

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK RESIDENT ADVISORS AT
HISTORICALLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

by

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ABSTRACT

MORGAN MURRAY. Exploring the Experiences of Black Resident Advisors at Historically White Institutions. (Under the direction of DR. RYAN A. MILLER)

The resident advisor (RA) position is one of the most complex and important roles on college campuses in the United States. Few other student staff positions require the same level of training and have the same level of responsibilities (Blimling, 2003; Cheng & Chan, 2020; Letarte, 2013). While these staff members serve many functions, the primary responsibility of RAs is to make their residents feel welcomed and valued in their community. Black students who take on the RA role at historically White institutions (HWIs) are charged with creating welcoming environments for students and making them feel valued in the community while often not feeling welcomed or valued themselves in these same environments due to the stereotypes and racism they encounter on their campuses (Harper, 2011; Hardaway, 2020; Roland & Agosto, 2017). Navigating the RA role as a Black student may mean helping their residents develop their sense of belonging while simultaneously trying to find spaces where they feel they belong.

This study is a qualitative phenomenological one that explored the lived experiences of Black students serving in the RA role at HWIs and where they found belonging and support in their residence life department. The study shares the stories of 10 students using interviews and photovoice. Photovoice was selected for this study because it can be a powerful tool for providing marginalized students with the ability to share their experiences from their perspectives (Duran, 2019). The words and images captured by the participants of the study are used to better understand the needs of Black RAs.

The findings of this study are broken down into five themes: (1) Compelled, which looks at why these students sought out and stay in the RA position; (2) Isolated, which describes Black RAs feeling connected but also disconnected to their peers; (3) Stereotyped, which refers to the labels and microaggressions Black RAs commonly experience; (4) Exploited, which relates to how Black RAs often have to expend more emotional and actual labor in their roles; and lastly, (5) Underrepresented, which refers to the lack of representation of peers and leadership in the departments Black RAs work for.

DEDICATION

This is for my Nana Rosa, Grandma Jeanne, mother Kathy, and the love of my life, Nora. Their hard work, belief in education, tenacity, generosity, dedication, support, and love made this possible, and I will be forever grateful. I hope you are proud of me.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

HWI	Historically White Institution
PWI	Predominantly White Institution
RA	Resident Advisor/Resident Assistant

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

When undergraduate students arrive on campus and move into their residence hall, often the first staff members they interact with are resident advisors (RAs). Not only will these student staff members issue keys and help direct new students to their rooms, but RAs become the first representatives of the university, and the first staff members to make students feel welcomed on campus (Blimling, 2003). At colleges and universities in the United States, the resident advisor position may be called by other names: resident assistant, community assistant, or resident mentor, but these student staff positions provide similar functions no matter what they are called. RAs are critical staff members in supporting the operations of college residence halls (Blimling, 2003). RAs are responsible for supporting their residents, those students assigned to their care on their floor or in their building. RAs are charged with facilitating community development, maintaining community standards, and providing educational and social opportunities for their residents (Blimling, 2003; Manata et al., 2017).

Over 95% of RAs in the United States were undergraduate students (Skyfactor, 2018). Most RAs were women, making up 61% of the sample. White students made up the majority of those in the role at 57% of the sample, followed by Black students, making up 17% of RAs (Skyfactor, 2018). Based on these numbers, the number of Black RAs is comparable to the number of Black students attending colleges and universities, with Black RAs commonly being underrepresented at historically White institutions (HWIs). IPEDS reported that during the 2019-2020 academic year, Black students made up 13% of students enrolled in postsecondary institutions (The U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education

Data System, n.d.). In addition to being underrepresented, Black RAs experience additional challenges that their White peers do not, such as being the targets of microaggressions and increased scrutiny of their job performance (Harper, 2011; Hardaway, 2020; Roland & Agosto, 2017).

Statement of the Problem

The resident advisor position is one of the most complex and important roles on college campuses. Few other student staff positions require the same level of training and have the same level of responsibilities (Blimling, 2003; Cheng & Chan, 2020; Letarte, 2013). Resident advisors play a key role in residence hall operations as they are often the point of contact and first responder for students. They live in the residence hall amongst the student population they serve and help their community of residents navigate and make connections on campus. RAs are commonly responsible for assisting students with their concerns and transitions to college, and for serving as role models to students and representatives of the university (Blimling, 2003).

Black students who take on the RA role at HWIs are charged with creating welcoming environments for students and making them feel valued in the community while often not feeling welcomed or valued themselves in these same environments due to the stereotypes and racism they encounter on their campuses (Harper, 2011; Hardaway, 2020; Roland & Agosto, 2017). The concept of students feeling valued and a part of a community is often referred to as a student's sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018). When college students feel they belong they are more likely to be socially integrated on campus, perform better academically, and persist at their institutions. For Black students at HWIs, developing a sense of belonging does not always come easy because of dealing

with the stereotypes and challenges that come with being underrepresented (Strayhorn, 2018). Navigating the RA role as a Black student may mean helping their residents develop their sense of belonging while simultaneously trying to find spaces where they feel they belong.

Black students serving in the RA role are often challenged with promoting their college campus to prospective students and their families in positive ways when it comes to diversity and inclusion while often feeling marginalized in their own experiences as Black students (Linley, 2018). Harper et al. (2011) found that Black men in the RA role experienced stereotyping, microaggressions, being “the only,” and more scrutiny from White supervisors on their HWI campus. Black women serving in the RA role experienced similar stereotyping as they navigated their positions and were often cautious about how they expressed their social identities (Roland & Agosto, 2017). A similar study on Black women RAs found that these students experienced racism, stress, fear, and feelings of being an outsider (Hardaway, 2020).

The literature on RAs rarely explores the position as it relates to the racial identity of RAs of color (Foste & Johnson, 2021). The current literature tackles topics like burnout and how the role has evolved to become more complex over time, but it does so often without acknowledging how an RA’s racial identity may impact these experiences (Blimling, 2003; Cheng & Chan, 2020; Manata et al., 2017; Renn, 2020). While there is an emerging body of literature on RAs of color (Bleikamp et al., 2015; Schuster & Stalker, 2020; Foste & Johnson, 2021) there is still a gap as it pertains to specifically addressing the needs and experiences of Black RAs. The current literature on Black RAs also does not explore their experiences through the framework of their sense of

belonging. Thus, this study adds to the conversation on Black RAs by giving additional voice to this population of students so practitioners can understand how the racial identity of Black students creates nuanced experiences for those in the RA role.

Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how Black RAs describe their lived experiences serving in the RA role and how they experienced a sense of belonging on campus. The study will examine how Black students describe and make meaning of serving in the RA role, campus climate, and their relationship with their residents, peers, and supervisors. The following questions directed the study:

1. How do Black undergraduate students at HWIs experience the RA role?
2. How do Black undergraduate RAs at HWIs describe experiencing a sense of belonging as RAs and students on their campus?

Theoretical Framework

Strayhorn's (2018) model of sense of belonging served as the theoretical framework for this research. Strayhorn (2018) discussed the importance of students developing a sense of belonging on their campuses. Sense of belonging is described as the human need to feel their presence is important and matters to those around them. For college students, sense of belonging refers to their perceived social support and connectedness toward their campus. Students feel they belong on their campus when respected, cared for, and valued in the community of faculty, staff, and peers. Sense of belonging is a strong predictor of student behavior as students with a greater sense of belonging are more likely to be engaged on campus and be satisfied with their college

experience. Students with a sense of belonging are also more likely to succeed academically and persist at their institutions (Strayhorn, 2018).

Sense of belonging is a psychological need, and when this need is met it impacts students' behaviors and perceptions (Strayhorn, 2018). A core element of Strayhorn's (2018) model of sense of belonging is that it is influenced by students' identities. Strayhorn (2018) finds that sense of belonging is more important in "*certain* social contexts where *some* individuals are prone to feeling unsupported, unwelcomed, or lonely, or in *some* social contexts where *certain* individuals are more likely to feel that way" (Strayhorn, 2018, p. 5). Black students are one of the specific populations Strayhorn (2018) explores as these students are more likely to feel unwelcomed at HWIs. Sense of belonging is more significant in certain contexts, like when students perceive a setting as unfamiliar. The culture at HWIs can be unfamiliar to Black students and those of other marginalized identities. Black students do not feel that they belong at HWIs in the same way that White students do. Many marginalized students on college campuses had experienced negative encounters, such as being denied membership to a fraternity because of their race, that affected their sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018). Museus et al. (2018) found that White students reported more positive experiences on their campus than Black students. Hussain and Jones (2021) found experiences of discrimination and bias on campus reduced students of color's sense of belonging on their campus. While Hussain and Jones (2021) studied Latinx, Asian, and Black students, they found that a negative perception of campus climate was especially impactful on Black students' sense of belonging. Developing a sense of belonging is more than just fitting in, it is being able to find community and show up authentically on campus as one's true self (Strayhorn,

2018). Being a Black student at an HWI does not always allow students to feel they can show up as their true selves in all contexts. This study seeks to explore if Black students feel the RA position allows them to feel they can be their authentic selves.

Residence hall environments are also typically mentioned in the discussion on students' sense of belonging (Berger, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2018). While not specific to Black students, Johnson et al. (2007) found students of color have a greater sense of belonging when they feel their residence halls are socially supportive and inclusive. The researchers suggest that student affairs practitioners focus on the climate of residence halls to improve the experiences for students of color (Johnson et al., 2007). In a study on first-generation college students, Garvey et al. (2020) found students' sense of belonging is greatly impacted by the residential environment and this is particularly true for marginalized students. Garvey et al. (2020) discussed the importance of the RA role as these students serve as the first point of contact for students when they arrive on campus and become critical people in helping students feel connected to campus. While this study is specific to first-generation students of various backgrounds, there are likely similar findings for Black students and students with other marginalized identities.

Black students' perceptions of their campus and residence hall climate all attribute to their sense of belonging. Literature also finds that involvement in some forms of student organizations, such as historically Black fraternities and sororities, helps Black students make sense of an environment that feels unfamiliar (Strayhorn, 2018).

Involvement in some clubs and organizations helped to reduce or rid Black students of their feelings of isolation and otherness (Strayhorn, 2018). This study explored whether

working as an RA helps students, specifically Black students, develop a stronger sense of belonging on their HWI campus.

Overview of Methodology and Research Design

The study utilized a phenomenological methodology to explore the phenomenon of being Black and an RA at an HWI. The study shares the common lived experiences of Black RAs' stories using photovoice and interviews. The study used an interpretive approach to phenomenology influenced by the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology (Vagle, 2018). Phenomenology was selected as the research design to provide a rich and detailed way to discuss how Black students experience and make meaning of the RA role, which will also include gaining an understanding of the nuanced experiences of how being an RA contributes to their sense of belonging.

The data collection process involved photovoice and individual semi-structured interviews. Photovoice was selected for this study because it can be a powerful tool for providing marginalized students with the ability to share their experiences from their perspectives (Duran, 2019). Ten participants who self-identify as Black, were undergraduate students at an HWI, and were current resident advisors or served in the RA role within the last two years at the time of data collection participated in the study. These students were recruited using outreach to colleagues and purposive sampling. All selected participants were provided a pseudonym to protect their identity in the study. Their institutions were also given pseudonyms.

Participants were asked to participate in two interviews and a photovoice activity. The initial interview was primarily intended to be informational, to establish rapport, and to provide clear guidance on completing the photovoice portion of the study. After the

initial interview, participants were given two weeks to complete the photovoice activity. For the photovoice portion of the study, participants were given prompts and asked to capture images that illustrated their experience as a Black RA and how they experience belonging and support in the role and as a student on their campus. After completing the photovoice activity, participants completed a second interview to describe why they submitted the images they captured, share why they were meaningful, and answer semi-structured interview questions that addressed the research questions of the study.

For data analysis, inductive coding and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to develop themes. IPA was selected because of the small sample size and the study's focus on exploring the lived experiences of participants (Bartoli, 2019). My data analysis process was guided by the six-staged process developed by Smith et al. (2009) and involved analyzing the data first for each participant and then looking at the data and their connections across the participants. Data analysis was also guided by researchers who developed procedures for analyzing photovoice data (Tsang, 2020; Capous-Desyllas & Bromfield, 2018). Throughout the coding process and the development of themes, I also kept a document for notetaking and reflective journaling regarding the research procedures, findings, and how my positionality showed up throughout the process.

Significance of the Study

This study is needed to contribute to the growing body of literature on the resident advisor position, specifically Black resident advisors. There is little research that specifically addresses the needs and experiences of Black RAs, so further exploration of this topic is needed. This study seeks to provide valuable insight into the nuances that Black students experience while serving in the RA role. I will also examine how serving

in the RA role informs a sense of belonging for this population of students. Previous studies have not looked specifically at sense of belonging as a framework for exploring the experiences of Black RAs. This study is also unique as photovoice is being used as a data collection method, which is also not seen in previous studies on this specific population of students.

The goal of my research is to better inform practitioners on the opportunities, motivations, challenges, and barriers that Black students experience as RAs. As a leader in higher education, I hope that this study adds to and enhances what we understand about the experiences of Black RAs. I hope that this knowledge aids in the reconsideration of policies and procedures that impact the experiences of Black RAs in residence life departments. I also hope that my study helps in the development of how practitioners train their staff to supervise with full consideration of how an individual's race may impact their experience in their role. As a leader in education, I want to work towards environments where all RAs feel comfortable bringing their full and authentic self to the position.

Delimitations

Given the purpose of my study, there are specific delimitations. First, historically White institutions in the United States were selected as sites to recruit participants. This decision was made because sense of belonging and the perceptions of campus climate for Black students may look different in an environment where they are underrepresented. Second, I have chosen to only recruit participants who self-identify as Black, which can include any student identifying as a part of the African diaspora (e.g., African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, Afro-Latin Americans, etc.). I will also include students that are

multiracial and self-identify as Black. Students from all other racial backgrounds are excluded from the study. Third, while there are graduate students who serve as RAs, I will only examine the experiences of undergraduate students serving in the RA role at the time of the data collection process. The decision to focus on undergraduate students was made to capture the students that make up the majority (95%) of those in the RA role at most institutions in the United States (Skyfactor, 2018). Much of the existing research on sense of belonging focuses on undergraduate students, as graduate students often have their own unique experiences and challenges, and there is less research on this population as it relates to sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018). The RAs in the sample may serve undergraduate or graduate student populations but must themselves be undergraduate students. The decision to interview current RAs or those who had been RAs in the last two years was made to be able to capture the lives of students currently experiencing or not too far removed from the RA role.

Definition of Terms

To be clear on the terminology used and ensure a common understanding, the following terms and definitions will be utilized:

Black: Racial classification for any individual whose heritage is connected to the African diaspora. This may include but is not limited to those identifying as African American, African, Afro-Caribbean, and Afro-Latinx.

Historically White Institution (HWI): HWI is the terminology used in this study to refer to institutions commonly referred to as predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Using HWI instead of PWI acknowledges the history of exclusion and racism at these institutions. The institutions in the study will be ones where the majority of the student

population is White, and the history and culture of the institution systematically favor Whiteness (Brunsma et al., 2013).

Marginalized: Refers to those socially excluded, systematically disadvantaged, and on the fringe of society due to one or more social identities that a person holds (Duran, 2018; Linley, 2018).

Resident advisor (RA): Student staff positions at colleges and universities responsible for confronting policy violations, building a healthy community environment, communicating with residents, addressing student concerns, planning residence hall programs, referring students to campus resources, and assisting with crisis management (Blimling, 2003). At some institutions, these staff members are called resident assistants or community assistants. I will use resident advisors to describe these student staff members.

Sense of belonging: Sense of belonging is described as the human need to feel their presence is important and matters to those around them. For college students, sense of belonging refers to their perceived social support and connectedness to their campus (Strayhorn, 2018).

Students of Color: Umbrella term commonly used to describe the collective of different racial and ethnic groups on campus. Students of Color commonly include those who identify as Black, Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, Native American, and multiracial.

Underrepresented: Racial or ethnic groups that make up a smaller percentage of the population or are represented in disproportionately low numbers (Healea & Hale, 2016).

Organization of the Study

In this chapter, I discussed how Black students commonly experience discrimination, bias, and microaggressions on their college campuses. Black students serving in the RA role are not exempt from these experiences, and for all Black students, these factors may inform their sense of belonging and connection to campus. As such, I have provided the rationale for this phenomenological study to critically examine the experiences of Black students serving in the resident advisor role at HWIs. In addition to the problem statement, chapter one outlined the purpose of the study, research questions, overview of the conceptual framework, methodology, the significance of the study, delimitations, and definitions of key terms relevant to the study.

Chapter two will review literature related to sense of belonging, campus climate, the residential experience for Black students and students of color, the resident advisor position, and Black resident advisors. The chapter will include evidence of how extant literature is pertinent to this study.

Chapter three will provide an in-depth discussion of the methodology used for this study, including in-depth details of the research design, along with plans for data collection and analysis. I will also discuss my positionality, in addition to the limitations of the study.

The remaining chapters will present the results of the study and a thorough analysis and discussion of the findings. The findings will highlight major themes elicited from both the interview and photovoice data. The study will also include implications for practice and suggestions for future research. The dissertation research will conclude with a list of references and appendices.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies examine the experiences of resident advisors, but the literature often approaches the topic without making considerations for these students' race or other identities. There are a few studies that look specifically at the experiences of Black resident advisors at HWIs (Brown, 2020; Hardaway, 2020; Harper et al., 2011; Roland & Agosto, 2017), but additional research is needed to understand the experiences of Black RAs and how the role influences their sense of belonging. The current study explored sense of belonging and the experiences of Black resident advisors (RAs) at historically White institutions (HWIs) in the U.S. This review of literature considered research on the resident advisor position in addition to the specific experiences of Black resident advisors. The study also draws on the literature on campus racial climate at HWIs, sense of belonging, the residential experience for students of Color, and current literature on the experiences of resident advisors. A summary of each of these literature themes can be found in Table 1.

Table 1
Identified Themes in the Literature

Campus Racial Climate at HWIs	Ancis et al., 2000; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado & Alvarado, 2015; Hurtado et al., 1999; I, Too, Am Harvard, n.d.; Lewis & Shah, 2021; Mwangi et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2013; Tynes et al., 2013
Sense of Belonging	Berger, 1997; Blimling, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Lewis & Shah, 2021; Museus et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2013; Strayhorn, 2018; Thelamour et al., 2019
Residence Hall Climate	Berger, 1997; Pascarella et al., 1994
	Racial microaggressions and racism in residence halls (Foste, 2021; Harwood et al., 2012; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017; Jagers & Iverson, 2012)

	Support networks and spaces in the residence halls (Boettcher et al., 2019; Garvey et al., 2018; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017; Jaggars & Iverson, 2012; Thompson, 2020)
Black Resident Advisors	The resident advisor position (Blimling, G., 2003; Boone et al., 2016; Cheng & Chan, 2020; Forsyth, 1983; Jaeger & Caison, 2006; Letarte, 2013; Manata et al., 2017; Renn, 2020)
	Recruitment and selection of Black RAs (Bleikamp et al., 2015; Boone, 2018; Healea & Hale, 2016; Ketchum, 1988; Langston, 2020; Schuster & Stalker, 2020; Watt et al., 2003)
	Navigating marginalization and microaggressions (Brown, 2020; Hardaway, 2020; Harper et al., 2011; Linley, 2018; Roland & Agosto, 2017; Schuster & Stalker, 2020; Thelamour et al., 2019; Tyler, 2019)
	Stereotypes and tropes (Harley, 2008; Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008; Harper et al., 2011; Hardaway, 2020; Roland & Agosto, 2017)
	Challenges and barriers (Hardaway, 2020; Harper et al., 2011; Roland, 2021)
	Identity-affirming groups and supportive spaces (Hardaway, 2020; Roland, 2021; Roland & Agosto, 2017; Schuster & Stalker, 2020)

Campus Racial Climate at HWIs

Campus racial climate is defined as how the institution's community members perceive and feel about issues of race, levels of racism, and incidents of discrimination on their campus (Hurtado et al., 1999). The campus climate of an institution is assessed by considering the structural diversity of an institution (the number of racially diverse students represented on campus); the institution's historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion; the psychological climate (how students perceive the hostility and tension around race on their campus); and the behavioral climate (the frequency and quality of interactions between racially diverse students) according to Hurtado et al. (1999). Students of color typically have more experiences with racism and discrimination than their White peers, so their racial identity shapes how they perceive their campus climate

(Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Black students often have particularly negative perceptions of their campus racial climate (Ancis et al., 2000). Black students being underrepresented at HWIs leads to fewer opportunities for them to engage meaningfully and more opportunities to be tokenized, thus causing them to look less favorably on their campus climate (Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

The 2013-2014 academic year ushered in the beginning of the “I, Too, Am...” movement on college campuses across the nation (Mwangi et al., 2018, p. 146). The movement was a photo campaign that started at Harvard University and then spread to other campuses and circulated widely on social media. Black students created the campaign to draw attention to the microaggressions and racism they experienced on campus. The photos in the campaign featured Black students holding a small dry-erase board with handwritten messages addressing or combating a racial stereotype or comment they have heard on campus. Some of the messages included, “No, I will not teach you how to twerk”; “You’re not blacker than me because you can rap more Jay-Z lyrics”; and “Surprise! My application to Harvard wasn’t just a picture of my face” (I, Too, Am Harvard, n.d.). Black students commonly cited feeling as though campus community members feared their presence based on stereotypes about their race (Mwangi et al., 2018). These stereotypes often led to them being negatively treated or encountering violence on campus. Most often though, Black students experienced persistent microaggressions rather than overt racism. One student described the racial climate on campus as the “black elephant in the room” (Mwangi et al., 2018, p. 462). In addition to feeling that they were feared by their peers and campus staff, Black students also expressed feeling like they were seen as intellectually inferior (Tynes et al., 2013). Tynes

et al. (2013) found Black students also could not escape racial discrimination and microaggressions in their social media presence and online interactions with faculty and peers.

In a case study at one HWI, Lewis and Shah (2021) found that Black students experienced instances such as White students appearing in Blackface, the N-word written in acts of vandalism on campus, videos of faculty members making racially charged comments, racist messages on university social media accounts, and police hyper-surveillance of Black students. In response, the institution created diversity initiatives and hired a chief diversity officer, but students perceived these actions as shallow and surface-level attempts to address the issues rather than leading to true inclusion. Students also felt their institution tokenized them and used them as props to promote how diverse and inclusive they were (Lewis & Shah, 2021).

For Black students, the campus environment is often seen as a “cold, uncaring place” (Strayhorn, 2013, p. 124). Their White peers do not typically perceive the campus in the same way. Black students also expect to encounter racism on campus more often than their White peers. Strayhorn (2013) discussed that the history of exclusion at many HWIs still impacts the experiences and perceptions of Black students and students of color today. Many of these students also expressed considering leaving their institution because of how they experienced the campus environment (Strayhorn, 2013). Notably higher percentages of Black students also report experiencing incidents of bias and discrimination as opposed to their White peers (Hurtado & Alvarado, 2015). Over 68% of Black students reported being targeted by verbal comments, 48% felt excluded from events on their campuses, and about 39% reported seeing offensive images on their

campuses (Hurtado & Alvarado, 2015). Given this information, examining how Black students perceive their campus racial climate is critical to understanding how those perceptions may impact their sense of belonging.

