STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THEMSELVES AS LEADERS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RESIDENT ADVISOR POSITION

THESIS

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By

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ABSTRACT

Student participation in leadership and involvement on campus has been found to improve students’ experiences and assist in their holistic development. This study uses the personal narratives of six Resident Advisors (RAs) to consider student perceptions of themselves as leaders through this specific residential job role. A literature review provides recent publications in the field of student leadership and RA development. Additionally, this study includes an in-depth analysis and discussion that presents several themes that emerged from the data provided by the interview narratives. The data collected from student interviews confirms that there are differences in the ways that students construct ideas about leadership and their own identities. The findings indicate that women and men view their involvement in the RA position differently. Also, the RAs who participated in this study discussed that job satisfaction and success in the RA position is dependent on positive relationships and support from students and staff. Lastly, recommendations for future research and practice associated with the RA position and student leadership development are presented at the conclusion of this thesis.
DEDICATION

To my current and past Resident Advisor staff teams and supervisors, with much gratitude. Never stop believing in your ability to positively affect the lives of others. You are truly incredible individuals who have forever changed my life and continuously inspire my work.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Tatiana Suspitsyna, thesis advisor, and Dr. Michele Welkener, committee member, for their guidance and support as outstanding faculty members, both in the classroom and for this individual study. Thank you for your sound advice, feedback, and for challenging me to grow as both a scholar and student affairs practitioner.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Growth and development through involvement on campus are central aspects of the collegiate experience for undergraduate students (Astin & Astin, 2000). Students’ involvement in campus activities often presents the opportunity to develop leadership skills (Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 2001). Student leaders have an important role on college campuses because they influence their peers and can help to construct an institution’s culture. Consequently, it is important that student leaders are aware of their own abilities and self-perceptions before they can be successful in working with other students at the university.

Numerous leadership opportunities exist on today’s college campuses. Students are involved with the student union, Greek life, and a myriad of student organizations as well as community initiatives. This study used Komives, Lucas, and McMahon’s (1998) definition of leadership provided by their relational leadership model as a basis for understanding how individuals form ideas about leadership. Komives, et al. defined leadership as “a relational process of people together attempting to accomplish change or make a difference to benefit the common good” (p. 21). The relational leadership model incorporated elements of inclusiveness, purpose, empowerment, and reflection on the
individuals’ experiences with others in their environment (Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005). When considering the aforementioned framework, work in the residence halls emerges as one of the most significant opportunities for student leadership experiences. As first-year college students cope with moving away from their families and adjusting to living in an unfamiliar space, residence hall leaders help ease the transition for their peers (Blimling, 1995).

One important leadership position for an undergraduate student in the residence halls is that of a Resident Advisor (RA). Resident Advisor and Resident Assistant are considered synonymous terms and will be used interchangeably for the purpose of this study. Resident Advisors typically live with and advise a floor or wing of undergraduate students and serve as a resource, mentor, disciplinarian, and leader to that community (Blimling, 1995). Although RAs have an important role and have shown leadership potential, student affairs practitioners must remember that these students are not fully developed. It is of utmost importance that student affairs practitioners are cognizant that RAs need challenge and support to guide them through their personal identity exploration during their collegiate experience.

Statement of Problem

This study examines and analyzes student development theory and individual student growth and experience. My assumption is that student development is an ongoing process and occurs when students’ beliefs and values conflict with a situation that is presented to them. Student development can be better understood through the analysis of three dimensions: interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive, which are
interconnected and together create a holistic representation of students’ growth and change (Kegan, 1994). In addition to the three dimensions of development, there are a number of dynamics of development that relate to these three dimensions and impact the way students make meaning of their lives. These dynamics often focus on issues of identity development that are salient for the student at the time (i.e. sexual orientation, race, gender).

Furthermore, this research is conducted within the constructivist paradigm which places value on narratives as well as postpositivist principles (Hatch, 2002). Postpositivist principles focus on a departure from quantitative methods and fit more closely with exploratory and interpretive studies and methods in which the views of the participant are central to the study. Theorists Josselson (1996) and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) posited that there are differences in the way that students and adults develop and make meaning of their experiences. More specifically, these theorists have noted different patterns and themes in the ways that women and men develop and construct their identities. Knowing this, student affairs practitioners should examine their approach to supervising, advising, and mentoring student leaders on campus.

In particular, I plan to examine the role of the RA and the self-perceptions these students construct in their experiences as leaders. Little research has been done to examine the patterns that emerge from a qualitative analysis of this topic. Moreover, the investigation of self-perceptions of RAs has been ignored in the literature surrounding college student leadership development and theory.
Other studies, such as the leadership study conducted by Kezar and Moriarty (2000) measured differences in leadership using quantitative methods and make a call for further investigation. Specifically, Kezar and Moriarty claimed that practitioners would benefit from research regarding the differences between men and women in leadership contexts. Qualitative research about the ways that men and women construct meaning in these roles could provide helpful information for staff members who design programs to meet the varying developmental needs of college students. Furthermore, Kezar and Moriarty asserted that in-depth studies are needed in this area to assist in the engagement and development of students’ leadership skills beginning in their first year at a university.

There have been a number of quantitative studies specifically focused on Resident Advisors. Komives (1991) measured the relationship of Residence Hall Directors’ transformational and transactional leadership approaches to select Resident Assistant outcomes, and Posner and Brodsky (1993) investigated the relationship between the leadership behaviors of RAs and the resulting level of effectiveness. Further, Hallenbeck, Dickman, and Fuqua (2004) researched the dimensions of leadership and motivation in relation to residential setting.

Shertzer and Schuh (2004) studied students’ perceptions of leadership and how these perceptions empower or constrain students from involvement in leadership. Shertzer and Schuh employed a qualitative method and conducted their research using focus groups, interviews, and document review. Schaller and Wagner (2007) also used the qualitative method to learn about Resident Advisors, but their study was specific to the sophomore transition and experience. Therefore, there is a significant gap in the
literature that can be addressed through a qualitative, exploratory study.

Guiding Research Framework and Questions

This study addressed these observations and was conducted using the inductive approach of using data analysis to determine the findings of the study. Participants were encouraged to share experiences and their perspectives related to their role as a leader in the RA position. The guiding question and sub questions for this study are as follows:

How do Resident Advisors construct meaning and perceive their leadership role?

a. How do Resident Advisors define leadership within the context of their individual experiences?

b. How do Resident Advisors believe they are perceived by students and staff in their residence hall?

Significance of Study

The benefit of this study, for both participants and residence hall communities, would potentially be a greater understanding of the complexity and variation inherent in the Resident Advisor position and experience. Student affairs practitioners will potentially gain knowledge to assist in developing new and better ways of supporting campus residence hall leaders and mentoring these students during their collegiate experience. The individual constructions of leadership in the RA position should be analyzed in an effort to better educate the full-time staff members that supervise these students (i.e. Residence Hall Directors). RAs meet with their supervisor on a regular basis to discuss their experience in the position. Ideally, the results of this study could help senior staff (i.e. Residence Hall Directors) to recognize the implications of the
experience of individual RAs and how self-perceptions can impact broader leadership development in other contexts on campus.

Delimitations and Limitations of Study

The delimitations of this study consider the lack of generalization inherent in qualitative work. As shown through a review of the existing literature, there is little information that addresses RAs qualitatively, and this study focused upon their perceptions and experiences. However, the perceptions of the six students that participated in my study cannot be generalized to a larger sample or population. Instead, this study sought to explore the perceptions of students and allowed them to interpret and describe their own experiences in an effort to better understand leadership and the RA position. Also, I selected the participants for this study from a pool of current and former RAs. Any RAs that I supervised or worked with in the past were not eligible for participation in this study to help in maintaining the goodness of the information provided by the participants. Inherent in this selection process was the delimitation concerning level of experience in the RA role. The study participants potentially had anywhere from one to three years of experience in the RA position.

Additionally, this study was conducted at The Ohio State University, a large, land-grant, Midwestern public university which is also a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). With about 10,000 students housed on campus in residence halls, the on campus student population is relatively small when compared to a total enrollment number of about 50,000 students. The campus is located in the urban center of Columbus, Ohio and provides a variety of residence hall living arrangements. The experience of the Resident
Advisors at this institution may vary considerably in comparison with other colleges and universities. Lastly, this study is designed to use broad questions to gain a holistic perspective of students’ stories and perceptions. Despite this fact, it is impossible to cover every aspect of a student’s experience in his or her position as a Resident Advisor. With consideration of these delimitations, the information provided by this study will add to the literature of the field and can provide helpful insight into the awareness and development exhibited by RAs as student leaders.

This study is organized around six chapters. Chapter One provides an introduction to the research topic, the purpose and significance of the study, and the delimitations of the research. Chapter Two includes a thorough review of the existing literature in an effort to provide a helpful context for this specific study. In particular, the literature review will discuss college student leadership, relevant student development theories, and the role of the Resident Advisor. Chapter Three details the methodology and methods used for this study. Chapter Four reports the themes and results of this study and Chapter Five examines participant narratives in the context of leadership styles. Chapter Six provides a conclusion while discussing the results of the study and their implications for practice and future research in the field of student affairs.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As leadership development continues to be a significant part of the college experience, the literature addressing this topic and specific leadership positions has grown. A variety of college and university mission statements highlight the development of leadership skills as a significant part of educating individuals on campus (Clark, 1985; Roberts, 1997, as cited in Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, Burkhardt, 2001). Given its importance, student affairs practitioners should be able to continue to support the mission of universities and be able to understand the phenomena of leadership growth and student identity exploration. More specifically, developing an understanding of current ideas on student leadership through the Resident Advisor position and their perceptions of themselves necessitates a brief review of the literature regarding these content areas. The review of literature for this study focused on three main areas: student development theory, especially relating to gender differences in growth and development, college student leadership, and specific studies about Resident Advisors (RAs).

Student Development Theory

In their study about student leadership development, researchers Kezar and Moriarty (2000) state, “Themes of interdependence and connectedness and new models of identity development emerging in personal development theories are similar to themes being discussed in the emerging paradigms of leadership” (p. 56). For this reason, this
review of literature begins with an exploration of relevant student development theory.

In order to learn about how students construct their identities as leaders and Resident Advisors, there must be a review of the ways in which students grow and develop during their college years. This section will review work from theorists demonstrating the need for further exploration of individual student experiences and identity development.

Student development theory has expanded to address several new aspects of students’ experiences in finding their identity. For this study, theories that focus on psychosocial and epistemological development are useful. Theories about psychosocial development address changes that occur in thinking and feeling over a period of time. Astin (1993) found that higher self-esteem and increased autonomy were results of growth and personal development during college. He summarized his findings by concluding that being less dependent on authorities meant that students were able to develop themselves and to think more highly of themselves.

*Psychosocial Identity Theories*

Another study by Chickering and Reisser (1993) also provided an outline of college student psychosocial identity development. Chickering and Reisser’s seven vector theory articulated the way in which students progress from developing competence to developing integrity. Chickering’s vectors discussed how students are often grappling with several dimensions of identity development at the same time. Additionally, he claimed that students’ experiences at college can help them move through the vectors and continue to develop. Chickering and Reisser recognized that college campuses are developmentally diverse and that students have varying needs, though these needs were
not addressed in detail until their later work. Thus, student affairs practitioners, faculty, and administrators need to maintain flexibility in their plans to promote identity growth and development and cannot focus on only one aspect of this process. Further, Chickering and Reisser noted that changes in students’ attitudes, values, future plans, and intellectual pursuits that occur throughout college are a result of new reference groups and interpersonal relationships developed in the residence halls. Chickering and Reisser’s findings were instructive for this study because they focused on the holistic development of students. The present study was focused on exploring all aspects of students’ developmental experiences as leaders and Resident Advisors.

