2
"Everybody"	8	1
Families with children	5	5
Not sure/no answer/nobody	3	5
Religious people	1	0
Elderly	1	0
Feminists	0	1
Couples	0	2
Liberals	0	2

Table 3 shows that many participants overwhelmingly believed that gender and sexual minorities (incorporating gays, lesbians, transgender people and other gender-variant persons) would be the main beneficiaries of multi-user mixed-gender bathrooms. Responses for single-user unisex bathrooms were more varied, with gender and sexual minorities still showing up – though with roughly half the frequency. Interestingly, several of the responses for unisex bathrooms do not really seem to constitute social groups at all. These responses – "everybody" and "self-conscious people" seem to indicate that participants had difficulties thinking about unisex bathrooms in terms of their benefits to particular constituencies, unlike mixed-gender bathrooms, which were strongly associated with gender and sexual minorities.

When asked to name groups that would oppose unisex and mixed-gender bathrooms, traditionalists and conservatives appeared with some frequency for both (Table 4). Again, several of the common responses for unisex bathrooms are not really social groups in the same way that the popular answers for mixed-gender bathrooms are. In fact, a number of participants simply

could not provide a response for this question at all.

Table 4. Frequencies of Social Groups Mentioned as Likely to Oppose Gender-Neutral Bathrooms

Group	Single-user unisex	Multi-user mixed-gender
People that don't want to share with other sex	12	6
Not sure/no answer/nobody	10	3
Traditionalists and conservatives	6	15
People in a hurry	4	0
Gender and sexual minorities	3	1
People who want to socialize	2	0
Feminists	1	0
Parents	1	3
People who take lots of time in the bathroom	1	0
Religious people	1	4
Women concerned with safety	1	10
Homophobic people	0	3
Self-conscious individuals	0	7

The survey data provide a snapshot of participant perceptions and beliefs before the group discussions. However, they are limited in that they are unable to convey the full complexity of the ways in which participants made and challenged claims about gender-neutral bathrooms. As such, I now turn to a discussion of the focus group data, though I will continue to reference the survey results when they support or contradict the data in interesting ways.

FOCUS GROUP DATA

I present the focus group data here as a collection of broadly similar argument types that were raised within and across conversations. Mirroring the flow of the focus groups, I first discuss claims about single-user unisex bathrooms, then move on to multi-user mixed gender. For each, I first describe those arguments made in favor of the particular form of gender-neutral bathroom, followed by those that were against. All names presented here are participant pseudonyms – I indicate my own speech with the letter "M."

Arguments for single-user unisex bathrooms

Benefits for particular groups

On the pre-discussion surveys, when asked to name one or more social groups that might be in favor of more single-user unisex bathrooms on campus, "self-conscious people" was the most frequently named "group", though a number of participants also mentioned trans* and gender variant people. "Everyone" was also a very common response to this question, which anticipated the ways in which participants spoke about the benefits of single- unisex bathrooms in the discussion groups. A few participants raised the possibility that single-user unisex bathrooms might benefit parents with other-gendered children:

> My other thought for single-user unisex and maybe even multi-user mixed-gender was for maybe families with kids. That's kind of a thing, if you're a mom and you've got a little boy, maybe dad's not there. You have to bring the little boy into the bathroom. It wouldn't be maybe as strange if you had a unisex bathroom.
>
> (Tami, GROUP 8)

And though single-stall bathrooms are generally more accessible for people with mobility impairments, and though single-user unisex bathrooms have often been advocated for on the basis of their accommodation of individuals with other-gendered care providers, these benefits were rarely mentioned, though accessibility issues arose on occasion:

> Alexis: […] I guess this isn't really a population but more of an incident. If you're with someone of the opposite gender, and one of you is sick or disabled and needs help in the bathroom. I know there have been cases where someone I know has been sick or been in the bathroom for a long time, and you have to get someone else to go check. So that would be another case where it might just be convenient.
>
> Alyssa: I guess too, there could be a lot of situations where that could happen.
>
> (GROUP 8)

Similarly, on the university campus and elsewhere, the push for single-user unisex bathrooms has been strongly associated with trans* politics. However, the potential benefits of such bathrooms to trans* people did not figure heavily in any of the discussion groups. When participants did raise the issue, it was because they had personal experience with the topic – and this often went alongside a defensiveness about the speaker's own gender:

> I chose the single-user unisex as my top pick, just because I like the privacy aspect of it, definitely. And also it's gender-inclusive. And that's something that I, I know trans people who go here, and they have a hard time trying to figure out where to use the bathroom. So I'm not trans myself, but because I know people, it's something that's important to me. So the fact that it's gender-inclusive and private is sort of the best of both worlds, in my opinion.
>
> (Judy, GROUP 7)

For the most part, participants did not frame their arguments for this option in terms of its benefits for particular social groups. Rather, they wondered why *anyone* would be opposed to the arrangement and wondered why single-user bathrooms had to be gendered in the first place.

Pointlessness of single-stall gender segregation

Participants overwhelmingly saw gender segregation in single-stall bathrooms as a pointless and unnecessary practice. They complained about the inefficiencies caused by the arrangement, and often drew comparisons between single-user public bathrooms and home bathrooms. If the latter weren't separated by gender, many asked, why should the former be?

> I would be fine with it. Kind of how she said, the single-user kind of makes it

> home-like. And for me at home guys and girls use the bathroom, it's not that big of a deal. And it's just a bathroom. When it's single-user, to me it doesn't really matter.
>
> (Alyssa, GROUP 8)
>
> M: Okay. Hypothetically, if you ran into C on campus, what would your reaction to that be? Would you feel comfortable going inside?
>
> Wendy: I'd be fine. A bathroom's a bathroom.
>
> All: Yeah.
>
> Lesley: Yeah, if that's the only bathroom then I would use it.
>
> Ursula: As long as there are toilet seat covers.
>
> Lesley: And it's clean.
>
> (GROUP 2)

Several participants even recounted times at which they used the "wrong" single-stall bathroom when nobody else was around, or when they felt that the queue for the "right" one was simply too long.

> Susan: […] what if it's a single-user women's bathroom? Would it be so bad if a man used that?
>
> Tami: I wouldn't mind.
>
> Alyssa: I feel like I wouldn't care.
>
> Alexis: No, because they're the same. They don't even have urinals. It seems like, I don't even know why they have different ones. They seem the same.
>
> Tami: Yeah, it doesn't matter to me at all.
>
> (GROUP 8)
>
> I have dipped into the girls' before. When you're waiting at Starbucks, like, oh my god, this guy has been in here for a half-hour, what did he eat? And you're like, well, the women's bathroom is open. Well, okay.
>
> (Dylan, GROUP 9)

Many participants wondered why so many single-stall bathrooms were gendered in the first place. Some suggested that there might be legal or historical reasons for this separation, but no participants offered any sustained argument for continuing the practice:

> Elliott: I don't see a need to define sex on a bathroom if it's a single-stall. Personally I'm not comfortable with defining gender and sex that way, but there's definitely no need for it on a single-stall bathroom.
>
> Robin: Do you think there is some sort of legal issue surrounding it? I'm not sure, I don't really know that much about it. But my old job moved into a new space, it was a brand new building. The old space had a unisex bathroom, and I believe that the new space, there was some sort of zoning thing where they had to label them. They keep them unisex and they tell everybody that, but they had to label them male and female, and they're just single stall. So I'm not sure if they build new bathrooms if they would be allowed to. It seems like an archaic law.
>
> (GROUP 4)

When asked if a change from gender-segregated to unisex status would affect their perceptions of or propensity to use a particular bathroom, most participants stated that the change would not influence them one way or the other. Indeed, some wondered whether such a change — even on a large scale — would be noticed at all by most users:

> M: So most folks haven't seen a single-user unisex bathroom on campus. But right now some of the single-stall separated bathrooms are being converted into unisex ones. So if that happened in a building that you frequented, how would that affect your view of that bathroom? Would you stop going there? Would you look for alternatives?
>
> Lindsay: Are they single? Single-use? Yeah, I wouldn't care at all.
>
> Michele: Yeah, as long as it's kept clean and maintenance, I would still use it, but if I started noticing that it's more dirtier and it smells weird, then I might start using another one, even if that means I have to go to another building, I would.
>
> Judy: I think that's the same for any bathroom, though. If you go to a bathroom and it starts getting dirty. Like, I'm not going to use the toilet if it looks disgusting, regardless. If I'm in a public room where there's multi-user and every stall is gross, I'm just going to go to a different bathroom. But if a single-use bathroom is converted into a unisex one, I could still lock the door, so it doesn't really matter.

> If they put a urinal in, okay, I can see a urinal now when I'm going to the bathroom, but obviously nobody's using it because I'm the only person in the bathroom. So it wouldn't really be a big deal for me.
>
> (GROUP 7)

Indeed, when asked which of the four possible bathroom arrangements they most preferred, several participants chose the single-user unisex option — it was the third most-popular choice on the survey ranking question. Indeed, even those participants who picked single-user gender-segregated as their first choice sometimes did not see much of a difference between this and the unisex version:

> I picked single-user gender-segregated. I just like single-user bathrooms better. I feel like they're cleaner, and I like the privacy. And I really didn't care between gender-segregated or unisex in that case. I don't really feel like there's such a difference when you're the only person in there.
>
> (Alexis, GROUP 8)

Summary

The most popular arguments about single-user unisex bathrooms were those that lamented the inefficiencies caused by gender-segregated single-user bathrooms, and not those that pointed to any special benefits presented by the unisex form. Participants saw the unisex bathroom as very similar to those found in most homes, and made the point that most households did not maintain separate rooms for women and men. As many stated, in most cases only one person is meant to occupy a single-user bathroom — whether in the home or in public — at once, making gender segregation unnecessary in their view.