Sense of Belonging

Students feel they belong on their campus when they feel respected, cared for, and valued in the community of faculty, staff, and peers (Strayhorn, 2018). This feeling contributes to their success as a student. For Black students and other students of color, racial identity is often tied to their sense of belonging and how connected they feel on campus. Museus et al. (2018) found that White student participants reported more positive experiences with their campus and a greater sense of belonging than their Black peers. Similarly, Thelamour et al. (2019) found that Black students often regarded their racial identity as salient and felt marginalized and less connected to their HWI campuses. Strayhorn (2013) discussed that many Black students are not retained at HWIs because these students do not perceive their campus favorably and have more difficulty feeling integrated into the academic and social fabric of the institution. Black students often enter their institutions believing they will fit in due to how many HWIs promote an illusion of campus diversity and inclusion in their promotional materials (Lewis & Shah, 2021). As these students encounter racism on their campus, they often reevaluate their perceptions of fitting in as Black students on their campus.

In addition to students' perception of their campus climate, several other important factors significantly impact students' sense of belonging, the first of these being students having positive interactions with faculty and peers on campus (Hoffman et al., 2003). Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that involvement in co-curricular activities

and students belonging to organizations played a significant role in the development of a student's sense of belonging. Participation in student organizations on campus was critical for the development of a sense of belonging for Black students, specifically Black men (Strayhorn, 2018). Harper and Quaye (2007) found that Black students were more likely to be involved in campus organizations whose membership was predominantly Black or minority students to work towards building community, dispelling stereotypes, and supporting and responding to the needs of other students of color. The Black student participants also reported that they often chose to get involved in a mainstream campus organization to increase representation in the organization and to advocate for the needs of students of color (Harper & Quaye, 2007). Lastly, living on campus also has a significant impact on students' sense of belonging as students living on campus reported feeling greater support from peers and social integration (Berger, 1997; Blimling, 2003). This literature review will now look at the literature on living on campus, specifically as it pertains to Black students.

Residence Hall Climate

Sense of belonging is also discussed in the literature that explores the experiences of students living in college residence halls. Berger (1997) described a residence hall student's sense of community as their perception of being a member of the community, their level of influence in the hall, their connection with others in the community, and the fulfillment of their needs. In addition to exploring the climate on campus, it is important to explore the literature on the perceptions Black students that live on campus have of the climate of their residence halls. Students that live on campus in the residence halls feel

more socially integrated with their peers than those students that do not live on campus (Pascarella et al., 1994).

Racial Microaggressions and Racism in Residence Halls

Several of the studies related to this topic do not look solely at the experience of Black students in the residence halls and include all students of Color. These studies include Black students in the population and still provide useful context for understanding the experiences of Black students in the residence halls. Harwood et al. (2012) conducted focus groups with 81 students of color living in their campus residence hall on an HWI campus and found that the group commonly encountered racist comments or racial jokes, racial slurs written in common areas, spaces they perceived as segregated, and the minimization and invalidation of their experiences. The racial comments and jokes students experienced were usually by friends or roommates, thus making it difficult for the students to confront, and making them feel like an outsider in their residence hall. There were also reported examples where peers continued to make racist comments even after being confronted about the comments being offensive. Some students reported seeing racial slurs written in shared spaces or being the victim of pranks on their residence hall floors. Returning to the residence halls and seeing racial slurs again made students feel isolated and unwelcomed. These feelings were often exacerbated when the students reported the incidents to residence hall staff and their experiences were minimized and not resolved (Harwood et al., 2012). It was common for students of color to feel that residence hall spaces were not where they belonged because they were segregated by race. Students also perceived that some residence halls were viewed as inferior on their campuses because more students of color lived there. Students

reported their residence halls being referred to as the “projects” (p. 167) based on the larger population of students of color when compared to other residence halls (Harwood et al., 2012). Foste (2021) also found that residence halls were often perceived differently based on the racial makeup of the community. Participants described certain buildings as “the White dorm” (p. 177) when there was a higher population of White students in those halls. These halls were often the ones that were more expensive to live in and so were considered premier. These more expensive halls were often in sharp contrast to the halls with a more diverse population of residents or those with more students of Color. These halls were often older and contained fewer amenities and visual appeal. Black students expressed not feeling welcomed or comfortable in the halls they considered to be more premier or designed for White students. One Black student that lived in one of these halls expressed feeling more comfortable in the other hall because there was a greater population of other Black students (Foste, 2021).

Harwood et al. (2012) also found that Black students felt that policies seemed different or were enforced differently in some residence halls. For example, one residence hall with predominantly residents of color had a bag search policy that other halls did not. Black students also perceived that room assignments seemed to intentionally segregate students on certain floors, wings, or portions of the hall (Harwood et al., 2012). Jagers and Iverson (2012) found that Black students were also critical of how room assignments were made, but unlike Harwood et al. (2012), these students felt that students with racial differences were intentionally assigned to rooms to promote racial harmony, but many of these students experienced the opposite.

Jaggers and Iverson (2012) focused on Black men that were students living in residence halls on HWI campuses. The researchers found that students reported challenges living with White roommates because of lifestyle differences or the White students having little to no experience interacting with people of color. Students also felt they had to represent their race, had to prove themselves against the negative stereotypes other students seemed to hold of them, and that their manhood was often tested by White men students. Black men students also felt they had to prove themselves to residence hall staff, that they were confronted differently, and that rules were applied and enforced differently because of their race (Jaggers & Iverson, 2012). Black students experience “perpetual homelessness” (p. 48), typically feeling excluded from places on campus and that they are hyper-surveilled in their residence halls repeatedly by staff (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017).

Support Networks and Spaces in the Residence Halls

To survive on HWI campuses, Black students often must seek out spaces and communities where they feel safe and supported. Garvey et al. (2018) found that there were significant differences in sense of belonging for residential first-year students based on their race and gender. Students of color equated their sense of belonging to feeling comfortable in their residence halls. Students of color living in residence halls often must find sites of belonging to be successful on campus. For some students, their residence hall room may have become a site of belongingness, but once outside of that space in the residence hall, that level of comfort often shifted (Garvey et al., 2018). Hotchkins and Dancy (2017) described that Black students often feel “absent while present” (p. 47) as they recognized that their race was not represented in the staff in their residence halls, the

student organizations in the residence halls, or the art, pictures, or items found in the residence halls. Similarly, Boettcher et al. (2019) found that students of color were often underrepresented in residence halls on HWI campuses, thus these students needed to find a community of support from their friends, roommates, and other students of color. Jagers and Iverson (2012) found that the negative experiences Black men students went through in their residence halls left them feeling isolated and not supported on campus. With many of the study participants being first-generation students, they often could also not find the support they needed in their home life.

Jagers and Iverson (2012) recommended that residence hall staff consider creating more spaces where Black men can have dialogues with each other and form support networks with each other around race and masculinity. These support networks should provide opportunities for the students to engage with and connect to mentors and Black role models (Jagers & Iverson, 2012). It becomes critical for Black students to find spaces to help them navigate the lack of support and feelings of isolation. Hotchkins and Dancy (2017) described the importance of connection with the theme “finding ‘our’ space(s).” Black students created or joined spaces, often student organizations, where they do not interact with their White peers to distance themselves from the racism and racial microaggressions they experienced in the residence hall (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017).

Thompson (2020) found that some campuses developed specific residential communities for Black students to be housed together. These communities were developed to foster Black student identity development and to help contribute to their retention and academic performance. On HWI campuses, this provided Black students

with counterspaces absent of White students and of some of the oppression they face elsewhere on campus. Black students residing in these spaces often referred to them as safe havens and places where they felt they belonged. Housing administrators in these residential communities worked to create spaces where Black students feel heard and believed when they report incidents of bias and racism they experienced. While these residential communities do not provide a fix for oppression for Black students, they are credited for creating spaces where students can find support and others that relate (Thompson, 2020).

Residence hall staff are another source of support for Black students in the residence halls. Boettcher et al. (2019) found that students that had connections with residential staff members that shared their identity, or another marginalized identity contributed significantly to students of color feeling supported in the residence halls. Of residential staff members, custodial staff members in the residence halls often formed connections with students of color that were powerful for their experiences. The participants' connections with custodial staff members gave them an increased sense of safety and belonging on campus (Boettcher et al., 2019). This study focuses on another type of staff member in the residence halls, the RA position, and thus literature on the RA position, specifically Black students serving in the RA position, was reviewed.

Black Resident Advisors

The Resident Advisor Position

While RA responsibilities vary across campuses, typically the responsibilities include serving as a student role model, administrative duties, serving as a representative of the university, confronting policy violations, building a healthy community

environment, communicating with residents, addressing student concerns, planning residence hall programs, referring students to campus resources, and assisting with crisis management (Blimling, 2003). A similar study found that RA responsibilities typically included 11 core competency areas: managing conflict, maintaining physical safety, connecting with residents, forming relationships and peer groups, connecting residents to university resources, encouraging involvement, counseling, providing academic encouragement and support, role modeling, managing time, and fostering psychological safety (Manata et al., 2017). Many RAs understand the role they play on campus to support student success by acting as an older sibling, role model, resource, and friend (Renn, 2020). RAs are situated at a unique place on campuses in their work with students as they often know some things that both faculty and staff don't know because of their experiences as students (Renn, 2020). Forsyth (1983) described this as a role conflict from being both students and staff members, needing to manage their perceptions of their role, students' perceptions, and their supervisors' perceptions. There are few other groups of students on college campuses that receive the same level of training and attention as RAs (Blimling, 2003). Few student staff positions on college campuses have the level of responsibility that RAs hold, thus many new RAs struggle with the workload and role ambiguity that comes with the position (Cheng & Chan, 2020). This has become more common as the RA role continues to become more complex with an increasingly diverse student body with more complex needs, and as they navigate recent social and political climates in the United States (Jaeger & Caison, 2006).

Boone et al. (2016) found that the RA role has also shifted and become more complex due to legal decisions like the Clery Act, which often requires that RAs serve as

first responders in reporting crimes and crises. Letarte (2013) found that with RAs playing a key role in confronting campus safety concerns that take place in the residence halls, RAs have become increasingly involved in lawsuits. The role has grown in the level of risk and responsibility. RAs are often amongst the most important staff members on college campuses and are also often staff members that most negligently expose campuses to liability because they are often undertrained for the situations they assist in managing (Letarte, 2013). The RA role has become intensified and required more training due to incidents like mass shootings on college campuses, growing mental health concerns, and the growth in emotional support animals on college campuses (Boone et al., 2016). As the RA role continues to evolve, RAs will likely be asked to rely more on their abilities to be trained observers, problem solvers, and community builders (Boone et al., 2016).

Recruitment and Selection of Black RAs

Boone (2018) found that helping other students, the financial compensation, and working on a staff team were the greatest motivating factors for students to apply to be RAs. Thus, housing professionals should focus their marketing and recruitment efforts on highlighting these motivating factors (Boone, 2018). Healea and Hale (2016) found that Black students represented a recruitment gap in the RA selection process and that students felt that this was often because of a lack of awareness and information about the position. For those Black students that do know of and are drawn to the RA position, there are often specific motivating factors that contribute to their willingness to apply. Similarly, there are often specific barriers that discourage Black students from applying. Ketchum (1988) found that Black RAs were motivated to apply most because the

position looked good on a resume, whereas White RAs were most motivated by liking to work with people. A deterrent to applying that Black RAs perceived that many of their White peers did not was feeling that RAs of their race were especially hassled by residents. Similarly, 32% of the Black RAs felt they were deterred from applying because they perceived that they would not be hired anyway. None of the White students in the sample felt the same (Ketchum, 1988). A study on Black men RAs found that financial support was a primary motivation for them to consider the position (Langston, 2020). For many, the position was the only way they could afford to live on campus as most RA positions provide free housing in addition to a stipend.

Black students often perceived the RA recruitment and selection process differently than their White peers. Bleikamp et al. (2015) explored Black students' perceptions of the RA selection process, which they overall felt was fair and appreciated facilitators striving to make the process inclusive. While feeling supported, the Black RA candidates also felt marginalized and underrepresented in the process, often feeling they had to represent Blackness to their peers. The RA candidates also felt the conversations around diversity were surface-level and not meaningful, particularly when it came to discussions on race (Bleikamp et al., 2015). Healea and Hale (2016) found that those underrepresented students that did participate in the RA selection process had more positive experiences in the process when they perceived that the housing department put some emphasis on diversity issues and cared to recruit diverse candidates. The researchers also found that racially underrepresented professional staff were more likely to select RA candidates of Color and made candidates of color feel more supported throughout the process (Healea & Hale, 2016). Housing professionals not only need to be

conscientious of selecting a diverse staff but also need to be focused on selecting candidates who are willing to grow in their self-awareness and multicultural competence (Watt et al., 2003). Housing professionals can increase the number of diverse RA candidates by redesigning the recruitment and selection process to include implicit bias training for staff involved in the process and challenging staff perceptions of “fit” (Schuster & Stalker, 2020). Schuster and Stalker (2020) also recommended meeting students of Color in their spaces to recruit more diverse staff to the RA position

Navigating Marginalization and Microaggressions

Several studies on Black RAs have looked specifically at how these students navigate the marginalization and microaggressions they experience in their roles. Many RAs with marginalized identities expressed that they experienced prejudice and microaggressions based on their identities (Schuster & Stalker, 2020). These microaggressions were often subtle and came from residents, peers, advisors, and supervisors. Microaggressions from their supervisors often led to marginalized RAs not feeling supported in their roles and impacted their desire to continue in the position (Schuster & Stalker, 2020).

Linley (2018) looked specifically at how racial identity and campus climate impact students of color in student leadership positions on an HWI campus. The researcher found that students of color in student leader roles were challenged to paint the university in a positive light when it comes to campus diversity and inclusion while feeling marginalized in their own lived experiences on campus. The participants felt that when not performing their student leader roles they regularly experienced microaggressions, especially in the classroom (Linley, 2018). Thelamour et al. (2019)

found that one of the Black man participants that identified as a resident advisor expressed being a target for racist incidents in his residence hall as the one Black staff member in the community. This incident had an incredibly negative impact on that student's feeling of connectedness to his campus and made him hesitant to trust White people (Thelamour et al., 2019). While performing their student leader role, these students often experienced microaggressions by their supervisors in being asked to represent their race for prospective students, which left many of them feeling used and not valued in their roles beyond their racial identity (Linley, 2018).

Often, the studies on this topic focus on the specific experiences of Black RAs that identify as men or women. Hardaway (2020) explored the experiences of Black women RAs and found that all participants had to navigate racism in their role and identified that the political climate in the United States intensified the racial climate on campus. The Black women RAs felt fear and anxiety to host programs on race and felt overly aware of how they were received as a Black women. These students often did not feel supported by staff and relied on creating support networks and counterspaces with other Black students (Hardaway, 2020). Roland and Agosto (2017) also explored the experiences of Black women RAs and found that these RAs experienced stereotyping as they navigated their positions and were often cautious when expressing their social identities. The Black women RAs equated their role with building relationships and being of service to their residents (Roland & Agosto, 2017). Tyler (2019) also studied Black women RAs and found that these students described feeling stuck, hated, ignored, dismissed, silenced, and unsupported by their fellow staff members, supervisors, and other housing administrators. Many of the women studied also discussed feeling trapped

in their RA roles for financial reasons and feeling that housing administrators take advantage of their reliance on the compensation and benefits of the position. For these Black women, the RA experience was riddled with navigating microaggressions against them, racism, fear, feeling unsafe, threats to their job security, and physical, emotional, and psychological stress (Tyler, 2019).

Brown (2020) found that Black men RAs appreciated that the position allowed them to connect with other Black residents, Black RAs, and Black professional staff members whom they might not have otherwise connected with if not in the position. These connections helped them find others who understood their experiences with microaggressions on their HWI campus and helped them find communities where they felt supported (Brown, 2020). Harper et al. (2011) found that Black men RAs often felt they were racially stereotyped as being incompetent, and as a result, felt they had to work harder than their White peers. A lot of their energy in the role was spent trying to prove their competence in the role to White supervisors (Harper et al., 2011).

Stereotypes and Tropes

The literature on Black RAs commonly spoke to stereotypes experienced by Black men or Black women in the role (Harper et al., 2011, Hardaway, 2020). Harper et al. (2011) found that Black men RAs often felt they were racially stereotyped as being incompetent, and as a result, felt they had to work harder than their White peers. A lot of their energy in the role was spent trying to prove their competence in the role to White supervisors (Harper et al., 2011). Black women RAs were often scrutinized for their performance and held to job performance standards based on stereotypes and generalizations. Common stereotypes impacting the perceptions of these Black women

RAs were being overly passionate or outspoken, intimidating, aggressive, and unwilling to be submissive. A participant in the Hardaway (2020) study was quoted as often feeling perceived as a Mammy or “Aunt Jemima” in their residence hall community (p. 7). The participant did not go on to define what that looks like, but exploring these common stereotypes of Black women is critical to explore in looking at how Black women in the RA role may feel they are perceived.

Harley (2008) explored the stereotype of Black women in the faculty being seen as maids and work mules in the academy based on how they are perceived at HWIs. Though this study was focused on faculty, and not the RA position or student staff roles, it is critical to understanding how tropes impact the experiences of Black women at HWIs and society at large. Harley (2008) compared teaching to childcare in that Black women often have disproportionate teaching loads and carry the weight of teaching diversity courses on their campuses. Black women often fall into the role of mentoring Black or other marginalized students, thus using much of their time and energy caring for students and the community. This is the “hidden work” that Black women in higher education have to deal with as they are often put in positions where they have to focus more attention on service to the university than on research and publication, the work more recognized and rewarded by university leadership (Harley, 2008, p. 25).

Harley’s (2008) description of the maid in academe is comparable to the Mammy, or caretaker stereotype that Hardaway (2020) referred to. The literature related to Black women in higher education typically refers to the Mammy stereotype more than the others, but it is important to understand that these images continue to show up in the experiences of Black women in a variety of settings. Mammy is often described as being

seen as a nurturing, loyal, self-sacrificing servant, which for Black women continues to show up in workplaces as needing to take on the role of being available for others and willing to lend a hand, often not considering the time and energy that expectation puts on them. Mammy as a character was responsible for taking care of those around them and tending to the domestic needs of a household not their own as this image originated during slavery (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). This seems to resonate with the Black women studied in previous literature on the RA position (Hardaway, 2020; Roland & Agosto, 2017).

Other race-based stereotypes from historical images like Mammy that come up for Black women are the Sapphire, an image of a loud and overbearing Black woman, and the Jezebel, which portrays Black women as seductive and hypersexual (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). The Sapphire stereotype emerged in the experiences of Black women in the RA role, who expressed worry that they were seen as having an attitude or being loud or “ratchet” (Hardaway, 2020, p. 7). The Sapphire is often thought to be tough and aggressive, thus Black women often find themselves in a place where they are expected to do the work no one else wants to do, or isolated because they are perceived as too outspoken or aggressive (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008).

Another stereotype found in the literature for Black women that is more modern than based on historical images is the Superwoman stereotype, which characterizes Black women as strong, talented, overachieving, willing, and able to do it all (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). This stereotype is also important to look at in exploring how Black women in the RA role and higher education, in general, may fall into this stereotype and feel the

need to constantly show strength and resilience or to work harder than those around her to prove her worth and talent.

Challenges and Barriers

Many Black RAs experienced similar challenges and barriers in their resident advisor role. Harper et al. (2011) found that Black men RAs often felt challenged by being one of few students of Color in the role and their residence life department. It became tiring for students to navigate this experience of “onlyness,” (p. 190) where there were few sources of support or role models and they constantly felt expected to represent their race (Harper et al., 2011). Hardaway (2020) described this phenomenon as Black women RAs experiencing “the outsider within,” (p. 8) and the daily management of balancing being Black, a woman, and in a leadership role where they felt they did not have adequate support.

A lack of staff diversity and a perception of departmental leadership are commonly a challenge for Black RAs. Harper et al. (2011) found that Black RAs commonly discussed that the lack of professional staff of Color in the housing departments they worked for led them to feel more isolated in their positions and contributed to the lack of Black students pursuing or continuing in the RA position. Those RAs that had a connection to a Black supervisor felt more prepared and supported in navigating the racial politics on their HWI campus (Harper et al., 2011). Hardaway (2020) described that many Black women RAs felt they received unfair treatment from their supervisors and that when they questioned things, they were often seen as being combative. They did not feel valued in their positions and felt dispensable to the leadership of the department. The RAs also expressed not trusting supervisors and being

afraid to ask questions at the risk of being viewed as incompetent (Hardaway, 2020).

Harper et al. (2011) found that Black RAs experienced similar worries about being seen as incompetent by supervisors, particularly White supervisors. The RAs found themselves working harder to prove themselves as not being lazy or underperforming in their RA role (Hardaway et al., 2011).

Harper et al. (2011) found that Black men RAs felt that their performance was scrutinized more by White supervisors than that of their White peers, describing this theme as “All Eyes on Me.” Participants did not feel they were shown the same grace by White supervisors as their White peers, felt there were different standards for Black RAs than their White colleagues, and that they received different accountability and follow-up from supervisors when they made a mistake or did not meet job expectations. Black RAs also reported that they felt their White supervisors were more likely to discuss their job performance with others before or without bringing those issues to them. These feelings often led to Black RAs not wanting to continue in their RA roles because of their perceived lack of support and their mistrust of their supervisors (Harper et al., 2011).

Roland (2021) found that Black women RAs often perceived the physical spaces, particularly academic spaces, as barriers to receiving educational and career support on campus. Campus spaces were described as solid, cold, and uncomfortable which led to feelings of spaces being isolating for and inaccessible to Black students. Similarly, relationships with faculty and staff on campus were also seen as a barrier for Black women RAs. The students found that their requests were not treated with respect or a sense of urgency leaving them feeling unsupported by those that are supposed to serve as resources for them. This created some dissonance for the students of the study who felt

that they took the effort to support students through their RA role but were not receiving the same support from other campus staff (Roland, 2021).

Identity-affirming Groups and Supportive Spaces

To navigate the RA position while Black often requires students to seek out spaces and groups that are affirming of their identities and are sources of support. For example, Hardaway (2020) found that other Black women RAs and Black RAs, in general, became a community of support for the Black women RA participants. To navigate their social identities and the position, Black women RAs sought support through their relationships with family, friends, and other residential staff members they felt could relate to their experiences (Roland & Agosto, 2017). Roland (2021) found that Black women RAs also sought out certain student services offices or resources, such as campus recreation centers and counseling services. Counseling services were often cited as helping these Black women RAs preserve their mental health. These spaces served as a refuge for these students and created a space where students did not feel on the clock and where they could truly get the emotional support they needed (Roland, 2021).

Schuster and Stalker (2020) found that the RAs with minoritized identities often found themselves seeking out and becoming a champion for other marginalized students on campus. Their participants included White, Black, Pacific Islander, Asian, Latinx, and multiracial students. Some participants also identified as gay, bisexual, queer, or trans. These students found that their leadership roles empowered them to help make students of Color more visible on campus. The researchers also found that minoritized RAs greatly benefited from having a supportive and encouraging mentor, most notably when these mentors were their supervisors or other residence life professional staff members.

When these students had a supervisor that shared their racial or other social identities, the connection was often more meaningful because of the shared understanding. Housing professionals should encourage and support identity-affirming affinity student groups to provide spaces for minoritized RAs to come together and find a community of support (Schuster & Stalker, 2020).