*Epistemological Development Theories*

Another theorist, William Perry, provided the first in-depth study of students’ epistemological development (King, 1978). Epistemological, or cognitive, development focuses on how people know, think, and reason. Cognitive theories are often somewhat linear in nature and move from simple to more complex reasoning. Perry discussed the way that students develop intellectually and postulated that students progress through nine developmental positions. Perry’s positions outlined a process in which students develop from a dualistic, simple perspective of the world around them to a perspective where students can put their ideas in relation to other ideas and long-term goals and plans.

Advanced development according to Perry’s theory would indicate that students are able to make decisions contextually and also refers to their advancement in ethical development (King, 1978). Students’ experiences, such as interactions with students of
different racial backgrounds and the navigation of various ethical dilemmas, help them to progress through this positional model of development. Knowing that Resident Advisors and other student leaders on campus often encounter ethical dilemmas and must make judgments in their role, Perry’s theory provided context for examining students’ cognitive development.

**Gender Differences in Development**

Marcia Baxter Magolda (1990) used the Measure of Epistemological Reflection (MER) to explore differences between cognitive development in men and women. Baxter Magolda found that there is a significant difference by gender, as men and women “experience the shift from certainty of knowledge to limited uncertainty of knowledge differently” (p.561). She noted that for men, this transition occurred much more quickly than for women. Baxter Magolda implied that this difference could occur due to women’s lower tendency to discuss uncertainty. Baxter Magolda’s findings were useful in exploring the differences in decision-making style for male and female RAs.

Theorists Josselson (1996) and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) discovered a particular division in the way that women and men develop and construct their identities, although these researchers do not make claims specific to men only. Josselson conducted interviews with women and found that women are not alike and they often define themselves in different ways than men. Josselson found that few researchers have studied women in a way that allowed for story-telling or self-definition. Her work resulted in the formation of four pathways of identity that describe the way a woman develops and learns about herself in the context of society.
Belenky et al. (1986) also examined the differences between the ways that women and men make meaning of their experiences. Belenky et al. interviewed women and grouped their responses into five major ways of knowing. It is noted in their research that these ways of knowing are not complete and the focus should be on the individual experience and learning the stories of others. Josselson and Belenky et al provided information about ways in which different populations construct their identities. In the present study, there was an analysis of how this process varied for different RAs.

Lastly, involvement has been linked to holistic student development by several theorists such as Chickering (1974), Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), and Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, Andreas, Lyons, Strange, Krehbiel, and MacKay (1991). Pascarella and Terenzini, who focused much of their research on how college impacts students, discovered a direct relationship between the development of leadership skills and involvement in student organizations. Kuh et al. also found that membership in a club or organization results in more mature interpersonal relationships. These specific studies illuminated the connection between student development theory and involvement and the ways in which these ideas intersect.

Leadership Identity

Despite the significance of leadership, few scholars have addressed the development of leadership identity through their work (Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005). There are a number of studies that have quantitatively evaluated leadership and have analyzed leadership phenomena from a traditional perspective. Wielkiewicz (2000) theorized that leadership could be understood as an
adaptive system, through the lens of ecology thinking. In a departure from the positivist paradigms used to evaluate leadership as a phenomenon, researchers explored ways to incorporate the voices of their participants. Komives et al.’s (1998) definition of leadership as a relational process is a departure from past ideas about leadership as “traits, behaviors, and situations” which were terms used when society focused on production and efficiency over growth and development (Komives et al., 2005, p. 593).

*New Perspectives on Leadership Development*

Komives et al. (2005) stated that there is a need for new leadership development theories that focus on developmental aspects of leadership. In order to learn more about this topic and the way it has evolved over time, Komives et al. implemented a study in which they had discussions with 13 participants about leadership, and through their work developed a 6-stage model for leadership identity. The relational leadership model incorporates elements of inclusiveness, purpose, empowerment, and reflection on the individuals' experiences with others in their environment (Komives et al.). Komives and her associates also highlight that involvement experiences are usually the first opportunities for student leadership identities to begin to evolve.

Komives et al. (2005) describe the six-stage model for leadership development as beginning with the realization that leaders do exist, which is referred to as the Awareness stage. In this stage, leaders might include parents or other popular figures as individuals that display leadership qualities. Exploration/Engagement is the second stage in this model, and it is described as a time when individuals become involved in group activities and observe other leaders, while not formally becoming leaders themselves. The third
stage, called Leader Identified, is a phase where individuals believe that positional leaders have a responsibility to lead groups and create positive experiences for members of that group. In this stage, students begin to realize that they can choose to be a leader through a position they take, and that there is potential for a variety of individuals to take this path to leadership. The third stage leads into a fourth, named Leader Differentiated, which is the stage in which individuals realize anyone in the group can be a leader and, “leadership is a process between and among people” (p. 606). Next, there is a stage called Generativity, in which students become invested in larger purposes and support their passion through service and mentoring others with similar goals. The final stage is the Integration/Synthesis stage in which students define leadership as an important part of their own self-identities. In summary, this leadership identity model serves as a resource for leadership development, while also indicating that this process occurs over time. This study by Komives provided a lens for analyzing participants’ views of themselves as leaders and was used to help condense ideas presented in the raw data from interviews.

Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster and Burkhardt (2001) completed a qualitative study to examine the nature of leadership. Shertzer and Schuh (2004) found that students’ own definition of leadership likely influences the degree to which they perceive themselves to be leaders. Shertzer and Schuh’s study produced themes about how a variety of students perceive leadership. Emergent themes included: “leadership as an individual possession, leadership is positional; leaders possess certain qualities and skills, and leaders act from internal motivations” (p. 116). This study also found that disengaged students were less confident, did not believe in their own ability to be
competent enough for a leadership position or new responsibility, and that their personal
traits prevented them from leading. These studies called for further exploration of
students as leaders and provided perspectives which were instrumental in defining the
structure of the present study.

Gender, Race, and Leadership Growth

Given that Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, and Osteen (2005) define
leadership as an ongoing process for individuals, it is necessary to explore how this
process can be unique for diverse populations. Kezar and Moriarty (2000) conducted a
study that challenged theorists and practitioners to focus on meeting the needs of a
diverse student body through their work on leadership development. This study was not
the first to discuss the need for expanding models of development beyond findings based
on white male participants. Researchers began debating the needs of different
populations after discovering that women and African Americans, as well as other racial
or ethnic groups, struggle to find common experiences with white men due to findings
that these groups experience the social world in unique ways (Belenky, Clinchy,
Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982).

Kezar and Moriarty’s (2000) quantitative study also found that regardless of race,
men usually have a higher self-perception of themselves as leaders than women. They
also noted that participation in leadership activities or programs was a strong predictor of
future leadership ability for women. Whitt (1994) also studied the connection between
leadership and gender. Whitt discussed the fact that women are attending college in
record numbers but do not have the proper tools to lead successfully. She noted that
women rely upon different skills when leading others and often favor a participative leadership style than their male counterparts. Whitt stated that women place greater importance on relationships, seek collaboration and community, and are more willing to share information and power than male leaders (p. 198). Women are expected to lead in environments that structure leadership experiences around models that are typically better suited for male leaders. Given that the participants for this study were both men and women, these studies provided context for the examination of gender patterns and differing perspectives on leadership.

Differences in racial identity can also affect the way students develop their leadership style. Perry (1970), Astin (1993), and Chickering & Reisser (1993), as well as other theorists, posit that college students who interact with other students of different races have better leadership skills. Also, Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster and Burkhardt (2001, p. 18) found that Mexican American and Chicano students valued experiences which allowed them to focus on relationships with a larger community and these experiences were best suited to promoting their leadership development.

Romano (1996) conducted interviews with women who were serving as presidents of various student organizations. This study by Romano also sought to explore the perspectives of African American women, Asian American women, and women with disabilities in connection with their leadership experiences. Women in the study conducted by Romano indicated that they were interested in increased opportunities to acquire leadership skills, found familial influence to be important, and found gains in self-confidence after participating in a leadership position. Romano also found that
women tend to think about leadership in more nonconventional ways when compared with their male counterparts. Kezar (2000, p. 8, as cited in Shertzer & Schuh, 2004) stated that, “Women and women of color tended to describe leadership as collective, collaborative, empowerment-based…team-oriented, and characterized by equal power relations.” Further, both Romano’s and Whitt’s (1994) qualitative studies illuminated the differences between the ways that men and women lead and perceive themselves in leadership contexts. The participants for this study came from various racial backgrounds and cultures. Thus, these findings were relevant in determining the impact, if any, of racial identity on the other findings.

Leadership and the Resident Advisor Position

As stated by Komives et al. (2005), much of the literature on leadership development, “focuses on skill-building or short-term interventions such as retreats or courses, rather than on the process of how leadership capacity or leadership identity is created or changes over time” (p. 594). Living environments can have a noteworthy impact on whether or not students will become connected to a group of individuals, involved on campus, or even make a decision to transfer or depart from a university (Berger, 1997). Students living in residence halls tend to exhibit greater levels of personal growth and psychosocial development than students who live off-campus (Schroeder, Mable, & Associates, 1994). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) also found that opportunities for involvement in residential living are positively linked to support for issues of social justice and an increased level of moral judgment.

One important leadership position for an undergraduate student in the residence
halls is that of a Resident Advisor (RA). Resident Advisors typically live with and advise a floor or wing of undergraduate students and serve as a resource, mentor, disciplinarian, and leader to that community (Blimling, 1995). Deluga and Winters (1990) used a quantitative study to examine the impact of role ambiguity and role conflict on students in the RA position due to the flexibility required by these students and found that students struggle to define their experience and learn expectations about this job role. RAs are the student workers who serve as the primary contact for students living on their floor or wing and respond to any issues that might arise (Blimling, 1998). The requirement that RAs live on the same floor as the students whom they advise and mentor often makes their daily routines challenging in nature, as they are typically undergraduate students balancing academics with the job role (Blimling, 1998). The Resident Advisor position provides a rich context for examining leadership through a student job role that is held over a significant period of time and promotes growth and development.

**Quantitative Studies about RAs**

Deluga and Winters (1991) surveyed RAs to learn about their motivations to apply for this position. Ames, Zuzich, Schuh, and Benson (1979, as cited in Deluga & Winters, 1991) stated that students often apply to become RAs to experience personal growth, new relationships or friendships, compensation, to have increased responsibility, and single rooms. Deluga and Winters’ quantitative study also found a relationship between interpersonal stress and financial obligations. Students who are interested in being RAs only for the monetary compensation often struggle to find meaning or value in their job.
Denzine and Anderson (1999) used their quantitative study to examine the relationship between self-efficacy and job performance. This study explored the tendency for RAs to have a more positive experience with the job position when they have found tangible success in the implementation of their job requirements. Denzine and Anderson also discussed students who were interested in learning about themselves and others through the RA job role were more likely to find value in the employment position.

Additionally, the study completed by Deluga and Winters (1991) found a positive relationship between interpersonal stress and a desire for power (p. 550). RAs seeking power through their job role may not be well received by their peers as are other RAs who appear to be more approachable to fellow students. Further, these RAs may feel less supported by their supervising residence hall staff members, may face confrontation more often, and could potentially experience increased stress from feelings of isolation. Deluga and Winters also found a relationship between RA job satisfaction and cohesiveness between RA staff. Their study indicated that RAs tend to have a more positive experience when they are appropriately supported and challenged by both peers and supervisors and value identity development and growth.