Arguments against single-user unisex bathrooms

On the whole, most groups expressed no serious apprehensions about single-user unisex bathrooms. However, when pressed, some objections arose. Only one of these objections specifically referenced the gendered aspect of the arrangement, whereas the others were more

general qualms with single- as opposed to multi-user public bathrooms.

Inefficiency

One major objection to single-user unisex bathrooms focused not the on the "unisex" part of the arrangement, but on the single-user aspect. While many participants appreciated the sense of ownership that the enclosed space of a single-user bathroom could provide, they also expressed skepticism about the practicality of the arrangement in any high-traffic setting (e.g. on a large, busy campus):

> Dylan: […] if you're having stomach troubles or something or you just don't feel good, or you get yelled at and just need to cry, sitting in a single-user bathroom, you might have a line of people outside tapping their foot like, what's taking this guy so long? And if you're sitting there having issues or you're taking a long time, you're trying to rush everything because you're trying to get out of there.
>
> Daren: That's what I chose too, and I chose it because usually it's not as efficient for a bathroom, because it's only one room. The amount of space used could be used better, square footage-wise.
>
> (GROUP 9)

Some women participants noted that the issue of efficiency was especially important for them compared to men, given that queues are generally longer outside of women's restrooms. While one important reason for the omnipresent queue disparity is because of the way that equality of facilities is usually determined (via floor space, thus pertinent mainly to multi-user bathrooms), these participants argued that it was also an issue for single-user bathrooms.

Overall, many participants seemed to argue that while single-user bathrooms were comfortable and perhaps especially useful to particular kinds of people, they could not be implemented on any large-scale basis without significant difficulties.

Loss of bathroom culture

Though much less common than the argument about inefficiency, some participants also

raised the point that single-user bathrooms prevented alternate uses of the public bathroom. By virtue of their design, these spaces sharply reduced opportunities for socializing with others. Women noted that multi-user public bathrooms are often used not just for casual conversation, but as spaces in which women can temporarily retreat from the outside world in order to be in the company of other women.

> Sarah: […] women go to the bathroom for other reasons. Like, I've heard a girl crying and whimpering in the bathroom before. I feel like the bathrooms for women isn't just a bathroom. It's a socializing place, there's women doing their homework in there, at least going through their stuff.
>
> Ellen: That's right though, about crying or just retreating for a while. I don't know that men necessarily retreat in a men's room.
>
> (GROUP 1)

The role of public bathrooms as "backstage" spaces for performance teams has been noted by symbolic interactionists, who have also argued that the gender-segregated character of these staging areas lends itself to the reinforcement of groups along gendered lines (Cahill 1985). Any kind of single-user bathroom, gender-segregated or not, is less likely to be used in this way by groups, although in their similarity to home bathrooms, they may serve as more useful backstage spaces for individuals (Goffman 1959).

Cleanliness

The only argument raised against single-user unisex bathrooms specifically was around cleanliness. The claim was made — both by men and women — that men are typically less clean in bathrooms, and thus, single-user unisex bathrooms would be less comfortable for women to use than their gender-segregated equivalents.

> M: Can you think of any reasons why people might want those divisions for single-user bathrooms?
>
> Alyssa: I guess there's the stigma of dirty men.

Susan: Yeah.

Alyssa: Like, if I compared a single-user segregated versus single-user unisex, I would probably prefer the women's, because I would think it was cleaner.

(GROUP 8)

The possibility was occasionally raised that men would be more conscientious about their use of the space if they knew it was shared with women. The presence of women, in this view, would inspire men to improve their standard of cleanliness. However, other participants were less optimistic.

Ursula: […] with my experience with men, I have two younger brothers, and they're not very clean in the bathroom. So if there were one toilet that was your only option, I'd feel more comfortable knowing that females had been using it.

Wendy: Some girls are pretty bad though too.

Laura: Yeah.

Ursula: Some are.

Laura: I lived in the dorms once upon a time. Nasty.

Ursula: But I think generally. Generally speaking, percentage-wise, females are a little more cleanly than males.

(GROUP 2)

However, on the whole, concerns about cleanliness were not paramount. Unisex bathrooms came just behind single-user gender-segregated bathrooms, in third place as participants' most-preferred bathroom configuration on the pre-discussion survey, and no participants indicated that they would never use a unisex bathroom. So while the potential difference in cleanliness was the one real distinguishing factor between the gender-segregated and unisex varieties of single-user bathrooms, it was not a very salient one for most participants.

Summary

When participants compared the single-user unisex bathroom to the single-user gender-segregated variety, they argued that the former was more efficient and sensible. However, when the comparison group shifted to multi-user bathrooms, participants claimed that single-user unisex bathrooms were too inefficient to implement on a wide scale. They also argued that they would eliminate the alternative social functions of public bathrooms, and perhaps be somewhat less clean than women's bathrooms under a gender-segregated regime.

Arguments for multi-user mixed-gender bathrooms

Efficiency

While efficiency was seen as one of the major benefits of single-stall gender-neutral bathrooms, this angle was rarely raised when it came to multi-stall bathrooms. Some participants suspected that the university and other property owners might be drawn to the idea for its cost-saving potential, but arguments about the "pointlessness" of separation and the inefficiencies caused for users thereby were not raised to nearly the same degree that they were in discussions of single-user bathrooms.

One might expect that participants saw the four bathroom types presented in this study on a linear scale from less to more efficient for users, with single-user gender-segregated bathrooms being the least efficient and multi-user mixed-gender bathrooms being the most so. Indeed, as discussed above, participants readily described single-user unisex bathrooms as much more sensible than their gender-segregated equivalents. They also pointed out that such bathrooms were not practical in high-volume locations, where multi-stall bathrooms would be much more suitable. However, they did not then make a similar argument about the superior efficiency of multi-user mixed-gender bathrooms over the gender-segregated version.

Only one group, the only one composed of solely male participants, discussed efficiency in any extended way. This group was also unable to come up with any other reasons to favor multi-user, mixed-gender bathrooms.

> Tim: […] Sometimes the guys' bathroom will be somewhere and the girls' bathroom will be somewhere else and you have to look for it. If you have one multi-gender bathroom then you don't really have to look for a restroom.
>
> Daren: In our dorm, they're on different floors. And some of them are multi-gender floors, so they have to go the other floor, that could seem really inefficient.
>
> [later on, after a discussion about improving the quality and security of stalls in a mixed-gender bathroom]
>
> Daren: […] this is also a lot more money we're investing in the stalls, which is a problem. Because the whole point was to mix the genders to save money, to save the bathroom. And then if we put all this money into making the stalls, it kind of didn't help anything in the end.
>
> Dylan: But overall, if you have two different bathrooms, male and female, and each one's 200 square feet, that's 400 square feet you have dedicated of the building to bathrooms. But if you have one multi-gender and you make it 300 -
>
> Daren: I guess in square footage it makes sense.
>
> Dylan: You're still saving space and money, and you don't have to pay to clean both, and you don't have to pay for paper towels for both, toilet paper for both. I mean, you might be going through a little more.
>
> Daren: Yeah, you'd definitely, well I think you would be going twice as much, because it's always going to be the same amount you're going through, whether it's in two bathrooms or one. It's just that you'll have to replace it more and in less amounts in one, than when it's two big ones. You have a lot more essentially, total-wise in the bathrooms, so you have to replace it, just less often.
>
> (GROUP 9)

With this exception, when the efficiency argument was raised, it was for the most part only hesitantly — and it was not seen as a major advantage of the arrangement.

Benefits for particular groups

After discussing the ways in which parents navigate existing gendered arrangements

while out in public with their children, some respondents argued that mixed-gender bathrooms might be beneficial to mothers with young sons or fathers with young daughters. Mixed-gender bathrooms would let parents accompany their child into the bathroom without having to decide whether the child was old enough to go in on their own. This would both eliminate the discomfort involved in bringing a child into the "wrong" gendered bathroom, and reduce the potential for harm to come to children while outside parental supervision.

> Ellen: I think this could be a good safe way to take your children in. I don't know if you guys ever heard this, but there was a crime where a little boy had gone into the men's restroom, this is years ago. There was a man in there who hurt him very badly, and actually killed him.
>
> Sarah: Because his mom didn't go in with him.
>
> Ellen: Because his mom couldn't go in, she thought he was old enough to go in alone, and there was a predator in there. So this in a way could help maybe reduce that kind of thing, because at least a parent can be with their child at all times.
>
> (GROUP 1)

However, some participants also noted that mixed-gender bathrooms might not be as helpful in the case of fathers with young girls. Insofar as the problem for these parents is not the risk of physical harm but rather the potential psychological damage of being exposed to adult men in the bathroom, the mixed-gender arrangement would not be any better than fathers bringing their daughters into men's bathrooms.

Even more so than families, participants consistently named gender and sexual minorities both on the pre-discussion surveys and during the group discussions as direct beneficiaries of mixed-gender bathrooms. The difference between single-user and multi-user here was stark, such that many participants argued about the benefits of mixed-gender bathrooms primarily in terms of their utility for the particular constituency of transgender people.