Chapter Summary

This review of literature informed the direction of my study as these themes found in the literature are needed to explore the experiences of Black RAs at HWIs. It was crucial to glean information on these research areas to better understand how Black students make meaning of their experiences and the support, challenges, and relationships they develop in the RA role. This literature review explored research on the resident advisor position to understand the general expectations and complexities of this role for students. Literature on the experiences of Black resident advisors was also considered to gain an understanding of how their social identities, perceptions, supervisory relationships, and experiences navigating microaggressions and racism create nuanced experiences in the RA role for Black students. Navigating the RA role while Black is an important consideration in research. To understand the experiences of Black RAs, it is critical to consider research on Black students' perception of their campus racial climate and to understand how their experiences impact their sense of belonging on campus. Additionally, it is necessary to consider research on the residential experience for students of Color. Residence halls are intended to be spaces where students feel comfortable, safe, and secure if they live on campus, but for many Black students,

experiences with microaggressions and racism in the residence halls leave them feeling disconnected and unwelcome.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The previous chapters shared the purpose of the study, an overview of the study, and a review of the scholarly literature used to provide context to the research topic. This chapter describes the methodology and data analysis procedures used to address the research questions for this study:

1. How do Black undergraduate students at HWIs experience the RA role?
2. How do Black undergraduate RAs at HWIs describe experiencing sense of belonging as RAs and students on their campus?

The chapter will provide detailed information about the epistemological stance, research design, and methodology for this study. A rationale will be provided for why qualitative phenomenology was selected as the research design for this study. Additionally, there will also be an overview of my positionality as a researcher, strategies utilized to protect the human subjects involved in the study, and the data collection and analysis methods used. The chapter will discuss the criteria and strategies utilized for recruiting and sampling participants and information about the photovoice and interview protocols used for the study. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the trustworthiness of the study.

Epistemological Stance

Kivnuja and Kuyini (2017) describe epistemology in research as how people come to know something. In addition to being a way to describe how we acquire knowledge, it is also used to describe how we communicate that knowledge to others (Kivnuja & Kuyini, 2017). A constructivist epistemological approach acknowledges that knowledge is subjective and that knowledge is constructed through the human experience

and people's social interactions with others (Creswell, 2007). This approach relies on the individual experiences of the research participants and how they reflect on and make meaning of things (Creswell, 2007). A constructivist epistemology was used in this study as the focus was on exploring individual student experiences and how those students make meaning of them. Constructivism is commonly used in qualitative research and made sense for this study because of the use of photo and narrative data from participants. In Constructivist research, the researcher needs to be aware of their positionality to their work and how their background and experiences shape their interpretations of data (Creswell, 2007). This chapter will provide detail about my positionality to the research, and chapter five will provide my reflections as a researcher. The remainder of the chapter will further detail how the study used a constructivist approach to interpret the meanings derived from study participants.

Research Design and Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative, phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Black students serving in the RA role. Creswell (2007) describes qualitative research as an "intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colors, different textures, and various blends of material. The fabric is not explained easily or simply" (p. 35). Qualitative research was utilized for this study because much like the intricate fabric Creswell (2007) described, so, too, are the various stories and experiences of Black students serving in the RA role. Qualitative research provided a detailed exploration of the topic in a way that quantitative research could not. This research allowed Black students serving in the RA role to tell their stories and make meaning of their experiences through participating in photovoice and interviews.

The research design for this study was modeled after a pilot study I conducted in the fall 2021 semester on the same topic. The pilot study involved interviewing a sample of three Black students to understand their experiences serving in the RA role. This study again will use interviews but will primarily utilize photovoice to continue to explore in-depth what it means for these students to be Black RAs.

Photovoice is a research method that originated in public health by Wang and Burris (1994, 1997) and has evolved into a research method used by other academic disciplines, such as education (Tsang, 2020). In photovoice, research participants take photos that represent their lives, social issues they experience, or their communities (Wang, 1999). Wang (1999) described the goals of photovoice to be “(1) to record and reflect their personal and community strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about community issues through group discussions of photographs, and (3) to reach policymakers” (p. 185). Photovoice is an arts-informed research method, which is beneficial to researching marginalized populations because it allows participants to use their emotions, senses, intellect, and imagination to reflect their experiences (Finley, 2005). Arts-informed research makes space for there to be multiple and creative ways to represent and express participant experiences, thus honoring diverse ways of knowing and making meaning of experiences (Capous-Desyllas & Bromfield, 2018). Photovoice as a research method uses participant-created art and visual representations to allow the participant to tell their story (Sutton-Brown, 2014). Photovoice was used in this study to reflect the experiences and concerns of Black students serving in the RA role and to bring critical dialogue about the issues they face in

hopes that it would reach practitioners that impact the policies and experiences of these students.

Phenomenology was selected as the methodology because the study explored the lived experiences of this group of students. Phenomenology captures the essence of an experience or that which all participants have in common (Creswell, 2007). This study seeks to explore the essence of being a Black student serving in the RA role. The focus of a good phenomenological study is what people experience and how they experience it (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology served as an excellent methodology for this study because the study aimed to provide a rich and detailed description of how Black students experience and make meaning of the RA role. The study explored the phenomena of being a Black RA at an HWI. A goal of this study was to allow readers to grow in their understanding of these students' experiences from the perspectives of a sample of Black RAs. Phenomenology was also selected given the nature of the research topic. The focus on the racial identity and racialized experiences of underrepresented students made phenomenology an appropriate choice as the topic can be very deep and personal.

More specifically, this study was guided by an interpretive approach to phenomenology influenced by the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology (Vagle, 2018). The study draws on van Manen's approach to interpretive phenomenology which consists of three essential elements: actively doing research, that research is an interpretive act, and that this work is never done (Vagle, 2018). Max van Manen's (1990) approach to phenomenology is commonly used in human science research. He suggests that this research should comprise six research activities: (1) turning to a phenomenon or the nature of a lived experience, (2) investigating the experience as we live it, (3)

reflecting on essential themes of the phenomenon, (4) describing the phenomenon through writing and rewriting, (5) maintaining a strong and oriented relation to the phenomenon, and (6) balancing the research context by considering both the parts and the whole (van Manen, 1990). This study was guided by these research activities as the focus was on the lived experiences of Black student RAs and working to understand as a researcher the common experiences or essential themes of the experience. It was also important for me to consider the parts, or each individual participant's experience, and the whole, the essential themes from all participants.

van Manen (2014) describes phenomenology in a practical way, a phenomenology of practice, which was appealing to me as a researcher as I intent for this study to have practical implications in higher education, making a change in the policies and practices of housing departments that can positively impact the RA experience, particularly for Black and other marginalized students. Recommendations for policy and practice changes will be shared in chapter five. This study also draws on van Manen's (2014) belief that phenomenology does not have to rely on the typical data collection methods of the social sciences, interviews, observations, and thematic analysis. He argued that phenomenology can be practiced in a reflective manner using visual and graphic arts or creative expressions such as photography (van Manen, 2014). As this study utilized photovoice as a data collection method, I appreciate van Manen's (2014) description of a phenomenology of practice that explores everyday life and can do so using creative means.

Positionality

It is important that I reflect on who I am in relation to this phenomenological study. I identify as a cisgender, queer, Black woman. As a former college student with marginalized identities, including being Black, I have a connection to the population I studied. I am aware of the ways in which I developed a sense of belonging and my own perceptions of my large, historically White university. A major way I found a connection to my campus was by becoming an RA during my junior year in college. As an RA, I served on a staff of 20, where there were only two other RAs that identified as Black. I can recall my own experiences with feeling underrepresented and stereotyped in my residence hall and on campus. I can recall my own experiences of encountering microaggressions from residents and peers. I can recall the feeling of not having many peers or supervisors that could relate to the cultural experiences I felt connected to. I can remember many of the Black residents in my residence hall gravitating to the few Black RAs on staff, and the Black RAs across campus finding each other to find community and support. I can also recall gravitating to the few Black supervisors in the department to find support and mentorship.

I also am connected to this research because of my professional experiences working with RAs. I supervised RAs directly for seven years and have supervised and continue to supervise them indirectly in my middle-manager role. As a housing professional, I have a vested interest in ensuring that all our RAs have a good experience, receive the training they need to be successful in the position and experience consistency in how they are supervised and held accountable.

I know that because of my personal and professional experience, I am an “insider” and had to be careful throughout the study to not impose my perspective and what I know

about the role onto the participants. Throughout the study, I worked to avoid imprinting my experiences and perspectives onto the participants by committing to listening to their stories openly and by engaging in my own reflection of the assumptions and biases I brought with me into the study based on my experience. It was important for me throughout the study to engage in reflective journaling on the decisions I made throughout the data collection and analysis processes and to reflect on my interpretations throughout the study. It was important for me to challenge myself to be mindful of what I was missing or not considering because of the preconceived notions I have about the topic. In addition to doing my reflection, it was also helpful for me throughout the process to debrief and share reflections with several trusted peers who also serve as housing professionals.

While there is much that I understand about the topic and the experience, I acknowledge that being an RA now is not the same as when I was a student over 20 years ago. The position has evolved to become increasingly complex as they work on campuses today that have more diverse student bodies with more complex needs (Jaeger & Caison, 2006). RAs today also work in a different social and political climate where conversations around diversity, equity, and inclusion have evolved since I was a college student (Jaeger & Caison, 2006). Thus, I approached this study with the openness to learn more about the experience of my participants. I served as the sole researcher for this study and will conduct all portions of this study except for the interview transcription.

Protection of Human Subjects

The risks of this study were minimal for participants, but I acknowledge that discussing incidents of microaggressions and racism may have elicited an emotional response from participants. Participants were supported in pausing, stopping, or

rescheduling the interview at any time if they needed to, but none of the participants needed to do so. Additionally, to avoid any conflict of interest and to minimize the power dynamic, none of the participants were students at my institution or students with that I have a personal or professional connection. However, I am aware that there is still a power dynamic at play as I am a mid-level residence life professional, and for many of these students, I serve in a similar role as their supervisor's supervisor or higher. It may not have always been easy for participants to share details of their experience for fear of being identified in the study and reprimanded or retaliated against. Furthermore, in some cases, I have connections to participant supervisors or departments which could have made it uncomfortable for participants to share negative experiences they have had with their supervisors or the department that employs them. I did not experience much hesitation from those that participated in the study, but it may have been something they considered or that caused others not to participate. To help minimize participants' concerns, I on several occasions assured participants throughout the interview process that their interview data and photos would be kept confidential. All participants selected or were given a pseudonym that they are referred to in the study to protect their confidentiality. The participants' institutions are also referred to by pseudonyms to not provide identifying information. Images captured by participants in the photovoice portion of the study were also not used if they seemed to identify their campuses, and all faces were blurred to protect the human subjects captured in the images.

Participants were sent an online survey and consent form using Google Forms (Appendix A) to determine if they met eligibility criteria and to consent to participate in the study. The online consent form was adapted from the sample consent form accessible

through the UNC Charlotte IRB at research.uncc.edu. At the start of both interviews, I was sure to review the points on the informed consent form again to make sure participants understood and I confirmed that they felt comfortable proceeding with the study.

As previously mentioned, faces, campus landmarks, and other things pictured that may identify the participant's institution in the photovoice images were not published. For the photovoice portion of the study, participants were asked not to take pictures of people, particularly of their faces, without their consent. Photos were securely saved and not published or shared without the editing mentioned above to protect the anonymity of participants. Participants were also sent a photo release form (Appendix B) that they were asked to share with other people that appeared in their images. Many of the participants were not able to get the consent forms completed by others, so I erred on the side of caution and chose to blur out faces and distinguishing elements in the photos.

Interviews for the study were recorded via Zoom with the consent of participants. The video and audio from the interviews were saved as cloud recordings. These recordings were only shared with Rev.com to utilize their transcription services. Both of the participant's interview transcripts were shared with each of them so they could review them and share any elements they prefer me not to discuss in the findings and discussion of the study.

Sampling

In this phenomenological study, criterion sampling was utilized as all participants needed to experience the phenomenon of being a Black RA at an HWI (Creswell, 2007). Participants were recruited through outreach to colleagues at other institutions who were

asked to share information about participating in the study with their staff members. I sent outreach about the study to sixteen institutions and have representation in the study from six of those institutions.

To participate in the study, participants had to meet the following criteria:

- At least 18 years old
- Self-identify as Black (This can include any student identifying as a part of the African diaspora, e.g., African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, Afro-Latin Americans. This can also include students that are multiracial and self-identify as Black.)
- Enrolled as a full-time undergraduate student at their institution
- Attend a mid-size to large HWI (a college or university where the majority of the student population identifies as White, and the undergraduate student enrollment is at least 5,000 students)
- Are current resident advisors (or similar role) at their institution at the time of data collection or served in the RA role within the last two years at the time of data collection

A recruitment email was sent out to colleagues and institutions meeting the criteria described above (Appendix C). The recruitment email contained background information on the study, a graphic advertising the study (Appendix D), and a link and QR code to a Google Form (Appendix A) that asked participants to verify that they met the criteria described above and to obtain their consent to participate in the study. The form also explained the purpose of the study, that the study was voluntary, any potential risks of the study, how participant information would be protected, and what to expect

about the process. Colleagues that received the recruitment email were also encouraged to share it with other housing professionals.

Through my recruitment efforts, I was able to recruit a sample of 10 students that completed the entire study. My goal was to recruit at least 10 participants to do the initial interviews and to retain at least seven of those participants throughout the study. I was happy with reaching the sample of 10 and feel that data saturation was reached. I had four students that did the initial interview with me but did not continue in the study. I also had several students express interest in participating in the study but then did not respond to any requests to schedule an interview with me. I anticipated having some issues recruiting and retaining participants throughout the study because it involved three parts for them over the course of several weeks. To manage the recruitment and attrition issues, I had three phases of recruitment to reach my desired sample size. To incentivize participants to complete the entire study, I was able to provide a \$50 digital Amazon gift card for their participation through funding I received to pursue this research from the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International (ACUHO-I).

Data Collection & Instrumentation

The data for this study was collected over the course of three months, from September 2022 through December 2022. Data collection consisted of three parts for each participant, an initial interview, a photovoice project, and a second interview. The combination of the participant narratives from the interviews and the images participants submitted provided rich data on the topic.

Foster-Fishman et al. (2005) describe photovoice as a tool to allow those often silenced in the political sphere to take photos to convey their feelings, and beliefs, and to

narrate their everyday life experiences using their voice. Photovoice was selected for this study because it can be a powerful tool for providing marginalized students with the ability to share their experiences from their perspective (Duran, 2019). This study was in part inspired by a student affairs research study by Duran (2019) that used photovoice to study belonging for queer students of color. Cheng and Chan (2020) did a photovoice study on new students serving in the RA role at a university in Hong Kong. Both studies show how impactful photovoice can be for allowing students to express themselves and share their experiences. This study attempted to use photovoice in the same way.

As I began the study, I came across an article in the *Scientific American* that speaks to how photography was often used throughout U.S. history to bring awareness to racial justice and the experiences of the Black community in America (Ramirez, 2020).

For generations, Black Americans have raised their voices about the atrocities against them, using the technology of the time. And one of the ways they displayed racism was by using their Black figure in front of cameras to bring it into better relief. Many allies today have said they were not aware of their privilege or their racism, likening both of them to water for fish...Once something is seen, the next step is not just to say something but to strategize, to reimagine the future and, most importantly, to act. (Ramirez, 2020, para. 9)

History has shown that photography has been a tool to change people's perceptions of the lives of Black people (Ramirez, 2020). Images raised awareness and appealed to the social conscience of people, including images that showed lynchings, Black activists being sprayed with water hoses in the south during the Civil Rights Movement, and more recent images of Black lives, like George Floyd, being ended by police brutality

(Ramirez, 2020). These images are hard to forget and have helped others understand what groups of people experience. There is a certain power to displaying elements of the Black experience through images. On the other hand, it is also true that images of Black bodies have been exploited and used without full consideration of the subject. In the findings presented in Chapter 4, a couple of the participants brought up that they felt that their images were exploited by their university to show the diversity of their campus. These images seem to have been taken without their consent or used in ways the students were not aware of. I acknowledge that my choice to utilize photovoice as a data collection method could seem exploitative and to be using these students' images as well to prove a point, but as a researcher, I worked to protect participants' privacy and to empower them to submit images that they felt comfortable sharing and that were meaningful to them. Participants also consented to this process and sharing their images.

Photovoice was a powerful tool for participants to reflect on and share their experiences. Images allow participants to reflect on the emotions tied to their experiences in ways that go beyond narrative data alone (Harper, 2002). I intended to empower participants to share images that they chose and that they felt best reflected their lived experiences.

While my data collection did not produce images that show violence and racial injustice, photovoice was used in this study to collect photos depicting both Black joy and struggles as experienced in the context of their RA position by the 10 participants in this study. As Ramirez (2020) suggests that once images are seen, the next step is to re-imagine the future and then to act. The goal of my study is to use the photovoice images to make Black RAs feel seen and to compel educators to act and create spaces where

Black RAs are able to find belonging in their positions and in the residence halls on HWI campuses.

Semi-structured interviews were also used as a data collection method as is common in phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2007). The interviews conducted for the study provided rich narrative data that complemented and helped bring voice to the images the participants submitted. The study consisted of two semi-structured interviews with each participant. All interviews were conducted using Zoom, and the audio and video from the interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants. First, participants were asked to participate in a 30-minute primarily informational interview. This interview was a time for me as the researcher to begin building rapport with the participants and to explain photovoice and the expectations for participating in the study. In interview protocol for the first interview was designed to also begin collecting data from participants (Appendix E). The participants were asked several questions to begin to understand the context of their RA position, questions asking about how long they had been an RA, what made them pursue the RA position, and what type of students they serve, for example. The initial interview was an effective way to help set participants up for success at completing the photovoice portion of the study.

For the photovoice portion of the study, participants were asked to use their personal cell phones or cameras to take 3-10 images that reflect their experience. Participants were given the following prompts: (1) Take a picture that reflects your experience being a Black student and RA on your campus. (2) Take a picture of how or where you experience belonging and support as an RA. Participants were asked to take more pictures of things, spaces, and places rather than people. If participants chose to

take photos of people, they were asked to submit a photo release form with those pictures, to be utilized (Appendix B). Many of the participants submitted photos of themselves with people. If a photo release was not submitted for the photos, images were not published without blurring all the faces of those featured. Similarly, any photos that would be identifiable of the participant's campus were not published to protect the privacy of participants. During the study, I collected 58 images submitted by participants. The images I selected to be published in the findings section of this study are what I felt were the best examples of the themes that developed from consistent patterns found in the narrative data of the ten participants.

Following the photovoice portion of the study, participants were asked to participate in a 60-90-minute follow-up interview to discuss the images they captured and to get a sense of how they make meaning of their experiences and their sense of belonging. The interview protocol for this interview was initially developed for a pilot study in my Advanced Qualitative Methods course and has been modified to focus the questions on learning more about the photos captured and the participants' interpretations of them (Appendix E). The interview protocol was developed by focusing on open-ended questions that would provide the space and prompting for students to share stories about their experiences. I intentionally developed some structured questions while still allowing the opportunity for follow-up questions to be asked that enhanced the dialogue and allowed me to be actively involved in the conversation with participants.

After the interviews, participants were also sent a brief demographic survey to better understand their social identities and how they may have influenced their responses and images (Appendix F). Some of these identities were self-reported by participants

during the interviews, but the survey was still helpful in providing additional context when interpreting the data. All but one participant completed the survey.

Data Analysis

After the data were collected, I used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and an inductive coding approach to analyze the data from participant interviews and photos. IPA seemed most fitting as a data analysis approach for this study because the goal was to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of the participants. IPA helps the researcher explore what people believe about and how they make meaning of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Data analysis was guided by Smith et al.'s (2009) six-stage process for analyzing data. It was adapted to include elements of a data analysis process for photovoice proposed by Tsang (2020) and an arts-informed approach to photovoice data analysis proposed by Capous-Desyllas and Bromfield (2018).

Tsang (2020) suggests analyzing photovoice data in four stages: (1) an analysis of the photos based on the researcher's interpretations, (2) an analysis based on the participant's interpretations, (3) a cross-comparison of those interpretations with the narrative data, and (4) theorization, or identifying the relationship between the themes developed during the cross-comparison phase. After the initial interview with the participants, they were asked to submit the 3-10 photos responding to the two prompts they were given: (1) Take a picture that reflects your experience being a Black student and RA on your campus. (2) Take a picture of how or where you experience belonging and support as an RA. In the initial phase of analyzing the photos, I previewed each photo submitted by the participants and began to make notes on my interpretations of the photos and questions about the photos I had. I did not spend much time in this phase to try not to

impose my preconceived notions before getting the participant's interpretations, but I did think it was important to go into the second interview with the participants having seen the images they submitted.

At the second stage of the photovoice analysis, I analyzed the photos in conjunction with the narrative data from the interview transcripts for the second interview when participants were asked to go through each picture and share what the picture showed and why they chose to submit that photo. This is when I brought in the second stage that Tsang (2020) recommended of looking at the participant's interpretations. Immersing myself in the narrative data from participants allowed me to explore the meanings from the participant's lens. Capous-Desyllas and Bromfield (2018) suggest doing a within-case analysis of data first so that guidance was used to focus on the interview data and photos of one participant at a time. During this phase of data analysis, I conducted multiple readings of each interview transcript of each participant one at a time. All interviews were transcribed using Rev.com's automated transcription services.

In the initial reading of transcripts, I conducted a general descriptive coding process looking for words and phrases that stood out in the data to create initial codes. I also began to make notes about each participant as an individual case, exploring the context of their RA position. This included making notes also about their institution type, years of service as an RA, and the region they come from.

After an initial reading of the interview transcripts, I read through the transcripts again line-by-line and refined my initial codes. After the second reading of each participant's transcripts, I also did another review of the photos of each participant and began to sort portions of the interview data next to the photos submitted using digital

collage techniques. Capous-Desyllas and Bromfield (2018) suggested using collage as an analytic tool to conceptualize and categorize ideas (Davis & Butler-Kisber, 1999 as cited in Desyllas & Bromfield, 2018). Collage was a useful method to organize visual data with narrative data because it allowed for images and words to be moved around as my understanding of themes evolved and as I made meaning of the data (Capous-Desyllas & Bromfield, 2018). Collaging was used to pull out quotes from the interview transcripts of each participant and to align them with corresponding photos and themes. It was a visual way for me to organize codes into themes based on connections I found across the data. At this stage in the process, I also began the cross-comparison steps that Tsang (2020) discussed by looking back at my initial interpretations and the interpretations of the participants.

After reviewing transcripts and photo data for each of the 10 participants, I then conducted the cross-comparison phase suggested by Capous-Desyllas and Bromfield (2018), comparing the data from all participants. The collage mapping was critical at this stage of the process as participant quotes, images, and themes were grouped together visually to show the patterns in themes found between the participant data. Quotes from participants and their discussion of the images led me to arrive at the themes discussed in chapters four and five as there were some patterns I found between the experiences of the participants. This portion of the analysis also corresponds with the last phase in Tsang's (2020) process, theorization, where the researcher must identify relationships between the developed themes. As I found connections using my digital collage, I also journaled about my reflections related to what I was finding and the nuances across the participants as they related to the themes. At this phase, I also began to connect the themes back to

which research question it helped me answer, and I began to explore and make note of the converging and diverging points I was finding between my data and the literature.

Trustworthiness

Nowell et al. (2017) define the four elements that make up trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The credibility of a study is described as addressing the congruence between the respondents' views and the ways that the research represented the respondents (Tobin & Begley, 2004 as cited in Nowell et al., 2017). To address the quality and any ethical issues that may emerge as this study was conducted, I did member checking with participants. Each participant had the opportunity to review their interview transcripts, and I shared an infographic (Appendix G) with a brief explanation of the themes I found from the data. It was important for me to share the findings and get their perspectives on the developed themes to ensure they felt that they accurately reflect their experiences. I received feedback from six of the participants, and they all found the findings to be relevant to them, with some findings resonating with them more than others.