Another study on RA satisfaction and motivation detailed the enhancement of RA satisfaction through the “transformational leadership behaviors of their Hall Director supervisors” (Komives, 1991, p. 514). Professional staff and RAs often form a bond and when successful, this bond can increase the RA’s ability to complete job tasks and stay motivated to perform well. Additionally, Komives found that professional staff members
help RAs to connect the significance of their work to ideas about student development within residence life.

RA and Identity Development

Blimling (1995) notes the importance of the RA role and the potential for significant growth and development through the job role. As with other developmental moments which college students experience, RAs’ development is impacted through their involvement in the position when they are challenged by ethical and moral dilemmas in their job role. Palmer (1996) conducted a study about victimization in the residence halls and found that developmental dilemmas often occur when there is dissonance between job requirements or housing policy and what the RA believes is morally right. This study also discussed how student behavior through acceptance or rejection can impact the way a RA makes decisions about what is moral. Palmer highlights the importance of a peer support system between RAs, which is especially important in times of crisis or developmental challenges.

There have also been studies, such as one completed by Watt, Howard-Hamilton, and Fairchild (2003) to assess the multicultural competence of Resident Advisors. This quantitative assessment found female RAs, liberal students, and students from a lower socio-economic background to be more competent about multicultural issues than their counterparts. Further Watt, et al. concluded that the RA position is conducive to educating students about issues of social justice and other diversity topics through training programs and conversations with student affairs supervisory staff.
Qualitative Studies about RAs

Much of the literature about Resident Advisors is quantitative in nature. However, it was useful to examine the past research about Resident Advisors to illustrate the gap in the literature, as well as the need for exploration of students’ individual experiences and voices. One exception to this method of research is a qualitative study completed by Schaller and Wagner (2007) about the sophomore RA experience. Similar to the present study, Schaller and Wagner employed the constructivist paradigm, using qualitative interviews as the method for learning about the participants’ experiences. Schaller and Wagner found several themes that emerged from their data; however, these themes are related specifically to the challenges students face in the job role during their second year on a private university campus.

Summary of Literature Review

This literature reviewed student development theory, student involvement, and the specific studies that have focused on Resident Advisors. The literature indicated that more exploratory work is necessary and that individual students may perceive leadership and their roles on campus in unique ways. Moreover, this review of literature revealed limited studies about the leadership opportunity available through working as a Resident Advisor and how this relates to identity construction and growth. The present study uses a broader lens to explore the perceptions that multi-rank students (sophomore, junior, and senior) have about the Resident Advisor position on a public campus and is designed to address this gap in the literature.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The review of literature indicated that there is a need for further exploration of students’ voices and individual experiences as leaders on campus. In particular, studies about Resident Advisors are limited in nature and often do not explore the students’ development through the position in a holistic manner. This chapter on methodology and methods will detail the qualitative framework that must be used in this type of exploratory, interpretive study. Further, this chapter will describe the way in which participants were selected and methods for data collection and analysis.

This study was a qualitative study of sophomore, junior, and senior RAs. The constructivist approach was selected because it allowed the researcher to identify patterns and themes based on information provided by the participants. Creswell (2005) also states that constructivism allows participants to share their genuine, individual experiences. The self-perceptions of RAs were examined through asking broad, open-ended questions that allowed participants to shape the course and results of the research. The primary reason this issue was explored through qualitative research is that no specific information has been published that examines how individual experience plays a role in the way RAs feel they are perceived in their leadership positions. The voices and stories of the students allowed for a broader, more extensive review of the individual
experiences in the RA position.

The Role of the Researcher

As discussed by Patton (1990), Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006) and other qualitative researchers, the researcher’s biases and positionality within the study must be considered. I completed my undergraduate education at Ohio State and am currently finishing a Master’s program in Higher Education and Student Affairs at Ohio State. During my undergraduate education, I was a Resident Advisor for three years in Lincoln Tower, which is a co-ed suite-style residence hall on West Campus and also worked for one summer in Scholars East, which is a corridor-style suite residence hall on South Campus. I currently work in the residence halls as an Assistant Residence Hall Director and directly supervise RAs. Additionally, it is relevant to note that I am a white, heterosexual female as well as a first generation college student. I prevented my biases and assumptions from significantly influencing the results of the study by transcribing data verbatim, focusing on individual participant experiences, and intentionally excluding current and past supervisees and co-workers from my sample.

Rationale for Selection of Method

In order to discover the students’ voices and genuine experiences, I chose to follow Patton’s (1990) description of the semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interview format has a number of questions that can be asked in the same order or in slightly different orders and allows the researcher to ask some follow-up questions if clarification is needed. It has been found that highly structured interview formats can potentially assume certain participant responses, limiting the extent to which their
perspectives are heard (Loevinger & Wessler, 1970, as cited in Baxter Magolda, 1990). Interviewing will allow for the exploration of individual differences between participants’ experiences and outcomes and the understanding of the meaning of the RA position to the participants. I plan to allow the order in which I ask the questions to be dependent on the informant’s responses and may ask the participant to expand on some of his or her answers if he or she is willing to do so.

Kvale (1996) defines qualitative research interviews as a strategy of deciphering the world from the participants’ perspectives, to discover the meaning of individual life experiences, and to find out about the participants’ world without looking through the lens of technical reasoning and science. I chose interviewing as my technique for data collection because my study is focused on uncovering the participant perspective that Kvale discusses. I also follow Kvale’s perspective that qualitative interviews should be centered on intellectual understanding of the experiences of others. My goal for this study is to use qualitative interviewing as an exploratory step and to provide the option of future quantitative, structured research to supplement this information.

The research procedures are based on Seidman’s (1991) model for qualitative interviewing. Seidman’s interview model calls for a discussion of life history, followed by discussion of an experience, and finally a discussion focused on the long-term meaning of the experience. This interview model was selected in order to obtain results that are as holistic as possible, given the limited interview time frame which was approximately one hour per participant. In contrast to Seidman’s strategy of three ninety-minute interviews, I used a single interview which contained Seidman’s three elements
for discussion and examination of holistic development.

Data Collection

The first portion of the interview focused on broad questions about the participant’s background and life history. The second section of the interview focused on leadership, how the student defined campus leadership, and the RA position. The participant was asked to share any specific experiences that were meaningful in the context of his or her RA role. Finally, the third portion of the interview focused on his or her perception of the long-term impact and meaning of the RA position. The participant was asked about his or her perception of himself or herself in the RA role and how the RA position impacted the individual’s collegiate experience. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed after their completion, with full participant consent from all six interviewees. Additionally, there were some written notes taken during the interviews to note nonverbal cues given by the participants.

Participant Sampling

As an employee of University Housing, I had access to a population of current and former RAs that could participate in this study. In an effort to examine the experience of both male and female Resident Advisors, I used a sampling strategy that Patton (1990) defines as purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is intended to identify individuals who are eligible and may provide rich information for the research. I did not offer participation in this study to any student that I have directly supervised or have worked alongside as a peer during my time as an undergraduate Resident Advisor at The Ohio State University. I distributed a letter detailing my study and procedures to all
Resident Advisors to which I wanted to offer participation in my study.

Due to the fact that interviews began during the summer quarter, I offered participation to all six summer Resident Advisors initially, as I intended to limit my sample to six participants. The sample size was limited in order to focus on an in-depth exploration of the experiences of the students participating in the study within a limited time frame. After not receiving responses from all six summer Resident Advisors, participation was offered to two Resident Advisors who were enrolled in classes but not working over the summer. Participation was later offered to three former RAs, and current Resident Managers (RMs), during RM training at the end of the summer. RMs are student paraprofessionals that supervise the Office Assistants (OAs) who staff the residence hall front desks and work collaboratively with the Hall Director (HD) and Assistant Hall Director (AHD) to build community in their building or complex. These students, while currently in the RM role, have held a position as a Resident Advisor for at least one year during their undergraduate experience. All of these students were eligible and had worked in a variety of different residence hall communities. A letter requesting participation in this study was distributed to 11 Resident Advisors. In total, I received responses back from one of the summer RAs, two of the RAs who were around taking summer classes, and three of the RMs. These six individuals were the participants for this study.

My method of selection of these Resident Advisors was based on Patton’s (1990) idea of maximum variation. I used this method of sampling to potentially increase differences in experiences and viewpoints by offering participation to individuals of
different backgrounds that have worked in different residence halls. I offered participation in my study to certain Resident Advisors in an effort to make my subject pool demographically diverse. However, this process was difficult due to the limited participant pool available during summer quarter.

I offered participation to both men and women who have worked in different residence halls around campus under different supervisors. To produce in-depth material from each participant interview, I limited my sample size to six participants. My goal was for about half of the participants to be female, in an effort to observe the different experiences of each sex in the Resident Advisor position. My final pool resulted in three male and three female participants for the study.

Each student that participated in my study received a copy of a letter detailing the study and was asked to sign a consent form prior to the start of the data collection. In addition, participants’ audio tapes and interview notes were kept in individual files, accessible only by the researcher and thesis advisor, along with their signed paperwork. When the interviews were transcribed, each participant was assigned a participant number and any information that could reveal the participant’s identity or provide a link to a participant’s identity was deleted. The assigned participant number serves as his or her identity throughout all of the writing that uses the collected data. I did not keep a list linking the identities of the participants with their assigned participant number. However, I did note on the transcripts the information included in Table 1.1 in order to track themes related to gender, race, and age and RA experience.
Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the inductive nature of qualitative research, as the critical themes emerged out of the data (Patton, 1990). I began data analysis with the verbatim transcription of the audio recordings into typed text. Kvale (1996) outlines five approaches to analyzing the meaning of interviews: categorization, condensation, narrative structuring, deeper interpretations, and ad hoc tactics for the generation of meaning (pp. 187-209). I implemented Kvale’s approach of meaning condensation in an effort to make sense of the broad data gathered from the qualitative interviews.

Meaning condensation is defined as an abridgment of the information provided by the interviewees into shorter phrases. I first read through the entire interview to get a sense for the overarching ideas expressed by the participant. Then, I searched for examples of the ways participants constructed meaning and looked for themes in which to group these examples. I examined the theme in relation to the study and tied the essential themes together to create descriptive statements based on the participants’ experience. Direct quotes from the participants were listed under participant numbers to track their “voices” illustrating the themes being described.

After I examined the themes that existed among the six interviews, several commonalities emerged from the participant data. I reread the transcripts several times each, made notes from written interview notes and highlighted common ideas through coding the transcripts. Using the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, and paper and pencil techniques, I employed “open coding” as well as meaning condensation. Both coding and meaning condensation are data analysis methods detailed by Patton (1990).
and Kvale (1996). These methods were used to find similar thoughts, developmental processes, and comments present in the interview data. The quotes and summarized interview transcripts listed in this manuscript were found through reading transcripts and using Kvale’s idea of meaning condensation. As the text was condensed, relevant quotes emerged under various codes after “open coding” was completed.

Through “open coding,” I created 29 free nodes, or units which condensed ideas in the interview transcripts into categories. These categories were developed based on phrases or sentences provided by participants that were representative of reflection, development, or growth in their leadership or RA position. In total, all 29 of these free nodes have references in multiple interview transcripts and 26 of these were grouped under larger themes. After completing this first step of analysis, I reread the transcripts again and determined where the free nodes could fit under broader themes. At this point in the analysis, I used paper and pencil to make lists of various free nodes and their relationships to each other. Some of the free nodes were listed under more than one larger category.