For supporting mixed-gender, I wrote transvestites and cross dressers, because I

> imagine that sometimes they'll have an issue about whether they should go into the guys' or girls' one. If it's a all-gender bathroom, then they don't really have to choose anything, they just go in.
>
> (Tim, GROUP 9)

This appeared to be one of the most important differences in the ways that participants talked about single-user unisex and mixed-gender bathrooms. As data from the pre-discussion survey presented earlier demonstrate, gender and sexual minorities (including transgender, gay, lesbian, queer, and other such individuals) were mentioned as potential beneficiaries much more frequently for multi-user mixed-gender bathrooms than they were for single-user unisex.

Positive social and symbolic value

By the end of the discussion, a few participants had argued that mixed-gender bathrooms might have some positive symbolic and social benefits. One form of this argument held that exposure to the "opposite" sex would be beneficial – acting to potentially lessen women's fear of men and to force men to acknowledge the reality that women also use the bathroom.

> Maybe it would be good for society. It feels like we're saying, we don't trust men, women don't want to know what women do. There's this difference. It puts a barrier in between. So maybe if we all went to the bathroom together [laughing] maybe women would learn that most men are trustworthy, and most men are not going to rape them. Men would learn that women also go to the bathroom the same way they do. It seems like it would be a great equalizer [laughing].
>
> (Julie, GROUP 3)

Other participants argued that mixed-gender bathrooms that were explicitly labeled "all genders" might go some way towards increasing acceptance of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals by recognizing that gender was not strictly a binary system.

> Laura: I think the acceptance equality part would be a good forefront. It would be kind of nice.
>
> Wendy: You could just say it's a bathroom without labels.

> Laura: I'll do whatever I please, you have to guess what kind of sex I am in that bathroom.
>
> (GROUP 2)
>
> […] the benefit I think would be creating a more progressive mode of definition. Because I just don't think that people are going to be able to stamp out variation in humans just by choosing a male or female stall.
>
> (Bonnie, GROUP 6)

Some participants also argued that the advent of mixed-gender bathrooms could be seen as part of a broader cultural shift away from gender as an organizing principle of social life. They linked changes in the organization of public bathrooms to the mainstreaming of gender variance and to their belief that gender itself was becoming more fluid. On the whole, however, these kinds of arguments were not very common.

Summary

The most popular arguments for multi-user mixed-gender bathrooms were those that pointed to the arrangement's benefits for the constituency of transgender, gender variant, and – sometimes – gays and lesbian individuals. Other arguments about efficiency, benefits to families, and the positive symbolic value of reducing gender segregation were raised much more sporadically in comparison.

Arguments against multi-user mixed-gender bathrooms

Unsafe for children

The argument most vulnerable to critique by others against mixed-gender bathrooms was that they would be unsafe or at least unsuitable for children. These concerns could be classified into two types: first, that children would be at risk of physical harm from adults, and second, that children would be inappropriately exposed to the "other" gender in the bathroom. These concerns were distinctly gendered – in both cases, participants were mainly concerned about the

safety and psychological well-being of girls. Both concerns led some participants to argue that mixed-gender bathrooms should have age restrictions.

An arrangement with both “children’s” and mixed-gender bathrooms would seem to counter the benefits of mixed-gender bathrooms for families — which arose in discussion fairly frequently. Some participants noted that a mixed-gender bathroom would actually be safer than a gender-segregated bathroom, in that it would eliminate the necessity for parents to send their children into the bathroom alone, a potentially dangerous situation.

> Jacob: […] in a way, a parent may not always be with that child in the bathroom, so if you're sending in the child in a multi-gender bathroom, I think it's opening it up to even more possibility -
>
> Ellen: Well you stay with your child.
>
> Jacob: Well yeah, I know. You want to think as a parent you'd accompany your child, but some parents don't, like there's a bathroom, you can go use it. And if its multi-gender, then if there are going to be problems in single-gender bathrooms, it would be even bigger.
>
> (GROUP 1)

This belief in the danger of mixed-gender bathrooms seems strange if we solely consider physical harm. However, it was clear that participants took a broad view of harm to children when considering mixed-gender bathrooms. Specifically, some participants were concerned that any mixed-gender bathroom with urinals would expose young girls to the sight of adult men urinating, which would be damaging or morally wrong in some way.

> Judy: […] As long as the urinals aren't out in public, I'm not uncomfortable. And also I feel like, if it's going to be a family restroom, then there shouldn't be public urinals if you're bringing children into a bathroom. Even if someone raises their kids in an environment where nudity is totally fine and okay, that's in your house, and the norms of our society are really different.
>
> Michele: Isn't that usually a crime, for an adult to show their —
>
> Judy: To expose themselves? Yeah.

> Michele: Yeah, to a minor.
>
> Judy: I think so. I mean, you're not supposed to expose yourself publicly anyway, but you get penalized more if it's to a minor. I don't know exactly, but I would assume that it would be. Because people would have an outrage about you're taking away the innocence of children.
>
> Michele: Yeah, and I have a feeling that these kind of bathrooms will make it more accessible for people who are pedophiles, if this bathroom was available for both adults and families -
>
> Jennifer: Not necessarily even pedophiles, but just voyeurs. People who just want to watch certain things.
>
> (GROUP 7)

A particular view of risk and understanding of who is most likely to harm children lies behind these sorts of arguments. In such an understanding, a mixed-gender bathroom would create a kind of "moral hazard," insofar as it would be attractive to pedophiles who might exploit the space for their own purposes. These fears and beliefs about risk led some respondents to weigh their own sentiments towards mixed-gender bathrooms against the reality of their children using them.

> It's interesting, because I want to be all pro-multi-gendered bathrooms, but I have a 12-year-old daughter. I would feel mildly uncomfortable peeing in a restroom if I knew a man were in there, but I would worry more about my 12-year-old daughter being in a restroom if I knew men were there.
>
> (Julie, GROUP 3)

Ultimately, however, the argument that mixed-gender bathrooms would be physically unsafe for children was contested by opposing claims that the space would prevent the need for parents to send their children unsupervised into a public bathroom without them. The "visual problem" of young girls being exposed to adult men in the bathroom remained an issue for some participants, but one that would be resolved simply by enclosing urinals within stalls.

Unsafe for women

By far, one of the most common arguments against multi-user, mixed-gender bathrooms was that the arrangement would be an unsafe one for women. Many participants seemed to consider this configuration as an inherently more dangerous environment than gender-segregated bathrooms. Concerns about safety occasionally led to discussions about the kinds of provisions that would be necessary to make mixed-gender bathrooms acceptable, such as multiple entrances and exits, alarms, panic buttons, and sturdier stall doors. These considerations were premised on two understandings apparently shared among many women participants: that all mixed-gender situations are potentially dangerous, and that the act of using a bathroom necessarily involves placing oneself in a vulnerable position, especially for women.

> Judy: […] late at night, if I'm going to the bathroom and some guy walks in, I'm going to fear for my safety and feel uncomfortable. So those are both important things with it.
>
> Jennifer: I try to avoid any situation where I'm solo.
>
> Judy: That's why girls go to the bathroom in pairs.
>
> Jennifer: Yeah, like at night, going to the bathroom and things like that, I totally try to avoid it. And not even going to the bathroom, but just I try to be very aware of my surroundings and try to make sure I'm never in a setting where I'm alone at night. So I think that would definitely be a big factor. And if you're a girl walking into a bathroom at night and you don't know who's in there, it's terrifying.
>
> Daniel: Is it really?
>
> Jennifer: Yeah.
>
> Daniel: Even if you're in a bar and it's a women's bathroom?
>
> Jennifer: I mean, if it were a men/women bathroom. Or even walking into, if I were to go to Qwest Field tonight and there wasn't anywhere there, I would be afraid of walking into a women's bathroom.
>
> Judy: Yeah.

> Jennifer: You just don't know, if you're in a big open space, and you don't know who's hiding in any one of those stalls, be it a woman or man, whoever. It's scary putting yourself into -
>
> Judy: I get super freaked out if it's late at night and I have to go anywhere alone. And then going to the bathroom makes me vulnerable. So I just go home. Honestly, I just go home. I wait.
>
> (GROUP 7)

Arguments about women's safety have been common in public discourses about gender-neutral bathrooms. Gershenson (2010:204) notes that the responses to one campus campaign for gender-neutral bathrooms at the University of Massachusetts were characterized by a conviction that the acceptance of alternative bathroom configurations would "unleash male violence and mischief that's already just barely contained." Participants echoed this view when they made statements like:

> I'm older, so this doesn't seem as much of a problem, but if I was sending my 18-year-old daughter, or if I was 18, I wouldn't want them to be in a bathroom like this, because I know what 18-year-old boys are thinking about. It just, it might up the odds of rape. But then, who could say that, you know?
>
> (Sarah, GROUP 1)

But these arguments are perhaps so powerful because their intuitive appeal crosses ideological lines — they simultaneously resonate with both feminist concerns for women's safety in public and traditionalist beliefs about men's sexuality as uncontrollable and predatory. Both of these rationales were evinced in participants' claims during the discussions, sometimes by the same participant. Early on in one group, one participant talked about her discomfort at the idea of sharing a bathroom with men:

> That's the one I said I would definitely not use. It's just not comfortable. I wouldn't feel even safe. I wouldn't feel safe going to the bathroom in the same space with a bunch of other boys and girls. Just because, I don't know. Especially with all the muggings and stuff that go around, the bathroom's just one more place that that could happen, if they're joined. So I wouldn't use it at all.

