

OFF THE BEAT

Off the Wall at UMass

"I'd rather have a bottle in front of me than a frontal lobotomy" — Simple words, indelibly etched into the walls of more than one public restroom in the United States. Yet they speak a basic truth, at least for the overwhelming majority of people. Not all bathroom graffiti, of course, can be classified as profound, reflective of popular opinion or even rational; much of it may be labeled pornographic, perhaps perverted.

Nevertheless, graffiti appear to fascinate persons from all walks of life, including psychology. Behavioral and social scientists have actually ventured — pen and paper in hand — into toilet stalls to record and examine anonymously scrawled messages to the world. But once this is accomplished — once these Ph.D.s have analyzed any and all scribbled narratives about sex organs, minority groups, defecation and urination — researchers are usually faced with the same basic question: "What does it all mean?"

Few have been able to answer this satisfactorily. "We don't know who writes it or whether the attitudes are representative of those of the general population, or even of [the graffiti-writers] themselves," psychologist John A. Bates told *SCIENCE NEWS*.

However, one of the few things toilet-stall buffs can draw conclusions about is the difference between graffiti written by males and by females. (Ruling out, of course, unisex restrooms. This is not always an easy task — at a recent Washington, D.C.-area rock concert, for instance, it was noted by one journalist that women outnumbered men significantly in each of the building's men's rooms.)

Bates, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Massachusetts, is among the latest of a stream of researchers since the early 1950s to tread the tiles of public restrooms "to study the content of graffiti as a non-reactive indicator of human attitudes." His results shed little light on the significance, if any, of graffiti per se. But, along with that of several others in the past five years, they indicate a dramatic reversal in the male-female graffiti picture since such studies were performed by Kinsey and others almost three decades ago.

According to Bates and Michael Martin, now at the University of Washington, their study suggests that women write more graffiti than do men, and that women's graffiti have "more sexual, hostile and



issue-related content." This contrasts with research in the 1950s and 1960s, which reported that men by far wrote more graffiti — especially of an erotic, homosexual or pornographic nature — while women's graffiti were "typically romantic."

Throughout the fall of 1977, Bates and Martin sent student emissaries into restrooms at the main library, student center, gymnasium and three general use buildings at the UMass Amherst campus. The buildings, each containing an equal number of men's and women's restrooms, "were likely to be frequented by students majoring in a wide variety of academic areas." In addition, a "preliminary investigation... indicated that their restroom toilet-stall walls both had been cleaned of graffiti prior to data collection and were constructed of a material that would allow the writing of graffiti," they report. The researchers, however, did have to slow down an overzealous janitor who they feared had a tendency to clean walls before data collection could take place.

With such safeguards assured, the data collectors, armed with 4- by 6-inch index cards, ventured into the stalls. "They would go in, close the door and sit down," Bates elaborated in an interview. Limiting the study of toilet stalls ensured the anonymity not only of the collector but of the writer — "decreasing the likelihood that the writer will consciously inhibit the graffiti's content," note the researchers.

Specifically, the research assistants would sit and categorize graffiti into any one of 16 categories: heterosexual, homosexual, autosexual (masturbation, not cars), fetishism, political-sexual, racial/ethnic, general political, personal/interpersonal (involving better understanding or relations with people), philosophical, religious, drugs, humor, sports, music, graffiti about graffiti and miscellaneous. "Picture graffiti were excluded to increase the reliability of content categorization," say the researchers. In addition, some graffiti were sub-categorized — i.e., heterosexual writings could be classified as either invitations/referrals, romantic, erotic or antihomosexual, and so on.

"As expected, graffiti collected in the present study differed in both amount and in content from the results reported in the Kinsey et al. (1953) research," Bates and Martin reported at the recent meeting of the American Psychological Association. In the UMass study, females accounted for 52 percent of all original graffiti recorded and for 62 percent of written responses to other graffiti. Of all sexual graffiti, writings of men accounted for just 41 percent. More than 40 percent of the female sexual graffiti — compared with 32 percent of the males' — was of a homosexual nature.

Women also wrote "significantly more" graffiti involving sexual-conflict, personal/interpersonal, political and philosophical subjects. And male graffiti were generally more humorous and less hostile than those found in the women's rooms. In contrast, Kinsey found 26 years ago that 76 percent of all sexual graffiti was located in men's restrooms, and that 75 percent of that was homosexual in content.

After compiling these and more data, performing chi-square analyses and determining various statistical significances, Bates told *SCIENCE NEWS*: "There is real difficulty in deciding what it means. ... It probably suggests that social influence is most important in determining whether or not a person will write graffiti." And the socialization of males and females is far more similar than it was 20 or 30 years ago, he says. He also concedes that other variables, such as the geographic location of the university, may have "some influence."

Any speculation about meaning would be just that, Bates says. Still, he ventures: "One might argue that [the results] ... clearly demonstrate a general lack of awareness toward issues of pressing social concern and an inability to express personal problems on the part of men attending this university. In contrast ... women might be viewed as generally hostile, sexually confused and humorless individuals, far less able than men to cope with stresses common to the human condition."

—Joel Greenberg