Transferability refers to whether the findings can be transferred to other sites (Nowell et al., 2017). While the sample is intentionally small, the study provides rich descriptions and interpretations of the Black RA experience that could make the themes transferable to a variety of HWIs. The data for the study also came from multiple sources between the participant photos and the two semi-structured interviews. Being able to connect the themes I found between both data sources created more meaningful data that should make findings more transferable.

The dependability of research involves ensuring that the research process was logical and well-documented (Nowell et al., 2017). To ensure dependability, I worked to keep detailed information on my research process and why I made the choices I did throughout the study. All research data and research notes were well organized and well documented. To be mindful of my positionality throughout the study, I engaged in reflective journaling and engaged in dialogues with a small group of peers that are knowledgeable about housing and residence life about what I was finding and reflecting on throughout the process.

Confirmability is met when credibility, transferability, and dependability are met (Guba & Lincoln, 1989 as cited in Nowell et al., 2017). As a researcher, I believe I reached confirmability by ensuring that my conclusions and interpretations of the data are clear and explained well throughout the process and that they resonated with the participants' experiences.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the research design, methods, and procedures used for this study and why these were selected for this study. The chapter also provides detailed information on how participants were recruited and selected, including the criteria for participating in the study. There was also a thorough discussion on how participants were protected through the course of the study including details on the consent process. The chapter provides an overview of the data collection and data analysis methods used for this study. It also discusses the limitations of the study and how trustworthiness was considered. My positionality to the research was also discussed. The following chapter will provide more detailed information about the research including a discussion of the research sites, participants, and findings.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This study explores the phenomenon of being a Black student and RA at an HWI, looking for the common themes that help describe what it is like for this population of students. Through exploring this population of students, my goal was also to explore how Black RAs experience a sense of belonging on campus, looking specifically at where these students find sources of support and community to perform their role and serve students while working through their own experiences of being a minoritized student on their campus.

The research questions for the study are:

1. How do Black undergraduate students at HWIs experience the RA role?
2. How do Black undergraduate RAs at HWIs describe experiencing a sense of belonging as RAs and students on their campus?

This chapter will describe the findings based on analysis of the photos and interviews of the ten student participants in the study. The chapter begins with an overview and description of each study participant and the institution they attended and is then followed by a discussion of the themes found while analyzing the study data. There were five themes I found throughout the study that describe how Black students experience the RA role at their institutions. Weaved throughout the findings will be examples of the images captured by the students while engaged in photovoice so the reader can see how the participants made meaning of the prompts they were given. Quotes from participants will also be shared throughout the chapter so readers can hear these students' stories in their own words.

Overview of the Participants

The participant sample included ten participants from six institutions. The table below displays the demographics of the participants and will be followed by more detailed descriptions of each participant and the institutions they attend to provide additional context. The demographics represent identities that participants self-disclosed through a demographic form I sent them. All but one of the participants responded to that form.

Table 2
Participant Demographics

<i>Name</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Black Identity</i>	<i>Sexual Identity</i>	<i>Spiritual Identity</i>	<i>Classification</i>	<i>Institution</i>
Uniqua	Cisgender woman	African American	Heterosexual	Christian	Senior	Big Mountain State University
John	Cisgender man	African American	Heterosexual	Christian	Senior	Garden Grove University
Semira	Cisgender woman	African	Heterosexual	Christian	Junior	Garden Grove University
Jordan	Cisgender woman	African American	Heterosexual	Spiritual	Senior	Garden Grove University
Tara	Cisgender woman	African American	Heterosexual	Other	Junior	Willow University
KiKi	Cisgender woman	African American	Bisexual	Christian	Junior	Boseman University
Faith	Unreported	Unreported	Unreported	Unreported	Senior	Boseman University
Aaliyah	Cisgender woman	African American	Bisexual	Christian	Junior	McIntosh Bay University
JW	Cisgender woman	African American	Bisexual	Baptist	Senior	McIntosh Bay University
Elle	Cisgender woman	African American	Heterosexual	Catholic	Junior	Witherspoon Woods University

As previously stated, there were six HWIs represented in this study (Table 3). For each institution, the table below provides a pseudonym that will be used throughout the

study, an approximation of the number of undergraduate students, an approximation of the percentage of White students, and the region the campus is in. All but one of the institutions in the study is a public institution. Witherspoon Woods is the one private institution represented in the study. The table below describes that all but one of the institutions in the study are also in the southeast region. The institution's geographical region is important to note as the region's history, demographics, politics, economy, and culture have an impact on the institution's policies and campus culture.

Table 3
Overview of Institutions

<i>Name</i>	<i>Approximate Undergraduate Population</i>	<i>Approximate Percentage of White Students</i>	<i>Region</i>
Big Mountain State University	19,000	81%	Midwest
Garden Grove University	19,800	60%	Southeast
Willow University	31,000	70%	Southeast
Boseman University	18,500	80%	Southeast
McIntosh Bay University	14,000	62%	Southeast
Witherspoon Woods University	5,447	64%	Southeast

Participant Descriptions

Below are brief descriptions of each participant to provide some additional context on the sample.

Uniqua (she/her) is a senior from a large urban area in the Midwest. She attends a large public institution in the Midwest approximately a five-hour drive from her hometown. She is a political science major with a minor in public administration and

legal studies. Uniqua was the only student in the sample who was not currently an RA but had served in the RA role last year.

John (he/him) is a senior majoring in exercise and sports science. He is looking to go to pharmacy school after getting his undergraduate degree. John is a student at a large research university in the southeast about two hours from his hometown. He is a third-year RA in a large residence hall of first-year students. John is the only man in the sample.

Semira (she/her) is a junior student attending the same institution as John. She is studying information science and biology. She is in her first year as an RA and works in an apartment-style building with primarily upper-class-level students.

Jordan (she/her) is a senior student also attending the large public research institution that Semira and John attend in the southeast. Semira is a double major in American studies and history. She was a high school athlete and discovered a passion and talent for spoken word in college. She is in her second year as an RA in a building of first-year students.

Tara (she/her) attends a public land-grant research university in the Midwest. She is a junior in her first year as an RA. In fact, she had only been in the role for about a month at the time of her initial interview. She is majoring in psychology with a minor in biology. Tara plans to go to medical school after graduation. She is an RA in the oldest building on campus.

KiKi (she/her) is a junior at a public institution in her home state in the southeast. KiKi has a parent in the military and is a child development major hoping to be an

OBGYN in the future. She is in her first year as an RA in a building with both upper-level and first-year students.

Faith (she/her) attends the same public institution as KiKi. She is a senior student graduating in the same semester we held her interviews. Faith is majoring in art and visual culture with a concentration in art history. She is planning to go to graduate school for library science after graduating. Faith is in her third year as an RA. Faith also shared that she identifies as Queer and has autism.

Aaliyah (she/her) is a health science major with a passion for studying and educating on reproductive health. She attends a regional public institution in the southeast. She has a passion for community service and is in her second year as an RA, primarily working with first-year students.

JW (she/her) comes from a military family and says she has lived everywhere. She was born in Germany and has lived in Florida most recently. She is a criminal justice major with a minor in Spanish. She is in her first year as an RA at a regional public institution in the southeast.

Elle (she/her) is a junior majoring in communications with a concentration in public advocacy. She is also doing a minor in journalism and hopes to go to law school after graduation. She was already busy studying for the LSAT. Elle is very involved on her campus. In addition to being an RA, she is a cheerleader, has a campus radio show, is a tour guide, and works at the library and for the engineering department. She is in her second year as an RA at the private research university in the southeast that she attends.

Findings

The remainder of the chapter will cover the five themes that I named after completing the data analysis: (1) Compelled, (2) Isolated, (3) Stereotyped, (4) Exploited, and (5) Underrepresented. Examples from the participants' photovoice images and interview data will be included throughout the chapter to give context to each theme.

Compelled: “It’s something I’d enjoy doing and I’d get paid really well”

One of the initial findings I constructed from the data came from my initial interview with participants where they discussed why they decided to become an RA and also what keeps them in the position. I learned from participants some of the core reasons that Black students are compelled to become RAs include (1) the financial benefit, (2) gaining leadership and career skills, and (3) wanting to give back or serve students.

The financial benefit of being an RA, which varies by institution, but typically consists of one or more of the following: free or reduced housing costs (typically in a single room in the residence hall), a stipend, and a meal plan, was a major motivator for Black students to pursue the RA role. When asked why she decided to be an RA, Jordan shared:

So, first and foremost my parents really wanted me to be one, just to alleviate the housing pressure in paying for housing and this and that. I was like “Alright, I’ll have to go for the team. I’ll do it, I’ll do it [laughs].”

Another participant, Semira, also talked about the financial compensation being a major motivator that compelled them to apply: “The pay was really nice. I was like I could really use that [laugh]...It’s something I’d enjoy doing and I’d get paid really well. So, I’m like, why not?”

Financial compensation for each participant looked different, but each participant had some type of housing benefit, usually, the position covered the cost of their room. The room type and accommodations seemed to vary a good deal, so some participants spoke highly of their assigned rooms, while others felt like they were not given the room or building they would have self-selected. For example, Elle described her room as “the slave quarters because there was a teeny, tiny, it wasn’t even a window...it had no sink, and it had no window...and then you aren’t at ground level.” Some participants used the RA position to have a spot reserved for them in on-campus housing. KiKi talked about how becoming an RA helped her secure a housing assignment on her campus where the demand for housing is high and there was a chance that she would not get a room on campus if not for applying for a position. There were varying comments from participants on whether the financial benefits of the position were worth it, but for many of them, it was a strong factor for participants to pursue and return to the RA role.

Several participants mentioned having to have second jobs to be able to make ends meet. Not all participants were able to seek outside employment as a stipulation of their RA job agreement. JW was one of those participants that could not hold a second job, and she spoke about her struggle to make do with the compensation she receives. She mentioned that she and other colleagues were working to advocate for their department to consider giving them a meal plan and some money to use towards laundry. She said the following,

We literally do all this stuff for our residents. We have to deal with crisis management, all this other stuff, and our own mental health as well. But then how do you expect us to have good mental health if we're not really eating well, we're

not sleeping? And then life happens where obviously family stuff

happens...Financially. It's just like how do you expect us to live?

Most of the participants mentioned the financial strain that often drove them to continue being an RA, and many of them discussed needing to find additional streams of income. Some participants talked about the position alleviating a financial burden from their parents and families, and that was a reason why they continued in the role, even when they might not have wanted to.

While compensation was mentioned by about half of the participants as a consideration to apply for the position, each participant that responded in this way also shared at least one other reason they chose to apply. One of the reasons that came up for several participants was how they perceived the RA position would enhance their leadership or transferrable skills and make them more prepared for their future careers. Uniqua spoke to the compensation as a draw but also talked about knowing how well the position looks on a resume to future employers:

I cannot lie, I originally was thinking about doing it because I knew of the benefits, but when I actually applied, I did it because I knew that it was an organization, that one, looked really well on a resume as a skill builder. It's also something that I realized would grow my...I guess it would just be a stepping stone or a personal growth mechanism to just get out of my usual community and into other people that wanted to do something on campus. And I think also because I just felt like I wanted to be able to do something outside of academics that was an org. more towards, I dunno, just leadership I guess.

Tara connected her future career goals in healthcare to the position: “I wanted to get more experience in a leadership position and seeing what it’s like when people are relying on me because I wanna go into the healthcare field, that’s gonna be a more common thing.” Similarly, KiKi connected the position to her aspirations of being a kindergarten teacher one day:

What made me become an RA is I think for me it’s good leadership skills. since wanting to be a kindergarten teacher, I’m gonna need that leadership skill and also being able to manage 40 plus people at one time, and also communication skills and also networking. I think networking is also a big thing period so if I need references or I need help with someone, I can come to someone in the housing department and talk to them about it or get a reference from them.

A final motivating factor mentioned by participants was the desire to serve students or to give back to students in some way. For example, Aaliyah shared:

So I originally decided to be an RA because I thought...it's a great way for mentoring individuals... So my first year was in [building name], which is primarily first-years, and my second year has also been in [building name], so I'm getting that one-on-one experience with first-years, and it's easier to mentor them and understand as well as helping them, which is an aspect that I love...So, it's easier to help them and understand them but also live with them and give them an experience that I wish I would've had my first year.

Aaliyah spoke to the experience of working with first-year students, a population that needs a resource and assistance navigating the college experience for the first time. She mentioned wanting to help fill a void for others that she felt as a first-year student. While

she didn't mention this lack of support coming from an RA specifically, she knew the role could be of strong benefit to students if done well. Another participant, John, discussed that an RA in his first year encouraged him to apply for the role so he could help be that resource for other students. John also mentioned working with first-year students and that compelling him to continue in the position. Over the years and in this study, it seems that both having a good RA experience and having a bad RA experience can serve as a reason to apply.

The impact of an RA can also be crucial to a student's development as evidenced by Faith's experience of her RA helping her discover her Queer identity:

I had a really good RA my freshman year, and she left halfway through to do her internship, and I had a second really great RA, and in fact, I'm actually Queer and they helped me discover that about myself, and I was just like, I wanna be that person for other people.

Faith talked about the "little moments" that she appreciates in her work with students where she knows she is making an impact on their experience, and how that makes the role worth it. The RA position can often be a thankless job, but participants did seem to notice these "little moments" that Faith referred to, and at times students did find a way to show their appreciation for their RA. The picture below is from Jordan and is a gift that a group of her residents got together to present her with to thank her for her work and care for them.



Figure 1: Jordan's "gift card" from residents

Jordan said that the residents knew that she loved buying different types of eyeglasses, so they worked together to do this gesture for her which she greatly appreciated. In thinking about what compels Black RAs to do the job, the money was not everything, but it mattered. Each participant was also able to articulate a more intrinsic reason that motivated them to pursue the position. The factors that compelled Black students to pursue the RA position became a theme that came up as part of how these students described their experience in the position, thus answering the first research question.

Isolated: “But yeah, definitely just feel isolated in this space sometimes”

A second theme to emerge from the data is one that I decided to title “Isolated.” Isolated seemed fitting because participants expressed that while they felt close to and valued by their peers, they often felt misunderstood by peers, supervisors, and residents, causing them to feel alone and different. This sense of isolation seems to be a result of participant perceptions that others held stereotypical views of Black culture, cultural differences, and that Black staff members were often underrepresented on their staff and in their departments.

One of the primary reasons I decided to describe this theme in this way is due to a picture submitted by one of the participants, Tara. Tara said the following about the image:

So we have our RA class. So this was before our RA class maybe a week or two ago.... So I included it for that reason just cause it was a funny moment. But then I also included, cause I was looking at it when you were saying what it feels like to be a Black RA, and I feel like that kind of describes it at times. Even though the RA that took this picture is White and we have a good relationship, I think a lot of times I do feel isolated as a Black student in general and also as an RA. And there's other Black RAs like I mentioned, and I don't know if that has to do with personally just feeling isolated, or just feeling isolated as a Black student. I'm not really sure. But yeah, definitely just feel isolated in this space sometimes.



Figure 2: Before RA Class

This image by Tara was one of the few that was more symbolic of a feeling rather than capturing or sharing a moment, a person, or an object. The image and her words speak to feeling isolated and maybe not being able to put your finger on why because you feel connected to peers but also at times feel different and apart from them rather than a part of them.

Other participants also spoke about this feeling of being connected but also feeling different. Isolated was not a word used specifically by other participants, but others evoked similar feelings and experiences. For example, Uniqua discussed how as the only Black member on her staff, she often grew tired of being around her White staff members and feeling some level of disconnection due to cultural differences and preferences. As a result, Uniqua brought her friends around the residence halls to events, so she had more of a familiar community around her:

So, like I said, I got tired of being around them a lot. So usually, I was always inviting my friends to come along, which I did ask [co-workers] like “hey is it OK? Is it OK if I invite the rest of my group my usual group?” ... I'll say it like this, it was really fun to be around them sometimes, and other times it was just like I don't even understand the references they make, or the jokes they make, or sometimes I'm just tired of listening to their music. I don't know. So, I would just try to surround myself with my friends so that I felt a little bit better about where I was.

Uniqua submitted the image below of the friend group of five other Black women that she referenced in the study as a source of support in helping her navigate her year as an RA on an all-White RA staff. This image is juxtaposed with another image she submitted

of her and the other RAs on her staff. She submitted two other photos of her staff, and as she described them in our interview, she mentioned feeling as though she “stood out like a sore thumb.” In this photo of her staff in particular, Uniqua highlighted not knowing how formal her co-workers would dress for a staff banquet, and when she came down to meet the group to go, she felt uncomfortable initially at how underdressed she looked in comparison to the others.



Figure 3: Uniqua’s friend group



Figure 4: Uniqua and her RA staff

Semira also commented on the dichotomy of feeling both connected and disconnected on her staff, where she is one of two Black females on a staff of 17.

I don’t know. Honestly, I don’t I feel like my staff is really tight knit but I feel like I have a hard time. I’m very close to a lot of them but with most of my White co-workers, I don’t connect with as well. There’s a few of them that are cool and we. We’ve worked together, we’ll talk and things like that. But a lot of them don’t really get to know me much. They just, they’ll say “hi” to me if they see me, but they won’t go past that. I don’t think we’ve ever had conversations. I haven’t had conversations with a lot of them really. And in the beginning of training and stuff

I kind of tried, but if I didn't, I don't know, I wouldn't put too much energy when I felt like it wasn't reciprocated or felt forced or they didn't wanna talk.

Participants expressed that while they typically felt close to and valued by their peers, they often felt misunderstood by or disconnected from peers that did not share the identity of being Black or a Person of Color. JW talked about her experience joining a student organization on campus that did not have any People of Color on the executive board, so she joined to be a role model for other Black and Brown students. However, once she started training for the role, as the only Black student on the board, she immediately did not feel comfortable with those in the organization that she was working with. Ultimately, she was told she could not continue in the position because others felt she was not doing her job when she felt she was doing it to the best of her ability and felt that she could not effectively communicate how she was feeling to her White counterparts on the board. That example was not specific to JW's experience as an RA but is an example of how isolating it can be for Black student leaders when they are the only or one of few that share that racial identity. JW also talked about feeling isolated on her RA staff because of her perception that the staff was divided, with about half of the staff being People of Color, and the other half presenting as White. JW shared, "And literally you go into our team meetings, and we're divided. It's basically segregated... White people on this side and all the People of Color, Black people on this side."



Figure 5: JW's staff conference room

JW submitted the picture above to represent the divide among her staff and the tension she described feeling when the staff goes into their weekly meetings. Though the room is empty in the picture, she described that the group is divided onto the sides of the conference table. I asked if others on staff noticed the divide, and she said that all the Black staff members noticed, but that she had never heard her White staff members mention noticing, and that her supervisors did not seem to care about it when it was specifically named and brought to their attention. JW seemed discouraged that her leadership was doing little to nothing to address the clear racial divide on their staff and the feelings of isolation it was causing for her and other Black peers who noticed.

Another participant, Elle, submitted a photo that she found symbolic of the racial divide on her campus.



Figure 6: A racial divide in a campus eatery

The photo was taken at a campus dining location where Elle was eating with a friend when they both noticed that the lines appeared segregated. While Elle recognized that the picture was more symbolic of segregation, the scene stood out to her as she thought about what it at times felt like to be a Black student on her campus. Elle and her friend also noted the fashion choices being different between the two groups, which she also felt was representative of her campus. Both Elle and the friend she was dining with felt the picture spoke to the nature of their HWI and was a good reflection of race relations on their campus, which Elle described in her words as more “petty racism” than blatant examples of racism. Elle acknowledged that blatant acts of racism exist, but the racism she was aware of most were more minor incidents or microaggressions.

The Isolated theme connects most to my findings about where participants find belonging and support, thus answering the second research question. Many participants found a sense of belonging and sought support with groups and in spaces where they did not feel the same sense of isolation. For example, JW found support in her campus multicultural center, where she felt “that’s actually where the Black professionals were...but as far as our whole campus, I feel like they preach diversity and inclusion but it’s not that way.” JW also described that she found her sense of belonging and support from another staff member who shares her identity as a Black woman. As a regular practice, JW and her co-worker do walk and talks, where they go around their area in the evening, catch up with each other, and talk about their experiences as staff members. Many of the participants talked about finding support with the other Black RAs on staff. Those relationships seemed to be critical for Black RAs to be able to talk about their experience with others they feel may relate more. Finding community with other Black RAs was often described as where participants found belonging. Those participants that had other Black RAs on their staff team seemed to value and find comfort in each other. These relationships seem key in Black RAs developing a sense of belonging in the position and in their residence hall communities.

Tara and JW both talked about their community front desks and staff offices as places where they felt they belonged and felt comfortable, in large part because other staff members that they felt close to, usually the other Black RAs on staff, would come to visit them during their shifts in the office. It became a meeting place of sorts for them to connect with each other and get their work done. Elle found support from her college cheer team. She noted that it also helped that there was another Black RA on the team,

and they were able to confide in each other. Several participants also talked about the support they receive from their campus' counseling and psychological services.

Participants seemed self-aware about their mental health needs and mentioned making use of this service. Student organizations for Black Students, like the Black Student Alliance/Union, were also named as places where Black RAs found support and a sense of belonging. Similarly, since most participants were women, campus women's centers were also named as a place where participants found belonging.

Outside of the campus, many participants talked about their family and friends being a source of support and a place where they feel safe and find belonging. Though these relationships are not connected to the campus, they are a critical part of participants thriving in their roles because they offer a great deal of support and help lessen those feelings of isolation, even if just slightly.

Stereotyped: "There's so much more to my personality than that."

The third theme is Stereotyped, which participants spoke a lot about and shared their experiences with dealing with microaggressions. As most of my participants were Black women, similar stereotypes came up, mainly the angry Black woman and Mammy stereotypes. In discussing herself and the two other RAs on her staff, Faith shares:

But I always say that the three of us encompassed three different stereotypes about Black women...One of us is the really mean Black girl and the other one of us is the exotic Black girl because she immigrated here from the Congo. And I'm like the Mammy, I mother people. That's what people feel like I am, and it's so frustrating because there's so much more to my personality than that.

Faith points out some serious stereotypes but also seemed to make light of them. While she seemed to find these labels ridiculous, she also acknowledged the ways in which she lived up to her stereotype in that she finds herself going above and beyond to care for her residents and her co-workers. Faith later shared that another stereotype she feels like she gets put on her is residents thinking she is mean and being afraid of her though she has given them no reason to feel that way. Semira also shared that she felt residents were intimidated by her and hesitant to talk to her, and she wasn't sure why that was other than those residents were usually White.

Faith went on to talk about how sometimes stereotypes work to her advantage. She found that she can command a room better than some of her counterparts.

They cannot command the room the way I command the room. And racism is bad, but that's great! [laughs] When I walked into one of her floor meetings by accident, I didn't know they were having one, and everyone was talking while she was talking, and then there was instant silence, and later she came back to me. She's like, "thanks for that." ... I realized afterwards...they probably don't see her as commanding as they see me, which is a stereotype, and it's bad, but it's like commanding a room is a much-needed skill.