(Jordan, GROUP 6)

Later on, she remarked that the campus sexual assault prevention and support group would likely be amongst those groups opposed to and potentially even protesting mixed-gender bathrooms, “just because it’s not really safe, especially at night” (Group 6). The fear about using a mixed-gender bathroom at night or when few other people were likely to be in the area was a common one.

> Laura: I could see how people feel not only insecure but unsafe with the opposite gender in the same bathroom -
>
> Lesley: Especially if you're, oh sorry.
>
> Laura: No, go ahead.
>
> Lesley: In a really public place, in an area with a lot of stuff happening. You're by yourself, you're the only one in there. If some strange guy comes in.
>
> Ursula: If it's in a really public place, I think there are going to be other people around.
>
> Lesley: Well it depends on the area.
>
> Ursula: Yeah. Maybe don't use the unisex bathroom late at night.
>
> (GROUP 2)

The concerns about women’s safety were not limited to the women participants in the discussions. Some male participants also argued that certain kinds of men were untrustworthy and that mixed-gender bathrooms might be attractive to them for the situational opportunities to harass and assault women they would offer.

> Ryan: I don't like to think about it, but it might increase crime rates. Especially like we were saying earlier, late-night usage.
>
> Michael: Yeah, because in a gender-segregated bathroom, a guy walks in and it's like automatic, what the hell are you doing? But when it's not gender-segregated, it's kind of a surprise, I guess. So people who are into that type of thing would

have kind of easy access.

Ryan: It seems like an ethical problem.

Michael: But I don't think they'd have multi-stalled gendered bathrooms available at late nights.

Ryan: Yeah, they would probably lock them after a certain time.

(GROUP 5)

This language of "moral hazards" was used by many men in the groups, implying a belief that mixed-gender bathrooms would naturally lead to higher rates of victimization and violence, and suggesting that they shared a view of male sexuality as uncontrollable or violent, at least in some cases.

Arguments about women's safety are perhaps the biggest challenge to those advocating for gender-neutral bathrooms. Generally, activists have sought to characterize such arguments as diversionary claims that effectively serve to pit two oppressed groups against each other: non-transgender women and gender-variant people – especially transgender women (Mateik 2003). They have then attempted to defuse these concerns in several ways. First, they have often pointed out that the mere existence of a sign labeled "women" on a bathroom door does not prevent anyone from entering it. On the contrary, gender separation means that somebody looking to assault a woman reliably knows where to look (Transgender Law Center 2005). Second, activists have pointed out that the image of sexual assault implied by fears about mixed-gender bathrooms draws from the myth that most sexual assaults are committed by strangers rather than relatives or acquaintances. Finally, activists have sought to shift the conversation from the alleged risks to non-transgender women in mixed-gender bathrooms to the harsh realities of violence faced by transgender people in gender-segregated public bathrooms (Feinberg 1996; Mateik 2003).

Some of these counterclaims actually arose during the group discussions. It appeared that some participants recognized that most gendered public bathrooms in the US rely on social, rather than physical barriers, to keep out the "wrong" category of people. The situations in which public bathrooms seemed the least safe to participants – at night, in isolated areas with few other people around – are precisely those in which these social barriers are at their weakest. In such a scenario, then, a mixed-gender bathroom is not necessarily any less safe than a gender-segregated one. And while most participants began and ended the discussion concerned about the potential safety implications of mixed-gender bathrooms, some thus came to see the arrangement as no more dangerous — or in some cases, as less dangerous than gender-segregated bathrooms.

> Sarah: Maybe this [multi-user mixed-gender] might be more safe than this [multi-user gender segregated] because if a guy wanted to find a girl, he's going to go in the girls' bathroom. So if it was a unisex bathroom, then what's the chances of him getting a girl? It's 50% either way. So maybe it would be safer to a certain extent.
>
> […]
>
> Steve: I kind of agree with what Sarah was saying. Because if you have strictly a women's and generally you're only going to see women in there, and you might see one guy who thinks hey, only women use this, so I'll go ahead and go in there. Whereas with the multi-sex, there's actually a good chance that if a man were to go in there pursuing a woman, there's a good chance there may be another man in there who could act as her savior, so to speak.
>
> Sarah: Or another girl who's bigger than the dude.
>
> [all laughing]
>
> Steve: Yeah, absolutely, totally.
>
> Amy: That's another thing, the people that are likely to be able to intervene would be people who could come into the multi-gender bathroom. Because just another woman is going to walk in, unless a guy hears her screaming or something.
>
> (GROUP 1)
>
> Julie: […] I think we have this idea that the biggest risk would be sexual assault. But really, if you're a woman, and it's late at night, and you're on campus, and

> you're in the bathroom by yourself, and there's not really a lot of people in the whole building, anybody could come in. There's nothing to stop them, any more than if it was a co-ed bathroom or not.
>
> Jane: But at the same time, it would be a plain sight. So if a guy walks into a women's bathroom, he's already labeled as a creepster.
>
> Julie: Yeah, but if you're the only one there, and if you're the only one on the whole floor, and a man walks in the bathroom, first you don't know he's a man because he just walked in the bathroom and you're going to the bathroom. There's a bit of safety net because you can say he came in the women's restroom, so clearly this is a bigger issue, whereas if it was a multi-gender bathroom then maybe just the fact he's there isn't obviously a problem. I don't know.
>
> (GROUP 3)

In some cases, the simple act of expressing an argument about the safety risks of mixed-gender bathrooms out loud seemed to alter a participant's views. For example, Megan stated that "if it was late at night or not very busy, I think I would feel uncomfortable going into a [mixed-gender] bathroom. Because if guys are allowed in there, I would feel unsafe." She paused, then reflected, "But I guess men can also enter women's restrooms, so that doesn't make sense" (Megan, Group 5). In other cases, claims about safety were contested by others. When this occurred, it was often other women participants who countered that gender-segregated bathrooms only presented an illusion of safety. While granting that women might legitimately *perceive* the space to be unsafe or feel uncomfortable in a mixed-gender bathroom, they challenged the notion that the arrangement would be less safe than any other public space.

> Julie: I don't think it would necessarily happen anymore than it already happens.
>
> Alison: Yeah.
>
> Julie: But I think there would be a lot more concern about it. I think it would be perceived that way. It's like the sexual assault thing. We say oh, it's the bathroom and you're vulnerable. But you're vulnerable anywhere, you know? You're not necessarily more vulnerable because your pants are already down.
>
> Jane: But -

Julie: You're not necessarily more vulnerable if there's a man in the bathroom.

Jane: But you might be more vulnerable because your pants are down and you're sitting down, and you're kind of occupied.

Julie: True.

Jane: There's no running, there's no fighting back.

[all laughing]

Julie: You're also behind a locked door.

(GROUP 3)

Elliott: […] getting back to the safety aspect of it, I don't think there's a difference in safety as far as women's bathroom, men's bathroom, unisex bathroom. I think assault is going to happen anywhere.

Robin: Sure, but if somebody has PTSD -

Liz: This makes it easier.

Nick: It would be -

Elliott: No, absolutely. If it's a personal thing that trauma has already happened, I'm saying just safety-wise, as far as saying it's not safe -

Robin: No, it can happen anywhere.

Elliott: I think that it happens anywhere.

Liz: I think this makes it easier, though. Like, if you're standing outside the restroom and you see a guy walk in the multi-user, it's like oh whatever, that's fine. Then if you see a girl walk in, that's fine. But what if something happens to her while she's in there. But if a guy walks into a women's restroom, that's not okay.

Nick: I think yeah, the instance of things like that would be at a higher rate. Things like that happening just because it's like, you see a creepy guy come in.

Paul: Or even if there was somebody just eerily hanging around that area. Maybe it would be one of those things, if there was a number on the stall, text this and what bathroom you're in, and the security will walk by the outside. If you're feeling that uncomfortable or that unsafe.

> Elliott: Having used multi-sex bathrooms, I haven't seen any instances of that, and granted I'm in a different, it's a military situation. But I've seen more instances of people like yourself -
>
> Robin: Robin.
>
> Elliott: Who have been ostracized and told to get the fu- out of the bathroom or, what are you doing in here? I've seen transgender individuals who have had the police called on them because they are in the wrong bathroom. Well no, I'm female. I used to be in law enforcement. I used to be a police officer, and I had to go to these calls at least once every couple of months, where someone would be in a public restroom, and they would be kicked out because they're transgender. And they live as a woman or they live as a man, and they're being told that they can't use a bathroom in a public place. I mean, how awful is that? So to have that option there, not necessarily to make every bathroom like that but to have those options available, I think is important. Just like we've made family bathrooms available in public places. I don't see why we can't have unisex, whether it's one stall or a multi-stall.
>
> (GROUP 4)

By the time each discussion group had ended, then, the safety argument had been at least minimally challenged**.** The rate at which the argument was raised in discussions, however, and its resilience in the face of counterclaims, points to its power as a "good reason" for experiencing discomfort with the notion of mixed-gender bathrooms, drawing as it does from both feminist and traditionalist discourses about gender.