Measures to Enhance the Quality of the Data

To ensure the goodness of the data collected for this study, I followed Kvale’s (1996) seven stages for designing and implementing an interview study. Kvale notes the interviewer’s role as an instrument in qualitative interviewing. I took into account the influence of my nonverbal messages, effects of the setting on the interview, and nuances of the environment. These subjective factors were strengths to the validity of the study because I used the flexibility inherent in semi-structured interviewing to be sure the
participant was able to comfortably communicate about his or her individual experiences.

Kvale (1996) also mentions the importance of strict attention to the process of transcription. I had all materials, including the audio recorder, set up in advance and ready for the start of each interview. Also, with participant consent, I took notes during the interview to keep track of any nonverbal messages sent during the interview that might be helpful to understanding the participant’s feelings and stories.

Additionally, the qualitative approach provided an opportunity to give interpretations back to the informants. The participants were offered an opportunity to comment on my interpretations and summaries based on their interview, as well as to elaborate on their own original statements. This strategy of testing the quality of the data is called “member checking” (Jones, Torres, Arminio, 2006). There were no significant changes when I employed this measure to check the quality of the data. Through “member checking,” I clarified the ideas of each participant in relation to the others as well as verified that I had transcribed accurate descriptions of their experiences. Lastly, I applied the seven larger themes that emerged from the data to a discussion about future implications and conclusions based on the research. Coding techniques and the seven themes are discussed in Chapter 4.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS, CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS, AND DISCUSSION

Chapter Three provided explanations of the methodological framework and methods used for this study. As outlined in Chapter One, interviews were conducted with six students who currently hold or have held Resident Advisor positions at The Ohio State University. The other three participants are currently working as Resident Advisors during the 2007-2008 academic year. The following table provides an overview of the demographic information of the participants for this study:

Table 1.1 Demographics of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Current Year in RA job</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>19-23</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>19-23</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>2 years completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>19-23</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>1 year completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>19-23</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Asian (Indian)</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>19-23</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2 years completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>19-23</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Coded Units and Themes

From this point, the data was further evaluated and an in-depth discussion of data analysis is provided here. As stated in Chapter Three, there were 29 free nodes that emerged from initial coding and data analysis and resulted in 26 free nodes being grouped under seven tree nodes, or larger categories, based on the participants’ stories. Before grouping the free nodes into categories, I reread transcripts and then began to create tree nodes, or themes for the study, in NVivo. Seven tree nodes were created and are listed in this chapter as subheadings to report the findings of this study. These tree nodes were named: Am I a Leader?, Leadership as Power, Relationships are Everything, Emotional Stress and Role Ambiguity, Judgments and Perceptions, Campus Niche, and Identity Development. Each group of free nodes listed under each of the individual tree nodes are listed here for reference with each number of references.

Specifically, Am I a Leader? grouped the free nodes named: definition of a leader (9 references), characteristics of leaders (11 references), questioning of leadership-women (7 references), authority (10 references), leadership-men (5 references), respect (7 references). Leadership as Power as a tree node grouped the free nodes named: relational leadership (12 references), respect (7 references), born or bred (7 references), authority (10 references), and definition of leader (9 references). Relationships are Everything as a tree node grouped the free nodes named: stress (5 references), support (6 references), personal connections with students (12 references), comparison with others (9 references), discipline (14 references), and friends outside of housing (4 references). Emotional Stress and Role Ambiguity as a tree node grouped the free nodes named:
consistency in RA position (3 references), inconsistency in RA position (6 references), ambiguity (4 references), meaning in work (15 references), and supervisory relationships (7 references). Judgments and Perceptions as a tree node grouped the free nodes named: discipline (14 references), authority (10 references), and individual style (6 references). Campus Niche as a tree node grouped the free nodes named: networking (10 references), community on campus (5 references), niche (22 references), and not a typical experience (8 references). Lastly, Identity Development as a tree node grouped the free nodes named: diversity issues (2 references) and changes due to RA position (19 references).

The free nodes that were not grouped under tree nodes were: reasons for attending OSU (10 references), volunteering (4 references), and continuation in student affairs (4 references). These free nodes were not used because although they provided insight into the background of participants, they did not uncover a deeper meaning or experience common to all participants. The coded information in these three free nodes was noted, but not used in the formation of the seven larger themes that resulted from this study.

I related these findings to each dimension of student development theory and found that through relationships, the students in my study who work as RAs also develop their identity and grow cognitively as well. Yet, interpersonal relationships are the focus of students’ ability to have a positive, successful experience in the RA role at this institution. The participants’ answers to the interview questions were often linked to relationships with students and staff in their buildings and the impact those relationships had on the RA’s overall experience.

The participants were asked to begin by discussing their experience in high
school. Five of the six individuals, including all of the female participants, recalled being highly involved and participating in leadership roles during that time. This commonality fits with findings by various researchers, including Kezar and Moriarty (2000), who found that female students who are engaged in leadership initiatives, groups, or other activities often have greater ability to be leaders and consider themselves to be leaders.

Almost all of the participants noted that they came to Ohio State because of the variety of opportunities, and over half of the participants liked the idea of attending a large, public university since they did not know what they wanted to study. All participants specifically stated that they chose to apply for the Resident Advisor position due to direct interactions with their own RA or close friend who was an RA. These interactions were generally regarded as positive, although Participant Six recalled she was motivated to apply to become an RA because she felt she could improve on her RA’s performance. In addition to having similar motivations for attending Ohio State and pursuing an RA job, the seven overarching themes which emerged from the coded data are outlined in this chapter.

Am I a Leader?

As detailed in the literature review, numerous theorists have posited that men and women define and perceive leadership differently. In this study including three participants of each sex, the interviews resulted in different perspectives that were consistent with other studies. Participant One, Participant Three, and Participant Six were all women and each of them partially believed they were leaders because of experiences such as others telling them they were or should be leaders or because they
had experiences in their RA job role that allowed them to witness their impact on others around them. Yet, when asked directly, Participant Three and Participant Six both hesitated to declare themselves leaders. Participant Six said, “I guess so…well, it depends on your definition of a leader,” which demonstrated her uncertainty and need for others to confirm her status as a leader.

Participant Three said, “I’m one of those people, I need to feel like I’m a leader,” but when asked more directly about her own perception of herself as a leader, she alluded to a lack of confidence in her own ability. She mentioned that starting as a new RA and feeling inexperienced in the job role made her feel less confident. She said, “I was more afraid of screwing something up and looking dumb than taking the lead and maybe you know, maybe doing something right.” At another point in the interview, she mentioned receiving some feedback from her peers by recalling, “They said I became overconfident with the residents…which I think was just…that was me compensating for a lack of confidence.” This uncertainty connects with Baxter Magolda’s (1990) finding that women tend to question their competency for longer periods of time than men.

The male participants, Participant Two, Participant Four, and Participant Five, all stated that they believed they were leaders due to their positions of authority as RAs. Participant Five said there were situations where he felt he did not need to be a leader; however, all of the male participants firmly believed they were capable of being a leader if the situation called for it. Although there were slight differences in the way each participant defined leadership, the answers of the male participants were more self-assured than the answers of the female participants. Male participants were likely to
identify themselves as leaders as a result of their RA position alone. Participant Four said, “I think I’m a leader because I’m an RA” and Participants Two and Five made similar statements.

Leadership as Power

A second theme that emerged from the data was related to participants’ individual definitions of leadership. All of the participants believed that the RA position required that they be a leader for their floor community. Each of the six participants also described ways in which individuals could be either natural born leaders or develop into leaders through their experiences. This idea is consistent with Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster and Burkhardt (2001) who found evidence that individuals were able to become leaders through participating in various involvement opportunities and experiences.

Interestingly, all of the participants discussed either the word “power” or the word “influence” when defining a leader’s role. Each participant defined the RA role as one which required them to serve as an authority figure on the floor and in their larger residence hall community. The participants described a stereotypically male description of a leader. Participant Three said, “A leader is someone who is very strong…a person who knows when to take the lead…they’re very confident.” Participant Four described a leader as “more extroverted than non-leaders” and Participant Five noted that some leadership qualities were “strong-willed, persuasive, confident.” The overall definition of a leader as possessing traditionally male characteristics affirms Whitt’s (1994) study that found women may not have the tools to truly be leaders in an environment where the definition of a leader is better suited to the interests of men.
All of the women participating in the study focused their explanation of leadership around relationships and their interactions with other people, whereas two of three male participants spoke more about positionality. Participant One noted that she felt like a leader “when she is told by others that she is one” and “when I had seen myself have an impact on others in a positive way.” Participant Six took the idea of relational leadership a step further by stating a leader is, “someone who is caring…that’s the only true way to influence other people.” This notion of care for others and relational leadership distinguishes the different ways in which men and women make meaning of leadership and is congruent with findings by student development theorists Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) and Josselson (1996). However, Participant Two, a male, also focused his explanation of leader on relationships, which was different from the other two men’s responses in this study. He said, “To be a better leader, I think more in terms of relationships – a relational leadership model and style.” The four participants that defined leadership in the context of interpersonal relationships are in congruence with Susan Komives’ (1998) definition of leadership that is relevant to this study and focused on relational leadership.

Relationships are Everything

Whether discussing experiences outside or inside of the Resident Advisor position, relationships were central to the way the participants in this study created meaning of their experience and ability to be leaders. Perhaps the most significant finding of this study is that RAs at Ohio State rely heavily on forming solid interpersonal relationships with both students and particularly, staff. When this did not happen,
participants noted lower job satisfaction, frustration, and sometimes questioned their own actions. Working as a part of a cohesive team has provided several of the participants a gauge for their own identity development. A few of the participants even noted occasions where interactions with peers have shaped the way they now react to situations in their RA role.

For example, Participant Two noted that through interacting with students successfully, he became more confident in his ability to do the RA job. From his perspective, “It is more about the people and the connections and I see why it is at the top of every expectations list that I have had. It’s always been: Get to know your residents first.” Participant Three said, “When you have interactions with other people…they help shape a lot of who you are.” Participant Four discussed the importance of being open with fellow staff members and the difficulty associated with living and working alongside the same group of individuals. He also noted his interactions with students in crisis situations and how those interactions have shaped the way he approaches educational conversations, setting boundaries, and assisting other students on his floor. Participant Five discussed the differences between the two years he was a RA and said that he preferred the first year when he was interacting in a social, positive manner with his residents as opposed to only being seen as the disciplinarian during the second year he held the job position. Yet, he noted that in his second year, he still enjoyed the job due to close relationships and a support network that he found with fellow RAs in his building.

Participant Six commented on how her relationships with students and staff helped shape her RA experience and that she has respect and concern for the well-being of both RA
staff and students with which she interacts. She stated:

I think the way I bonded with staff was different than how I bonded with residents...when I first met the staff I was a lot more reserved, because I like to watch other people and let myself decide, I guess where my personality fits into that group...but, I think as far as residents go, I think it’s really important to be transparent, to show who you are in the beginning is more important with them...I think that after a year in the RA position I became more comfortable with who I was...this year with being a returner...I was more comfortable being me.

Some of these discussions mirror Kegan’s (1994) third state of consciousness where relationships are a large part of what defines one’s identity, particularly for Participant Three. Looking back through the transcripts, the senior rank participants were less likely to discuss relationships as a defining part of their experience or identity, as opposed to the junior rank participants. This finding indicates that the seniors may be transitioning developmentally between Kegan’s third and fourth state of consciousness. This shift occurs when individuals are able to begin to reflect on their involvement with others, rather than internalizing those relationships and allowing the relationships to create their identities. An example from Participant Five, who is a senior, illustrates this finding. He stated:

Because I don’t know if...someone’s identity is established by other people that they are in contact with. I mean you have to somewhat take other people’s opinions into account, otherwise you’d have no point of reference, but you have to look at yourself.