Faith also shared that in trying to come off as less intimidating, she may have inadvertently led her staff members to think she was less competent than she is. She acknowledged that this is contradictory to the Mammy stereotype, not understanding why her peers would ask her for help if they thought she was incompetent. Aaliyah seemed to resonate with this, but with residents of the building rather than RA peers, as she discussed that residents will sometimes not listen to her when she's confronting them for

policy violations and will instead listen to a male counterpart that may be present with her. She referenced a specific incident where she and a White female coworker confronted a White male resident for being so intoxicated that he needed assistance from them. The next day he came to the desk where both Aaliyah and the White female RA that supported him were sitting, and he apologized, but only to the White RA even though Aaliyah was sitting right there as well. She felt hurt and confused that he only thought to apologize to her peer, but on the other hand, she also mentioned being used to the disrespect she received from residents. Semira also talked about feeling that residents didn't respect her and felt that she wasn't doing her job because she was Black. She felt that residents questioned her work ethic and thought she was lazy without having examples or reason to feel that way.

John was the only man represented in this study, and his view of the stereotypes he encounters was different than those of the Black women participants. John said, "I always kind of been perceived as the laidback guy, not in a bad way, but just he gets his stuff done, and then he's chill and stuff and relaxed most of the time." This is consistent with how Faith described her perceptions of Black women stereotypes versus stereotypes of Black men RAs:

I think that they're cool. They're the cool guys and any of the female-identifying RAs or the Black female-identifying RAs are bitches. People hate us. They're like they're so mean and scary, but like, oh my gosh, and this speaks to the overall experience of a Black man going to a PWI in general. But they're cool. They're cool and fun, we're mean and aggressive... I think my experience as a Black RA would be different if I was perceived as masculine... We're here fighting for our

lives, but it's fine. I imagine it's not easy making a generalization, but I just think they are having more fun than I am.

Faith's suspicion that Black men in the RA position are just seen as the cool guy is consistent with how John described how he feels stereotyped. John's interview felt noticeably different than the women in the study in terms of not having as many negative experiences with stereotypes and microaggressions to draw on. However, he did allude to how he at times feels that Black men in the position get the stereotype of being aggressive and dangerous. John recounted a story of a fellow Black man RA that ended up getting fired because he refused to have police search his room after students reported smelling marijuana coming from that RA's side of the hallway. John seemed to feel confused about why the incident played out that way since the RA told him afterward that he didn't have any drugs or anything in his room, he just didn't want his room searched by police. Another example John shared was how White residents, particularly White women residents, react to encountering him in the building.

I feel like we all get treated fairly, but I feel like it's still a stereotype there, not by the staff, but I can say residents and stuff. Here's an example. We're doing rounds and stuff and walk past...I would see White girls and stuff, and they just lock the door. They see you walking by. Just that type of things like that that happens.

The women in the study talked about being stereotyped as being mean and scary, and how residents at times avoided them, but it was different than how John described how he felt residents avoided him because they perceived him as dangerous or suspicious in some way.

Participants in the study all recognized and could recall specific incidents of experiencing microaggressions from their peers or residents. Aaliyah talked about the impacts of stereotyping and microaggressions on her experience during her first year in the RA position. She had an encounter with a coworker about the “angry Black woman” stereotype.

One of the main microaggressions, I wouldn't even say it was a microaggression. I feel like it was more of a disrespect. We kind of got in an argument, well I feel like it is a microaggression. They were demeaning. My sense, I don't like to get angry because I get the stereotype of becoming angry black woman. And people were like, “oh, why don't you just say anything?” And I was like, “no, because if I show any form of emotion that's outside of what you see now, you're going to perceive me that way.” And she was like, “well if I do, then technically you are.” And I was like, “that's microaggression.” I was like, “that's microaggression. You can't say stuff like that.” And she's like, “oh, why not?” And I was like, “I can say it because that's just that, that's me perceiving me as who I am, but you can't say that due to the fact that you've never been in that experience.”

Aaliyah also shared another incident with a co-worker where she had to ask them to stop playing a song at the desk that had the N-word in it. The co-worker gave her a hard time and did not understand why she wasn't ok with that song being played since it was just music. Aaliyah felt put in a position where she had to defend a boundary she put up and explain to that staff member why it wasn't ok for her to say the word even if singing a song, and that that was not the environment to play the song. At that point, Aaliyah's supervisor called a staff meeting where the group talked about microaggressions and

respecting each other's boundaries. She said the meeting was positive and that she appreciated the discussion. In her second interview, she also shared that this year she has been on her staff committee for diversity and inclusion and had the opportunity to present a session on microaggressions to the team. One of the things I found interesting was that Aaliyah shared the political context of how her state has changed policies that impact how universities can educate around diversity topics. Her department could still provide diversity education for staff, but it could not be required, so her peers were not mandated to stay for Aaliyah's presentation on microaggressions, but she was happy that they all chose to stay to learn more.

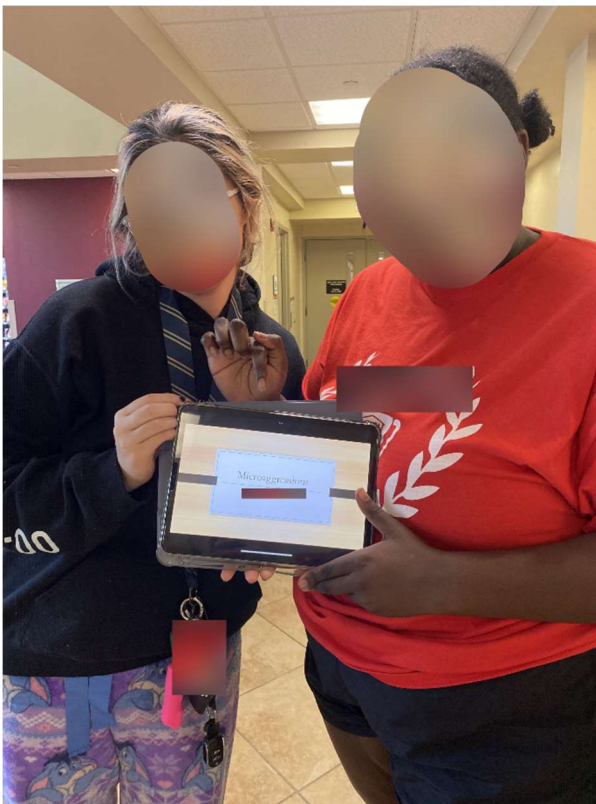


Figure 7: Aaliyah's microaggressions presentation

Aaliyah was also happy to report that not only did all her peers stay, but they were also engaged and had a great conversation about each other's social identities and how they experienced microaggressions.

Tara shared another example of a microaggression that she was not there for herself but impacted her experience and perception of one of her coworkers.

But there was an incident with a fellow RA within our complex who's also Black, and she had an incident with a fellow RA in our complex who's White. He's conservative, and they were playing this game called Cards Against Humanity... They were playing that and something came up about cotton, one of the cards had the term cotton on it, and he said while she was there and other people and other RAs on the scene... he said something like, "Yeah, it's what Black used to pick or what slaves used to pick" or something like that out loud in front of this Black woman and other RAs who are very much not like that.

Tara said the other RAs in the room were quick to intervene and call out that staff member in the moment, but the damage had been done as the Black staff member left the room upset and crying, and it left a lasting impact on the staff dynamic. The White staff member in the incident was allowed to continue working on the staff, which seemed to have left a sour taste in Tara's mouth because of the campus' emphasis on inclusion. She had concerns about what other inappropriate or offensive comments he may continue to make or may have made to residents he interacts with. She also raised concerns about how he got hired in the first place.

While most of the stereotyping led to participants experiencing microaggressions, there was an example from one participant of a more blatant act that was perceived as

being because of her race. Jordan told the story of working with a coworker who took the lead on purchasing programming supplies, like food for events. Whenever he purchased Jordan's supplies, he commonly gave her products that looked old or were expired. On one occasion, he didn't purchase her needed items at all. Jordan said there were no other examples of that happening with him and other staff members.

I told my supervisor about this guy who kept buying my stuff expired or old. And she basically was just like "Oh well it's almost the end of the year, so it doesn't really make sense to fire him now." So, I was like, but I feel like if he wasn't a White man and I wasn't a Black woman, if I was a White girl or a White boy going to her complaining about this guy, it would have been no questions asked. Whereas I'm telling you and I'm your hardest worker here and you're like, "Oh well just deal with it, girl."

Jordan's supervisor identifies as White, and she seemed to feel that both the RA she spoke about, and her supervisor did not see how she may be being treated differently because of her race. When Jordan confronted the RA about the shopping issues, he refused to talk to her and began avoiding her until she just stopped trying.

Exploited: "I think my supervisor sees me as a hard worker, but I think she uses that to exploit my hard work too."

Participants also spoke about the emotional labor they must expend due to the stereotypes they feel subjected to and the underrepresentation on their staff, and the actual labor they take on that goes above and beyond their expectations. Because of how participants spoke to this aspect of their experience, I decided to refer to this theme as Exploited, a word that one participant specifically used. Some participants shared that

they find that residents that live in the building will specifically seek them out as a Black RA when they have questions or to discuss their issues because they feel they will be better listened to or better received.

I always had other people's kids coming to me because they felt more comfortable talking to me because I was a Black woman. And when I say any type of kids, it could have been White, they could have been Indian, they could have been Hispanic, they could have been Black. It didn't really matter what racial identity they had, but they always felt very comfortable coming to me first... It was definitely because I was Black and I've had a lot of them say, I just felt more comfortable talking to you because you were Black... And so between me and the other Black girl we were handling a lot of different kids coming out of the woodworks who would be like “hey I know you're not my RA, but I feel more comfortable talking to you than my RA.” Or, I have one person come up to me and be, “I feel like you're gonna listen to me because I'm a Black woman, you're a Black woman, and when I just tried talking to my white RA who's a man, he didn't get what I was talking about.”

The Black women RAs of the study gave several examples of feeling as though they had to carry the weight on their staff in one way or another. For Jordan, who was quoted above, it was being sought out by residents more often than other RAs on staff because she was a Black woman. Jordan felt this was the case because she tended to come off as older and motherly, which appealed to the first-year students that would seek her counsel. KiKi also shared that she felt Black residents seek out any Black RAs in the building or that they have access to because they understand certain cultural nuances or may have

similar upbringings and experiences that White RAs cannot understand in the same way. She gave the specific example of White RAs not being able to offer as much understanding to Black students that may seek them out to discuss not feeling included. Inclusion at an HWI looks different for White students, so she felt that not being able to relate to the experience of being underrepresented would make them have less to bring to the conversation. Uniqua shared the experience of a White resident from another floor asking to speak specifically with her to help her understand the conflict she was having with her Black roommates.

Another way that KiKi shared she felt the burden of having to take on labor not expected of others was with her staff team as she felt that she was put in a position where she had to be the one to name issues and bring up concerns happening on their team:

Cuz almost all of us know what's going on, and I'm like I guess no one else is gonna say it, so I guess I'll just say it and I'll just look like a bad guy...Because everybody else is like non-confrontational and they don't wanna have bad blood with anybody...Being an RA, you're like a babysitter, a therapist, someone's parent, you're doing all this and then you have to go to a staff meeting and then address a situation...But overall it is very heavy and stressful.

KiKi felt called upon to address the conflict that arose on her staff. In her opinion, her supervisor and peers seemed to expect her to take on this role whenever difficult discussions about staff issues needed to be had.

The Mammy stereotype came up or came through my conversations with participants, with one participant naming it as such. Faith described feeling seen as a

caretaker and compared that to the Mammy stereotype as she discussed how she is often called upon by her staff to take the lead on handling needs and situations.

And it happens to me so often I end up being mothering to people, and I'm like, "I don't wanna be your mother!" I'm also an RA, and I also need help sometimes, but can't just like, I'm not always there to fix everyone's problems. It's really frustrating. It's really, really frustrating.

It clearly became frustrating to feel as though she had to do her job but also constantly help others do theirs.

Similarly, Aaliyah also felt the burden of having to take on helping others on staff or in the community when others would not step up. She did not specifically say that she felt it was because of her race, but she did point out in the photo below that the two staff members who stepped in to help one of the student organizations set up for their event were Black staff members. They were not responsible for helping set up the event but stepped in when they saw a need.



Figure 8: Setting up for an event

Aaliyah's willingness to step up in and help when she saw a need was attributed to her not being able to sit back and watch others struggle, especially when she was not doing anything else. Aaliyah said she found herself commonly playing that role on her team and noted that many others did not step up in those same ways. JW also discussed feeling as though she took on more than her peers as she would find herself regularly picking up extra shifts for others: "I sometimes take on probably, I don't wanna say more than I can handle, but I do a lot of things for people when I shouldn't." Similarly, to Aaliyah, JW also felt a sense of obligation to step up when there is a need. She attributed it to growing up in a military family and being raised to step up when it's needed. JW also shared that in the following semester, she wanted to be better about setting boundaries and not taking on more than her peers.

Jordan talked about how her supervisor knew she was a hard worker but then began exploiting that. When asked how she felt she was perceived by her supervisor, Jordan shared the following.

So, I think I'm perceived as what any Black woman is perceived as this just very strong character. I think my supervisor sees me as a hard worker, but I think she uses that to exploit my hard work too. So, I don't know if it's ever in good intentions. And I realized she loves when I do work, but she hates when I make critiques. So, I think she perceives me as a hard worker, but also another Black girl with attitude who has something to complain about from my coworkers.

I asked Jordan later in the interview to share more about what she meant when she said she felt her supervisor exploited her, and she went on to say that she was asked to do things that went beyond the scope of the position. For example, the supervisor asked her

on occasion to walk her dog for her. In the beginning, Jordan didn't find the asks odd and just thought it was part of the job, but then she realized she was the only one being asked to do these things:

She just constantly was just like, "oh, can you do this? Can you do this? Can you do this for me?" But what am I getting from this? What are you giving me other than a thank you? OK. But it was just doing a lot, a lot. And so, I felt she was and she was always asking me I guess, because I was the most reliable. But it was like, damn, can I have a break? Stop asking me and ask, you're taking away from me all the time but you're not pouring anything into me because I came to you needing help on a certain situation, you basically turned your hat.

Aaliyah also shared that she felt that only she and one other RA on staff were regularly being asked to take on additional work because they were trusted to do good work. She however did not seem to feel that her labor was being exploited in the same way that Jordan did.

Underrepresented: "They Sure as Hell are Using My Imagery"

Almost every participant at some point during the study commented on being the only or one of few Black RAs on their staff or Black students on their residence hall floor. One of the participants even shared that she felt that her staff had a specific racial quota for RA staff that the supervisor worked to hit each year. I found that underrepresentation was a major theme that emerged from the data, and even when participants could identify that it looked like their department tried to hire a more diverse staff, they were still missing the mark in some way. JW was one participant who discussed feeling this about her department:

I feel like in the past they probably got a lot of criticism about not being diverse. So they obviously were like, yeah, we're going to hire some more... But in reference to actually meeting needs and understanding and even just talking to us on an individual level, they don't do that.

She went on to say that some leadership in the department she works for will greet and be excited to see her White RA peers, and then not even greet the Black and Brown RAs. The only leader she felt did so was one of the Assistant Directors that is a Black man.

On Faith's campus, she shared that out of about 140 RAs, only 7 were Black. She felt fortunate that two of those RAs worked on staff with her. Faith also commented that as a student at an HWI, it is easy to not feel valued as a Black student but to feel taken advantage of when the campus needs representation. She found that her image was being used all over campus when she had no idea it would be used in that way: "...I don't think they appreciate me, but they sure as hell are using my imagery." She pointed out that the university had even put a picture of her face on the back of a campus bus, and she laughed at the irony she found in that. JW expressed similar concerns about feeling tokenized on her campus:

I feel like they use us as tokens to get other people to sign up for things. For example, the job that I was telling you about before they still put me on flyers that they post. So I feel like it's, we're a token and then they preach about diversity and equity and inclusion and all that, but in reality it's not like that at all.

Two of the participants submitted photos of their bulletin boards, which are often a requirement of the job where RAs are asked to make a display to help educate residents on a topic. Submitting these boards was meaningful to them because their bulletin boards

were designed to educate on Black History Month. Jordan shared that during Black History Month, only her board and one other staff member's board were made to highlight Black History Month. Similarly, Uniqua also submitted her bulletin board on Black History Month, and she was the only one to highlight the month on her staff.



Figure 9: Uniqua's Black History Month Bulletin Board

Uniqua said that doing the board was important to her because she knew no one else in the building was going to focus on the topic. She also talked about feeling like she had to represent herself and her race well and do everything right. Elle submitted a photo of a welcome sign she spotted in one of the first-year residence halls during their move-in.



Figure 10: Welcome sign for equality

This photo was meaningful for her to submit because she felt it described what it was like to be a Black RA at an HWI, “having to help other minority students navigate a PWI.”

Another aspect of underrepresentation came up when participants talked about their supervisor or the number of professional staff that identified as Black in their housing departments. Those participants that had Black supervisors routinely commented about how much of a positive impact that made on their experience. Faith had been an RA for three years and had a Black supervisor this year, which she said made a big difference and was refreshing for her.

Oh my gosh, it’s so much easier. Not easier as in I do less work or anything, but when I talk to my supervisor that it comes so naturally, he’s just so understanding, and he’s super cool. There’s, when you meet another Black person, there’s just an instant like “oh we get each other,” and I didn’t feel like I had to break barriers to be, to get at and have a good personal relationship with him. We literally, I go and I just talk. When I see him in the hallway, I talk to him. I feel like some of my other supervisors, I would avoid their eyes as I walk through the hallways.

This is in stark contrast to how JW spoke about her supervisor who she said identifies as a White man. She shared that her relationship with her supervisor is strained and that he has often canceled meetings with her and overall, not been very available. She said it was obvious that he did not want to be doing the job, at least not at that institution or under the circumstances. JW submitted the photo below of her supervisor's empty office as symbolic of his lack of presence for her.



Figure 11: JW's empty supervisor office

When speaking on why she chose to submit this photo, JW shared, "And literally when five o'clock hits when he is working, he's already out the door...So that was a picture of an empty office space to show that basically that he isn't there for us. He says that he is." Jordan also expressed concerns about her relationship with her supervisor that identifies as a White woman. On one occasion, Jordan had to give her supervisor feedback about

frustrations she was having with a co-worker. The supervisor responded by coming off upset that Jordan was coming off combative and making her feel bad about the job she was doing. Jordan expressed feeling that her concerns or issues were not taken seriously by her supervisor and were often just dismissed: “And all the people of color that's in the RA position, I feel like feel the same way. Why is it that when we go to our bosses, our problems are brushed off? But if it's a White woman or if it's a White woman crying, the world has to stop.” Most participants brought up the race of their supervisor and discussed ways that their supervisor’s racial identity impacted their experience, whether for the better or worse.

Having a Black supervisor was usually described as a more refreshing experience. Semira talked about how nice it was to have a Black supervisor. The image below is one Semira captured from her supervisor’s office. When she discussed the significance of the image, she shared that she took it because his office is a place where she feels comfortable as an RA.

So we were talking one day and we were kind of talking about being out of place or feeling confused about things... and then I was like, “You know what? At the end of the day, I think we’re always in the right place. Wherever you are, you’re always in the right place, and you just gotta make the best of that.” And then he was like, “Oh that’s an amazing quote! I’m gonna write that down on my board and look at it all the time.” And now whenever I’m working the desk, I’ll pass by his office and I’ll see, and then it’s just a nice reminder that I have someone that I could talk to.

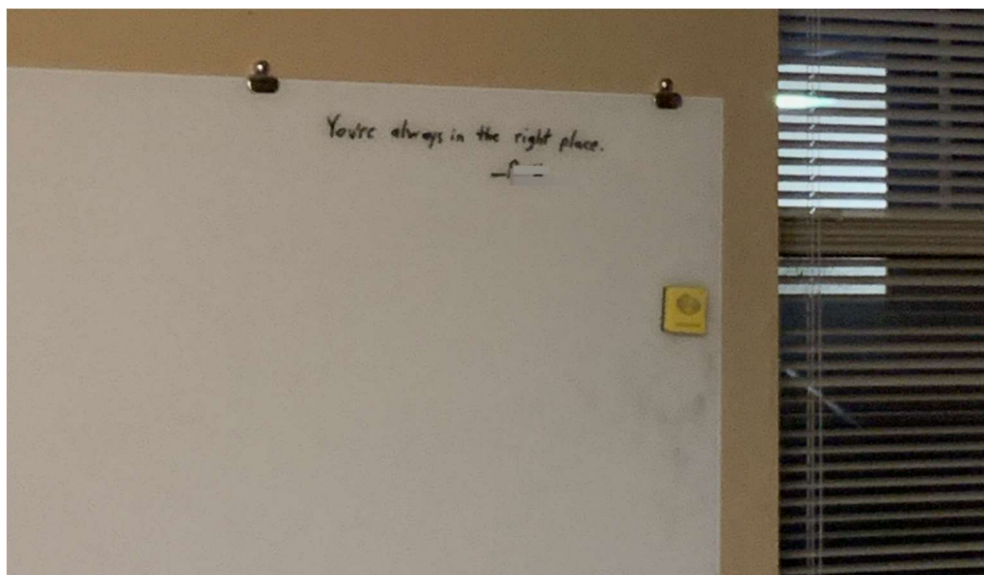


Figure 12: “You’re always in the right place.”

Each participant that shared that they had a Black supervisor talked about how much that increased their job satisfaction and made them feel a greater sense of belonging and support on the staff. Even when participants did not have a Black supervisor, they seemed keenly aware of whether there were Black leaders and professional staff in their departments. For several, they knew the Black professional staff members and may have seen them or interacted with them briefly, but they did not typically have a connection or relationship with them even though that desire to was there. One of the things that stuck out from Jordan’s interview was that she went around to Black professional staff during her first year as an RA to try and get one of them to recruit her as an RA on their staff for the following year. She was however returned to the same staff and supervisor.

There was a desire from participants to have more outreach and more representation of Black professional staff members in their department. One participant stood out in this area because there was a Black staff member that did attempt to reach

out and provide a space for the Black RAs on their campus to come together. Uniqua shared the following image and words about her experience.



Figure 13: Uniqua and other Black RAs

So this is a picture of all the Blacks [RAs] on our entire campus, which is really sad because we have, I wanna say...there is a hundred and something total RAs on our campus, and this picture is of the Black RAs, which is like I said, kind of sad, but this was our closing dinner...I wanted the research to include the fact that we did always try to get together and we did have our own group chat and we utilized our group chat to the max.

When I asked about how the group came together, Uniqua referenced one staff member, who was a graduate student staff member at the time, who organized the group and encouraged them to get and stay connected with each other. The staff member was a Black woman, and Uniqua shared the following about that staff member's role in that group.

I feel like she just kind of took on that role. No one assigned her that role, no one made her do those things. She kind of just stood up and was like, I want us Black people, since we're such a small group, to be able to have a community outside of this bigger community to feel supported. And it was really nice.

There were similar comments and feelings from participants like Aaliyah who had a supervisor that does not identify as Black but does identify as a Person of Color. There was still a sense of familiarity and feeling more comfortable for participants that had supervisors that identify as a Person of Color. Tara was an outlier in this as she shared that her supervisor is a Latino man, but because he was not open to discussing his social identities with the staff, she felt that in some ways her experience would be the same as if she had a White supervisor and didn't talk about those things or try to relate with each other as People of Color. She seemed to find it strange that he would not broach conversations around diversity and inclusion with the staff.

How participants talked about their supervisors who identify as Black or People of Color was different than those that had White supervisors. Jordan suggested a creative solution to help better the experiences Black RAs have with supervision by considering having two supervisors, one being a supervisor that identifies as a Person of Color.