Loss of bathroom culture

Case (2010) notes that many people continue to see the ability to be alone with "one's own" (defined by gender) as a benefit of gender-segregated bathrooms. Much like single-user bathrooms, mixed-gender bathrooms were seen by participants as threatening existing "restroom cultures." In this view, these cultures — but especially the culture of the women's restroom — are worth preserving. Both women and men argued that women would lament the loss of this space. Owing to the "mystique" many participants attached to the "other" gender's bathroom and

the consequent lack of knowledge of what goes on within, some women thought that men also might regret the loss of spaces for same-sex socializing.

> Alexis: It's also kind of a social thing, at least for women, I'm not sure for guys. I don't know how, but, you know, girls going to the bathroom together, there's kind of an unwritten code, that whole aspect of going with your friends. But I feel like even strangers in women's bathrooms will often talk.
>
> Alyssa: Be friendly, yeah. I wouldn't go into a multi-use bathroom and be like, hey Kenny, what's up.
>
> Alexis: Yeah. It's just different. It's a whole camaraderie that happens in the bathroom, and I'm sure it's like that for guys too. And I feel like it wouldn't happen, there wouldn't be that gender bonding if it was both.
>
> [later]
>
> Susan: I just don't like the idea. But I mean, yes, answering the questions on your questionnaire, that was a big part of, one of the reasons why I think some people would oppose single-user bathrooms. Because restrooms are a time for socializing. So maybe if they had stalls around the urinals […]
>
> Tami: I feel like it would restrict the types of things that you talk about in the bathroom. You don't necessarily censor yourself so much when you're around other women. You talk about personal things, but if there's guys there, you probably wouldn't be talking about personal things.
>
> (GROUP 8)

Participants' claims about women's bathrooms — especially those in bars and clubs — point to their status as "sacred spaces" in which women can interact without the intrusion of men (Cooper and Oldenziel 1999; Goffman 1959). Participants noted that the adoption of mixed-gender bathrooms would mean the loss of this space, and would necessitate that both men and women relearn the cultural scripts called upon to navigate interactions in public bathroom.

Some participants perceived the loss of a dedicated space for same-gender interactions as a cost of single-user unisex bathrooms. In the case of multi-user mixed-gender bathrooms, this space is not only taken away, but replaced by something potentially frightening and threatening –

the demand that users navigate cross-gendered interactions within a space that is already the source of tensions and anxieties for many. After all, the key difference between single- and multi-user gender-neutral bathrooms is that the latter involves the possibility of (gendered) interaction while the former does not.[4]

Lack of privacy

The word "privacy" found its way into many participants' initial reactions to the mixed-gender bathroom. Daren's response when asked to explain the reasoning behind his ranking of the bathroom types was typical here: "I just feel there's no privacy anymore involved in that" (Daren, Group 9). But privacy is a complicated concept, and it is worth investigating the complexities concealed by apparently simple and direct statements like Daren's.

One definition of privacy in a public bathroom might be the degree to which one is able to insulate oneself from exposure to an external audience. Using this definition, we might place the multi-user bathrooms on the "less private" end of the continuum, and the single-user bathrooms on the "more private" end. Some participants did explicitly express a preference for this type of privacy, and the sense of ownership of space provided thereby. If most participants had this definition of privacy in mind, and if they held privacy to be one of the most important aspects of a public bathroom, then we would expect them to generally favor single-user bathrooms over multi-user bathrooms.

This was not the case. As the survey data reviewed earlier indicates, the multi-user gender segregated bathroom was the most popular type by far, with the combined total of "most preferred" rankings for both single-user types falling just below the multi-user gender segregated total. This implies one of two things: that contrary to what my participants said, privacy is not

4 It is perhaps worth noting that insofar as any actual material benefits of gender segregation do exist, it is likely that they accrue to men, who gain privileged access to a location for informal networking in the workplace (Case 2010:224).

really all that important to them; or, that they are operating under a different definition of privacy than that described thus far.

Assuming for the moment that participants really did value privacy, what kind of privacy might they have been thinking of? It seems clear that many participants, when referring to privacy, really meant *gendered* privacy. That is, their conceptions of privacy included two dimensions: the level of exposure to an external audience (analogous to the simple definition above) *and* the gendered composition of that audience. These dimensions were usually not weighted equally. Rather, most participants seemed to consider the gender of their potential audience as much more important in defining a particular situation as private or not. The original dimension of seclusion thus loses its salience — privacy becomes not so much the ability to be *on* one's own as the ability to be *with* one's own.

Here participants discussed the differential socialization of men and women such that women using the bathroom are expected to be silent and odorless, while men are expected to feel no shame or even revel in the "disgusting" nature of excretion. That is, excretatory functions were seen by participants as bolstering to performances of masculinity and discrediting to performances of femininity. The discomfort caused by the lack of gendered privacy was primarily seen by participants as centering on women. That is, a mixed-gender bathroom would be uncomfortable for women for their discomfort with a potential male audience, and for men for the direct exposure it would provide them to the reality of female excretion.

> Jane: […] I feel like this society makes women feel like they have to uphold this more than men. For example, there are plenty of movies, there is one movie, I can't remember, but I saw a trailer and the two men changed lives, and one of the guys married, and his wife is very hot apparently. But she goes in the bathroom, and she keeps the door open, and she's taking a dump. And the other guy, he switched bodies, so he's not used to that scene, and he's completely turned off.
>
> [all laughing]

Jane: There are a lot of movies like that. And even my boyfriend, he's like, I don't want to know. I don't want to know what you do in the bathroom. Complete denial.

Julie: Yes honey, I shit too. [laughing]

(GROUP 3)

Ursula: Probably females would be more opposed than males.

M: For the safety reasons we talked about?

Ursula: Yeah, and even the privacy.

Lesley: Privacy, yeah.

Ursula: Because we're all brought up to be these dainty things that don't make any, don't have any bodily functions.

[all laughing]

Ursula: So I just feel like females in general are more private about that, and they want to keep it amongst themselves.

Amy: Yeah, I chose C. Because those are the ones I feel most comfortable in when I use them anyway. But it's not practical for high volume. I think once you have a single user, gender segregation doesn't really matter, only one person goes in anyway.

(GROUP 2)

It was often argued that many people already felt a baseline level of discomfort at using multi-stall public bathrooms. For women, this discomfort was related to socialization about femininity as discussed above. Participants had a more difficult time explaining why men might feel uncomfortable about public bathrooms, except by gesturing towards the notion of a general cultural shame about human excretion. Some participants noted that men actually seemed more uncomfortable in public bathrooms than women did, but were generally unable to articulate why. One group was an exception here, suggesting that men's discomfort related to the necessity of

sitting on a toilet.

> Men are, I feel like they're more, in some ways they're more into the privacy of the bathroom. It's because of the sitting part. I know a lot of guys who cannot take a dump other than their own, they can't sit down. I heard about a guy who moved into one of the dorms, and he couldn't use the bathroom there, so he had to move back home.
>
> [later]
>
> My boyfriend, actually even when we're in Odegaard, there's multi-gender single room bathrooms in the engineering library, fourth floor. My boyfriend likes the fact that it's single user. So no matter where we are on campus, if he has to go, he's going to go there.
>
> (Jane, GROUP 3)

Yet mixed-gender bathrooms, according to many participants, would bring the existing discomfort associated with public bathrooms to new levels. Here it becomes clear that gendered privacy is a (hetero)sexualized concept. The way participants spoke about the potential embarrassment involved in breaches of gendered privacy emphasized the scenario of being in the bathroom with an attractive member of the "opposite" gender.

> Elliott: Well I don't think men and women are comfortable going to the bathroom in front of each other. I won't in front of my husband, it was different in the military because I had to, but I don't think most people are comfortable. Like, you've got to take a -
>
> [all laughing]
>
> Elliott: It's on tape. [laughing]
>
> Paul: Two?
>
> Elliott: Yeah. If you're defecating right next to somebody else and then you get out of the stall, and it's some cute guy, and you're like, oh my gosh -
>
> Liz: That would be so terrible.
>
> [all laughing]
>
> Elliott: I think some people would be uncomfortable with that.

> Paul: I think it would be uncomfortable, say it's really smelly and you walk out of the stall and there's some cute girl there, and then you're like, oh, that was my smell there.
>
> Nick: If there was like, a group of girls outside.
>
> Paul: Yeah.
>
> Nick: Awkward.
>
> (GROUP 4)

Women participants also talked about the potential discomfort of dealing with menstruation in a bathroom with men. For their part, some male participants agreed that they would rather avoid potential exposure to menstrual pads, tampons, or even conversations about menstruation.

> Michele: Also another thing, a lot of public restrooms that are gender-segregated, you could buy your pad or your tampon. I don't think women will feel comfortable buying that when there's a guy standing right there.
>
> Daniel: That is true. I mean -
>
> Judy: Would you want to see a lady buying a tampon?
>
> Jennifer: Guys would rather think that girls don't have periods, girls don't poop. I get that. I totally -
>
> Daniel: No, no no. I don't care, I just don't want to see that stuff. Come on, hide that. It's just the fact that I don't want to deal with that kind of -
>
> Judy: No, exactly. And I don't want guys around when I'm on my period.
>
> (GROUP 7)

These anxieties about exposure to desirable potential sexual partners and to menstruation (culturally coded as “dirty”) highlight the continuities between fears around privacy and fears around contamination and boundary-crossing. Mixed-gender bathrooms would dispel the “mystique” many participants associated with the “other” gender’s bathroom and expose them to

the bodily realities of excretion. That is, the "loss of privacy" participants discussed entails not just being seen and heard by the "other" gender in the bathroom, but being forced to see and hear the "other" gender in turn. As Elliott put it, "we're still a society where some people believe that women do not burp, fart, or poop. Which is totally untrue, but men don't want to see that" (Group 4). Thus, the apparently straightforward arguments made by participants about the lack of privacy mixed-gender bathrooms actually concealed more complex concerns.