Despite any developmental differences, there were a variety of examples the data provided to support the statement that relationships are central to the success of the RA. Another theme related to interpersonal relationships was the difficulty in maintaining friendships with other students who do not work in the residence halls.
Several of the participants noted feeling disconnected from old friends and roommates they had been close with prior to becoming an RA. As detailed by Participant Four, some of these difficulties are related to balancing job expectations with social opportunities. Participant Four discussed the birthday party of a friend and how he knew his friend was of legal age and would be drinking alcohol, but that this individual was a close friend and would want him at the party. Participant Four said his solution to this was to just stop by the party and leave “before any Facebook photos were taken.” Still, special considerations must be considered for RAs as they socialize in order for them to abide by job expectations.

A few of the participants also specifically noted that they were aware that they were sacrificing the traditional college experience to be an RA. Participant One said, “it’s not a typical college life…you can’t really have [it]…you have limitations.” Participant Three recalled her unique college experience due to “all of the rules imposed by the university…how it affects your social life…having the majority of your friends in University Housing.” Additionally, Participant Five discussed his contentment with the RA lifestyle by discussing that his friends outside of the job would ask him to go out and socialize in ways that might challenge his job role but he was comfortable telling them that he was going to spend time with students and staff in the building instead. He mentioned that he was able to spend a lot of time in the building since he felt supported and had friendships in the residence hall. He summarized by stating that the RA job has been, “probably the biggest part of my collegiate experience…a lot of the people I know and call my friends are from University Housing.”
Emotional Stress and Role Ambiguity

As highlighted through the discussion of the most meaningful moments each participant has experienced in their RA role, the theme is that situations are significant and meaningful when they impact an RA on a personal level. Each of the situations outlined by the participants (i.e. suicidal resident, domestic abuse, serious roommate conflicts, assisting residents with social issues, aiding someone with alcohol poisoning, teaching students about diversity issues, and responding to a sexual assault) are notable incidents where as Participant Six stated, “They were things that changed me and I couldn’t just leave in the job, you know?” Her example was focused on a student who had been sexually assaulted. More specifically, she said:

I would say...when one of my residents was sexually assaulted, that really had the most impact on me...when she came to me, it was something I really wasn’t prepared to deal with...and...it’s something that I didn’t even see coming...I think I’m definitely more sensitive to it now...it really does feel kind of like it happened to me...so just watching her go through it impacted me.

Participant One shared a crisis situation she encountered in working with one of her residents. She recalled:

We were close enough that...I knew him well enough to know that he was “off.” It eventually got to the point where I had to “pop the question” and ask him if he was thinking about hurting himself. We referred him to counseling and he enjoyed and appreciated the counseling he was given. He talked to other people about it. He would mention the fact that he was going to counseling, which was great. Like, he didn’t even realize that in itself was kind of a leadership thing.

She summarized her response by stating that meaningful experiences often were those experiences where someone had shared something personal and trusted in her to assist with the issue.

Similar to other participants, Participant Four discussed a crisis situation as one of
his meaningful experiences he’s encountered as a part of the RA role. He discussed an incident in which a resident who had gotten counseling in the past, and was socially awkward, was unable to handle the jokes made by men on the floor. He stated:

One day [the student] went out and drank a lot. He passed out in a bathtub, off-campus at a house party. He was vomiting and was lying on his back and some other residents carried him 10 blocks…back to Steeb…They put him in a red cart and took him to his room…the RAs on call checked it out and he went to the hospital…But then, a few weekends later…a similar thing happened…cop stopped him, threw him to the ground, arrested him…he did counseling over the summer…I feel like even though it took him that much to realize it, he needed it.

He described the significant amount of time he spent talking with this student, how this situation happened a few weeks after he was hired mid-year, and the ways in which this situation provided him with some perspective. He said that this situation makes him think about choosing his battles and responding as early as possible, as well as discovering where to set boundaries and how to best assist students.

A few of the participants mentioned feeling like they were not capable of handling these types of serious situations until the time arose. In response to assisting a student who was in an abusive relationship, he said, “I always thought no one is going to want to listen to me or I wouldn’t know what to say…for whatever reason, I just knew what to say when the time came and she was more than willing to talk.” Although it seems that these serious situations described by the participants caused them a significant amount of emotional stress through the job, it seems that they also felt more competent and confident as RAs after dealing with these types situations.

The data also indicated that some RAs at this institution struggle with inconsistencies and role ambiguity. Deluga and Winters (1990) discussed role ambiguity
as a serious concern and reason for RA stress and burnout. Participant One noted that consistency and motivation for the job are important for each staff. She also discussed the frustrations she was currently having as a part of a staff team where she believed there was a significant amount of incongruence. Participant One also commented on her changed perception of the way residence halls are managed across campus. She noted that there was less consistency than she would have hoped for, since she knows she holds herself to high standards and is frustrated when other RAs do not. Participant Three also noted her frustrations with inconsistency by stating, “The supervisors tended to take sides…they had their favorites…I don’t know if that happens on every staff or not…but you could definitely tell there were favorites being played.” She mentioned that this observation had an impact on the way she was able to form relationships with peers and supervisors on her staff team.

Judgments and Perceptions

When asked to define how they made judgments in the RA job, all of the participants struggled to define what judgments meant, but talked about the way they address policy violations and documentation procedures. Being familiar with the variety of judgments RAs continuously need to make as a part of their jobs, I was surprised as a researcher to find that the primary example the six participants discussed was related to documentation. All of the participants mentioned that they first consider what their job expectations are and always uphold these when addressing policy violations. These statements could be true, but my position as an Assistant Hall Director could have influenced the way the participants responded to being asked to describe this process.
Another theme that emerged here was that the participants believed their residents’ perceptions of an RA was based almost entirely on individual interactions and experiences. Their perception was that students who had been documented for policy violations were more likely to have a negative perception of their RA. Participant Four disagreed by sharing that in his experience, students have not become upset or frustrated with him when he has needed to document their behavior. However, the overall response from the participants was that RAs feel as if students judge them when there are documented policy violations. Participant Three even noted that confronting policy violations tainted her overall RA experience by stating:

Well, first let me say that I would never take that experience back, but I never would’ve done it again. There’s certain things about the RA position where…it’s more like being a cop and less about being a person…I very much disliked having to be the cop.

Alternatively, Participant One discussed that residents can have the opposite perception if they have not witnessed their RA confronting a policy violation. She said that these students sometimes do not view the RA as an authority figure and this is also problematic.

Each participant referenced his or her own individual style of handling policy violations in the residence hall. For example, Participant One discussed documenting an alcohol situation by stating, “I’m not going to just straight up say ‘I know there’s alcohol in here,’ I might chat with them…I have my style…but then I get around to what I’ve been trained to do in order to keep consistency.” She also discussed that the RA position is more fluid with the expectations of making judgment calls, due the protocol that RAs should contact Hall Directors or Assistant Hall Directors in the event of a student crisis.
On the other hand, Participant Three stated, “With CIFs…I pretty much did it under the basis that if it was against the rules and I was supposed to be documenting it, I just did it.” Communication Information Forms (CIFs) are reports submitted by RAs to their senior staff (i.e. Residence Hall Directors) that details any incident impacting the community. These CIF forms are submitted online and are used for documentation of policy violation or to make note of other student behaviors.

Participant Five demonstrated a more reflective understanding of documentations and other judgments in the RA role. When asked to discuss how he made judgments in the job role, he explained that he focuses on the larger picture or the long-term outcomes. He stated:

> It could be documentations or personal problems residents have…I think about how your actions in November will affect how people will feel in March. Also, what you choose to do in your personal life and what you judge is appropriate and how that will affect how you are perceived in the building and how that will affect you and the other RAs. I think it can be how you go into a documentation…the attitude you have…like either he’s trying to make sure that we’re safe, or he’s trying to get everyone in trouble…Some of them think that …this is a bad person that thinks they are better than I am and they are trying to get us in trouble…they are narcs…and I think that….is the residents’ choice….their perceptions are molded by their experiences….But then, there’s the other group of residents who really respect the RAs and see that they are working hard to do their job.

Participant Two said he had one experience with a resident he thought would cause trouble who he recalled, “was just someone who didn’t understand the alcohol policy. But, he was actually a really great person.” These last statements by Participants Two and Five illustrate ways in which they are moving forward in their development. Being able to separate people from behaviors, to some degree, and to reflect on a situation are ways in which individuals begin to move into self-authorship (Kegan, 1994). Almost
every participant highlighted the importance of relationships here as well, noting that the time an RA puts into building strong relationships will often be reflected in the way they are received by their residents and staff team.

Campus Niche

Almost all of the participants discussed another theme that emerged from the data: the RA position provides a niche on campus for students that otherwise may have transferred to another institution or struggled to connect with the campus community. In particular, the women mentioned that they felt significantly disconnected from campus until they found the opportunity to be an RA. Participant One said, “You have to find your place, which was hard for me at first. To me, being a RA gives you purpose and a place on campus.” She further explained by stating:

I wasn’t really sure that I needed to be at Ohio State…I wasn’t feeling like I was fitting in anywhere on the large campus and…I wasn’t connected to a whole lot of people…So, it was definitely something that gave me an opportunity to establish myself as something.

Participant Three noted a similar experience, especially since she came to Ohio State as a transfer student. She said that the RA position allowed for her to be exposed to new friends and opportunities and as she stated, “it was just a matter of finding my niche.” Participant Six mentioned that she had seriously considered transferring to a different institution until she became involved in the RA process, which made campus much smaller and made her feel more connected. Through getting involved, the participants found that comfortable niches do exist on a large, and potentially intimidating campus. This theme reflects the qualitative findings of Logue, Hutchens, and Hector (2005) and Astin (1993) who discovered that students who are involved on campus are more likely to
feel that campus is a welcoming place where they are connected to others around them.

Identity Development through the RA Position

The RAs in this study perceived themselves as becoming more well-rounded individuals because of the RA position. Almost all of the participants discussed an increased ability to be confident as a person and as an RA. They also reported being more sensitive to diversity issues after RA training and experience in working with a variety of populations. Participant Six stated that meaningful experiences have affected her identity when she has learned about issues that are important to her residents that she had not previously considered in her own life. She also noted that prior to her RA experience she was not aware of diversity issues and did not have much exposure to diversity. She said, “I know the feelings of others are important, so [diversity] is something that maybe I didn’t value before…but it’s something that’s important to who I am now.” Using Perry’s positions as a reference, there is evidence that some RAs, like Participant One, discovered a more multiplistic view of the RA experience after having worked in the job role for a year. Participant One noted that one perception that changed for her was that she was now more aware of inconsistencies between supervisors, buildings, and the way in which her fellow RAs upheld job expectations and requirements.

Participants also noted that their identities and values were challenged, developed, or affirmed through their experiences in the RA role. Participant Six stated that she used to allow others to decide her values for her and the RA position helped her to become more confident and begin to attempt determining her own beliefs and values. Participant Four discussed that his values were affirmed through the RA position. He believes that
since his values are similar to the values of University Housing, he does not feel much dissonance and is reminded through his work that social justice issues and respecting others are things he wants to continue to support. Participant One discovered that she needed to surround herself with people who would “be more giving” to her for her own well-being as a student balancing an RA job with other roles. Participant Five said that he had strong beliefs, particularly about religion, when he entered into college and the RA position. He found that his faith did not change, but his perspective on his religion had changed due to the diverse interactions he has had as a part of his RA experience.