I don't even wanna waste my time talking about a White woman that I don't care for...Because I think if I did have a Black (supervisor), if I don't feel comfortable talking to my boss, I could go to this other boss that I have...Even if I did have a problem, why in the hell would I talk to you about it? So I feel like if I had another person, even if they weren't technically Black, they could be Indian, they could be Hispanic, but as long as I could talk to somebody else who's in their

same building, who's seen the dynamics, and I know they're not just here for the paycheck.

The participant went on to talk about how she didn't feel she could speak up or criticize her supervisor because of the fear of losing her job. Overall, the representation of peers, professional staff, and supervisors matters for the experiences of Black RAs and aids in their development of a sense of belonging.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I described the findings that emerged from exploring the images and interviews of my participants. The findings brought out five themes that describe how Black RAs seem to experience the position at HWIs. The five themes I described are: (1) Compelled, which looks at why these students sought out and stay in the RA position, (2) Isolated, which describes the common feeling of feeling a disconnect with staff and residents, (3) Stereotyped, a common experience for Black RAs, (4) Exploited, which describes both the actual and emotional labor that participants described taking on, and (5) Underrepresented, which describes how participants experienced being the sole or one of few Black RAs on their staff or in their departments. In summary, I described what I found to be key experiences and characteristics that describe the phenomena of being a Black RA at an HWI.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The previous chapter presented the findings of this study and provided powerful images, anecdotes, and stories from the participants' experiences as Black students and RAs on their HWI campus. This chapter will review those findings and discuss how they relate to my research questions and the literature reviewed in chapter two. Following this discussion of the findings, I will provide implications and recommendations for higher education practice, recommendations for future research, and present the limitations of the study. Finally, I will share my reflections on the study and how the research informed and evolved my perspective.

Summary of the Study

This study explores the phenomenon of being a Black student and RA at an HWI, identifying common themes that describe the experience for this population of students.

The research questions for the study are:

1. How do Black undergraduate students at HWIs experience the RA role?
2. How do Black undergraduate RAs at HWIs describe experiencing a sense of belonging as RAs and students on their campus?

Strayhorn's (2018) Model of Sense of Belonging was utilized to explore the experiences of Black RAs and their sense of belonging, looking specifically at where these students find sources of support and community to perform their role and serve students while working through their own experiences of being a minoritized student on their campus.

Discussion of Findings

After analyzing the data, I determined five themes that address the research questions and that stood out from the images captured and stories shared by participants.

These five themes are: (1) Compelled, which looks at why these students sought out and stayed in the RA position; (2) Isolated, which describes Black RAs feeling connected but also disconnected to their peers; (3) Stereotyped, which refers to the labels and microaggressions Black RAs commonly experienced; (4) Exploited, which relates to how Black RAs often have to expend more emotional and actual labor in their roles; and lastly, (5) Underrepresented, which refers to both representation by peers and leadership in the departments Black RAs work for. These five themes all address my first research question and are descriptions of how participants described how they experience the RA role as a Black student at an HWI. As a phenomenological study, the goal of my findings is to address those common experiences of my sample that shape what it means to be a Black RA on an HWI campus, and while there may be differences in these experiences based on the type of and location of the institution, these findings seem to be five essential aspects of what Black undergraduate students in the RA role experience at HWIs. Four of these five themes (Isolated, Stereotyped, Exploited, and Underrepresented) all play a role in answering my second research question as they all connect to how the participants described their sense of belonging. There is a great deal of intersection between these themes, particularly Stereotyped, Exploited, and Isolated.

The themes found in this study came from patterns I found in the experiences of my participants, and while their individual experiences and stories are all different, I found that these five themes summarized the experience of being a Black RA at an HWI. Elements of these themes may have been described differently or come with different examples from each participant, but the interviews with students and their discussions of

the images they captured and submitted for this study all captured the essence of their experience in these ways.

As photovoice was used in this study, I thought of photography when I thought about how I developed the five themes for this study. I specifically thought of a Polaroid picture developing, which often takes a bit of time for the picture to become clear and emerge. With each interview and each participant, an image of the essence and experience of these students became clearer. The five themes I found in this study create an image of the Black RA experience at an HWI. And while there is certainly joy and pride in the experience, there are also struggles and barriers that require consideration from educational leaders and professionals. My hope with this chapter is to describe the image captured of these students' collective experience and why it matters in a way that provides the context and understanding needed to compel action from those that can influence improving the experiences of Black students in the RA role.

Compelled: “It’s something I’d enjoy doing and I’d get paid really well”

The first theme I found from participants explores why these students sought out and stay in the RA position. This theme answers my first research question as it relates to an aspect of how Black students experience the RA role. This theme was essential in the conversations with my participants when asked to talk about why they originally became RAs and to discuss what keeps them as RAs. These students felt compelled to be RAs and stay in the position in ways that benefited them, whether monetarily or through skill-building, and also in ways that allowed them to help or mentor others. I felt Compelled was a fitting description of this theme because it speaks to the sense of duty or obligation some participants expressed. Some participants felt compelled because their

compensation helped them afford college, and some felt compelled to be visible as a Black student leader for other Black and Brown students. For most of the participants though, it was not one or the other, but both types of reasons that compelled them.

Previous studies on the RA position have explored why students seek out these roles (Boone, 2018; Langston, 2020; Wilson, 2014). For example, Wilson (2014) conducted a study on a sample of RAs and found that their primary motivations for pursuing the RA role were housing benefits and their financial compensation. This is consistent with my findings as well, but there were additional reasons participants of this study articulated. These reasons included a combination of the financial benefit of being an RA, gaining leadership and career skills, and a desire to give back and serve students. Almost all participants said that a major factor that led them to apply for the RA role was the financial benefits that come with the position, which typically include room and board and a stipend. This varies from institution to institution, and while each participant did not share the specifics of their compensation package, several talked about what they received, but more notably what they don't receive and wished they did or felt they deserved.

Many of the participants seemed nervous to admit that they do the RA job for the financial benefit and felt like that was not the right answer even though it was the honest answer. It is not surprising that with the cost of higher education on the rise, that students would choose opportunities with compensation in mind. The reality is that finances do play a role for college students, and often more of a role for marginalized students, but from my experience, many student affairs professionals continue to preach to student employees about how if they are applying for the RA job for the financial compensation,

that that is not the right reason, and that it should be more about the intrinsic benefits of the position. It was clear from the participants that both things are true, and that they were invested in the position for both the extrinsic and intrinsic gains.

Literature found that financial compensation is a motivating factor for RAs to pursue the job (Boone, 2018; Langston, 2020; Wilson, 2014). Langston (2020) looked specifically at Black men serving in the RA role and found that financial support was the primary reason for his participants to consider the position. Those participants shared that the only way they could afford to live on campus was to take on the RA position. My study participants were primarily Black women, and they articulated similar reasons as the Black men in Langston's study (2020). Participants spoke specifically about how it helped them or their parents continue to afford to live on campus.

While the financial compensation did compel Black RAs, it was never just that. Participants all articulated at least one other reason that the position was meaningful and worth it for them. One of those reasons was that participants could see how the RA position would allow them to develop leadership skills and transferrable skills that they could apply to their future career pursuits. Ketchum (1988) found that Black RAs were motivated to apply because the position looked good on a resume. While this was true for the participants in my study, it went further than just being able to include a bullet on a resume. The students who spoke about developing transferrable skills seemed to have a keen understanding and awareness of how the RA position was setting them up for success and allowing them to practice skills that they knew they would need in the future. Participants talked about leading large groups of people, working with a team, working with diverse individuals, and communication as skills they knew they would take with

them in their life beyond the RA role. This is consistent with a study by Benjamin and Davis (2016) that found that RAs learned five key things through the job: interpersonal skills, helping skills, problem-solving, teamwork, and self-efficacy. Participants could identify these skills and how they will be helpful to them after graduation.

Ketchum (1988) also found that White RAs were most motivated by their desire to work with people. The participants in my study also expressed a desire to work with people, but it seemed to go beyond just wanting to work with people and was described more as a desire to be a role model to students or to be of service to students. Roland and Agosto (2017) also described how Black women RAs saw themselves as being of service and building relationships with students. While my study was not designed to have predominantly women-identifying participants, this may explain why this finding is consistent with Roland and Agosto (2017). This finding is a bit different than what Ketchum (1988) found because I found that Black students are motivated by skill-building and looking good on a resume, but also were motivated by wanting to connect with students. Participants talked about wanting to be role models or a mentor for students, particularly those participants that worked with first-year students.

Isolated: “But yeah, definitely just feel isolated in this space sometimes”

Feeling isolated was one of the more interesting themes that came out of the study, and this theme answers both research questions. Feeling isolated at times seemed to be a common experience for participants, and often when discussing feeling isolated there were discussions of where the students do find support or what people or places help them feel less isolated. This theme was interesting because while students felt isolated, some participants also talked about still feeling connected with their staff

members. They seemed to recognize the feeling of not always feeling as though they belong, but not feeling completely disconnected as they were having common experiences with their peers and other students. While some cultural differences and preferences made them feel different, the RA position also seemed to connect them still to some extent with their peers.

The Isolated theme connected back to literature on the experiences of Black RAs, RAs of other marginalized identities, and Black students living in the residence halls (Harper et al., 2011; Hardaway, 2020; Harwood et al., 2012; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017; Jagers & Iverson, 2012; Paladino et al., 2005; Boettcher et al., 2019). The primary reason that participants felt some level of disconnection seemed to be because of cultural differences and preferences that they held and how they could not relate to the preferences of their White peers (Jagers & Iverson, 2012). Participants talked about feeling like there were differences in how they communicated and in the things that they liked to do, watch, and listen to. These differences became draining at times for participants, and they often had to retreat to being around those that shared those interests or could relate to those cultural norms. This evolved into discussions about where participants describe finding support. One of the participants, Uniqua, was a good example of this as she regularly brought her group of Black women friends to events in the residence hall she worked in so she had a familiar group to keep her company. She mentioned enjoying their presence and relying on them to be present with her even though they did not live in that residence hall.

Hardaway (2020) talked about the importance of Black RAs creating support networks and counterspaces with other Black students. This was a coping strategy

utilized by the RAs in my study who frequently talked about leaning on their relationships with other Black RAs or their Black friend groups. Relationships with other Black RAs stood out as a key factor for the participants to feel as though they belonged. Harper et al. (2011) found that one reason Black RAs feel more isolated in their positions is because they are usually underrepresented on their individual staff team and in their department. Underrepresentation emerged as its own theme but connects to what helps create this sense of “otherness” that leads to feelings of isolation. Hardaway (2020) named this phenomenon the “outsider within,” which seems to accurately describe my participants feeling this sense of being connected and disconnected simultaneously. This isolation seemed to be a root cause that led to Black RAs seeking out supportive spaces that helped them develop their sense of belonging. For some, it was a friend group, for some other Black RAs, and for others, it was through student organizations or campus offices that were created to serve Black students.

Stereotyped: “There’s so much more to my personality than that.”

The third theme, Stereotyped, was one of the most powerful themes to discuss with the participants of this study. With nine of the participants identifying as women, this theme was the one where the Black man that participated was certainly the outlier, experiencing completely different stereotypes than the women. Existing literature on Black RAs has been done with a sample of Black women or Black men, and some of the gendered differences in their experiences came through in my findings as well (Hardaway, 2020; Roland & Agosto, 2017; Brown, 2020; Harper et al., 2011). Women in the study felt that they were stereotyped as being scary and mean, the angry Black woman, or the Mammy. When one participant specifically used the word Mammy to

describe the stereotype she felt she is most subjected to, it reminded me of Hardaway's (2020) study entitled, *"I'm not your mammy": Unearthing the racially gendered experiences of undergraduate black women resident assistants at predominantly white institutions*. One of the participants of the Hardaway (2020) study shared,

Being a Black woman is such an individual, unique experience that often shapes a majority of our experiences throughout our entire lives. Part of this individual experience is created by the stereotypes that surround the image of Black women. For example, being loud, ratchet, unambitious and the caretakers, like Aunt Jemima's. So a lot of the time as a Black woman who does not subscribe to these stereotypes, a lot of my energy is spent combating them through my actions, how I talk and I conduct myself in public spaces, specifically public spaces where other Black women aren't present. This combat has also translated into the residential life experience (p. 7).

The quote above felt like it could have been a quote from one of my participants who expressed similar feelings and struggles of being seen as the caretaker or Mammy as they felt seen as more nurturing and supportive than other RAs, thus making Black women RAs sought out more often by residents and their peers for support and assistance. Mammy as a racial caricature represents what White America during the Jim Crow wanted the world to believe about slavery by showing this example of a Black woman who was happy to be loyal and of service (Hall, 1997). There seemed to be an expectation from community members in the residence halls that Black women in the RA role were better suited and more willing to be caretakers when needed by those around them. This is also resonant with how Harley (2008) described Black women faculty at

HWIs who are often put in the position of being caretakers for others and more often fall into roles taking on more service than other faculty members. It is important to recognize how these historical stereotypes that originated during slavery continue to show up and impact the experiences of Black women at HWIs. The RAs of this study clearly felt the impacts, and these stereotypes often led to these women taking on more emotional and actual labor out of service or obligation to their roles. And while the RA role at times does require students to be able to show care for the students they serve, the expectation for Black women seemed to be more extreme than what was expected of other RAs.

Some participants also shared how they were labeled as lazy or not having a good work ethic. To combat this, Black women again often take on more labor and fall into the Superwoman stereotype discussed in the literature (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). There was no evidence Black staff members were not doing their jobs adequately as was perceived by others. I found that Black RAs often take on extra work and feel obligated to step up more than their White peers. This finding comes out in the Exploited theme and is consistent with Harper et al. (2011) who found that because Black RAs were racially stereotyped as being incompetent, they tried to work harder than their White peers to dispel the stereotype. The stereotypes of Black women are deeply connected to the Exploited theme finding of this study as the way Black women feel perceived or perceive themselves seems to have a direct impact on the amount of labor put on them or that they take on as a result. Participants grappled with some serious and painful stereotypes whose historical significance dates back to slavery and yet continue to be images used by Black students to describe how they feel they are perceived.

Harper et al. (2011) looked specifically at Black men in the RA role and how stereotypes impact their work ethic. My study found that Black women in the RA role also seem to feel the pressure to work harder. Some participants expressed wanting to be seen as working hard and doing their jobs well as a reason they step up and take on responsibility in their roles, but others discussed taking on more as being more of a natural tendency or how they were raised by their families and communities. This seems to be another gendered difference between how women and men respond to feeling as though they are seen as inadequate.

Another gendered difference that emerged in the study is the differences in which Black women were stereotyped and Black men were stereotyped as RAs (Hardaway, 2020; Harper et al., 2011; Roland & Agosto, 2017). There was only one man that participated in my study, but his experience came through differently than the women in the study, particularly in this theme. The women in the study seemed aware of this difference in stereotypes as well. Black women in the RA role were seen as intimidating, strict, and mean, but Black men were seen as being relaxed and the cool RA. One of the participants named that at times, this stereotype had advantages for her as a Black woman RA, because she can effectively command control of a room or bring a room to order when needed better than some of her White women RA counterparts. That same participant said that while Black women are “out here fighting for their lives,” Black men in the RA role and on HWI campuses in general, are admired for being cool and fun rather than mean and aggressive. She felt that Black men in the RA role get to have more fun with the position and have an easier time with peers and residents than she does because of these stereotypes. What she did not acknowledge though is how this

difference in how Black men in the RA role are perceived by peers made me think of how these students are perceived by their supervisors (Harper et al., 2011). Being the cool and fun RA by other students may lead to their supervisors perceiving them as not meeting job expectations. Harper et al. (2011) discussed how Black men in the RA position often experienced more scrutiny about their performance and less grace from White supervisors. There was a sense of fear among the Black men in the RA position of being seen as underperforming, and there may be a connection of being seen as laidback, which is a pro for other students but may be seen negatively by a supervisor (Harper et al., 2011)

Another stereotype that gets attributed to Black men is being dangerous and aggressive. John, the one Black man participant, though he feels he is seen as chill and cool more often, he was also aware that at times he was seen as being dangerous. He gave the example of White women residents locking their door when they saw him coming down the hallway performing rounds of the building, an expectation of his job. This is consistent with the literature on how Black men often experience living in the residence halls, where they are hyper-surveilled by staff and confronted differently about violating residence hall policies (Jaggers & Iverson, 2012; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017). While these studies were not specific to the RA position, they do speak to the added scrutiny Black men in HWI residence halls face related to how they are stereotyped.

When participants spoke about stereotypes, they also typically named microaggressions as something they experience. There were several examples of microaggressions committed against them by residents, supervisors, and peers, which is consistent with what Schuster and Stalker (2020) found. These microaggressions seemed

to come more from their peers than other groups and typically seemed to come out as a joke gone wrong or as an attempt to poke fun without realizing the harm and impact of their statements or actions. One of the examples that stood out to me in this area was from Tara, who shared a story about a game of Cards Against Humanity that went wrong when a White man RA commented on Black people and picking cotton. That RA got frustrated when confronted because he could not understand how it could be taken so seriously when they were just playing a game. That incident changed the staff dynamic for Tara's team and led her to question why there did not seem to be any consequences for that RA beyond having to make an apology that came off as insincere.

Exploited: “I think my supervisor sees me as a hard worker, but I think she uses that to exploit my hard work too.”

There is emotional labor expelled being a Black RA on a staff or in a community where they are underrepresented and experience stereotypes like those mentioned above. There is also actual labor Black RAs take on in being asked to go above and beyond their expectations or feeling like they must take on more to not be seen as lazy or incompetent (Hardaway, 2020; Harper et al., 2011). This led to RAs feeling exploited by their supervisors and peers. Participants feeling exploited for their labor helps answer both research questions. It was a part of the essence of their experience that emerged and often led to students not feeling supported by those they felt were exploiting their labor or talent.

Black women RAs felt they were sought out more by residents or felt they were put in a position where they had to speak up or volunteer more of their time to be helpful, which again speaks to the Mammy stereotype (Hardaway, 2020; Reynolds-Dobbs, 2008).

Black women RAs were looked at to take lead or handle things, particularly when it came to bringing up challenging topics or confronting issues on staff. Being put in this position only furthers the angry Black woman and Mammy stereotypes, which only furthers the feelings of isolation when peers then shy away from Black staff members after feeling called out or being confronted. The participants shared some examples of times when confronting staff drama and issues should have been brought up and managed by supervisors, but Black women in the RA role found themselves having to take on this leadership role, sometimes at the detriment of how they were perceived on their staff or by their supervisor, and always at the detriment to their stress. These Black women in the RA role were also taking on this additional labor while feeling dispensable to the leadership of the departments they worked for (Hardaway, 2020). Hardaway's (2020) findings show that Black women RAs experience a lot of anxiety not knowing how they will be perceived or unsure of what to expect in their majority-White communities. This anxiety and constant state of worry created a significant amount of physical, emotional, and psychological stress (Hardaway, 2020).

Mental health was brought up by several participants who expressed how hard and heavy the RA position can be at times, which seems to be exacerbated when RAs also have one or more minoritized identity. McLaughlin (2018) described the RA position as one conducive to stress and burnout because the role has evolved to include more responsibilities and often includes work that can be emotionally draining. RAs experiencing burnout may choose to return to the position because they want to continue to receive the compensation and benefits of the position (Stoner, 2017). For some RAs the thought of finding a job and housing was more draining than the thought of

continuing in the role, so RAs continue to work positions that impact their well-being (Stoner, 2017). Several participants mentioned being in therapy or being connected to their counseling center on campus. Several participants also recommended that housing departments put more emphasis and resources towards providing support in this area for RAs. Taking on emotional labor takes a toll on the well-being of RAs. The RAs in this study seem to have developed a sense of belonging and found their support networks, but those who may not have this when they start the position or early in their tenure may struggle to manage the demands of the RA position, and the added demands of being a Black RA.

Participants also talked about how they find themselves doing extra work either because they felt obligated to step up when no one else seemed to be doing so, or because they wanted to be seen as pulling their weight. Participants spoke about how it was frustrating to them that they were willing to help others, but that they did not always receive that level of help from their peers in return. It seemed noticeable to several participants that the Black and Brown staff members were often the ones volunteering to take on extra or stepping up to help others. I also found that at some point, participants may reach a breaking point where they realize their hard work may be being exploited by their peers or supervisors. Jordan gave a good example of this when she had to set a boundary with her supervisor when she realized she was being asked to do tasks that go beyond the scope of the position, like being asked to walk her supervisor's dog, a task other RAs were not being asked to do. It is a common saying that in housing and residence life when you do good work you are rewarded with more work. This seems to be the case with the participants of my study, thus making them feel exploited.

Previous research on Black RAs did not discuss labor or exploitation as a finding in this way. Harper et al. (2011) did discuss that Black men in the RA role often feel they must work harder to avoid being perceived as incompetent by peers and supervisors. This is a bit different than how doing extra labor was described by participants in my study. While some participants in my study talked about how they are perceived as being lazy or not doing the job effectively, most talked about stepping up to fill in the gaps when others did not answer the call. This may be because of the Mammy stereotype and being socialized to be a caretaker or to just handle the needed things around them. This also may speak to the natural tendency for others to let Black women handle things or do the dirty work to fix things, which harkens back to the Sapphire image (Reynolds-Dobbs, 2008). The Sapphire was seen as being tough and aggressive enough to do the hard work. This theme made me think of fictional characters like Olivia Pope from the popular tv show *Scandal*, whose job was to “fix” the scandals and transgressions of powerful political figures. Olivia was often the only Black face you would see in some of the rooms or situations she had to manage, but she was constantly called on to fix things for others. It could be seen as not having a true seat at the table beyond being expected to play a role.

Underrepresented: “They Sure as Hell are Using My Imagery”

The final theme I found is Underrepresented, which connects to the Isolated, Stereotyped, and Exploited theme as it seems to be part of what leads to those themes for Black RAs. This theme answers the first research question as being underrepresented was the most common experience found among participants. Participants were often the only or one of the few Black RAs on their staff or Black students on their floor (Boettcher et

al., 2019; Bleikamp et al., 2015; Brown, 2020; Harper et al., 2011; Paladino et al., 2005). When asked to describe a bit about their floor or their community of residents, often one of the descriptions involved the racial makeup of their residents, with most participants being able to give a specific quantity of how many Black students also lived on their floor. Harper et al. (2011) found that it was tiring for Black RAs in their study to navigate the experience of being the only or one of few and to regularly feel the burden of having to represent their race. This came through when my participants talked about their need to represent their culture and history through things like bulletin boards, which are passive displays to educate their peers and show pride in their heritage. Participants felt obligated to perform this labor to educate their peers because they knew if they did not take that initiative, no one else in the residence hall would do it. This finding also seemed consistent with Hotchkins and Dancy's (2017) finding that Black students in the residence halls often feel "absent while present" as they are not only well-represented in the diversity of the community, but they also are not represented when they look around at the art, staffing, or programming that takes place in the residence hall. Participants discussed the importance of their visibility as Black RAs and how they hoped their presence inspired other Black students to feel the RA position and other leadership positions on campus were obtainable. Several participants spoke about how they do what they can to encourage and support other Black students in their application process to become RAs. One participant even shared that she speaks highly of her experience to encourage prospective Black applicants, but then downplays it to White students because she would like to see Black students have more opportunities with the RA role.