Erosion of gender boundaries

Rather than argue about the safety or privacy issues involved in mixed-gender bathrooms, some participants expressed a sense of unease stemming from the simple unacceptability of men and women sharing the bathroom space. For the most part, these participants rooted their discomfort in religious beliefs about the naturalness of boundaries between men and women.

> I think that we should work on using this idea of mixing genders and kind of making it all equal in other aspects of society, like the labor force, before we talk about the bathroom, personally. And I'm a Christian, so I'm really conservative, and anything involving a guy on a personal, intimate level like that is unacceptable for me. So a man should not see a woman like that at all. […] If I ever ran across that, I know subconsciously I would probably judge every person that went in there. Because I'd be like, you don't respect yourself, or what is going on, or oh my gosh, you people are weird. So yeah, I would not use one. I would hold it.
>
> (Susan, GROUP 8)
>
> M: Ryan, you said you might use it if you had to, but you'd probably avoid it, right? So what were your reasons for that?
>
> Ryan: I guess they're religious. I don't really feel that it's proper for men and women to be that way, but I couldn't really explain it logically. I guess there's no scientific reason.
>
> M: Doesn't need to be scientific.
>
> Ryan: Yeah, personally I would feel uncomfortable. Whatever the reason.
>
> (GROUP 5)

These participants used terms like "improper," "disrespectful," and "uncomfortable" to describe mixed-gender bathrooms. Here, religious discourses provided ready arguments against the blurring of gender boundaries that mixed-gender bathrooms would apparently entail, insofar as a binary gender system is understood as natural and right in the context of the belief system in question. These arguments, unlike those around more mundane concerns, were challenged much less readily by other participants. This may have been out of a belief that religious claims could or should not be critiqued in the same way as secular ones, stemming as they seem to from deep personal convictions rather than from "rational" argumentation. Another possibility is that religious claims about the naturalness of gender separation resonated with other participants.

Summary

Participants presented a variety of arguments against mixed-gender bathrooms, yet many of them appeared in very similar forms across the focus groups. Arguments about the safety of children and women were the first claims many raised, though these were sometimes discussed and found by other participants to be unjustified concerns. Notions of "privacy" arose repeatedly, and many participants appeared to share concerns about the loss of privacy that mixed-gender bathrooms might entail. Arguments around loss of privacy shaded into concerns that the unique cultures of the women's and men's rooms – but especially the former – would be jeopardized by integrating the two. Finally, some participants argued that mixed-gender bathrooms represented an unnatural or improper mixing of the genders that was unacceptable to them based on their religious beliefs.

DISCUSSION

The focus group and survey data presented here have demonstrated a great variety of arguments about the practice of gender segregation even among people who have not seriously considered the topic in the past. In itself, this constitutes a major finding of this research – that when people begin to talk about public bathrooms, it becomes apparent that fears, beliefs, and commitments around gender segregation are varied and complex. Even as most participants spoke at length about their continuing attachments to gender segregation, this clinging was multifaceted rather than uni-dimensional, and it sometimes varied along participant characteristics such as gender.

Keeping in mind the immense variety of discourses presented by participants, I will now move beyond analysis of the immediate data and offer some theoretical interpretations of broad themes that arise when the data are considered as a whole.

The meaning of persistent resistance to mixed-gender bathrooms

By the end of the discussions, many of the arguments advanced by participants had been either been contested by others — as with regards to claims about safety — or were revealed to be more complicated than they had initially seemed, as was the case with privacy. Yet even when these apparently rational arguments about the potential problems with mixed-gender bathrooms had been exposed and challenged, many participants remained uneasy about the possibility of change. Some clearly struggled to put their feelings on the matter into words.

> I know this isn't, I don't know. I would kind of feel like it was disrespectful. Like, I wouldn't expect one of my guy friends to just pee in front of me. And I wouldn't expect them to, I wouldn't pee in front of them. […] So I kind of feel like it would be an invasion of privacy, and a little disrespectful to someone of another gender, to be doing that right in front of them. […]
>
> (Jennifer, GROUP 7)

In follow-up interviews, when asked to describe what they had taken away from the discussion, some participants employed a language very similar to that which had been used by the self-described religious participants in the discussions.

> What I took away from the whole thing was that it wasn't a good idea just because it would be awkward, not a comfortable kind of thing. That's basically what I got from the whole conversation. There was no concrete reason for why, it's just that the feeling was [disgusted sound] for a guy/girl bathroom.
>
> (Nick, GROUP 4 Follow-up interviews)

> I feel like most people, most of us agreed that unisex single-user bathrooms were fine. And then if it was going to be a multi-user it would be more like a family bathroom, rather than just a unisex one. That people felt more comfortable with the idea of that, and I agree, just because I don't want some guy walking in on me as I'm going to the bathroom alone. Uncomfortable. But we were most comfortable with segregated bathrooms. So I felt like that was the consensus. If it's a single-user then it's fine, it doesn't really matter.
>
> (Judy, GROUP 7 Follow-up interviews)

What was going on here? How are we to account for the persistence of opposition to mixed-gender bathrooms even in those cases where participants' arguments were contested by others? Often, participants noted that much of their and others' discomfort likely came from their socialization and comfort with the existing gendered arrangement — this was perhaps due to their training as sociology students. Some also advanced the argument that most people were generally change-averse, and that bathrooms were not a special case in this regard. However, perhaps the endurance of opposition and inability to fully articulate the basis of this opposition shows that when it comes to gender segregation, there may be more at work than a general cultural conservatism. Perhaps, then, these participants' continued resistance reflected a deep feeling of unsettledness about gender itself, much as it appeared to for some religious participants.

The practice of gender segregation reinforces cultural beliefs about gender as composed

of two discrete, pure categories. As Barcan (2010:29) argues, the gender boundaries enforced by the public toilet are "at once immensely naturalized and immensely policed, the most taken-for-granted social categorization and the most fiercely regulated." Mixed-gender bathrooms threaten this taken-for-granted, yet fiercely defended system, especially as segregated bathrooms come to perform more and more of the symbolic work involved in maintaining it as other forms of gender segregation and differentiation fall out of practice.

But if anxieties around the destabilization of gender really do permeate society, then why did only a few participants express these fears during the group discussions? It seems likely that those participants who identified as liberal-minded members of a society that privileges rational modes of thinking felt the need to provide "good reasons" for their discomfort. In the context of a public group conversation, "I don't know" probably does not constitute a "good reason" for opposition to mixed-gender bathrooms. In the particular context of a group of undergraduate social science students at a highly-ranked university in a major urban center where the presumed political atmosphere is liberal, discomfort with gender variance or fears about gender blurring more broadly are similarly not "good reasons." Unless, that is, one has access to a justifying discourse such as religion.

Without access to the legitimating discourses provided by religious belief, then, participants could have been unable to fully articulate their apprehensions about mixed-gender bathrooms. It seems likely that in such cases, participants might have instead – consciously or not – reached for a more rational-sounding argument such as one based on concerns about safety, rather than admit that they held irrational or unacceptable views based on the impropriety of mixing genders. These "good reasons" might not have been the original motivation behind the individual's reaction to mixed-gender bathrooms, but could, once expressed, be called upon to

defend that reaction.[5]

Liberalism and qualified acceptance of mixed-gender bathrooms

It should be noted that by the end of the group discussions, a substantial number of participants had indicated at least a qualified willingness to use a mixed-gender bathroom. Many participants had also indicated their support for the existence of *some* mixed-gender bathrooms on campus and elsewhere, often framing this support as an issue of tolerance for transgender people, who were seen as the main beneficiaries of mixed-gender bathrooms. The notion that "[bathroom] options are important" was common.

> M: So Sarah, you said to maybe build one like this [multi-user mixed-gender] next to the regular ones to see who uses each. Do you think people would use it if there were options?
>
> Sarah: If they had the option? I think options are always good. But yeah, I totally think they would. I've seen that, where they give you the option, if you want unisex or not. And I don't know if they were trying to figure it out, if people wanted to use them or not. But it's like, what are you comfortable with? If you want to go in the multi-gender bathroom, then you can go in there. But if you're still really uncomfortable with it, you can go in a different one.
>
> Ellen: Options are good.
>
> Sarah: We love options in America.
>
> (GROUP 1)
>
> I think there were a lot of different views, but I think overall each of us had our own preferences. But we would not be opposed to accommodating others' preferences as well, as long as our preferences were accommodated for as well. I don't know if I remember it correctly, but I think that's it. I think we were a group that really didn't mind, just as long as we weren't forced to change what we preferred.
>
> (Susan, GROUP 8 Follow-up interviews)

These statements appear to signal an acceptance of diversity and recognition that gender-

5 For more on "good reasons" in a different context — that of gender attribution — see Kessler and McKenna (1978).

neutral bathrooms might be important for some individuals. However, they also imply a belief that the existing system is essentially just and acceptable, and that while it could be altered to accommodate gender-variant individuals in accordance with a perspective of liberal tolerance of difference, these alterations should be as minimal and unobtrusive for the majority as possible. This reasoning depends on a multicultural view of society as consisting of a number of distinct constituencies, each requiring specific accommodations.