The participants all highlighted interpersonal growth and development as an outcome of their experience as RAs. Participant Two discussed how the RA position helped him to network and become more open and involved in other campus organizations. Participant Four spoke about his close relationship and support from his staff team this year. Participant Five concluded his interview by detailing how his identity changed as a result of his involvement in the RA position. He said:

> Coming out of high school, I was very closed-minded I guess… and I was sort of on this religious thing… where I’d be reading the Christian Bible and trying to believe in all this stuff… I guess I was more judgmental… I’m more open to that now and more aware of that now than I was then, which you are sort of forced to do through University Housing… I didn’t change my faith but I developed a different perspective on it… I’ve become a lot more mature… I believe now that life is what you make of it… and that if you’re not happy, it’s because you are choosing not to be.

Participant Six demonstrated her transition from Kegan’s (1994) third state of consciousness toward the fourth state by stating the following:

> [The RA position] really helped me to develop my values, because I think that you sort of just depend on other people to tell you what is important to you at first… Then, when you’re in the RA position, it’s almost if someone is telling you that you have to be a leader… so then, determining for yourself what is important
to you. As far as me personally, developing an understanding of things that I hold important and…being able to show that to other people…I took my cues from other people around me at first…but then came up with my values.

All of the participants stated that they have learned from their relationships. Overall, the RA position challenged these students to view themselves in the context of a community and to make decisions about their future after considering multiple perspectives. Participant Five summarized this growth by sharing, “I’ve become who I am because of Ohio State, and I may not be able to say what that is…I can’t look back to where I was before I came here completely…but yeah, it’s just a great place.”

This chapter provided an explanation of the data analysis techniques that were employed for this study. It also explored each of seven themes that emerged from the participants’ data. There were differences found in the way students make meaning of the word “leader” as well as the ways in which they lead others. RAs also were found to place significant value on interpersonal relationships. The next chapter takes an in-depth look at the participants’ voices and leadership styles to better understand the way they make meaning of their paraprofessional experience.
LEADERSHIP STYLES

As described in the previous chapter, the narratives shared by each participant produced excerpts of raw data which were coded into units and themes. Using Kvale’s (1996) meaning condensation, I summarized transcripts by finding the most salient sections of raw data and provided participant quotes in this chapter to support claims made as results of this research. After reading all of the transcripts, I assigned a title to identify each participant’s individual leadership style and interactions with his or her residential environment. Each excerpt details each participant’s leadership style in the context of the Resident Advisor position.

Participant One: The Giver

Participant One is originally from Ohio and is a white, heterosexual female at The Ohio State University. She is in her second year of the Resident Advisor position this year. When asked to discuss some of her background and experiences prior to coming to college, she indicated that she was quite involved in high school in a number of organizations, including Young Leaders.

Participant One also detailed her understanding of the term “leader” and leadership by explaining that she had considered herself to be a leader for some time and
has been called a leader. She continued to link the word “leader” with the idea that a leader is “just someone who takes things upon themselves and wants to make themselves and others better.” After this description, she said that leaders have to be mature and selfless. Participant One indicated that to become a leader, “You just have to be like a step above other people, just in the way you carry yourself. You just have to have a general, genuine, concern for people and doing things to the best of your ability.” She continued to discuss the connection between a leader and high standards and said that she feels compelled to challenge herself to continually be better and to work hard. When asked if she believed she was a leader, she said:

I would say that to a pretty good extent I believe I’m a leader…I guess part of the reason I feel like a leader is because I had seen myself have an impact on others in a positive way. Like I’ve seen people grow from us having a conversation…and I have as well. Like I think that’s been mutual and that’s really important to leadership.

This participant’s definition of leadership as a relational process fits with Komives’ (2005) third and fourth stages of the leadership identity model. These stages follow individuals’ perceptions that they are able to lead groups and have a positive impact on others around them, as well as the idea that leadership is negotiated between individuals or groups of individuals. Additionally, she summarized by stating that she believes she is a leader when she is told by others that she is one. This statement is an example of Kegan’s (1994) third state of consciousness where individuals allow their relationships or the voices of others to define themselves.

When asked about the RA position and its impact on her identity, the participant
noted that she realized she was a giving person and had to adjust in order to balance her life. Her perception of the way students perceived her was focused on disciplinary contexts. She said:

People have heard of an RA and they don’t really get it, except, they know that people get written up for things. But my floor community realized they would get more than that…I put a lot of time into…making the floor look like a welcoming space. They saw that this person was…gonna be investing more.

She reflected on her overall experience of holding the Resident Advisor position and the ways in which it has helped her grow in her job role and as a student during her college years. Participant One noted that she has become more responsible, aware of balancing personal and job-related commitments and feels that the RA job, “provided me with a niche on campus…it led me to other opportunities.” She found that her most important experiences associated with the RA position have been the day-to-day interactions with other individuals. Over time, her perceptions about the Resident Advisor position slightly changed. She originally felt the position was time-consuming but did not realize the true time commitment required by the job until she began working. She also originally believed that all standards were consistent among hall staffs around campus and quickly learned that expectations and procedures vary greatly depending on the Senior Staff, RA staff, and specific student community.

Participant One’s summary of her experience was positive and she indicated that she would be continuing with the Resident Advisor position for another year and might seek a Resident Manager position in her senior year on campus. She feels that her work in housing has allowed her to engage in a number of opportunities, gain new friends, and connect to campus. Despite this, she is not as connected to her peers outside of the
residence hall in which she works. She commented, “I started to realize that I’ve had a harder time relating to them…I’ve been seeking out friends who are a bit more giving.” She believes she has gradually changed and has become a more responsible, more selfless adult due to her experience, growth, and education connected with the RA role. It is also relevant to note that this student’s future plans include pursuing graduate education in student affairs.

Participant Two: The Networker

Participant Two is originally from Ohio and is an African American male at The Ohio State University who also identifies as gay. Additionally, he is a first year Resident Manager. Prior to this position, he was a Resident Advisor for two years. For the purpose of this study, he was primarily asked to discuss his experience as a Resident Advisor in this specific living environment. He was unsure about where he wanted to attend school and was told by a friend that Ohio State had a variety of resources for minority students. After finding that Ohio State offered a wide range of opportunities, funding, and experiences, he decided to enroll.

Participant Two discussed that some individuals are natural born leaders, although they can build on their ability to be leaders through the acquisition of new experiences and networking with others. For other individuals, Participant Two stated that the motivation to be leader and exposure to opportunities to build these skills could create leaders out of individuals who did not possess these innate characteristics and skills. He described an example of a born leader by stating, “There was someone on my staff who…always thought ahead…would be thinking three steps ahead of us…and trying to
plan out every detail…someone who wasn’t afraid to speak her mind…she was someone who people respect.” He said that there is an intangible trait that born leaders have that make others want to follow their lead. The use of power and influence for something positive is a way that he believes one can be a successful leader.

Participant Two stated that he knows he is a leader because of the variety of experiences he has had, the times when others have come to him for advice, and due to the position he is in as a student paraprofessional staff member. He focused on his relationships with other people and believed that in conjunction with the RA position, the relationships he constructs with others help him to take initiative in groups. He believes that individuals cannot have influence on others around them unless they spend time getting to know the others in the group. He posited that one must have strong relationships with others in order to be considered a leader. With regard to his own leadership development he said, “I could stand to grow…to be a better leader, I think more in terms of relationships – a relational leadership model and style.” Participant Two differentiated himself from the other two male participants by focusing on this relational style of using networking and community to build leadership skills.

In connection with his RA experience, Participant Two discussed how the RA position taught him about leadership and that he learned quickly that the position alone does not make someone a leader. He again related his successes in the RA position to his ability to gain influence over others through building strong relationships with which he worked. Helping others was also a significant part of Participant Two’s discussion about his perceptions of the RA job. He applied for the job because he wanted to help other
people, work with diverse individuals and personalities, and to learn about himself. He stated that he has grown significantly in terms of his ability to construct successful personal relationships with staff members and students through his RA experiences.

When asked about his individual experience with the job position, he said:

As an RA, you get to know so many people so quickly...that it’s only too natural that you go to a different organization and you’re naturally going to be a little more open, a little more extroverted, even if you are an introverted person.

The RA position has provided him with a better appreciation for others around him, especially in navigating relationships with peers of different backgrounds and personalities. Through having the RA position, which he considers to be a leadership position, he believes he has become more empathetic to other leaders in other contexts.

The RA job provided Participant Two with a number of transferable skills, assisted him with interpersonal relationships, and also helped him realize the importance of knowing the jobs of others around him. He defined important parts of his RA experience through reflecting on situations and said, “I define them through things that after they happen, I felt some kind of epiphany or I felt like this will change how I interact in the future.” His ability to reflect on past situations and determine his own future decisions highlights growth in his development and ability to find his own voice in a contextual world. As opposed to some of the other participants, Participant Two is slightly more reflective and is able to recognize that his relationships aid him, but do not define him. This developmental state aligns with the transitional period between Kegan’s (1994) third and fourth states of consciousness.

Participant Two commented on his growth as a young professional learning about
reputation. Every interaction with a peer or a Hall Director has taught him that it is important for others to remember him for the right reasons and that the RA position is primarily a job. His future plans for involvement on campus included his work as a Resident Manager for the upcoming academic year and participating in a gospel choir on campus. Participant Two also plans to continue his education through pursuing graduate studies or an employment position in student affairs upon graduation.

Participant Three: The Analyzer

Participant Three is originally from Ohio and is a white, heterosexual female at The Ohio State University. She is in her first year of the Resident Manager position this year. Prior to this position, she was a Resident Advisor for one year. For the purpose of this study, she was asked to primarily discuss her experience as a Resident Advisor. It is also relevant to note that she transferred to Ohio State from another institution after her out-of-state scholarship was no longer available.

She noted that coming in as a transfer student was difficult because sophomores generally have developed social circles of their own by the second year on campus. The RA position provided her with an opportunity to establish her own relationships and learn about campus. She viewed the RA position as a way to gain additional leadership skills. She discussed the two ways she perceives that someone can become a leader. She believes that there are both naturally born leaders and leaders that need experiences, opportunities, and development to become true leaders. She explored the difference between the two types of leaders by stating, “I guess…born leaders would be the people that…just go at it from the beginning…they don’t need that motivation from somebody
else, they don’t need those suggestions, they…just go out and get involved to begin
with.” Given that Participant Three believes there are multiple paths to leadership, she
connects with Komives’ (2005) third stage of leadership identity development, where
individuals are able to see that there are several ways to lead others and a variety of
opportunities in which to do so.

Participant Three continued dialoguing about leadership by assessing her ability
to be a leader. She stated, “I think it depends on the situation…like I said before, I’m
okay with people following, sometimes people know better than I, and I’m okay with
that.” In her RA experience, she felt that since she did not have experience in the job
role, she would not be able to lead. She said, “Being inexperienced, I was more afraid of
screwing something up and looking dumb than taking the lead and maybe you know,
maybe doing it right. So, I guess it could be a lack of confidence.” This lack of
confidence was mentioned multiple times by Participant Three and fits with her claims of
having high expectations for herself and often analyzing her role in the context of a
community.