When speaking on underrepresentation, another interesting theme came from a couple of the participants who talked specifically about how their institutions used their images across campus to represent diversity, making them feel tokenized and exploited when the campus needs to show a Black face. Participants mentioned seeing their faces on flyers, digital screens, billboards, and campus buses that they had no idea they would be featured on. JW, whose face continues to be featured on a department's flyer though she is no longer connected to that department, discussed that this is the difference between what the university wants people to see and what the reality is.

Participants also talked about the underrepresentation of Black professional staff and leadership in their housing departments. This was a major theme that participants spoke about. I found that those participants that had supervisors that identified as Black or as a Person of Color commented about how much of a positive impact that made on their experience, but even if they had a Black supervisor, they still were aware that that professional staff member may be the only or one of few and having similar experiences that they are having in terms of feeling underrepresented. Boettcher et al. (2019) found that Students of Color needed to have connections with residential staff members that shared their identity or an otherwise minoritized identity to feel supported. In their study, the students found connections with the custodial staff of their communities who were more likely to share similar racial identities than other professional staff in their buildings. The participants' connections with custodial staff members gave them an increased sense of safety and belonging on campus (Boettcher et al., 2019). While no participants in my study talked about custodial staff, they were able to identify and name Black or Brown staff members which made them feel supported. At times, the

participants may not even have had a personal relationship or interactions with those professional staff members that shared their identity, but they seemed to feel safer and more comfortable knowing that they were there. A couple of the participants even mentioned seeking them out to try and get hired on their staff the following year. One of the participants, Uniqua, stood out because her experience as an RA involved a Black professional staff member who was intentional about bringing the other Black RAs across campus together to have them form a community and support network amongst each other. When she told me about this staff member, I was thankful that she had that staff member perform this outreach for her, but I also wondered how other participants' experiences and sense of belonging may have looked differently if they had a Black staff member do something similar. It was also notable that the Black staff member who organized this group was a graduate student staff member, a Black woman, and not a member of the department's senior leadership. This again may be an example of how labor is pushed on those, particularly Black women, to carry the mantle when they see a need that no one else is addressing.

It was clear from most participants of this study that they would like to see more students and professionals with diverse racial identities hired into roles in their departments. Many did not feel that the leadership of their department shared this priority, or if participants did feel that they were actively working to recruit diverse candidates, they felt that it was done to just check off a box and reach a racial quota.

Belonging

Though it was not one of the five themes of the study, it is important for me to connect the themes to belonging as Strayhorn's (2018) Sense of Belonging Model served

as the framework for this research and belonging is an essential component addressed in the second research question. Four of the five themes in my data speak directly to what contributes to and serves as barriers for Black RA's feeling a sense of belonging in their position, particularly Isolated, Stereotyped, and Underrepresented. The RA position is highly relational, and it was clear from the study that what contributed to a positive sense of belonging most for Black RAs were positive relationships with their residents, peers, and supervisors (Brown, 2020). For the RAs in this study, this was most notable when the relationships were formed with others that shared their racial identity. Black RAs are commonly underrepresented on their staffs and in their department, so for some participants, it was harder for them to develop relationships with others identifying as Black, which led to feelings of isolation and disconnection from residents, staff, and the institution (Paladino et al., 2005). This disconnection has negative impacts on these students developing a strong sense of belonging and connection to their role, residence hall, and institution. While many of the participants felt that the position helped them feel more connected to their institution, most of their reasons why were related to meeting new people, having more awareness about their campus, and having increased access to leadership opportunities. Those that found connections to other Black residents, RAs, or professional staff members seemed to express a greater sense of belonging derived from the position. Brown (2020) found these connections helped them find others who understood their experiences with microaggressions on their HWI campus and helped them find communities where they felt supported (Brown, 2020).

The RA position places emphasis on community, and for those participants that could articulate a community of support they found, whether that be a meetup of other

Black RAs, a group of friends, family, or faith-based organizations, when Black RAs found community, it helped them find belonging. Several pictures submitted by participants included the community they found and talked about the importance of those people in their RA and college experience.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. The first is that the study sample is homogenous. Of the ten participants in the study, nine identified as women, and only one man was represented. When I embarked on this study, I was hoping to have more diversity in the gender of participants, particularly because previous studies have looked specifically at either Black women or Black men. I wanted to be able to recruit a more diverse pool of participants, but that did not come to pass. I ultimately only had a few participants that identified as men, and only one completed the entire study. I did do an initial interview with two other men, but they dropped out of the study after that point. The findings speak more to what seems to be the experience for Black women in the RA role than I originally intended. The demographic survey shows a lot of similarities in how the sample identifies themselves. One participant did not complete the survey, which presents another limitation of the study as I was not able to gather that information on all participants.

Another aspect of the sample that is a limitation is that all but one of the participants are from institutions located in the Southeast United States, with one being in the Midwest. While I reached out to a variety of institutions, many of the schools that I reached out to for recruiting participants were in the Southeast. I think I relied on my networks and had better success with colleagues who were more aware of me and my

institution. Similarly, only one of the institutions represented in the study was a private institution. I realized most of my recruitment was at public institutions. I think if I could do it again, I would be more intentional about working to diversify the sample in these areas.

I also experienced a fair amount of attrition after the initial interview and did not retain as many participants as I expected to early on and had to do additional recruiting to get more participants. This study involved multiple parts and was likely more time-consuming than other research studies, which I think impacted participant retention in the study. Based on the findings, specifically that of Exploited, it is not surprising though that most participants that felt obligated or encouraged to complete the study were Black women. It also seemed that those participants appreciated and desired the opportunity to tell their truth and seemed grateful for the experience of getting to participate in the study.

Another limitation is in the photovoice, which is not as common of a data collection process as conducting interviews. I think participants generally knew what to expect from an interview but may not have been as comfortable with the idea of photovoice and may not have known what to expect. I am confident that those that completed the first interview with me left knowing what was expected of them in completing the photovoice portion of the study, but I suspect that others were intimidated by not understanding the process or feeling that it would be too much work or require too much time to complete. Another challenge with the photovoice is that I expected participants to use their personal cell phones or cameras to capture the images they would submit for the study. Each of the participants did not seem to have an issue with this and

seemed to have access to a phone or camera, but I know not all participants may have had the access to complete that portion of the study. And a final challenge of the photovoice was in trying to maintain the privacy of those people featured in pictures. I had a process for getting approval to use people's images in the study, but ultimately that process was not well-utilized by participants and seemed to be a nuisance to obtain permission from others pictured. I think this may have discouraged some participants from submitting pictures with people in them, and to protect people's privacy, I just decided to blur out faces rather than seek out permission. This was also the best decision for protecting the privacy of participants.

A final limitation is that all interviews were conducted virtually rather than connecting with participants in person. While the COVID-19 pandemic has made participants all too familiar with virtual meetings, I know that these interviews may have been more impersonal than if I could conduct the interviews in person. I had to be more intentional about establishing a strong rapport with participants to get them comfortable enough to share. I worked to make my interviews more conversational to have more in-depth conversations with my participants and to encourage participants to share more. I had to manage my own Zoom fatigue and the potential fatigue of participants. I also had to manage the occasional technical difficulty that came with connecting with participants online.

Implications for Higher Education Practice

The findings of this study suggest several implications for higher education and housing and residence life practice. The first is to look at the factors that motivate Black students to pursue the RA position and to utilize those to recruit and retain Black staff

members in the position. This includes being transparent about the compensation package, transferrable skills, and opportunities to serve as a role model or mentor to other students as these were all things that drew Black students to the position. Working to recruit and retain students in this way would also help increase the representation of Black students in the role.

A second implication for higher education is to look critically at the way RAs and other student affairs staff and student leaders are trained, particularly around diversity, equity, and inclusion. Experiencing stereotypes was a common experience for participants in the study, and most had examples of when they experienced them in their work as RAs. It is clear there is still work to be done in naming and addressing that these stereotypes and challenges are there for Black and other marginalized RAs, and Black students living in the residence halls. This is easier said than done when it comes to effectively incorporating diversity, equity, and inclusion education in staff training, but it is a critical need for practitioners and leaders to consider. It is an area that campus departments should consider enlisting the support of professionals trained to do this work on campus or outside presenters that have expertise in this area. With most of the institutions in my sample being in the South and public institutions, it is important to recognize that how departments can train and educate staff and residents is being impacted by changes in policy and politics. By 2021, lawmakers in 16 states had introduced or passed legislation that in some way restricted the teaching of what has been deemed critical race theory at public institutions (Flaherty, 2021). Conservative lawmakers have been attacking educating around race and diversity as they feel it is divisive and puts too much emphasis on the worst parts of America's history and not

enough on the progress that has been made (Flaherty, 2021). While this is not specific to the southeastern region of the United States, it does seem to impact many public institutions in the south, where states are continuing to introduce legislation making it harder for educators to teach about diversity, equity, and inclusion. Departmental leadership must find ways to continue the equity and inclusion work in this political climate.

A final implication is for practitioners to evaluate the sources of support that exist for Black students in the RA role. The findings of this study suggest that Black RAs feel connected to an extent to their staff and departments, but also feel isolated at times, which is exacerbated by being underrepresented. We need to look critically at things that can be done in our own departments to make all RAs feel included and like they belong. This could also look like creating affinity groups for Black RAs to come together in the department or looking at ways to bring Black student leaders and staff members together across campus offices and departments. This strategy may be more effective for departments that have less representation of Black RAs.

Recommendations for Higher Education Practice

A goal of this study was to provide housing and residence life practitioners, student affairs administrators, and higher education leaders, with the knowledge to make changes to practices and policies that will improve the experiences of Black students serving in the RA role at HWIs. As such, I have developed several recommendations for professionals in the field to consider.

The first recommendation is to take a critical look at the way RAs are compensated as the financial benefits of the position were a key motivator for students

(Boone, 2018; Langston, 2020; Wilson, 2014). In addition to evaluating RA compensation packages, it is also important for us to consider changes in the ways we encourage RAs to talk, or not talk, about their compensation and the financial benefits of the position. It was clear from the participants in this study that there was some level of shame they had in admitting that a primary reason they applied for the position was that it helped them financially. Practitioners must do their part to acknowledge that the financial benefit of the position can be as important if not more important than the intrinsic benefits for students. Staff members want to get compensated fairly for their work. This was a trend that came into the spotlight in many industries, including higher education, from the years 2020 to date in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This phenomenon was referred to as the Great Resignation as many employees were quitting their jobs in large numbers because of the stressors and burnout experienced while trying to work through a pandemic (McClure, 2021). Inadequate pay was often also cited as a factor leading staff to quit their jobs. With morale being so low at colleges and universities, faculty and staff members left in mass (McClure, 2021). While the Great Resignation in higher education usually refers to the loss of professional staff from the field, it should be said that RAs and other student jobs may no longer be as competitive as jobs outside of the campus (Wade, 2022). And while there are still benefits for students working on campus, like the convenience and connection to the campus it can bring, students must consider opportunities that offer them the biggest gains, considering both extrinsic and intrinsic value.

In a similar vein, housing and residence life leadership should consider allowing RAs to pursue additional employment opportunities, even if those opportunities are

limited to a certain number of hours or to positions on campus. Johnson (2022) found that for Black RAs, while the financial benefits of the position helped, they often had to have additional employment to meet their financial needs. There is a growing need for students to be employed while taking classes, and restricting RAs from additional employment disproportionately impacts underrepresented students (Johnson, 2022; Choi, 2018). Many of the RAs in my study talked about holding second jobs, and how important that was for their finances. If outside employment is not considered, departments may run the risk of the RA position only being attainable to students that can afford to do the job.

To allow all RAs to financially sustain themselves, housing and residence life leaders and departments should consider evaluating the compensation package they offer to their RAs. Not every department will be able to make significant changes quickly to compensation packages or all at once, but there may be things that can be done in increments to help RAs that are struggling to afford their tuition and the expenses of attending college. It is also recommended that leadership look at the disparities in RA compensation that come in based on the different living experiences and amenities that RAs receive. Some of these disparities cannot be easily addressed, but again, there may be steps that can be taken to make compensation more equitable across campus.

Another recommendation is to think about ways departments can provide more access to counseling services, mental health resources, or support groups. The RA job has become one of the most stressful and involved student staff positions on most college campuses and can lead to burnout and mental health issues for the students who hold the position (Boone, 2016; McLaughlin, 2018; Paladino et al., 2005; Stoner, 2017). The need for attention to their mental health came up from several participants who mentioned

wishing their departments put more support behind acknowledging that the RA job was hard and finding resources that could help them talk through some of the issues they were experiencing themselves or helping their residents with. Participants of the study already seemed to be tapped into their campus counseling centers or therapy but mentioned wishing there were specific resources for RAs. While most housing and residence life professionals are not trained counselors and are not hired to play that role, there is an opportunity for departments to consider hosting open forums, advocacy groups, meditation spaces, bringing counselors into the halls, or affinity groups that may provide more support for RAs. Creating affinity spaces with other RAs or student staff that identify as Black or People of Color would be fairly easy to implement and could be incredibly supportive spaces for these students to find community with each other. This community will have positive impacts on the sense of belonging of these students. There was one good example of this coordinated by a staff member in one of the participant's departments. The professional staff member who organized the group of Black RAs seemed to do so on her own without the need to be identified by the leadership of the department. That participant spoke so highly of having a connection to that group. Though the participant reported that the group did not come together often, knowing that the group was there and sharing a mobile group messaging group where they could regularly communicate with each other, made all the difference for her not feeling as isolated in her role. Other housing departments should consider organizing these groups or supporting students wanting to organize in this way.

A third recommendation is for practitioners to pay special attention and seek to find ways to address the experiences Black RAs feel when it comes to stereotyping,

microaggressions, feeling isolated, and feeling the need or being asked to take on more labor than other RAs (Hardaway, 2020; Roland & Agosto, 2017; Roland, 2021; Harper et al., 2011; Brown, 2020; Langston, 2020; Linley, 2017). There were several examples from participants in this study where supervisors could have stepped in and intervened in staff issues, could have named conflict, or could have held staff accountable for harmful things they said or did to their Black RAs. To help Black RAs feel more supported in their roles, we have a responsibility to speak up when necessary to show outward signs of support and to name microaggressions and racism when we encounter it. We must also be careful to not put Black RAs in a position where they have to always speak up on their behalf or work to address staff conflict as this may just further the feelings of isolation or lead them to continue to be stereotyped negatively by their peers.

It is also recommended that supervisors and campus leadership think about how we ask Black RAs to take on additional labor, even if it is not intentional (Harper et al., 2011; Bleikamp et al., 2015). Professionals should be more mindful of when Black staff members are feeling like they must educate their peers or their community on diversity, equity, and inclusion. One participant spoke about leading a session for her peers on microaggressions after having issues with this on her staff team. While it seemed to be a powerful and meaningful experience for her, and one that was received well by her peers, it perhaps would have been better to be presented by supervisors of the team. The message coming from the top down can at times be more credible than when it is delivered by peers, and then the burden of having to educate other students would not be placed on the Black students experiencing the microaggressions.

Supervisors should also work to be more aware of imbalances in the workload of their Black RAs. Several RAs in the study shared that they volunteer more to help, take on more shifts than others, and have residents and their peers come to them more often. These things may be easy to not notice but are impacting the experiences of our Black RAs who do seem to notice. It is also important for supervisors to note the perception that Black RAs feel they must work harder than their peers to avoid being seen as lazy or not performing to expectations (Harper et al., 2011; Hardaway, 2020). Supervisors should do more to educate themselves on ways to implement strategies to be more culturally responsive as supervisors (Burkard et al., 2006; Estrada et al., 2004; Gatmon et al., 2011). Additionally, practitioners would also benefit from taking advantage to create more opportunities for student staff to provide feedback on their supervision and their experiences working for their department. Several participants commented on wanting to have the opportunity to express their concerns about their supervisor to departmental leadership but felt those opportunities weren't available and they did not feel they should reach out, either because they felt they should not be the ones to initiate those conversations or for fear of their positions or reputations being in jeopardy.

A final recommendation is for departments to continue to find ways to recruit and retain Black and Brown professionals and students for their staff teams. Participants in this study all seemed to be underrepresented on their campus, which led to some of the feelings of isolation and stereotyping they experience (Paladino et al., 2005; Harper et al., 2011; Hardaway, 2020; Bleikamp et al., 2015; Healea & Hale, 2016). Departments must make a conscientious effort to reflect on their current recruitment strategies and to think about the ways they may be able to adjust to attract and retain professionals of Color.

Healea and Hale (2016) found that professional staff of Color were more likely to hire RAs of Color and make them feel more supported throughout the recruitment process. Having more representation in the professional staff helps contribute to recruiting and retaining more underrepresented RAs. Those students then help champion the experiences of other students of Color on campus (Schuster and Stalker, 2020).

Participants in the study discussed the benefit to their sense of belonging and the level of support felt when they had a Black supervisor or had a close relationship with a Black professional staff member in the department. Black RAs also clearly benefited from finding community and support from each other. While not all departments may have the opportunity or capacity to find ways to bring Black staff members together, creating these spaces seem to positively impact the experiences of Black RAs on our campuses (Schuster and Stalker, 2020).

Suggestions for Further Research

In addition to recommendations for higher education practice, I also have recommendations for future research on this topic. The first recommendation would be to conduct a similar study with more emphasis on recruiting a more diverse sample of participants. Future samples should consist of more diversity in gender, the region the institution is in, and the type of institution. Further research can compare and contrast the ways that there are similarities and differences in the experiences of Black RAs based on the type of institution and regional differences. There is current research on the experiences of RAs that identify as women and as men, but there is not as much research that looks at both populations in the same study, so there is an opportunity there to explore that.

If I could conduct this study again, I would also consider utilizing a case study design and recruiting a sample of Black RAs attending the same HWI. I would continue to utilize photovoice and individual interviews but would also consider doing more collective interpreting with participants through focus groups or exhibits of images, which is common in photovoice research (Liebenberg, 2018). Using a case study approach would also provide more opportunities to learn more about and collect data about the institution, as that context could be critical to understanding participants' lived experiences at that institution.

Another area suggested for further research is to conduct a similar study using photovoice and interviews as data collection methods to learn more about the experiences of Black professional staff members in housing and residence life. The political landscape and college campuses continue to shift, and the field is continuing to go through the "Great Resignation," which likely plays a role in shifting the experiences of staff members. That research is worth pursuing to learn more about ways to improve the experiences of our Black professional staff members since they play a pivotal role in improving the experiences of our Black RAs.

Researcher Reflections

I went into this research knowing that there was a lot of "me-search" involved with the study because I was a Black RA at an HWI, and from my professional experience working closely with RAs for many years, I expected to find some things to continue to ring true from my experiences. I also expected to have my perspective challenged and expanded by taking in the perspectives and meaning-making of my participants. For example, I expected to find that money and room and board were major

motivators for Black students to pursue the role. This was certainly reminiscent of my experience and was something I expected to find based on my professional background at institutions where many of the students depended on jobs to meet their financial needs. I was disheartened that many of my participants seemed to feel like they were admitting a big secret or were somewhat ashamed to admit that the financial benefit mattered so much to them. From my experience, it has always been taboo for RAs to admit that they considered the job for the money, so it was not surprising that several of them shared that reasoning with some hesitancy, but I certainly hoped that in our current climate, we would have evolved more so students felt they could be more transparent.

I also reflected on my own motivation to pursue the RA role because I wanted to help people and serve other students. I was not surprised by that finding, but I was surprised at how almost all participants made connections to how the RA position was helping them develop transferrable skills and could specifically speak to how they see it applying to their future careers. This is certainly not something I was as self-aware of when I was an RA.

In terms of the Isolated, Stereotyped, and Underrepresented themes, I was not surprised at some of the students' experiences. It at times was heavy and challenging to hear some of their stories and the way they felt they were perceived. And while some things resonated with my experience, I also recognize that the conversation around diversity, equity, and inclusion has evolved. The students in the study spoke much more eloquently about their racialized experiences, particularly the way they reflected on microaggressions they experienced. I cannot remember being aware of microaggressions

as much as blatant examples of racism I perceived or experienced. The word microaggressions was as well-known as I was an RA.

As I think about my interactions with the participants, one thing that stood out to me as I wrapped up my time with each participant at the end of the final interview was how grateful they seemed to feel having someone care enough about their experiences to ask the questions I did and having a safe place to share their stories. Many of the participants, especially the Black women in the study, were eager to tell their truths and share their experiences. I couldn't help but feel that they knew if they took advantage of this opportunity, the changes that come from the study may not benefit them directly in their time as an RA, but that it would hopefully help future RAs have better experiences. After completing the data collection with the tenth participant, I can remember wishing I was able to provide this space for more participants, particularly for other Black women in the RA role. I hope to find meaningful ways in my continued professional career to create these spaces for Black RAs on my campus, and I hope that other practitioners consider thinking about ways they can create meaningful change in this way on their campuses.

Conclusion

There is more conversation and research needed to continue to explore the experiences of Black RAs at HWIs. This study adds to the dialogue around common issues these students experience (Harper et al., 2011; Hardaway, 2020; Roland & Agosto, 2017, Roland 2021, Brown, 2020, Langston, 2020). There are certainly systemic causes that institutions and leaders in education must work hard to dismantle, but there are also smaller considerations that can be made when it comes to considering what motivates

Black RAs, what barriers to belonging they face, and ways in which we can support these students better. This research study set out to answer questions about how Black students experience the RA role when they attend an HWI, and how they describe their sense of belonging and sources of support. I was thankful to be able to see and hear examples from the 10 participants that answer these questions. The photovoice provided rich data that complemented their stories, thoughts, and expressions painting a vivid picture of their lived experiences. It is important that administrators and leaders on college campuses take the opportunity to see and hear the experiences of the Black RAs that give their labor and at times sacrifice their energy, wellness, time, and sense of belonging to improve the experiences of and support the students they serve.

Summary

Chapter 5 discussed the five themes found in this study and how they connect to the research questions, the theoretical framework, and the reviewed literature. The chapter also talks about the limitations of the study, suggestions for higher education practice, and further research. Those recommendations were then followed by reflections from the researcher and closing remarks.

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APPENDIX A:

ONLINE CONSENT AND STUDY ELIGIBILITY FORM

3/18/22, 5:59 PM

Exploring the Experiences of Black Resident Advisors at Historically White Institutions Research Study

Exploring the Experiences of Black Resident Advisors at Historically White Institutions Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. Participation in this research study is voluntary. The purpose of the proposed study is to explore the experiences of Black resident advisors (RAs) at historically White institutions (HWIs) in the United States.

To participate you must meet the following criteria:

- You must be at least 18 years old
- You must self-identify as Black
- You must be an undergraduate student enrolled full-time at your institution
- You must attend a mid-size to large HWI (a college or university where the majority of the student population is White, and the undergraduate student enrollment is at least 5,000 students)
- You must be a current resident advisor (or similar role) at your institution, or you must have served in the RA role within the last two years

Participation in this study involves three parts and is estimated to take 3-4 hours of your time over the course of several weeks:

Part 1: Complete a 30-minute informational interview on Zoom.

Part 2: For the second part of this study, I am asking my participants to do a research method called photovoice. Photovoice is when people participate in research by taking pictures to represent their experiences, communities, and to bring overlooked social issues to light through capturing images. You will be asked to use your personal cell phone to take 3-10 images that describe your experience using prompts that I will give you during your first interview. You will then be asked to upload your photos to a designated folder that you will receive access to.

Part 3: Complete a 60-90 minute follow-up interview on Zoom to discuss the photos you took and to learn more about your experiences as a Black RA on your campus.

You will be given adequate time to complete the three parts of this study, and in appreciation for your participation, you will receive a \$50 Amazon gift card after completing the final interview.