In some cases, participants used this liberal view to explicitly justify the continued existence of gender-segregated bathrooms. These participants saw gender-normative and gender-variant people as equally comprising unique constituencies that society had a responsibility to cater to. The analogy was made that while gender-variant people might be more comfortable with or even require mixed-gender bathrooms, normatively gendered people needed gender-segregated bathrooms in the same way.

> I feel like this is a silly point, but you have to be comfortable and relaxed to biologically go to the bathroom anyway, so you have to be in a setting where you're going to be comfortable. And if you made every single bathroom multi-user and gender inclusive, then a lot of people would be uncomfortable. I feel like for those people there have to be some gender-segregated bathrooms or single-user ones at least. Just to be inclusive. Because you can't say, we're going to change all of these into multi-user and unisex, and everybody just has to deal with it. That's not going to happen, because if you're going to be inclusive to trans people or gender-bending people, you have to realize that they're not the only people on this campus too. I don't think that you should only be inclusive to one group, you should be inclusive to all groups. But that doesn't mean that multi-user unisex is going to appeal to everyone.
>
> (Judy, GROUP 7)

> Susan: I know personally for me, I would never use it, but it's not my place to judge. So if they want it, sure. Just have options for me. Just make sure that I don't have to bow down to your new idea. But yeah, it's not my place to judge. So if they want, and if that, by all means, helps out the transgender community or whatever, I'm not here to keep someone from being able to advance in society, or socially, at all.

> Alexis: The problem with having all the bathrooms, regardless of the transition time, it's the same problem of leaving some people without options. The people who are left out now will definitely be better-served, but it sounds like all of us would rather have another option. I think there can definitely, there should be both, I think.
>
> (GROUP 8)

This perspective led participants to support inclusion up until the point that it challenged or threatened their own comfort. For example, several participants claimed that they would have no problem with mixed-gender bathrooms, as long as gender-segregated bathrooms remained in place – in other words, as long as they weren't forced to change their own behavior. However, when participants were asked to imagine the possibility of a complete end to gender segregation in public bathrooms (as Phyllis Schlafly had threatened in the 1970s), fears around the instability of gender seemed to rise to the surface. Thus, while participants did not want to be seen as illiberal, or as denying minority groups needed accommodations, they also did not want to be forced to use mixed-gender bathrooms. One exchange about the possibility of ending gender segregation on campus was telling here.

> M: So there's idea that people like options. But imagining that all bathrooms on campus became multi-user mixed-gender. What do you think the results of that would be? Would people get used to it? Would there be bathroom boycotts?
>
> Elliott: Yeah, I think people would be crying in Red Square.
>
> Liz: I would be crying.
>
> Paul: I was thinking there would be mass bathroom protest.
>
> Elliott: “Bring back men and women!”
>
> (GROUP 4)

The use of “men and women” here is of course shorthand for “men’s and women’s bathrooms.” However, the phrase also highlights the fact that an end to gender segregation would

be about much more than bathrooms for many people. The segregated public bathroom stands in for gender itself (Halberstam 1998), and threats to segregation represent threats to the recognition of gender differences — a recognition to which many people retain powerful commitments (Cahill 1985).

The symbolic power of gendered bathrooms

There were clear differences in the discourses that emerged around single-user unisex and multi-user mixed-gender bathrooms in this research, the most prominent being around who was seen to benefit from each configuration. Participants did not primarily argue for or against single-user unisex bathrooms in terms of their benefits for particular groups. In contrast, they seemed to understand multi-user mixed-gender bathrooms as primarily being "special interest" accommodations for a particular constituency — transgender people. This represents an inversion of much activist thought, which tends to see single-user bathrooms as useful to people with disabilities, families, and transgender people, while understanding mixed-gender bathrooms as representing a transformative societal shift away from the primacy of gender. For many activists, single-user unisex bathrooms are a step towards the ultimate goal of ending gender segregation (Transgender Law Center 2005). While a number of participants argued that *some* mixed-gender bathrooms would be acceptable, they did not see them or single-user unisex bathrooms as steps towards ending gender segregation completely.

The increased public visibility of transgender people has contributed to an increased comfort with and understanding of gender variance, but this understanding is for the most part limited to a simple model of switching from one gender to *the* other.[6] Thus, the participants in

6 Indeed, the increasingly popular psychological concept of "gender identity" – one's innate gendered self that may or may not match one's body and gender assignment – can be understood as reinforcing the idea of gender as fixed and unchangeable. Under this model, individuals undergoing physical transition procedures are seen as altering their bodies to match their interior gendered selves, and hence, have not really "changed genders" at all (Kessler and McKenna 1978).

this study were unable to discern the symbolic power of gendered public bathrooms, which serve to unambiguously divide the world into female and male. Indeed, a strong sense of entitlement to gendered bathrooms often emerged during discussions, as did confusion about the idea that anyone might want or need gender-neutral bathroom spaces.

Perhaps contributing to this confusion is the fact that the call to end gender segregation does not easily fit within commonsense understandings of gender equality as being between two well-defined social groups, women and men. While some have argued that mixed-gender bathrooms actually would solve the systemic inequalities in bathroom access between women and men created by current laws that require only that women's and men's bathrooms have equal floor space (Edwards and McKie 1996), participants did not approach the issue in this way. Instead, they treated it as either a special interest issue, or else could not understand the motivations behind the idea.

> M: Susan, you said something earlier, it seemed like you thought this might be an attempt at equality? You brought up the labor force, you were saying that we should be trying to get equality there before here. So do you think that's one of the reasons that people want this? They present it as an equality issue?
>
> Alyssa: Oh definitely, I think.
>
> Susan: Yeah, I think that equality between men and women, I think that's still a big issue in society. And when you're trying to pass something, or pass a policy, you're going to do whatever you can to get it passed. You're going to come from any perspective possible that will support your argument. So I think, yes, they could propose it that way. I think they would try to minimize the necessity for privacy. Because if you talk about the original purpose of a bathroom, it's to go and do bodily functions. Period. Over time it's evolved into this social thing and everything else. So if you go back to the first purpose of a bathroom, I think, yeah. You could come from an equality perspective, and say we're all just doing our bodily functions, using our body parts that we were made with. And yeah, that's all there is to it.
>
> Alexis: But I don't really see how it's inequal now. Because they're divided, but they're the same. It's not like men have better bathrooms, or women have better bathrooms.

(GROUP 8)

Indeed, many were unable to say whether feminists would support or oppose ending gender segregation, pointing to the issue's unintelligibility within mainstream models of feminism.

Megan: Do you think feminists would be want this or not?

Michael: It's hard to say.

Megan: Because -

Ryan: It seems like feminists would have reasons both to support and oppose this, actually.

Megan: Yeah.

M: So what would the two different arguments be?

Megan: I can see them saying equal and everything like that, it makes us the same, all that good stuff. But at the same time, women need their own bathrooms for privacy reasons.

(GROUP 5)

Mainstream feminism, then, does not provide an unambiguous interpretation of gender segregation in pubic bathrooms. For example, arguments about safety can be couched in feminist language about threats to women from men in public, but so can claims about the inequality inherent in prevailing definitions of "equal" access to public bathrooms. While participants were easily able to place the issue within a liberal-conservative logic, they were unable to relate it to feminism in a similar way. This highlights a disjuncture between participants' conceptions of "liberalism" and "feminism" and marks gender segregation as an issue that makes apparent the conceptual limits of mainstream models of gender justice.

CONCLUSIONS

This research has sought to investigate the various discourses that arise in response to the possibilities of configuring public bathrooms in gender-neutral ways. Participants were able to provide a diverse range of arguments both for and against gender-neutral bathrooms despite little previous exposure to the idea. These arguments drew upon well-established cultural ideas about gender, such as the uncontrollable nature of male sexuality and men's comparative lack of cleanliness compared to women. Many of these arguments were contested and debated within the focus groups, with only religiously-motivated claims about the naturalness of gender separation remaining almost totally unchallenged throughout.

It might be argued that the use of undergraduate students recruited entirely from sociology classes constitutes a limitation of this study, in that such a convenience sample is most likely not representative of any broader group — and in any case, one cannot quantify the degree of certainty in generalizing from such a sample. However, one might instead see the sample as constituting an extreme case. That is, as students of social science, we would probably expect the participants in this study to be somewhat more critical of "common-sense" beliefs about the social world than the average population. In this light, the challenges some participants presented to others' arguments about safety and privacy in public bathrooms are not entirely surprising. However, the same kinds of challenges were conspicuously absent when it came to arguments about the "naturalness" of gender separation. This appears to indicate the deep-seated nature of these beliefs, even amongst those — such as sociology students — who are trained to expose the constructedness of apparently natural phenomena. What Kessler and McKenna (1978) refer to as "incorrigible propositions" might also be labeled the hegemony of gender. This hegemony renders the questioning of gender segregation unlikely, given the lack of language necessary to

even begin conceiving of possibilities outside of a binary gender system.

What does this research imply for the possibility of shifting the dominant status of gender-segregated bathrooms in US society? Primarily, it suggests that even if activists are able to anticipate and answer objections on the grounds of safety or privacy, resistance to mixed-gender bathrooms will remain strong. Religious conservatives have been the loudest voices against any kind of shift towards more inclusive public bathrooms, but these results suggest that many who do not share their religious values will share their discomfort even if they do not share their faith. Further, dominant models of gender justice as represented by mainstream feminism cannot be called upon to provide support for ending gender segregation. While many liberal-identified people — including most participants in this study — will support single-user unisex bathrooms, these are unlikely to come to replace multi-user bathrooms entirely, as they are impractical in high traffic locations.