In the RA role, she felt that leadership was important but thought it should be
more of a mutually-constructed process than she felt it was communicated to be. She
believes that the RA position requires individuals to role model appropriate behavior for
students and in that way, RAs can demonstrate positive leadership. Her experience as a
transfer student allowed for the RA position to expose her to new friends and new
opportunities and as she stated, “it was just a matter of finding my niche.” Participant
Three’s experience with the RA position differed from the previous two participants. She
mentioned that she gained valuable experience from her job role but also stated:

Well, first let me say that I would never take that experience back, but I never would’ve done it again. Like…upfront not. There’s certain things about the RA position where…it’s more like being a cop and less about being a person and I think that there’s some fine lines there…that fall between the two and I very much disliked having to be the cop.

She continued by discussing situations where she had to confront residents and they placed the blame on her instead of on their behavior and actions. Some of her other perceptions about the RA job focused on building strong relationships, learning about responsibility, and maturing as an individual through the job experience.

When asked about how her meaningful experiences helped shape her identity she said, “When you have interactions with people, in general, like, they help shape a lot of who you are, because, I’m one of those people…if we interact, I’m going to go back and analyze it.” By recognizing that she allows her relationships to shape her identity, she fits with the description of Kegan’s (1994) third state of consciousness where relationships define the individual. Her ability to recognize that relationships shape people likely means that she is beginning to move beyond this developmental state. She also remembered occurrences where she learned more about her ability to relate to a variety of individuals on her floor and is now more confident in communicating with others.

Her interactions with students often differed depending on which students she interacted with in specific situations. For example, she categorized her floor by stating:

I had my three types of residents. I have my hermits that never came out of their
rooms, I have my residents that were friendly with me, would stop in and chat, and then I had my residents that just kind of...tried to keep themselves away from me.

She noted that she did not have problems with the RA staff but did mention, “The supervisors sometimes tended to take sides...they had their favorites...I don’t know if that happens on every staff or not...I don’t know but you could definitely tell there were favorites being played.” She discussed how this potentially did have an impact on her relationships with peers and supervisors at times. Subsequently, she discussed how she makes decisions about relationships involving students and staff. With residents, she was clear about having professional interactions with students before personal friendships, particularly in the beginning of the year. She said:

They teach you in paraprofessional class that you should tow the line the first couple of weeks just so that they realize you’re business and they don’t walk all over you...but as far as developing those relationships...it was very much what the residents were willing to give me.

Her perceptions of the RA job had not changed significantly over time but she did gain new experiences and felt more confident and prepared for life after college.

Participant Three said that she valued the new interpersonal relationships and that these relationships did change how she acts and some of her identity. She feels more mature and believes she has taken on an increasing amount of responsibility and has matured because of these goals. She moved on to the Resident Manager position and plans to finish her senior year in this new job role and to start chiropractic school after graduation.

Participant Four: The Community Builder

Participant Four is originally from Ohio, and he is a heterosexual, Asian male at The Ohio State University. He was beginning his second year of the Resident Advisor
position at the time of the interview. This student began his collegiate education at a regional campus for the Ohio State University and transferred to the Columbus campus after two quarters. He was a mid-year hire during his first year as a Resident Advisor, which had a significant impact on his experience and training in the job role. Participant Four was originally motivated to apply for the RA position because his sister was an RA and was having a positive experience. He had just recently applied to be an RA and was called early in the process to interview for a position for a mid-year hire job, which he accepted.

When asked about the word “leader,” his definition was, “A good follower, and they completely understand the position…of that community…can lead a group to a desired goal…or maybe someone who governs a body of people.” He referred to himself as a leader and someone who worked in a variety of different environments before pursuing opportunities to increase his responsibilities. He communicated that a positive attitude helps individuals to become leaders and he believes leaders are more extroverted than non-leaders. He described that leaders must be patient, flexible, willing to work with others, and to relate to the individuals they are leading.

Participant Four stated that leadership is important to him because he believes the word means he has impacted people’s lives other than his own and the idea of leadership gives him another goal outside of education. When asked if he perceived himself as a leader he said:

I think I’m a leader because I’m a RA. People just see me as one because of the position and because of things I do…Actually, it’s funny you mention that. I didn’t see myself as a leader at all during middle school…because I hadn’t served in a leadership position.
He further elaborated on the notion of not being a leader and how this idea intersected with his family life. He shared:

I think another big part of it is my parents…like being Indian and stuff. I don’t want to say just because I’m Indian, but…our parents are a little more overprotective and they don’t let you go out as much. I got more social experience behind their back…I didn’t do anything bad…but it’s just that to them, anything was bad.

He has since become increasingly more extroverted and has gained this ability through his other experiences. However, this participant’s narrative is the only one that explicitly addresses the influence of non-white race and culture on his development as a leader. He had less confidence in his leadership abilities when his support system did not encourage him to be involved in leadership experiences.

When asked to describe his interactions with staff and students, he said that both types of relationships could be positive. In his experience, he found that when returning RAs were consistent and collegial, they were more capable of helping the first year RAs transition to the job role. He considered the difference in the way he constructs relationships with residents and believes that although they share ownership in the community, it is important not to develop close friendships with students since RAs are authority figures. Even though he believes students perceive RAs as authorities in the community, he discussed further by stating, “I think students really appreciate what I do, because…well, it’s a horrible thing to say…but, the other day, one of my Co’s residents came up to me and was like, I wish you were my RA.” In First Year Collegian (FYC) residence halls at this institution, RAs work in Co-RA teams. There is a male RA for the male wing on the floor and a female RA for the female half of the floor. The two staff
members work together as Co-RAs to plan events and hold their community accountable. Again, this participant uses the community and relationships with others to gauge his own growth, development, and success in the RA job.

He also discussed that his perception of the RA role has changed over time. He said:

I thought it was more on the administrative side than the social and get to know your residents, deal with situations side. And then, when I came into the job, I suppose it’s the small things that matter more than the huge ones…I was definitely excited…but I had to define myself as an RA more than I guess I had expected to.

Participant Four did not notice that any of his personal values had changed because of the RA position, but rather that they had been reaffirmed. He shared that it was helpful that a number of his values are congruent with those held by University Housing as a department. His future plans include becoming a Resident Manager for his senior year at the university.

Participant Five: The Role Model

Participant Five is originally from Connecticut, and he is a heterosexual, white male at The Ohio State University. He was beginning his first year of the Resident Manager position at the time of the interview. Prior to this, he worked as a Resident Advisor for two years. He came to Ohio State primarily because both of his parents attended Ohio State. Similar to other participants, he was inspired to apply for the RA position through interacting with his RA, who was a role model for him during his freshman year. He wanted an opportunity to role model for others and to improve his leadership skills through the position.
When asked about his reaction to the word “leader,” he said:

   I think a leader is someone who is respected by a lot of different people…being a role model…You can be sort of a quiet leader and lead by example. You can be an outspoken leader and kind of telling people what to do. I prefer to lead by example.

He perceives leaders as generally positive and respectable individuals. He stated, “I think your experiences in life lead you to become a leader, and the people you interact with…It depends a lot on the people, you know, adjust who they are based on who they associate with.” Participant Five also believes that individuals can become leaders through their experiences and at different points in their lives. This statement is also congruent with the fourth stage in Komives’ (2005) leadership identity model which states that leaders take different paths and can have unique experiences.

   He shared that he believes he is capable of being a leader when the situation requires one and noted that his current RM position demands that he lead and supervise Office Assistant (OA) staff. Although he stated that he believes he is a leader, he mentioned that he feels leadership is often linked to experiences and there are situations when he is not a leader. In his experience as an RA, he felt it was necessary to be a leader in order to connect with students and perform well in the job role. He elaborated on his perceptions about the RA position by stating:

   It’s someone who has chosen to set themselves apart…and take a leadership role, set an example, and influence those around them…It takes a lot from your personal life. I think you don’t have as much time to do what you would want to do before you came to school…It just changes your priorities a little bit…and you actually feel like you are making a difference.

   When he entered college, he recalled that he did not know what RAs did and his first perception of a RA was the RA who advised him as a first year student living in the
residence halls. As he continued through the RA selection process, he learned from others that the position was a leadership role and was intended for individuals that cared about others and wanted to represent the university well. By the end of his second year as a RA, he mentioned that his perception of the position had changed to focus more on disciplinary issues and policy enforcement, although he did not enjoy this part of the position. His future plans included developing a community among his Office Assistant staff for the upcoming year and job searching.

Participant Six: The Caring Friend

Participant Six is originally from Ohio, and she is a white, heterosexual female at The Ohio State University. She was beginning her second year as a Resident Advisor at the time of the interview. Her RA work experience is in a FYC residence hall which is corridor-style and students are housed with one to three other roommates. Each floor has both a male and female RA that work as a Co-RA team and the rooms are same-sex by wing, co-ed by floor. She recalled that she was not entirely sure about attending college but came to Ohio State for the variety of majors and opportunities. Similar to other participants, this student chose to apply for the RA position because of her own RA during her first year at college.

When asked about her reaction to the word “leader,” she said, “Everyone has potential to lead people…people lead in different ways…bad leaders are people who lead unintentionally. I think that being a leader is someone who influences others…it can be positive or negative.” She believes that leadership is taught to others by people who are already leaders and that more outspoken individuals have personalities that make them
better leaders. Her definition of a leader was, “Someone who is caring…by being caring, that’s the only way to truly influence other people is to care about them…maybe strong personalities.” Participant Six’s statements about leadership are relational in nature and place a substantial focus on people, friendships, and care.

She communicated that leadership is important to her because the RA position is one in which an individual has a significant amount of influence over others. When asked if she defined herself as a leader, she said, “I guess so…well, it depends on your definition of a leader…just because I generally care about people.” This statement implies that she relies on relationships to help define her leadership style and identity. Again, Kegan’s (1994) third state of consciousness is defined by these examples where individuals are defined by their environment and relationships.

Her general perceptions of the RA position were focused on the leadership opportunity available through the position, the potential to influence others, and the variety of opportunities students can experience through the job role. Due to her experience as a RA, she said, “I think that it’s definitely made me more independent. I’m especially able to stick up for what I believe in…I’m definitely more outspoken…it’s helped me to develop a lot of skills…work with people…and find what is important to me.” The most meaningful experiences she has had through the RA position have been interactions with other students in the building.

Generally, she felt that the RA job has helped to develop her and helped her to become a leader. She defines important parts of her RA experience by stating, “I guess
those were just the things that had an emotional toll on me, so I guess that tells me that it’s important…They were things that changed me and I couldn’t just leave in the job, you know?” Her description here aligns closely with the issues of burnout and emotional stress associated with the RA role, as described by Deluga and Winters (1991). Through the RA position, she described, “I think that I’ve definitely become more assertive…but I think with bulletin boards and programs…you see a lot more disappointment in those areas…I found it’s more important to just be there and available than to do those RA things.” She concluded by speaking about her future plans to move to Africa to do mission work. This student noted, “I would really credit that to the RA position, because just being able to take initiative and…because religion is really…important to me…through the RA position, it’s given me the courage to just go for it!”

These excerpts from participant narratives provide insight into the stories of each of the six participants for this study. Each student provided ideas and quotes from which their leadership styles emerged and the results of this study were found. Using the results of this study and the analysis of leadership style, the final chapter will explore implications of this study as well as future opportunities for research in the field of student affairs.
CHAPTER 6

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study explored the self perceptions of junior and senior Resident Advisors as leaders at a large, public, land-grant institution. As a summarization, this study emphasized that definitions of leadership can differ in relation to gender and are highly related to how individuals perceived their job role in the context of other campus leadership positions. Additionally, participants believed that having a positive and successful RA experience is strongly related to the relationships an RA builds with their floor community, staff, and supervisors. Though these students discussed experiences that show their epistemological and identity development, the primary dimension of student development that emerged from the data was related to the navigation of interpersonal relationships. Lastly, while the results of this study are not necessarily generalizable to a larger population of Resident Advisors, they suggest some important considerations for student affairs professionals working in residence halls.