* Required

1. Email *

3/18/22, 5:59 PM

Exploring the Experiences of Black Resident Advisors at Historically White Institutions Research Study

2. Please enter your full name. *

3. Are you 18 years old or older? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No

4. Do you identify as Black (this includes those that identify as African American, African, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latinx, multiracial, etc.)? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No

5. Are you a current undergraduate student enrolled full-time at your institution? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No

6. Do you attend a mid-size to large historically White institution (a college or university of 5,000+ students where the majority of the student body is White)? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No

3/18/22, 5:59 PM

Exploring the Experiences of Black Resident Advisors at Historically White Institutions Research Study

7. Please provide the name of the college or university you currently attend. *

8. Are you currently working as a resident advisor (RA) at your institution or have you worked as an RA within the last 2 years at that institution? Please note that this title may vary at different institutions, so all those in a similar role would be eligible to participate (resident assistant, resident mentor, community assistant, community advisor, etc.). *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No

**Informed
Consent**

You are invited to participate in a research study about your experiences as a Black RA. Participation in this research study is voluntary. The information provided is to give you key information to help you decide whether to participate. Please read the consent form carefully to ensure you meet the criteria and are comfortable participating in the study. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to enter your full name to constitute your agreement to participate in the study.

9. Please enter your full name. *

Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in a research study. Participation in this research study is voluntary. The information provided is to give you key information to help you decide whether to participate.

The purpose of the proposed study is to explore the experiences of Black resident advisors (RAs) at historically White institutions (HWIs) in the United States.

To participate you must meet the following criteria:

- You must be at least 18 years old
- You must self-identify as Black
- You must be an undergraduate student enrolled full-time at your institution
- You must attend a mid-size to large HWI (a college or university where the majority of the student population is White, and the undergraduate student enrollment is at least 5,000 students)
- You must be a current resident advisor (or similar role) at your institution, or you must have served in the RA role within the last two years

Participation in this study involves three parts and is estimated to take 3-4 hours of your time over the course of several weeks:

Part 1: Complete a 30-minute informational interview on Zoom. This interview will primarily be used to explain the study and what you will be asked to do as a participant in the study. There will be some open-ended questions to learn more about your RA experience.

Part 2: For the second part of this study, I am asking my participants to do a research method called photovoice. Photovoice is when people participate in research by taking pictures to represent their experiences, communities, and to bring overlooked social issues to light through capturing images. You will be asked to use your personal cell phone to take 3-10 images that describe your experience using prompts that I will give you during your first interview. You will then be asked to upload your photos to a designated folder that you will receive access to.

Part 3: Complete a 60-90 minute follow-up interview on Zoom to discuss the photos you took and to learn more about your experiences as a Black RA on your campus.

Participating in this study may not benefit you directly, but it will help us learn more about how to support Black students serving in the RA role. You may find answering some of the questions challenging as some of the interview questions will focus on your racial identity and experiences with microaggressions or racism you may have experienced on campus. You may skip any questions you don't want to answer and you may end the interview at any time.

You will be given adequate time to complete the three parts of this study, and in appreciation for your participation, you will receive a \$50 Amazon gift card after completing the final interview.

Your privacy will be protected, and confidentiality will be maintained to the extent possible. Your responses will be treated as confidential. Your screening survey information will initially be identifiable, but your name and email will be separated from the screening survey data. In addition, you will be referred to in the study using a pseudonym as will your institution. Interview responses, photos, email addresses, and any other identifying information that links you to your responses will be stored separately with access to this information controlled and limited only to people who have approval to have access. Zoom audio and video recordings will be deleted after transcribing and analyzing the data or within 90 days of your interview. Photovoice images may be published in publications, presentations, and/or in educational materials. Photos that would easily link to you as a participant or to our institution will not be published. Similarly, any photos of people without their received permission will also not be published. After I coordinate and complete the interviews, your email address will be deleted. I might use the interview data and photos for future research studies and might share the non-identifiable interview data with other researchers for future research studies without additional consent from you.

Again, participation throughout the study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part in the study and stop participation at any time.

After submitting this form, you will be sent additional information about scheduling your first interview.

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1pheKG33Y8YRUMHuJl6u4iFXE7FsVdUhzkrD_5l5vFZk/edit

4/5

3/18/22, 5:59 PM

Exploring the Experiences of Black Resident Advisors at Historically White Institutions Research Study

If you have questions concerning the study, contact the researcher: Morgan Murray at morgan.murray@uncc.edu. You can also contact the supervising faculty member for this study, Dr. Ryan Miller at RyanMiller@uncc.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Office of Research Protections and Integrity at uncc-irb@uncc.edu.

10. I agree to participate in the research study under the conditions described above.

*

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes, I agree to participate
- ☐ No, I do not wish to participate.

Signature

I certify that I have read and fully understand the research study and my expectations of participation, and I agree to participate in this research study. My participation is given voluntarily, and I have not been coerced to participate. I understand that I may discontinue my participation at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which I might otherwise be entitled.

11. Please enter your full name (this will constitute your agreement to participate in the study). *

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APPENDIX B:

PHOTO RELEASE FORM

3/18/22, 8:23 PM

Participant Consent Form for Use of Images

Participant Consent Form for Use of Images

Title of Project: Exploring the Experiences of Black Resident Advisors (RAs) at Historically White Institutions (HWIs)

This study seeks to explore the experiences of Black resident advisors (RAs) at historically White institutions (HWIs) in the United States. The study will involve interviews and photovoice, which includes study participants taking 3-10 photos that reflect their experiences as a Black RA.

You are receiving this form because you are being asked to consent to have your photo used as part of this study. Photos may be described in the study but would not be published without your consent. Your photo will only be published with your permission granted through this form. These images would only be used to publish in research reports, journal articles, conference presentations, and/or educational materials. Images will not be used in ways that you would be perceived negatively. Photos that would easily link to study participants or to their institution will not be published but may be described in the study and future publications. Use of these images will be taken without payment or benefit to you.

If you have questions concerning the study, contact the researcher: Morgan Murray at morgan.murray@uncc.edu. You can also contact the supervising faculty member for this study, Dr. Ryan Miller at RyanMiller@uncc.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Office of Research Protections and Integrity at uncc-irb@uncc.edu.

* Required

1. Email *

2. Please enter your full name. *

3/18/22, 6:23 PM

Participant Consent Form for Use of Images

3. Are you 18 years old or older? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No

4. I agree to have my photo taken. *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No

5. I understand that my name and identifying information will not be linked to the photos. *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No

6. I understand that I will not be given compensation for my appearance in photos. *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No

3/16/22, 6:23 PM

Participant Consent Form for Use of Images

7. I give the researcher listed above permission to include my photos in printed and electronic material for research and educational purposes (e.g. research reports, journal articles, conference/academic presentations). *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No

8. Please enter your full name (this will constitute your consent to use your image for the purpose described above). *

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APPENDIX C:
RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Recruitment Email

Project Title: Exploring the Experiences of Black Resident Advisors at Historically White Institutions

Hello,

My name is Morgan Murray. I am a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and I am conducting a research study on the experiences of Black students serving in the RA role at historically White institutions. I am interested in connecting with RAs that identify as Black and would be willing to do an interview and photovoice project about their experience. My hope is that you will consider sharing the following link with any students that meet the criteria below that you think may be interested in participating: [INSERT LINK]

Participants must meet the following criteria:

- 18 years old or older
- Self-identify as Black
- Current undergraduate student enrolled full-time
- Attend a mid-size to large historically White institution (a college or university of 5,000+ students where the majority of the student body is White)
- Currently working as a resident advisor (RA) at their institution or worked as an RA within the last 2 years at that institution (the title may vary at different institutions, so all those in a similar role would be eligible to participate: resident assistant, resident mentor, community assistant, community advisor, etc.)

Participation in this study involves three parts and is estimated to take between 3-4 hours of their time over the course of 2-4 weeks:

- Part 1: Complete a 30-minute informational interview on Zoom.
- Part 2: Photovoice assignment - participants will be asked to use their personal cell phone to take 3-10 images that describe their experiences.
- Part 3: Complete a 60-90 minute follow-up interview on Zoom to discuss the photos and to share more about their experiences as a Black RA on their campus.

In appreciation, participants will receive a \$50 Amazon gift card after completing the final interview.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. Participant privacy will be protected, and confidentiality will be maintained to the extent possible. Participant responses will be treated as confidential. Participant screening survey information will initially be identifiable, but participant names and emails will be separated from the screening survey

data. In addition, participants will be referred to in the study using a pseudonym as will their institution.

If you have students who may be interested in this opportunity, please feel free to share this email and the following link with them: [INSERT LINK] This link will give interested students additional information about the study, discuss eligibility to participate, and will serve as their consent to participate in the study. Please feel free to also share this email with other colleagues you think may be interested in reaching out to students to participate in this study.

If you have questions concerning the study, contact the researcher: Morgan Murray. You can also contact the supervising faculty member for this study, Dr. Ryan Miller.

Thank you for your attention and for your help with making this study happen. My hope is that this study provides useful information for residence life professionals to better understand and support their Black RAs.

Sincerely,

Morgan Murray
Doctoral Candidate | Educational Leadership

Ryan A. Miller, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Higher Education
Higher Education Program Director
UNC Charlotte | Cato College of Education | Department of Educational Leadership

APPENDIX D:

RECRUITMENT FLYER/GRAPHIC



VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

For doctoral research study on the experiences of Black resident advisors (RAs) at historically White institutions

QUALIFICATIONS:

If you are:

- ✓ A Black undergraduate student enrolled full-time at a historically White institution with 5,000+ students.
- ✓ A current resident advisor/resident assistant (RA), or were an RA in the last 2 years

THEN I WANT TO HEAR ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES!

Participants who complete the study will receive a \$50 Amazon gift card.

For more information about the study and to access the questionnaire to participate in the study, use the QR code below.



For questions, contact the researcher: Morgan Murray at morgan.murray@uncc.edu.

APPENDIX E:

INTERVIEW AND PHOTOVOICE PROTOCOLS

Interview #1 and Photovoice Protocol

Project Title: Exploring the Experiences of Black Resident Advisors at Historically White Institutions

The purpose of the proposed study is to explore the experiences of Black resident advisors (RAs) at historically White institutions (HWIs) in the United States and how these students find belonging and support in their role.

This initial interview is designed to be primarily an informational interview to develop rapport with participants, introduce the study, share expectations for participation, and give instructions on completing the photovoice portion of the study. The interview will ask some semi-structured, open-ended questions to begin understanding background information on participants.

Procedure

1. The researcher will begin with an introduction, a brief overview of the study, a review of some of the points of the informed consent form, and information on what to expect during the interview (which should include consent to have the interview audio and video recorded on Zoom).
2. The participant consents to being recorded via Zoom and shares they understand the process and expectations.
3. The researcher asks the participant if they have any questions before they get started.
4. The researcher begins the recording and proceeds with the interview questions.
5. Following the initial interview questions, participants will be given the information below about the photovoice phase of this study.
6. The researcher provides participants with the photovoice prompt, a timeline, a consent form if taking photos with people featured, and an overview of the process for submitting their images.
7. The participant consents to participate and shares they understand the process and expectations.
8. Participants use their personal cell phones to take 3-10 images and upload images and captions directly to the researcher through an assigned Google Folder. Any required consent forms should also be uploaded or emailed to me.

Interview Introduction & Guidelines

Good morning/afternoon/evening! My name is Morgan Murray. My pronouns are she/her/hers. I am a housing professional currently at Georgia State University and have

been in the field for about 16 years. I am also a doctoral student finishing up my program at UNC Charlotte in Educational Leadership.

As mentioned, I am conducting a study to explore the experiences of Black RAs at HWIs [Ensure they are familiar with the term HWI]. Thank you for your willingness to participate in my study. I am excited to hear more about your experiences as an RA as we go throughout the study.

Participation in this study involves three parts and is estimated to take 3-4 hours of your time over the course of several weeks. This is part 1. This initial interview will be primarily informational for you to learn more about the study. I am going to ask you some questions in this first interview to better understand your experience, but most of the questions for you will come in our follow-up interview after you complete part 2 of the study, which is the photovoice portion. I will talk more about that at the end to make sure you have an understanding of what to expect to complete phase 2 of the study. I will also send you an email with instructions that you'll need in the next day or so following this interview.

I will be recording and reporting on your responses, but your name and institution name will be changed to protect you from being identified.

- Do you prefer a pseudonym or name you would like to be referred to in this study?
- Can you share your pronouns with me?

I also want to assure you that these video recordings will not be shared with anyone other than myself and potentially my dissertation faculty chair and that they will only be used to transcribe the interview.

Please know there are no wrong answers, and if you ever do not feel comfortable answering, we can stop the interview at any time. You can also take a break if you need to during the interview or we can pick up on the interview at another time if you'd like.

- Are you still comfortable proceeding with the interview?
- Do you have any questions before we get started?
- **I am going to go ahead and start recording.**

- If not, the researcher will stop the interview and ask whether the participant is willing to be interviewed at another time.
- If yes, the researcher will begin recording and proceed with the interview.

Questions

- Tell me a little bit about yourself (what year are you? Major? Where are you from?)
- How long have you been an RA and why did you decide to be an RA?

- Can you tell me about the building and the residents you work with (i.e., name of the building, location on campus, traditional/suites/apartments, class year of students, any special communities)?
- What have you enjoyed most about working as an RA?
- What challenges have you encountered as an RA?
- Has the RA experience been what you expected it to be? If so or if not, in what ways?

Explanation of Photovoice Process and Expectations

I want to talk about moving forward in the study at this point:

- Part 2: For the second part of this study, I am asking my participants to do a research method called photovoice. Photovoice is when people participate in research by taking pictures to represent their experiences, and communities, and to bring overlooked social issues to light through capturing images.
- You will be asked to use your personal cell phone to take 3-10 images that describe your experience using prompts that I will give you in an email of instructions after this interview. The prompts will be simple:
 - Take pictures that reflect your experience being a Black student and RA on your campus.
 - Take pictures of how or where you experience belonging and support as an RA.
- You will then be asked to upload your photos to a designated folder that you will receive a link to access in that email as well.
- You are free to take pictures of any moments or things on campus, in your hall, or that make sense for you based on the prompts.
- I do ask that if you take pictures featuring people, especially their faces, you receive their consent to be photographed for the study. I will send you a photo release form so that you can get to those in the pictures. If you do not get their consent, you can still submit the photos and we can discuss them in the follow-up interview. I will just be mindful of not publishing those particular photos anywhere.
- The email will have a deadline for submitting the pictures to the folders. I am giving participants 2 weeks to get part 2 done. Please communicate with me if you need more time or if we need to adjust this deadline.
- Part 3: Complete a 60-90-minute follow-up interview on Zoom to discuss the photos you took and to learn more about your experiences as a Black RA on your campus.

Wrap up

- Are you still comfortable proceeding?
 - If not, the researcher will stop the interview and thank the student for their participation.
 - If yes, the researcher will email the participant information about the prompt, the needed consent form, and information about submitting photos and captions.
- Share that: I will follow up with an email including a written copy of the photovoice instructions with the prompts. The email will also include a link to upload the pictures and my contact information if you have issues or questions. I will also share a link to an online photo release form if you need to get permission to use photos of anyone.
- Do you have any questions for me before we wrap up?

Interview #2 Protocol

Project Title: Exploring the Experiences of Black Resident Advisors at Historically White Institutions

The purpose of the proposed study is to explore the experiences of Black resident advisors (RAs) at historically White institutions (HWIs) in the United States and how these students find belonging and support in their role.

In addition to the interviews of participants, photovoice will also be used as a data collection method. Photovoice was selected for this study because it can be a powerful tool for providing marginalized students with the ability to share their experiences from their perspectives rather than the researcher creating their own interpretations (Duran, 2019).

Procedure

1. The researcher will begin with an introduction, a review of some of the points of the informed consent form, and information on what to expect during the interview (which should include consent to have the interview audio and video recorded on Zoom).
2. The participant consents to being recorded via Zoom and shares they understand the process and expectations.
3. The researcher asks the participant if they have any questions before they get started.
4. The researcher begins the recording and proceeds with sharing the screen to go one by one through the participant's submitted pictures.
5. Following questions about the photos, the researcher continues with the semi-structured interview questions.
6. Following the interview questions, the researcher will do a brief wrap-up discussing the next steps, incentives, demographic survey, and member checking.

Introduction & Guidelines

Thank you again for interviewing with me for the study and for engaging in the photovoice. This interview will be similar to the last time. I'll be recording again as we get started. I'll have some questions for you, and I'll want to hear from you about your pictures and what they mean/are. Sound good? Any questions before we get started?

- If not, the researcher will stop the interview and thank the student for their participation.
- If yes, the researcher will proceed with the interview.
- **And begin recording.**

Interview #2 Questions

Finding Meaning in the Images

- What was it like to participate in this process?
- Tell me about each of the pictures you took and why you selected those images.
- What do these images mean to you?

- What do you see in the pictures that you want your department or residents to know about your experience?

Experience as a Black Student in RA Role

- What has your experience been as a Black student on your campus and in the residence halls?
- How do you feel you are perceived as a Black RA? By supervisor? Staff/peers? Residents?
- Have you had any negative encounters as an RA with your supervisor/peers/residents because of your race?
- How have you felt your peers have valued your racial identity? Supervisor? Department?

Sense of Belonging

- Are there people or places on campus that make you feel supported as a Black student and RA?
- Can you tell me about a time when you felt supported in your role/by your department?
- Can you now tell me about a time when maybe you didn't feel supported?
- Tell me about your relationship with your supervisor. Do you feel supported by your supervisor? What have they done to show you/make you feel their support?
- How have you felt like you belong on your staff? In the department?
- Can you tell me about an experience when you felt you didn't belong?
- How has being an RA made you feel connected to your campus or not?

Suggestions for Change

- Tell me about how you would like to see the RA position change on your campus for Black students in the role.
- How could your department/institution/supervisor make you feel more supported?
- Are you planning to return to the RA role right now? Why or why not?

Wrap-up

- Do you have any questions for me before we wrap up?

I want to thank you so much again for participating in the study. As we close out, a few things:

- Do you have a preference for a pseudonym/fake name?
- I will be sending a quick demographic survey to learn more about the identities of the participants.
- In the coming months, I will also do a process called member checking, so I will likely share your transcript with you so you can review it, and I will share some of the findings from the data and get your opinion on whether it resonates with you to make sure that I am reflecting your experiences accurately.
- And last but not least, your gift card. I will be working with my school admin. to get the \$50 Amazon gift card to you via email. Is the email you used to schedule today the best email for you or do you prefer it to be sent to another email address?

Alright, thank you again. Please let me know if you have any questions that come up. I will reach out to confirm you got the gift card once it is sent in a few days.

APPENDIX F:

DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Demographic Information

Thank you for participating in my study. I would like to collect some additional demographic information from you for the purpose of helping me analyze my study results. Please take 5-7 minutes to answer the following questions.

mmurra52@uncc.edu [Switch account](#)



* Required

Email *

Your email

Name: *

Your answer

What term best describes your gender identity? *

- ☐ Cisgender Woman
- ☐ Cisgender Man
- ☐ Transgender woman
- ☐ Transgender man
- ☐ Non-binary
- ☐ Genderqueer or gender nonconforming
- ☐ I prefer not to respond to this question
- ☐ Other: _____

With which category do you most identify? *

- ☐ African-American
 - ☐ African
 - ☐ Afro-Caribbean
 - ☐ Afro-Latinx
 - ☐ Multiracial
 - ☐ I prefer not to respond to this question
 - ☐ Other: _____
-

With which sexual orientation do you identify? (Select all that apply) *

- ☐ Asexual
- ☐ Bisexual
- ☐ Gay
- ☐ Heterosexual
- ☐ Lesbian
- ☐ Pansexual
- ☐ Queer
- ☐ Questioning or unsure
- ☐ I prefer not to respond to this question
- ☐ Other: _____

Are you the first in your family to go to college (i.e., neither of your parents/guardians have attended any college)? *

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I prefer to not respond to this question

What is your preferred religious identification? *

- ☐ Agnostic
- ☐ Atheist
- ☐ Baha'i
- ☐ Baptist
- ☐ Catholic
- ☐ Church of Christ
- ☐ Christian (non-denominational)
- ☐ Eastern Orthodox
- ☐ Episcopalian
- ☐ Hindu
- ☐ Jewish
- ☐ Latter Day Saints (Mormon)
- ☐ Lutheran
- ☐ Muslim
- ☐ Pagan
- ☐ Presbyterian
- ☐ Quaker

- ☐ Seventh-Day Adventist
- ☐ Spiritual but not religious
- ☐ United Church of Christ/Congregational
- ☐ I prefer to not respond to this question
- ☐ Other: _____

Classification: *

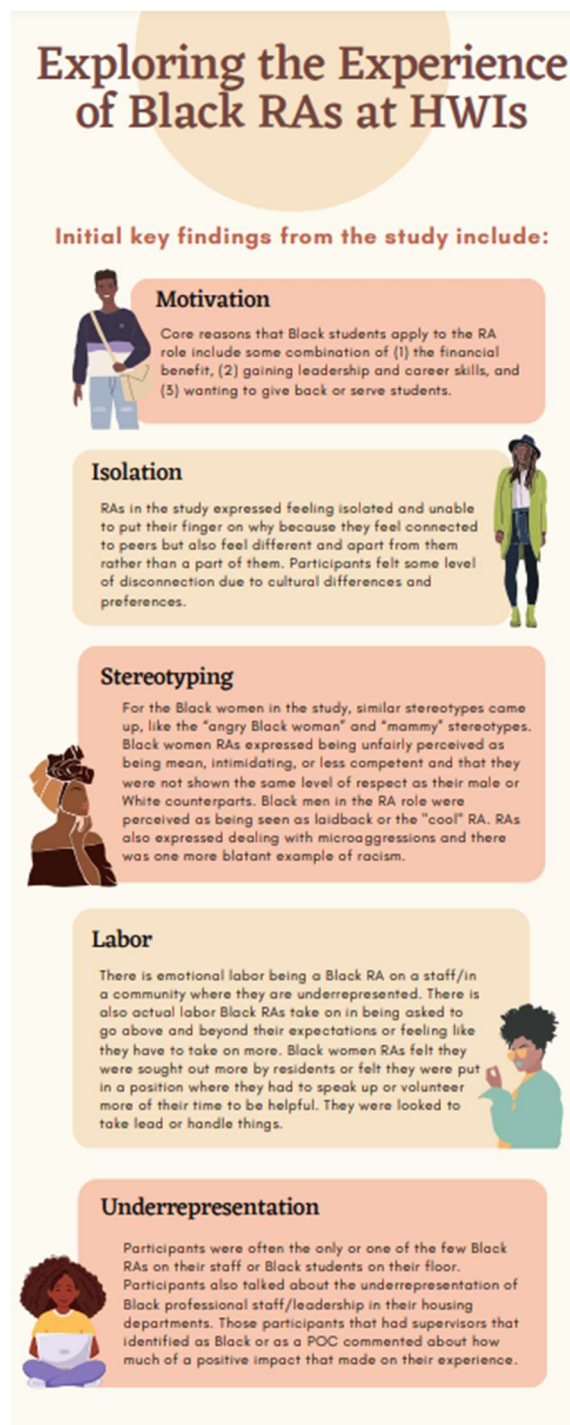
- ☐ First-year
- ☐ Sophomore
- ☐ Junior
- ☐ Senior

Submit

Clear form

APPENDIX G:

INFOGRAPHIC FOR MEMBER CHECKS



*Some themes were re-named after member checks were completed