The opponents of the ERA, most prominently Phyllis Schlafly, were able to employ the possibility of ending gender segregation as a useful threat in the campaign against the amendment. Some of the other potentialities Schlafly warned of — such as gay marriage and the inclusion of women in the military — have become increasingly palatable to at least parts of the US public in the time since she brandished them as potential consequences of the ERA's success. Yet gender segregation remains the overwhelming norm with regards to public bathrooms. The data presented here indicate that attachment to this norm also remains strong, though it is not easily explained by a single factor. Rather, this continuing attachment is multifaceted and complex, based on a variety of ideas about gender and space.

Given the complexity of arguments and challenges that was evident in the discussion groups, it may be that the social acceptability of expressing concerns or “irrational” attachments

to gendered norms and practices such as segregation in public bathrooms has changed, but that the prevalence of privately-held beliefs about them has not. If this is the case, then activists' concerns about a lack of support for ending gender segregation were well-founded. The picture of gender that emerges here is one of continuity in core beliefs – that there are two genders that are essentially different in certain ways – despite a great deal of societal change with regards to equality between men and women.

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APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
CONSENT FORM
GROUP DISCUSSIONS OF UW PUBLIC BATHROOMS

Researchers: Matthew Kopas, Graduate Student, Department of Sociology

Katherine Beckett, Professor/Faculty Advisor, Department of Sociology

Researchers' statement

We are asking you to be in a research study. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether to be in the study or not. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what we would ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When we have answered all your questions, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." We will give you a copy of this form for your records.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the viewpoints of University of Washington students on campus public bathrooms and to understand students' preferences with regards to different aspects of how public bathrooms could be built or designed.

STUDY PROCEDURES

1.) You will fill out a short questionnaire (taking approximately 10 minutes) about your views on public bathrooms at the UW.

2.) You will participate in an approximately 1-hour long audio-taped discussion group on the topic of public bathrooms on the UW campus. The group will consist of approximately 6 people, including yourself. Questions will be similar to those included on the questionnaire, dealing with preferences for certain kinds of bathrooms versus others.

3.) You will be contacted within 4 weeks of the group discussion for an audio-taped follow-up survey that should take around 10 minutes to complete.

You may refuse to answer any question or item on the questionnaires, during the group discussion, or during the follow-up.

RISKS, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT

Risks from participating in this study are primarily in the areas of privacy and confidentiality. By the nature of the group discussion, participation means that it is possible that other group

participants are able to identify you after the research has been carried out. The discussion will be audio-taped, but these recordings will not be heard by anyone other than the researcher present at the discussion, and they will be destroyed once the research is complete.

BENEFITS OF THE STUDY

You will learn about different types of public bathrooms which are available on campus and some which might be adopted at a later time.

OTHER INFORMATION

You may refuse to participate and you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.
Your data will be kept confidential. The digital recordings will be transcribed within 30 days, and then deleted within 48 hours post-transcription. You will be assigned a pseudonym in all written notes and reports. You will not be identified (or identifiable) from information contained in any written reports.

_____

Printed name of study staff obtaining consent Signature Date

Subject's statement

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have questions later about the research, I can ask one of the researchers listed above. If I have questions about my rights as a research subject, I can call the Human Subjects Division at (206) 543-0098. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

_____

Printed name of subject Signature of subject Date

Copies to: Researcher
Subject

APPENDIX B: PRE-DISCUSSION SURVEY

Name: _____ Phone number: _____

Age: _____ Email: _____

Gender: _____ Race/Ethnicity: _____

1. Please examine the reference sheet for descriptions of the different options. Then rank the following designs in order of your preference for each, from 1 (prefer most) to 4 (prefer least but would still use). If you would never use one or more of the options, please mark an X next to them rather than a number.

_____ Multi-user gender-segregated (Picture A)

_____ Single-user gender-segregated (Picture B)

_____ Single-user unisex (Picture C)

_____ Multi-user mixed-gender (Picture D)

2. In the previous question, what factors influenced your decisions? Specifically, what factors influenced your top-ranked and lowest-ranked choices?

_____

_____

_____

_____

3. What kinds of reasons do you think people might have for wanting the following kinds of bathrooms available on campus?

Multi-user gender-segregated (Picture A):

_____

_____

Single-user gender-segregated (Picture B):

_____

_____

Single-user unisex (Picture C):

_____

_____

Multi-user mixed-gender (Picture D):

_____

_____

4. What sorts of people do you think might benefit from having these types of bathrooms available on campus?

Single-user unisex (Picture C):

_____

_____

Multi-user mixed-gender (Picture D):

_____

_____

5. What sorts of people do you think might oppose having these types of bathrooms available on campus?

Single-user unisex (Picture C):

_____

_____

Multi-user mixed-gender (Picture D):

_____

_____

If you require additional space for any question, please write here, noting the question(s) that you are continuing from:

APPENDIX C: BATHROOM PHOTO REFERENCE SHEET

Photo Reference Sheet

Picture A – Multi-user gender-segregated

- Two bathrooms – women's and men's
- Non-locking outer door – multiple people may be inside at the same time
- Multiple stalls (in both), plus urinals (in men's)

Picture B – Single-user gender-segregated

- Two bathrooms – women's and men's
- Locking outer door indicating vacant or occupied status
- Single room similar to home bathroom – toilet, sink, mirror

Picture C – Single-user unisex

- One or more bathrooms with no gender restrictions
- Locking outer door indicating vacant or occupied status
- Single room similar to home bathroom – toilet, sink, mirror

Picture D – Multi-user mixed-gender

- One bathroom with no gender restrictions
- Non-locking outer door – multiple people may be inside at the same time
- Multiple stalls – may or may not also contain urinals

APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONING GUIDE

Introduction

Good afternoon everyone, and welcome. My name is Matt Kopas, and I'm a graduate student in the Department of Sociology here at the UW. Today I want to hear your thoughts on some of the different types of public bathrooms that exist on the UW campus. The campus is in the early stages of change in this area, and I want to get student views on these changes.

I just want to let everyone know now that there aren't any right or wrong answers here. I expect people will probably have different points of view, and I hope that everyone will feel free to share their views even if they're different from what others have said.

I'm taping our discussion because I don't want to miss anyone's comments. As noted on your consent forms, your names won't appear in any reports. Your comments are confidential.

I've given everyone name tags to set in front of them. They help me remember names, but they can also help you. If you want to follow up on something someone has said, you want to disagree, or agree, feel free to do that. Don't feel like you only have to respond to me all the time. Feel free to have a conversation with one another about the questions. I'm here to ask questions, listen, and make sure everyone has a chance to speak.

You've all got a questionnaire and a reference sheet in front of you. Before we start talking as a group, I'd like you all to take about 10 minutes to fill out those questionnaires. First let's take a look at the reference sheet together and make sure we're all on the same page.

Opening

1. Tell us your name and major.

Introductory Questions

2. Which option did you pick as your top choice, and why?

Key Questions

3. Say that you encountered a bathroom like this [unisex single-user] on campus somewhere. What would your reaction be? Would you feel comfortable using it?

Probes:

- If security/safety is raised: more/less safe than in a multiple occupant, mixed gender room? Why?
- If privacy is raised: what aspect of privacy is most important?
- Say you had the option of a single-user unisex bathroom or a multi-user mixed gender room. Which would you prefer?

4. Some of the bathrooms on campus like this [gender-segregated single-user] are currently being converted to be unisex. Say that this happened in a building that you spent a lot of time in. Would this affect the chances that you would use that bathroom? How? Would you look for alternatives?

5. If you encountered a bathroom like this [mixed-gender multi-user] what would your reaction be? Would you feel comfortable using it?

Probes:

- If security/safety is raised: more/less safe than in a multiple occupant, mixed gender room? Why?
- If privacy is raised: what aspect of privacy is most important?
- Say you knew there was a gender-separated bathroom a floor away from where you were. Would you go there instead?

6. Imagine that one day, all of the bathrooms on campus had their “women” or “men” signs replaced with signs saying “toilets” or “toilets and urinals.” How would this make you feel?

Probes:

- Would you expect there to be any problems? If so, what kind of problems?
- Who do you think this would benefit, if anyone?
- Who do you think this might harm, if anyone?

Ending Questions

7. Imagine that you were asked to be on a student advisory panel for the new HUB building, and that among other things, you were asked to give recommendations about the bathrooms in the space. What recommendations would you give? How would you argue for your preference?

8. I wanted you to give me your opinion on these possible options for public bathrooms on campus. I'm interested in knowing people's thoughts and their preferences for some options over others. Is there anything I missed? Is there anything that you've wanted to say that you didn't get a chance to say?

APPENDIX E: POST-DISCUSSION INTERVIEW GUIDE

You recently participated in a group discussion about student opinions of different kinds of public bathrooms on campus. I'm interested in knowing people's thoughts and their preferences for some options over others.

Sometimes in group discussions, individuals aren't able to get their points of view across as well as they'd like, either because there's not enough time or because they're concerned that they hold an unpopular opinion.

1. So thinking back to the group discussion you participated in, is there anything on this topic that you wanted to say in the focus group but didn't or weren't able to?

2. Do you have any stories or experiences (positive or negative) regarding public bathrooms on campus that you'd like to share?