RAs as Leaders

Given the results of this study, student affairs practitioners must review the ways in which they view RAs as leaders of their floor or wing communities. Whitt (1994) and Romano (1996) which show clear evidence that women and men perceive leaders and leadership experiences in unique ways. In congruence with past research, this study
found that women place a significant value on relationships with others and leading collaboratively. While the men in this study also emphasized the importance of relationships, they believed that they were leaders due to their RA position more than as a result of their interactions with others. Relational leadership appeared to be more secondary in defining male leadership experiences in the RA role at this institution. Past research by Kegan (1994) and other theorists indicates that a dependence on others’ opinions and relationships would be an obstacle for moving forward in development. However, there is no evidence from this study which indicated that the tendency for women to be relational leaders implies that they are at a lower developmental level. This finding could be a result of the theorists’ identification that women and men have different leadership styles.

Also, student affairs practitioners should continue to use student development theory to ground practice as these theories encourage holistic growth for individuals during the college experience. Komives and her associates (2005) define leadership as a highly individualized experience, and the information provided by the study participants demonstrate that this finding is significant for some RAs. Professional residence hall staff should continue to evaluate progress and growth of their RAs on an individual basis, in order to allow these individuals the opportunity to learn from their job experiences.

Personal Impact of the RA Position

Participants indicated that the most meaningful moments of their experience as RAs usually focused on assisting a student in a crisis situation or making a visible, positive impact on their community or an individual. Although RA training provides
RAs with the basic tools to address these crisis situations, it would be helpful for professional staff to spend more time reflecting on what students have learned from these moments. Study participants reported that these crisis situations were most impactful on their personal and professional development because the situation affected them both in and outside of their RA position. While there are a number of things to manage in the residential environment, supervision should include time to reflect on these types of life-altering moments that occur often in the residence halls.

It is also relevant to note that when asked about how their identity had changed through the RA position, the participants initially seemed confused. They said that they had not thought much about their identity previous to participating in this study, nor had they communicated their perceptions about their own growth to someone else in relation to the RA experience. After reflecting on these identity and value shifts, the participants generally agreed that the RA position was a significant influence on their current identities. The RA position either challenged or validated participants’ past values and beliefs and often presented new perspectives and ideas to each individual.

Lastly, the RA position inherently presents a developmental challenge for students through requiring them to confront their peers about their behaviors, educate others who are close in age about community living and diversity, and through the unexpected nature of the job. For some students, the RA position is more challenging due to their current state of development. Students who are able to reflect on their own actions in the context of a more global environment are likely to find the RA job to be less stressful and will usually have a more successful experience.
Expectations and Training

At Ohio State, the current RA training includes two weeks of extensive teaching, teambuilding, and community planning. However, the training schedule requires that all RAs, of different ages, ranks, and experiences, undergo the same training sessions and topics. Given what this study has explored about the differences in the ways that men and women perceive the job role, it might be useful for student affairs practitioners to find ways to address gender or developmental differences in training and supervision techniques. Although it is useful for the RAs to build relationships through attending all training sessions together, it is important to explore nonconventional ways of addressing students’ developmental needs. This statement applies to the RA job at Ohio State, and likely at other large, public, research institutions with large housing departments.

Additionally, to continue discussion started by Deluga and Winters’ (1990, 1991) studies, RAs often struggle to negotiate their expectations of the RA position in relation to the actual experience they have in the job role. This adjustment particularly includes learning to balance friendships outside of the residence hall, being a friend and disciplinarian to students, completing academic work successfully, and learning to be part of a staff team. Some of the participants also mentioned their difficulty in adjusting to inconsistency or role ambiguity. The RA position presents situations that students cannot always prepare, even when given the proper training during RA training. It is important that student affairs practitioners keep these implications in mind when planning how to design and develop their community, hiring new staffs, training, and supervising paraprofessionals.
Opportunities for Future Research and Conclusion

This study highlighted the importance of exploration into the leadership experiences of individual students and emphasizes the need for more research related to gender and leadership positions. Additional studies could further explore the dissonance between expectations for RAs and the demands of the job role. Also, there is room for further exploration of how RAs’ perceptions of themselves relate to retention of RAs for a second or third year in this leadership position. Given the significance of interpersonal relationships and support networks for students in this job role, there is a need for more research into the way these support systems develop on RA staff teams. Perhaps Participant Three summarizes the importance of relationships best by stating, “There’s common ground…you know everyone’s welcoming if you say you’re a RA and meet another RA, they’re like “Hey!” like they’re your best friend…and they understand. More than anything, they understand.” It is of utmost importance that student affairs practitioners attempt to understand and support RAs in ways that assist these leaders with their academic, personal, and social development.
APPENDIX A: LETTER TO RESIDENT ADVISORS

June 20, 2007

Dear Ohio State University Resident Advisor,

Greetings! My name is Gina Kozlowski, and I am a Master’s student at The Ohio State University, as well as an Assistant Hall Director for University Housing. You have been invited to participate in a Master’s thesis study I am conducting about the experiences of Resident Advisors.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the self-perceptions of students as leaders in their role as Resident Advisors at The Ohio State University through interviewing. Participation is voluntary and this study has no effect on your status as an employee of University Housing. The interviews will be approximately 45 minutes in length and will consist of questions related to your experience as a Resident Advisor. Additionally, interviews will be tape recorded and I may also take written notes during the session, if you permit.

If you decide to participate in this study, you may choose not to answer certain interview questions and may stop the interview at any point in time. All identifying information is confidential. Your specific responses will be maintained in a secured, private file, and will be destroyed within 2 years of the completion of the study. In addition, I will be assigning pseudonyms to each participant’s interview responses and materials in order to protect confidentiality. Any links to personal information will be removed and no personal information or names will appear in any publication based on this study. If you should choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to sign a written consent form before the start of the interview. The information from this study will be valuable to postsecondary institutions in understanding the ways that students describe the Resident Advisor position in the context of their individual experiences. The results may provide insights and direction for professionals in higher education to better accommodate the needs and address the concerns of students in this paraprofessional role.

If you would be willing to participate in this study, please contact Gina Kozlowski, research investigator, via phone (614) 313-7032 or email at: gkozlowski@studentaffairs.osu.edu. You may also contact the research advisor, Dr. Tatiana Suspitsyna via email at suspitsyna.1@osu.edu if you have any questions about the study. You may also contact Janet Schulte, IRB Administrator - Human Subjects Review Board, The Ohio State University at Schulte.58@osu.edu or (614) 688-0389, if any problems or concerns arise during the course of the study.

Sincerely,

Gina Kozlowski 
Research Investigator 
The Ohio State University

Dr. Tatiana Suspitsyna
Thesis Advisor
The Ohio State University
APPENDIX B: SAMPLE IRB CONSENT FORM

CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

I consent to participating in research entitled: Students’ perceptions of themselves as leaders in the context of the resident advisor position

This Master’s thesis study conducted by Gina Kozlowski, Co-Investigator, seeks to examine the self-perceptions of Resident Advisors at The Ohio State University. Gina Kozlowski has explained the purpose of the study, the procedures to be followed, and the expected duration of my participation. I understand that Gina Kozlowski will be collecting the data for this study. I also understand that my responses to the interview questions will be tape recorded and the investigator may also take notes on my responses. Possible benefits of the study have been described, as have alternative procedures, if such procedures are applicable and available.

I acknowledge that I have had the opportunity to obtain additional information regarding the study and that any questions I have raised have been answered to my full satisfaction. Furthermore, I understand that I am free to withdraw consent at any time and to discontinue participation in the study without prejudice to me.

Finally, I acknowledge that I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy has been given to me. If I have any questions or concerns about this study, I am aware that I have the option of contacting Dr. Tatiana Suspitsyna, Principal Investigator at Suspitsyna.1@osu.edu, or Gina Kozlowski, Co-Investigator at kozlowski.28@osu.edu.

Date: ____________________________  Signed: ____________________________

(Participant)

Signed: ____________________________

(Principal Investigator or his/her authorized representative)

Signed: ____________________________

(Person authorized to consent for participant, if required)

Witness: ____________________________
APPENDIX C: SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Area #1 (Background):

Tell me about yourself and some of your involvement as a student prior to coming to OSU.

Tell me about your experience at OSU, why you came to OSU, and how you decided to apply for the RA position.

Area #2 (Leadership and the RA position):

What is your reaction to the word “leader”?

What is a leader?

How do you think that people become leaders?

What would you consider as the qualities a leader must have to be successful?

How important is leadership to you?

Do you believe you are a leader? Why or why not?

Please describe your thoughts on leadership in connection with your experience as an RA.

Area #3 (Perception and Meaning in the RA position):

What are your general perceptions about the Resident Advisor position and how it has played a role in your individual experience at OSU?

Tell me about some of the meaningful experiences you have had as an RA.

How have these meaningful experiences affected your self-identity?

Please describe your interactions with students and staff.

How do you make decisions about your relationships with students and staff in your building(s)?

In your opinion, how do students react to you in the RA role?

How do you make judgments in the RA role?

How has the RA job played a role in your collegiate experience?

Tell me about how you make meaning (or define important parts) of your experience as an RA.

How have your ideas regarding the RA position and your personal identity changed over time?

How do you plan to continue your involvement on campus?
APPENDIX D: CODED UNITS AND THEMES

Tree Node/Theme: Am I a Leader?

Free Nodes: Definition of a Leader (9 references; 6 sources), Characteristics of Leaders (11 references; 5 sources), Questioning of Leadership – Women (7 references; 4 sources), Authority (10 references; 5 sources), Leadership – Men (5 references; 3 sources), Respect (7 references; 4 sources)

Tree Node/Theme: Leadership as Power

Free Nodes: Relational Leadership (12 references; 6 sources), Respect (7 references; 4 sources), Born or Bred (7 references; 4 sources), Authority (10 references; 5 sources), Definition of a Leader (9 references; 6 sources)

Tree Node/Theme: Relationships are Everything

Free Nodes: Stress (5 references; 2 sources), Support (6 references; 3 sources), Personal Connections with Students (12 references; 6 sources), Comparison with Others (9 references; 5 sources), Discipline (14 references; 6 sources), Friends Outside of Housing (4 references; 2 sources)

Tree Node/Theme: Emotional Stress and Role Ambiguity

Free Nodes: Consistency in RA position (3 references; 2 sources), Inconsistency in the RA position (6 references; 3 sources), Ambiguity (4 references; 3 sources), Meaning in Work (15 references; 5 sources), Supervisory Relationships (7 references; 4 sources)
**Tree Node/Theme:** Judgments and Perceptions

**Free Nodes:** Discipline (14 references; 6 sources), Authority (10 references; 5 sources), Individual Style (6 references; 4 sources)

**Tree Node/Theme:** Campus Niche

**Free Nodes:** Networking (10 references; 5 sources), Community on Campus (5 references; 3 sources), Niche (22 references; 6 sources), Not a Typical Experience (8 references; 5 sources)

**Tree Node/Theme:** Identity Development

**Free Nodes:** Diversity Issues (2 references; 2 sources), Changes due to RA position (19 references; 6 sources),

**Free Nodes not grouped under Tree Nodes:** Reasons for attending OSU (10 references; 6 sources), Volunteering (4 references, 2 sources), Continuation in student affairs (4 references; 3 sources)
LIST OF REFERENCES


